



Virginia Woolf's Maternal Narrative

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Abstract

This article argues that Woolf serves as an exemplary model of women's writing; a kind of writing through which patriarchal language is subverted. She explores the nature of oppressive male discourse and the conditions necessary to create alternative women's discourse. In her text, unconscious desires manifest themselves through different languages. Through meticulous analysis of characters' language in Woolf's selected works, it becomes evident that so far, patriarchy has repressed the feminine element of the articulations of these unconscious desires. Therefore, Woolf's text lays bare a language which does not repress pre-symbolic elements, since they are considered as crucial determinants in the process of the construction of subjectivity. Such a language is possible by merging masculine and feminine elements, or in other words, by merging symbolic and semiotic elements. Characters, under an ever-present maternal power, realise the inadequacy and limitations of the patriarchal (symbolic) language and therefore, transcend the rigid boundaries of patriarchal language.

Key words: Maternal narrative, Desire, Semiotic, Patriarchy

1. Introduction

Female narrative challenges the historical absence of the *mother*, who, as subject and character, has been repeatedly suppressed and written out of the text. Virginia Woolf's major preoccupations as a modernist and feminist find full embodiment in her fiction. Her works bring out the complexities of identity formation and gender issues through a new style and form. She, like any other prominent modernist of her age, endeavoured to break away from the dominant and dominating conventions of the 19th century both in subject matter and form. The most important of these conventions is realism. Jeremy Hawthorn argues that:

the modernist artist no longer saw the highest test of his or her art as that of verisimilitude. This does not mean that all modernist art gave up the attempt to understand or represent the extra-literary world, but that it rejected those nineteenth-century standards of realism which had hardened into unquestioned conventions. Instead, the modernist art-work is possessed, typically, of a *self-reflexive* element: we may lose ourselves in the fictional 'world' of, say, *Pride and Prejudice* when reading Jane Austen's novel, but when reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* we are made conscious that we are reading a novel. (*Contemporary Literary Theory*, 107)

In his discussion of modernism, Hawthorn considers Freud significant in originating this shift from outside reality to psychological reality; he notes that "Freud turned the attention of many writers inward, towards subjective experience rather than the objective world." (109); this led to the development or refinement of important new techniques, such as Joyce's and Woolf's development of "internal monologue and stream-of-consciousness" (*ibid.*). Therefore, it was opportune for Woolf to create a style of her own to reflect this new mode of understanding reality. Another important factor which was formative of Woolf's new style was the growing significance of an anti-humanist understanding of man and his identity. According to traditional humanism, the subject is considered unified, autonomous, primary and self-present; but in the modernist period, this view of subject was radically changed to a view of subject as secondary, self-divided and constructed by language or any other outside forces. Consequently, this view of subject, together with the emphasis on subjective reality and experience, could not be represented and captured in traditional forms and styles.

It was Woolf who formulated psychological realism in her essay 'Modern Novels' (1919) and its revised version 'Modern Fiction' (1925) which illustrated modernist fictional method (Parsons 46). She needed to break from previous generic conventions in order to be able to represent modern life as it is—the way it is experienced subjectively; and in this respect a "fundamental aspect of their new realism was a shift of focus in the representation of character and consciousness, in the light of the pervasive influence of psychological thought at the turn of the century, and how it repositioned the individual in relation to the world around him" (Parsons 55).

Therefore, Woolf and some of her contemporaries like Joyce and Richardson were struggling to portray modern subject and consciousness which tended to be more fluid and unstable in comparison with the notion of the self as stable and rational in pre-modern periods. Consequently, subjective consciousness turned to be the cornerstone of the modernist novel and influenced its main themes and dominant techniques (Parsons 56).

To render this view of subject, the traditional conventions of earlier prose fiction, like narrative continuity and coherence, was also quite inadequate; for this reason, Woolf devised a new form and style to subvert these traditional conventions of writing and narrative by use of innovative modes or techniques of narration—like stream-of-consciousness—which could render the fragmentary nature of this newborn subject. As an outstanding literary innovator, she employed these novel techniques to depict inner experience and capture the essence of the impressionable self. Her form and subject matter were inextricably intertwined and bound to each other. Deborah Parsons notes that:

Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy, she [Woolf] argues, spend their creative energy ‘proving the solidity, the *likeness* to life, of the story’ (my emphasis), yet amidst this abundance of external detail fail to capture life itself. Rather than concentrating on external events and scene, she asserts, modern novels should be concerned instead with the life of the mind, in all its conscious, subconscious and unconscious workings. The writer needs to break from the limits of materialist realism, and find new methods and forms for representing this life in all its immediacy and multiplicity (*Theorists of the modernist novel*, 48).

