WOMEN'S STATUS IN THE EARLY XXth CENTURY SOCIETY AS REFLECTED IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S FICTION

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Abstract

The present paper analyses the status of women in the early XXth century society – whose values are not very well defined – as reflected in Virginia Woolf's following novels: 'Mrs. Dalloway', 'To the Lighthouse' and 'The Waves'. The emphasis is laid upon issues such as: marriage and motherhood, social role of women, women's fight and determination to get emancipated.

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf is recognized as a great novelist and essayist being a key figure in literary history as a feminist and modernist. Her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, appeared in 1915. Her major novels are the following ones: *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando: A Biography*, *The Waves*, *The Years* and *Between the Acts*.

Virginia Woolf's novels are highly experimental and impressionistic. Her fiction consists of *'brilliant and extraordinarily varied experiments each one searching for a fresh way of presenting the relationship between individual lives and the forces of society and history. She was particularly concerned with women's experience not only in her novels but also in her essays and her two books of feminist polemic: "A Room of One's Own" (1929) and "Three Guineas" (1938)'* (Mc Nichol, 1992).

2. The Woman as a Wife

On Marriage

Bernard in *The Waves* cannot bar the pressure of solitude. That is why he gets married and has children. He likes to be surrounded by people; he fears solitude. Clarissa and Sally Saeton are very good friends. They discuss about many things. But they speak of marriage always as a catastrophy. This must be the result of their teenage aspirations to be nonconformists and to disobey the established social conventions. In the end they both get married and have children. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe have a conversation during which Mrs. Ramsay insists that Lily must get married. Thus, marriage is a MUST. Trying to convince Lily to get married, Mrs. Ramsay told her that *'whatever laurels might be tossed to her, or triumphs won by her, there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman has missed the best of life'* (Woolf, 1992: 56). But for Lily, her painting was more important than marriage. Lily wants to urge her exemption from the universal law that it is a woman's duty to get married. She was not made for that, besides she liked to be alone, to be herself. Lily's opinion about marriage is the following one: *'she need not*

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marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation' (Woolf, 1992: 111). She was saved from that dilution by the power of her passion for art and especially for painting.

Old women pitied young women who had to get married and to pass through difficulties, trying to accommodate with their new life as married women. Peter Walsh thinks that divorce is possible and for some women there is nothing in the world so bad as marriage and politics. Clarissa Dalloway considers that: *'in marriage a little independence there must be between people living together day in and day out in the same house which Richard gave her and she gave him'* (Woolf, 1993: 53). She was not possessive, but very liberal.

In a scene from *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay were standing close together watching Prue and Jasper, their children, while playing. Lily saw them and she had a revelation: *'So that is marriage, Lily thought, a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball. (…) And suddenly the meaning descends on people, making them symbolical, (the meaning) came upon them and made them (…) the symbols of marriage, husband and wife'* (Woolf, 1992: 79-80).

2.2 Married Couples. The Relationship between Husband and Wife

The love for each other and the love for their children unite a couple. The wife's status in a certain couple is very important, she might be and equal partner, equal to her husband. Sometimes she willingly assumes her inferiority. This status is typical for the Victorian woman. But women started to change their attitude towards their status as women and wives. A woman is sometimes dominated by her husband, but not all the times. She is a Penelope, a mother-wife, a nurse.

Mrs. Ramsay understands her husband very well. He does not have to say anything. With one single look at him, she knows what he thinks and what he needs. This is not because she is a submissive wife, but because she loves him. Still there is this lack of communication between them. He finds himself sometimes unable to speak to her: *'But he could not speak to her. He could not interrupt her. He wanted urgently to speak to her now that James was gone and she was alone at last. But he resolved (...) and passed her without a word though it hurt him'* (Woolf, 1992:72). She understands him better than she does her. She goes after him because she knows that her husband really wishes to protect her. She takes his arm and makes him believe that she needs his protection. They go for a walk together.

Mrs. Ramsay is concerned with her flowers, he is concerned with his books. They do not seem to communicate. They discuss various things and they do not agree on any of them. They are different but they complete each other. She is trying to establish a route of communication between her husband and her, but she has to overcome many obstacles in order to achieve her goal. He feels that he cannot share her thoughts and that he is on his own and she is on her own, too. Anyway, he shows her that he loves her: *'He seized her hand and raised it to his lips and kissed it with an intensity that brought the tears to her eyes'* (Woolf, 1992: 54).

Mrs. Ramsay did not want to stand in the way of her husband's career. She had complete trust in him. After dinner, Mrs. Ramsay went with a smile on her lips into the other room where her husband sat reading. They did not want to speak to each other. This lack of communication was on purpose. He needed her presence only. Words were not necessary. Her presence was enough. She gives more than she receives from her husband.

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Mrs. Ramsay was reading a book. While doing that she became conscious of her husband looking at her. Mr. Ramsay liked to think that his wife was not clever at all, not book-learned at all: *'He wondered if she understood what she was reading. Probably not, he thought, she was astonishingly beautiful. Her beauty seemed to him, if that were possible, to increase'* (Woolf, 1992: 131-132).

Mr. Ramsay loves his wife, but, at the same time, he tries to dominate her. His wife would *'never for a single moment regret her decision* (of marrying him) *evade difficulties or slur over duties'* (Woolf, 1992: 56). Mr. Ramsay is a tyrant and he wears Mrs. Ramsay to death.

There was nobody whom she reverenced as she reverenced him. He stopped to light his pipe, looked once at his wife and son in the window and the sight of them fortified him and satisfied him. He wants sympathy from his wife. Without her, he felt he had no real value, he was a failure: her delicious fecundity versus his fatal sterility. She assured him that if he put implicit faith in her, nothing should hurt him, *'however deep he buried himself or climbed high not for a second should he find himself without her'* (Woolf, 1992: 44-45). She has restored her confidence in himself. He looked at her with humble gratitude. She and her husband seemed like two different musical notes, one high and one low sounding together in harmony. She did not like even for a second to feel finer than her husband.

Clarissa Dalloway is *'the elegant and vivacious wife of a Member of Parliament'* (Bradbury, 1994). Peter Walsh found her in her drawing-room sewing, mending her dress. Clarissa is like *'a reincarnation of Penelope'* (Fusini, 1993). She is a Penelope waiting for her Ulysses and Peter is her Ulysses, returning to her after an absence of five years, returning from India, but Peter is not her husband.

Mrs. Ramsay was knitting a stocking, while Clarissa was sewing her dress. *'Woolf loved to present her women in that posture of knitting or sewing. But it would be altogether wrong to see this as an indication of domesticity'* (Fusini, 1993).

Lady Brutton invites Mr. Dalloway to lunch, but he does not invite his wife. Clarissa was not jealous. *'No vulgar jealousy could separate her from Richard'* (Woolf, 1993: 45). Clarissa had been ill and her husband wanted to take care of her. After her illness, Richard insisted that she must sleep undisturbed. She sat thinking about her husband. Richard was so nice to her, he did not want to disturb her sleep because he was preoccupied by the state of her health. As compared to Mrs. Ramsay, Clarissa is far from being the perfect wife or ideal mother. Clarissa must have thought that Richard was the most original man whom she had ever met. She had her reasons, good reasons when she decided to marry him. Firstly, he treated her as his equal. He discussed politics with her, which was a privilege of men only. And secondly, she must have seen that she could rely on him, she was safe near him, he could protect her. This was because, when she first met Richard and her dog got caught in a trap, he released the dog's paw and took care of him. Richard was the man she needed.

Richard is at lunch with Lady Brutton, but he is thinking about Clarissa. He needed to see her, to be near her. He was eager to meet her. He wanted to give her a proof of his love. He wanted to remind her that he loves her. He set off with his great bunch of flowers held against his body, red and white roses towards Westminster, towards her, to say straight out in so many words: I Love You! But there is again this lack of communication between husband and wife. Richard gave her the flowers, but he was unable to speak to her, to openly express his feelings. He could not tell her he loved her. He held her hand. He thought that was happiness.