Her modernist and feminist views, which are reflected in her fiction, have changed some of the traditional understandings of character and subjectivity. Her breaking away from the inadequacy of the traditional understanding of plot and character shifts focus away from external stimuli to an internal world, while her perspective on the fragmentary nature of experience led her to devise some new techniques of narration, like stream-of-consciousness (Parsons 48). This technique was at Woolf’s disposal to render the events of story in non-linear form, and therefore, disturb the conventionally perceived understanding of reality. Her feminist views are diverse, from urging women to having their own room and independence, to the practice of feminine writing and a new configuration of gender identity. Woolf’s persistent preoccupation with the construction of identity is evident in her fiction.

The desire of returning to the maternal space and subsequently moving away from rigid phallogocentric language creates a specific kind of language for characters, called *écriture féminine*. The literary theory of *écriture féminine*, or feminine/female writing, derives from the French feminist Hélène Cixous’ revisions of Lacanian theory. According to Lacan, an infant moves during its earliest psychosocial development from an imaginary order—which is the mother-centred, non-subjugated, pre-symbolic, pre-Oedipal space of bodily drives and rhythms (linked with the unconscious)—to a symbolic order of separation between self and (m)other, of law and patriarchal social codes, and of loss and associated desire (linked with consciousness). *Écriture féminine* is a radical, disruptive mode of feminine writing that is opposed to patriarchal discourse, with its rigid grammar, boundaries, and categories. As Keith Green and Jill LeBihan note,

the force of patriarchy is always inscribed upon women, and upon men also, by the prevailing symbolic systems; it is a fundamental belief of *écriture féminine* that the only way to transform relations between the sexes is to transform the ways in which we *represent* these relations. (*Critical Theory and Practice*, 243)

For this very reason *écriture féminine* asks for an alternative form of language to allow this transformation to happen. The use of *écriture féminine* can be observed when characters move away from the phallogocentric language of the symbolic towards the fluid language of the semiotic.

2. Towards Kristeva’s Semiotic through *écriture féminine*: the Language of Desire

Lacan and his emphasis on the centrality of the masculine dominance over the symbolic made feminists especially Julia Kristeva revise Lacan’s wholly inadequate account of the feminine and gender. She sees in the subject an opportunity for subversion of the masculine dominance. In Kristeva’s usage of the term, semiotic refers to one of the two modes of the signifying process. It is a pre-Oedipal, maternal space and energy repressed and subordinated to the laws of the second mode (the symbolic). The semiotic is a repertoire of the subject’s drives and a decentered libidinal organisation. Although the semiotic may be expressed verbally, it does not follow the strict syntactic rules of the symbolic mode of signification, i.e. poetical and musical expressions. But the two modes are not completely separate: the semiotic *can* breach the boundaries of the symbolic in privileged moments of social transgression, and subvert its rules and operations. But if it has no specific syntactic rules, how then is the semiotic articulated in language, or remain part of the signifying process? Kristeva herself argues that the semiotic is “definitely heterogeneous to meaning” (qtd. in McAfee 24). But this does not mean, however, that the semiotic is at odds with meaning. As Kristeva notes:

It goes without saying that, concerning a *signifying practice*, that is, a socially communicable discourse like poetic language, this semiotic heterogeneity posited by theory is inseparable from what I call, to distinguish it from the latter, the *symbolic* function of significance. The symbolic, as opposed to the semiotic, is this inevitable attribute of meaning, sign, and the signified object...Language as social practice necessarily presupposes these two dispositions [the semiotic and the symbolic], though combined in different ways to constitute *types of discourse*, types of signifying practice (qtd. in McAfee 24, emphasis maintained)

Following in Kristeva’s footsteps, one can trace the origin of the subject’s desires in the semiotic. As Grosz states:

The semiotic involves both the inscription of polymorphous impulses across the child’s body; and the *return* of these infantile inscriptions in adult form (her [Kristeva’s] analogy is with Freud’s concept of the symptom as the return of the repressed). They ‘return’ in the form of rhythms, intonations, melody accompanying all representation. They form a site, a threshold from which the earliest vocalizations, and eventually naming and language, can develop. (*Sexual Subversion*, 44)

As Kelly Oliver points out, Kristeva claims to be concerned with discourses in which identity is broken down, such as the discourse of maternity, which is a discourse that “more than any other points to a subject-in-process” (*Reading Kristeva*, 48-9). Furthermore,

Kristeva argues that the only available discourses on maternity are those of religion, science and possibly a certain feminism, all of which cover over the semiotic side of the maternal body. These discourses leave out the pain and *jouissance* of the mother because they operate on a level that challenges the symbolic with its fundamental notions of autonomy and law. The mother is a threat to the symbolic order...Her *jouissance* threatens to make her a subject rather than the Other against which man becomes a subject...[and] she not only represents but is a strange fold between culture and nature that cannot be fully incorporated by the symbolic.

In light of semiotic language, Kristeva picks her examples of revolutionary writers from avant-garde male writers, but seldom mentions women writers. This is not a purposeful negligence of women writers, however; in *About Chinese Women* (1974), Kristeva argues that there are only very few women writers who have written using revolutionary language, owing to the different relations that men and women develop concerning the mother, and accordingly to language. Kristeva maintains, but revises, Lacan’s account of the imaginary and the symbolic, and of the mirror-stage bridging between them, in her own discussion of the semiotic and symbolic. While Lacan believes that the symbolic remains associated with the father, language and patriarchy, and the mirror stage marks the repression of desires, drives, and maternal-identification through identification with an alienating and distorted image of the self, the semiotic differs from the imaginary precisely in that it is not grounded on imaginary identification. Rather, the semiotic is the very real and significant pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic period during which the child does not distinguish itself from the mother’s body, or between bodies and sexes.

The semiotic is a period of merging with the mother and *jouissance* during which there is no identity and no language in sharp contrast with the symbolic, which introduces repression of desire, difference, and the possibility of selfhood. To Lacan, the imaginary is repressed with the mirror stage. To Kristeva, this repression is instead non-permanent, and always leaves some traces of the symbolic, meaning that the semiotic is endowed with the possibility of resisting the symbolic, in which one inevitably must be located in order to find a position as a subject in the social order. Kristeva celebrates and valorises the pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic or semiotic period of compulsions and drives, which both Freud and Lacan neglect to explore in its entirety. Although Kristeva considers the semiotic extremely important, she regards the symbolic as equally significant, because it provides subjects with language, and thus power, politics, history, and art. And although the symbolic is inextricably connected to the father and to his law, this law may be subverted and undermined precisely through interruptions by the semiotic.

Kristeva makes it clear that if the woman writer allows herself to look back to the semiotic, she may never return, for the position of even a paternally-identified or “phallic” woman within patriarchy may not be enough to incite her to struggle to return to the symbolic. And the maternal body, unmitigated by the symbolic, threatens dissolution, delirium, chaos (Oliver 12). As Chloë Taylor notes:

Women, then, according to Kristeva, have most often either over-identified with and desired the mother and lived silently incarnate existences, or have over-identified with and desired the father and become militants, devotees, or even fanatics of the structuring systems of society, whether these be religion, ethics, or politics—including fascism and feminism—because their sanity and lives have depended upon it. Men, however, can play between the paternal and maternal realms without undue risk, take up nuanced, ambivalent stances, because they are secure within the symbolic, and their play rarely really destabilises them. Holding a passport to the symbolic, to use Kelly Oliver’s metaphor, men may more cavalierly transgress its rules, while women, as aliens, tread more warily. (Kristevan Themes in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, 59)

Kristeva believes that all change for women, whether political or literary, must take place from within the symbolic, since there is no articulation or language outside this realm. Taylor also states that:

Being exists in time and time exists in the symbolic, while women who commit suicide are called by the maternal to go beyond time, being, and language. One symptom is that they are sick of words. To stave off the ‘call of the mother’, the ‘call beyond time’, these women, persecuted by ‘voices,’ ‘madness’, ‘hallucinations,’ try for a time to cling to the symbolic, identify with the Father, compensate with language, but, eventually they can no longer hold on. They ‘begin to slip, life itself can’t hang on: slowly, gently, death settles in.’ (60)

I would like to show in this paper that there is a shared understanding of gender and maternity in Kristeva and Woolf, and that reading Woolf with Kristeva sheds light on the complexities of her novels. Kristeva argues that the maternal consists of the intonations, melodies, and echolalias which make language poetic, and which allow for social change. Yet, she says, we must commit ‘matricide’ to live, and that the mother is necessarily in a state of abjection in society—but it is a society that Kristeva does not reject. Moreover, Woolf’s characters explore the possibilities and often dangers of women making a bridge between the symbolic and the semiotic.