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3. The Woman as a Mother vs the Woman as a Hostess

3.1 A Successful Combination: Mrs. Ramsay

Mrs. Ramsay had not generally any difficulty in making people like her. She bore about with her the torch of her beauty. It was her effort of creation, her work of art, creating ties among people. She laughed, she gesticulated, Lily thought, how childlike, how absurd she was sitting up there with all her beauty opened in her, talking about something insignificant. There was something frightening about her. She was irresistible. She has always got her own way in the end because of her abundance of spirit. She put spell on all. Without looking young, she looked radiant.

Mrs. Ramsay is the female identification with the maternal. She had eight children. Her daughters – Prue, Nancy, Rose – respected their mother and admired her, but they wanted for themselves a life different from that of their mother. *'They wanted a life in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life, not always taking care of some man or other'* (Woolf, 1992: 183). She sat with her children listening to the sound of the waves, their fall on the beach. She murmured the words of an old cradle song: *'I am guarding you – I am your support'*.

Mrs. Ramsay has a close relationship with her children. She allows her daughter, little Rose, to help her prepare for the dinner party. The children, Jasper and Rose, were very fond of this ceremony: choosing jewels. They had to choose jewels that their mother should wear at the party*: 'Jasper offered her an opal necklace; Rose a gold necklace. Which looked best against her black dress?'* (Woolf, 1992: 87). She had a lot of patience with her children: *'Jasper rather liked her stories about Mary and Joseph (the rooks). She made him laugh'* (Woolf, 1992: 89).

Mrs. Ramsay puts her hopes and dreams into her children. She stroked James' head. She transferred to him what she felt for her husband. She kissed her little boy on the forehead. James hated his father because he interrupted the tender moments he was sharing with his mother. Mrs. Ramsay was reading a story to her son. It was from Grimm's book of fairy tales. It was *The Story of the Fisherman's Wife*.

'Mother and child are seen as objects of universal veneration and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty' (Woolf, 1992: 40). Thinking about her children, she wondered with sadness why should they grow up so fast, why should they go to school. She would have liked always to have a baby. She was happiest carrying one in her loving arms. She takes care of her children, then they grow up and leave. She tries to convince herself that her children will be perfectly happy. She loves them so much.

3.2 The Hostess: Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway

A hostess is a woman who receives and entertains other people as guests especially in her home. To be an excellent hostess is a difficult task. Some women are really eager to achieve this status.

She was not arrogant. *'Her only gift was knowing people on her spite instinct (…). How much she wanted it! The people should look pleased when she came in'* (Woolf, 1993: 111). This was her reason for giving parties.

Clarissa has the necessary qualities that make her a good hostess. She has openness, she likes people, their company, she knows how to be very attractive and cheerful. She believes in human relations. She wants to know people behind their masks. She is capable of sudden

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empathy with her guests. She wants to do good for the sake of goodness. She is able to give a successful party.

Clarissa is a typical social lady, snob, superficial, polite, decorative, flattering, but not with hidden interests, altogether charming in her intention to give pleasure to others and honour her guests. Clarissa is the soul of the party. She keeps her posture upright. This gives her distinction and elegance. She looks like she knows what she is doing and this is the most important thing. She has perfect manners. She knows the social norms of behaviour. Peter admired her courage, her social instinct, her power of carrying things through.

The social life in London was very active. People were going to parties. A special guest was coming to her party. It was the Prime Minister, the symbol of the English society: *'She escorted her Prime Minister down the room, sparkling, with the stateliness of her gray hair. She wore ear-rings and a silver green mermaid's dress. It was a breath of tenderness, an inexpressible dignity, an exquisite cordiality about her as if she wished the whole world well'* (Woolf, 1993:153). Most of her guests admired her and liked her: *'She was so charming to look at; she made her house so nice and her parties so nice'* (Woolf, 1993: 149). But these social triumphs – her walking beside the Prime Minister at her party – had a certain hollowness and she felt it.