Early in the 20th century, Woolf epitomised the aspirations that several decades later would be more fully articulated by *écriture féminine*. Her juxtaposition of interrelated issues of language, the presence of the mother, and identity align her with the French feminists’ views. The main point which French feminists and Woolf share is the exploration of the construction of a subject position in language, and how language is highly responsible for that particular construction. To connect *écriture féminine* to Kristeva’s views discussed above, it is enough to note that the former aims to return to

the semiotic *chora* through writing; and this return “encourages an obsession with the pre-Oedipal mother that can have disastrous consequences as it requires that a woman shed her single subject identity while simultaneously exposing herself to the full force of the unconscious drives” (Holden 6). Throughout her texts, Woolf demonstrates the dangers of attempting to return to the lost mother, to the pre-Oedipal period.

In Woolf’s attempt of feminine writing, women attempt to return to the pre-symbolic period, which is tremendously repressed at the unconscious at the time of separation from the mother, consequently making feminine language the language of the unconscious. Both Kristeva’s and Cixous’ practice of *écriture féminine* moves away from those known conventional linear discourses, in favour of a more fluid and multifaceted discourse. Kristeva’s semiotic, in particular, disrupts the conventional linear discourse, valorises poetic language inspired by the maternal space, and aims at restoring the sensual, i.e., the auditory, visual, olfactory, and tactile.

According to Elaine Showalter, *écriture féminine* is “a practice of writing ‘in the feminine’ which undermines the linguistic, syntactical, and metaphysical conventions of Western narrative” (9). And going by this definition, one can observe Woolf’s *écriture féminine* as the undermining of the sentence and the sequence of narrative, not only as a theory that she proposes in *A Room of One’s Own*, but also as an essential part of her writing practice in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. Woolf’s technical experiments, such as the stream-of-consciousness narrative and the dislocation of grammatical structures, subvert the linguistic, syntactic, and metaphysical conventions of language and narrative. Woolf’s understanding of how the feminine disrupts the symbolic structures of language, meaning, and writing anticipates the very similar views of Cixous and Kristeva. Kristeva notes that language is

a plurality of signifying systems of which each is one layer of a vast whole... Thus, gesturality, the various visual signals, and even the image, photography, cinema, and painting are so many languages to the extent that they transmit a message between a subject and an addressee by using a specific code, even though they do not obey the rules for the construction of verbal language that have been codified by grammar (*Language: The Unknown*, 296)

This stress on plurality is a significant part of both Cixous’ and Kristeva’s account of *écriture féminine*, which gives way to the possibility of self-expression. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1980), Cixous urges that a woman writer

must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which... will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations... By writing herself, women will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her... censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time of language and meaning. (250)

We can perceive how Cixous’ ruptures and transformations become an indispensable part of *écriture féminine* when they are reiterated by Kristeva as the process of “introducing ruptures, blank spaces, and holes into language” in order to dismantle symbolic systems (“Oscillation between Power and Denial,” 165).

Woolf’s creation of a shared poetic language between her characters in her novels introduces a kind of ‘in-between writing’. The “multiplicity of meaning” which Woolf creates for her characters, according to Christina Kay Moriconi, moves them “beyond the categories of sexual difference” and their forms of streams-of-consciousness “highlight the androgynous mind.” This is Woolf’s conception of in-between writing, which “disrupt[s] the fixed structures of language” (8).

One of the aims of *écriture féminine* is to move beyond the fixed confines of sexual difference, in order to introduce new forms and new writing practices. When the semiotic resurfaces in the symbolic, it introduces new possibilities beyond the fixed oppositions between men and women, such as the merging of them as in bisexual category. To achieve this, Kristeva emphasises a continuous interaction between symbolic establishment and semiotic rupture, while Cixous advocates women writing “through their bodies”:

[T]hey must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes; they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word ‘silence’. (256)

3. Virginia Woolf’s Modernism

Woolf continues to haunt and inspire contemporary critics and readers, and she is still celebrated as one of the outstanding figures of the modernist era. There are a variety of reasons for this: the main reason which can be accounted for here is that she adroitly disturbs most of the conventions and standards of the late Victorian and early modern periods, and by extension, the periods that preceded them. Her use of stream-of-consciousness, her breaking away from the inadequacy of traditional understanding of plot and character, her shift of focus from the external world to a more internal one, her emphasis on the fragmentary nature of experience, as well as her views on the significance of memory in storytelling, are among some of the main characteristics which constitute a break from mainstream tendencies in the storytelling techniques of the pre-modern period.

In her fiction, female voices repressed by dominant discourses find chances to surface and resurface within male’s masculine narrative which is a linear and sequential narrative and is more historical and more often than not is in monologues. The self that emerges from male narrative is autonomous, unified and individuated in contrast to relational, connected and split construction of female self. Female narrative, on the other hand is non-linear and anti-sequential

Female narrative creates new form that substitutes multiple voices for phallogocentric discourse: the single monologic and authoritative narrative voice. Female narrative subverts the monologic fallogocentricity of male discourse and it is more plural than single and it frequently expresses experiences about intimacy and body.

Woolf's entire oeuvre is a formidable challenge to patriarchy. The challenge entailed a very critical revision of the past, proving their inadequacies in terms of form and content, and accordingly created a 'new intellectualism' which anticipated, by almost half a century, the future direction of some feminist movements, i.e., the French feminists. Woolf's subjects, both men and women, are confronted with the limitations of androcentric discourse—which marginalises and subordinates women to patriarchal maxims and does not take into account feminine qualities—move instead towards gynocentric discourse. Androcentric discourse, which functions through narrativity and sequence, follows and is fundamentally characterised by the binary thinking of *absence* and *presence*. In the symbolic order, according to Lacan, "nothing exists except upon an assumed foundation of absence" but "there is no absence in the real" (qtd. in Evans 1). Lacan argues that the word is "'a presence made of absence' because (i) the symbol is used in the absence of the thing and (ii) signifiers only exist insofar as they are opposed to other signifiers" (*ibid.*).

Such a discourse always makes an unbridgeable gap between signifiers and signifieds, and therefore, distances subjects from the immediacy of things, people, and especially the maternal space, where there is no language, lack, nor separation between child and mother. Instead of touching, merging or being one with things, subjects use language to describe them; in other words, language by its very nature distances people from approaching things and distorts their real nature and truth. Because language works through absences, characters like Bernard in *The Waves* seek presences, lost things or signifieds through a new language, which works by means of presences, immediacy, plurality of signification, silences and overlapping of signifier and signified.

I argue that unconscious desires manifest themselves through different languages. Through meticulous analysis of characters' language in Woolf's selected works, it becomes evident that so far, patriarchy has repressed the feminine element of the articulations of these unconscious desires. Therefore, I lay bare a language which does not repress pre-symbolic elements, since they are considered as crucial determinants in the process of the construction of subjectivity. Such a language is possible by merging masculine and feminine elements, or in other words, by merging symbolic and semiotic elements. Characters, under an ever-present maternal power, realise the inadequacy and limitations of the patriarchal (symbolic) language, which represses maternity for the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality. Consequently, patriarchy underestimates and devalues the significance of desire for the maternal space, which can subvert, and at the same time, transcend the rigid boundaries of patriarchal language. Woolf valorises desire as a locus of drives which do not adhere to the patriarchal rules of sexuality or heterosexuality. For this reason, Woolf's characters only pursue their own unrestrained and unfettered desires—especially their desire for maternal space—to move away from the constructed and prescribed cultural expectations regarding their desires.

4. Woolf's Feminine Writing Practice

The observation from Woolf from *A Room of One's Own*, that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (132), has exercised a powerful rhetorical force on contemporary feminist criticism, urging for a new (female) literary history. Jane Marcus opens her article, which is in fact titled after this influential quote, with this claim: "Writing, for Virginia Woolf, was a revolutionary act" (1). Part of my endeavour in this study is to reveal the process of her revolutionary act of writing, which is manifested in her early articulation of what later came to be called *écriture féminine*.