Clarissa and Elizabeth, mother and daughter, were very different. Elizabeth is seventeen, she is a teenager. She is very different from her mother. The differences are both external and internal. She is not fair-haired, but on the contrary, she is dark-haired. She has round eyes, a pale face and nothing of her mother in her. They do not share the same passions.

Elizabeth does not help her mother organize the party. She is not as passionate about parties as her mother and Clarissa is not as passionate about religion as her daughter. She did not believe in God whereas her daughter went to Communion, she went to church every Sunday morning. Sometimes mothers are not models for their daughters, but this does not necessarily mean that they are not good mothers.

Clarissa had a passion for gloves and shoes, a passion for elegance. Her own daughter cared not a straw for any of them. Elizabeth really cared for her dog most of all. Elizabeth was at tea with Miss Kilman. She sat perfectly upright in her chair. So she involuntarily resembled her mother. Her daughter makes her worried when she spends so much time locked up in her room. She is afraid that her daughter might become a stranger to her. Because there is no much communication between mother and daughter, she talks to Richard: *'It might only be a phase, as Richard said, such as all girls go through … it might be falling in love…'* (Woolf, 1993: 45).

Clarissa suspects Elizabeth to be in love, but she does not actually know what is the matter with her. They are not close friends. They are more distant. The relationship she has with her father is closer than the one with her mother. Her father is proud of his daughter. Elizabeth was closer to Miss Kilman, her private teacher, than to her own mother.

Miss Kilman and Elizabeth were inseparable. Miss Kilman influenced Elizabeth's mind and personality with her ideas. One result of this influence was the fact that Elizabeth spent a lot of time in her room reading prayers from prayer books. Clarissa felt this woman was taking her daughter away from her. Elizabeth wanted to be an independent woman and have a job. She would have liked to be a doctor, or a lawyer or a politician perhaps.

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3.3 The Passion of Maternity: Susan

Some women want to be mothers. They desire that with great tenderness of heart: Susan, Lucrezia Warren Smith, Mrs. Ramsay. Susan and Mrs. Ramsay are the personification of maternal love. One of the symbols for maternal instincts, maternal love is the hen spreading her wings in order to protect her little chicks. *'Susan dedicates herself to the natural and earthly, animal physicality of her being'* (Parsons, 2000:7). Susan has hated school and decides never to send her children to school. She wants very much to be a mother: *'My children will carry me on (…) I stoop, I feed my baby (…). His eyes will see when mine are shut'* (Woolf, 2000: 59).

Susan asserts the following: *'I shall be debased and hidebound by the bestial and beautiful passion of maternity. I shall push the fortunes of my children unscrupulously. I shall hate those who see their faults. I shall lie basely to help them. I shall let them wall me from you, from you and from you'* (Woolf, 2000: 73).

Susan was crooning her baby to sleep: *'I sing my song by the fire like an old shell murmuring on the beach. Sleep, sleep, I say warning off my voice all who rattle milk-cans, fire at rocks, shoot rabbits, or in any way bring the shock of destruction near this wicker cradle, laden with soft limbs curled under a pink coverlet (…) I am all spun to a fine thread round the cradle, wrapping in a cocoon made of my own blood the delicate limbs of my baby'* (Woolf, 2000: 100).

There is a very powerful connection between mother and child: *'Sleep, I say and feel within me uprush some wilder, darker violence so that I would fell down with one blow any intruder, any snatcher, who would break into this room and wake the sleeper* (Woolf, 2000:95).

4. The Independent Woman

Women's Rights and Freedom

Women want to have a well-paid job that will help them earn their living. They refuse to depend on men for money; they refuse to accept that they have no alternative and must become housewives only. They want to choose their jobs, to be able to become doctors, lawyers, politicians; they want access to education, schools, universities; the right to vote.

Tansley is a little bit sexist. He underestimates Lily's talent, her intelligence, her creativity, originality and her imagination. She is an artist, but according to him, women cannot paint, women cannot write.