Woolf serves as an exemplary model of women's writing; a kind of writing through which patriarchal language is subverted. In "Modern Fiction" (1925; originally "Modern Novels, 1919) she argues for a new reality and a unique way of rendering subjective experiences. Here she anticipates the future novel and notes that it will invade the territories of poetry:

It will resemble poetry in this that it will give not only or mainly people's relations to each other and their activities together, as the novel has hitherto done, but it will give the relationship of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude. (qtd. in Batchelor 36)

In "Women and Fiction" (1979) Woolf argues that literary conventions are the creation of men and are not suitable for women. She also states that "for the first time, this dark country [the inner lives of women] is beginning to be explored in fiction" (51). Cixous would repeat the sentiment several decades later: "The dark continent is neither dark nor unexplorable...It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explored" (255).

Furthermore, in a 1920 review entitled "Men and Women," Woolf also stated that "I have the feelings of a woman but I have only the language of men" (30). In *A Room of One's Own*, she describes the process by which the woman writer might create a woman's sentence. This other sentence, as Woolf envisions it, is shaped according to the different physical and mental spaces occupied by women, the "different order and system of life" within which women operate (*A Room of One's Own*, 86). She explores the nature of oppressive male discourse and the conditions necessary to create alternative women's discourse. When Woolf declares that men's sentences are inappropriate for women's use, her metaphor points to three aspects of the inadequacy of male discourse—its style, its forms, and its content.

These limitations are even clearer, I think, in Woolf's original formulation of the problem in "Women and Fiction": "It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose [syntactically], too heavy [with the weight of formal conventions], too pompous [with its freight of male values and male power] for women's use" (48). Women's writing must "knock into shape" (*A Room of One's Own*, 80) the sentences, the genres, the values of men. They must have a tradition of women's

writing to place themselves within, must be able to, as Woolf says, “think back through our mothers” (79). Women writers must kill the “Angel in the House,” the stereotyping which patriarchy associates women with, the representation in male discourse of ideal womanhood, that of being “immensely sympathetic...immensely charming...utterly unselfish” (“Professions,” 59). More difficult still, the woman working within female discourse must represent the aspects of herself that the Angel stereotype has repressed—she must “tell the truth about my experiences as a body,” as Woolf puts it (62). This was a problem Woolf felt that neither herself nor other women writers had yet solved.

5. Woolf and the French Feminists

Certain French feminists like Cixous and Kristeva, who are mainly concerned with women’s relation to writing and language, and who are tremendously indebted to Lacan’s poststructural psychoanalysis, share with Woolf the same insights and preoccupations regarding a type of language which is able to circumvent and subvert patriarchal language. As a strategy for creating women’s discourse, the French feminists’ call for a female language, *écriture féminine*—the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text—which emerges from and defines itself in relation to psychoanalytic theory and practice. It too speaks—at a metaphorical level—to Woolf’s problem of “telling the truth about my experiences as a body.” Much of Cixous’ and Kristeva’s views regarding feminine mode of writing coincides; they both share a common concern regarding bringing the semiotic body back into structuralism. Cixous, one of the leading advocates of *écriture féminine*, urges women to create a uniquely female style compounded of and celebrating the female body, female desire, the unconscious and heterogeneity (Neely 316). This source is to be reflected in the textual features of the writing-structure, syntax, sentence length and imagery.

Much of Cixous’ theory relies heavily on Freudian and Greek mythology as she endeavours to dismantle the dominant myths of patriarchal system. Cixous is selective in her appropriation of Freud, however; she refuses to accept the Oedipal drama and the idea of castration as the origin of desire, since they are ideas that repeat the same old binary thinking and define women in terms of lack. Cixous pities man’s confined sexual experience, located only in the penis. She instead valorises women for experiencing desire in a holistic manner throughout the body. This is the basis of Cixous’ theory of “writing the body”:

Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning...she doesn’t defend herself against these unknown women she’s surprised at becoming, but derives pleasure from this gift of alterability. (*The Laugh of the Medusa* 252)

In a 1996 interview with Kathleen O’Grady, Cixous argues that in her experience, theory does not precede text: it does not “proceed” or “dictate” the writing process, but is instead the “consequence” of her text. Cixous calls this kind of writing the “self-seeking text.” Like Woolf, Cixous considers language a fluid entity and calls women to redefine it:

Write! And your self-seeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood, rising, insurrectionary dough kneading itself, with sonorous, perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed. (*ibid.*)

Cixous’ rhetorical strategies include many traits typically despised in male discourse: flowing, formless language, irrationality, the unconscious, and maternal nurturance. For Cixous, these strategies manifest themselves in the form of lengthy, redundant sentences, full parenthetical insertions. Other sentences are broken in unconventional manner, and create the impression of the non-linear pattern of thought. Cixous believes that within the confines of the symbolic order, ‘woman’ has a fixed, stable meaning defined by the binary opposition of presence/absence, language/silence, and male/female.

In her *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, 1974) Kristeva distinguishes between two aspects of modalities of language: the semiotic and the symbolic. While the symbolic constructs subjects through language, the semiotic is the physical basis of language: its sounds, tones, and rhythms, which originate in the body. The semiotic, being physical, is “a psychic modality logically and chronologically prior to the sign: without this bodily basis there could be no symbolic, no language or culture” (Jantzen 195). The semiotic is also gendered feminine. Kristeva describes the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic as a dialectic oscillation: without the symbolic, all significations would be babble or delirium (Oliver, “Kristeva and Feminism”). Yet, without the semiotic, all significations would be empty. Signification requires both the semiotic and the symbolic. Rachel Blau DuPlessis theorises that women’s fiction [including Woolf’s] inscribes a “wavering dialogic structure” (38). This structure vacillates between inclusion (the inheritors of culture) and exclusion (the outside and oppositional) (Snaith 26). DuPlessis further argues that Woolf’s novelistic career “moves increasingly away from the heterosexual romantic plot, displacing it in *To the Lighthouse*, for example, by a parent-child tie oscillating between mother and father” (qtd. in Snaith 26). Detecting a similar oscillation in Woolf’s writing, Anna Snaith cites Susan Stanford Friedman’s description of Woolf’s writing in more narratological terms:

Positing a distinction between ‘lyric’ (a simultaneity or cluster of feelings/ideas captured in figurative and rhythmic language) and ‘narrative’ (a story or structure of events that foregrounds a sequence of dynamic movements in time and space), Friedman presented Woolf’s writing as a complex interplay between the two modes (26).

I believe that Kristeva in *Language: The Unknown* (1989; *Le Langage, cet inconnu: une initiation à la linguistique*, 1969) clearly explicates the configuration of maternal forms of signification or signifying practices, which stand in sharp opposition to the verbal logic of the symbolic language:

[A] plurality of signifying systems of which each is one layer of a vast whole... Thus, gestural, the various visual signals, and even the image, photography, cinema, and painting are so many languages to the extent that they transmit a message between a subject and an addressee by using a specific code, even though they do not obey the rules for the construction of verbal language that have been codified by grammar. (296)

Kristeva's plural system of signifying practices is able to disrupt the symbolic and arbitrary structures of language, and comes closer to a language with non-arbitrary codes. As Oliver states of Kristeva's view of signifying practices:

Instead of lamenting what is lost, absent, or impossible in language, Kristeva marvels at this other realm [bodily experience] that makes its way into language. The force of language is [a] living driving force transferred into language. Signification is like a transfusion of the living body into language. (Oliver, Introduction to *The Portable Kristeva*, xx)

6. Conclusion

Woolf's literary practice is grounded and dependent for the most part on her new stylistic and textual experimentations. In her literary and non-literary works, she endorses fluid identities which challenge foundationalism and essentialism, and replaces them with new paradigms of socially constituted identities. Her innovatory practice of writing is closely interlocked with her feminist ideology. In this article I argued that Woolf serves as an exemplary model of women's writing; a kind of writing through which patriarchal language is subverted. Woolf explores the nature of oppressive male discourse and the conditions necessary to create alternative women's discourse. In her text, unconscious desires manifest themselves through different languages. Through meticulous analysis of characters' language in Woolf's selected works, it becomes evident that so far, patriarchy has repressed the feminine element of the articulations of these unconscious desires. Therefore, Woolf's text lays bare a language which does not repress pre-symbolic elements, since they are considered as crucial determinants in the process of the construction of subjectivity. Such a language is possible by merging masculine and feminine elements, or in other words, by merging symbolic and semiotic elements. Characters, under an ever-present maternal power, realise the inadequacy and limitations of the patriarchal (symbolic) language and therefore, transcend the rigid boundaries of patriarchal language and finally create their own language.

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