Women can also be book-learned and discuss about art. At Clarissa'a party, people discuss about Milton and Bach. Mr. Hutton, a very bad poet, always felt that Mrs. Dalloway was far the best of the great ladies of the English high society who took interest in art.

The Woman Artist: The Painter

Lily was strolling with Mr. Bankes and she told him that she would always go on painting because she was interested in art. Mr. Bankes was sure she would. *'Lily's picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled (…) One could not take her painting very seriously, but she was an independent little creature, Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it'* (Woolf, 1992: 50).

Lily Briscoe could not have endured Mr. Ramsay looking at her picture. She is very sensitive to criticism: *'Lily looked at her picture. She could have wept. It was bad, it was infinitely bad! She could have done it differently of course; the colour could have been thinned and faded; the shapes etherealized; that was how Paunceforte would have seen it. But then she did not see it like that'* (Woolf, 1992: 30).

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She is an innovative artist. She does not take her predecessors as models. Mr. Bankes puts on his spectacles and examines Lily's picture: *'She would have snatched her picture off the easel, but she said to herself, one must, she braced herself to stand the awful trial of someone looking at her picture. One must, she said, one must and if it must be seen, Mr. Bankes was less alarming than another'* (Woolf, 1992:88).

The picture was her treasure. She made no compromise in painting. Although Mr. Pounceforte's style was fashionable, she saw things in another way and she did not hesitate to paint according to what she felt. *'Then beneath the colour, there was the shape and she could see it all so clearly when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage conception to work dreadful'* (Woolf, 1992:23). Once her picture had been seen, it has been taken from her and this man had shared with her something profoundly intimate.

For Lily, art is a fight. That painting might as well be a novel and Lily Briscoe might be the image of Virginia Woolf and her struggle, her efforts to finish the novel.

The Feminine *Don Juan*

In direct contrast with Susan or Mrs. Ramsay, *'Jinny resembles a flickering flame of exuberance and vitality'* (Parsons, 2000:3). Her refrain: *'I dance, I ripple'* is very characteristic of her. *'She flits promiscuously through life and men responding to erotic sensation'* (Parsons, 2000:4). Jinny is active, full of energy. She enters the world of the parties. She is very concerned about her physical appearance, her external beauty. She is charming and coquette. There is this scene with the first party she attended: *'my hair is swept one curve. My lips are precisely red. I am ready now to join men and women on the stairs, my peers. I pass them, exposed to their gaze as they are to mine (…) our bodies communicate. This is my calling. This is my world'* (Woolf, 2000: 91). She finds the world that she dreamed of. She wants to be attractive to men, to charm them, to get their attention.

She does not want to become a wife and have children, to be loyal, faithful to her husband and take care of children. She likes her freedom. She does not want to get married. She likes to charm and this is what gives her pleasure. She likes to make men fall in love with her. Very young men watch her. She begins to master the techniques of seduction. The art of seduction is the only art that interests her: *'He approaches. He makes towards me. This is the most exciting moment I have ever known. I flutter. I ripple (…) Are we not lovely sitting together here, I in my satin: he in black and white (…) I am a native of this world. Here is my risk, here is my adventure'* (Woolf, 2000: 55).

This is Susan: *'I have lived my life (…) and I am now past thirty, perilously like a mountain goat leaping from crag to crag; I do not settle long anywhere; I do not attach myself to one person in particular'* (Woolf, 2000: 97).

As years pass, she is getting older and more alarmed because her beauty starts to fade. Men no longer seek her company and she finally realizes that she is alone and dissatisfied.

5. Conclusions

Virginia Woolf's famous novels are mainly about life, everyday existence, about war and its harmful effects upon society as a whole and upon each individual. They are about life and death being analytical, introspective and built by means of experimental new narrative techniques.

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Time is very important as well as the alarming lack of communication among individuals that create their own world and shut themselves in it.

Virginia Woolf's female characters create a model of feminity. The *post-war* woman or the woman of the twentieth century had many things to say and this woman *talked* inWoolf's novels. What are her values, her ideas, her ideals? They can be clearly identified if one reads Virginia Woolf's fiction.

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