

# Jacques Lacan and Susan Bordo and the Social Construction of Identity in Virginia Woolf's "The New Dress"

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**Abstract**—"The New Dress" is Virginia Woolf's short story about Mabel Waring who attends a social gathering wearing a new yellow dress. The story is written in a stream-of-consciousness fashion as it describes Mabel's thoughts and actions while she is at the party. According to Lacan's tripartite model of the human mind, Virginia Woolf's main protagonist in this story, Mabel, is entrapped in inevitable Symbolic order. She is a desiring subject who has left the fullness of the Imaginary order and has entered into the social realm of language. The 'lack' which has permeated her life is a central fact regarding her life. Throughout her life, Mabel develops a fragmentary, split, and divided self based on Others' responses to her. She is unable to interpret those innumerable contradictory responses towards herself. Consequently, she is constructed as a torn and divided desiring subject entrapped in a phallogentric Symbolic order.

**Key Words:** Subject; Identity; Social Construction; Body; Symbolic; Desire;

## 1. Introduction

Veena Sharma (2012) in her article entitled "Literary Work and the Mind: Approaching psychoanalytical Theory" notes that: Psychoanalysis today has become a psychology of the self, although there are wide differences in the way different schools address the self: British object-relations, Kohut's self-psychology, Lacan's return to a verbal psychoanalysis (172). Psychoanalytic literary criticism has its root in the work of Sigmund Freud and some other thinkers influenced by his work. Although psychoanalysis is a medical technique, it has proved invaluable in interpretation of literary texts. Freud himself quite frequently turned to examples from literature to illustrate his ideas. The findings of psychoanalysis have filtered into literary and cultural criticism and theory, providing a repertoire of concepts and terms that reach beyond those critics who describe themselves as psychoanalysts. Psychoanalysis does not stop in deciphering distorted ways in which the mind expresses feelings; feelings which could range from anxiety and fear to sexual desire. Psychoanalysis is also concerned with the dynamics of interpersonal relations and with the ways the self is constructed through interactions with its familial and sociocultural environment or discursive practices.

## 2. Jacques Lacan and Construction of Subject

Jacques Lacan argues that language by its very structure bars human subjects from fullness and unity and postpones the never satisfied movement of desire. To quote Freud, perhaps there is "something unsatisfiable in the nature of desire itself...". In the last session of his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis in a paper called 'Driven to Death' Lacan describes the place of the tragic hero (since (s)he is divided, fragmentary and unsatisfied) as "the zone between-two-deaths"(271-272). If the second death is the one which brings to an end one's existence, then what might be the first death? Man's fate is limited to desire; a desire that remains in a fundamental relation to death, therefore the birth of a desiring subject corresponds with the first death of the same subject. Lacan argues that:

Desire emerges at the moment of its incarnation in speech, at the moment when the child learns to replace its longed-for, absent mother by a word. The subject, therefore, can in a very special sense be said to *be* (structured by) the other, which in turn *is* (structured by) the discourse of the 'big Other' (culture) that we all inhabit (Parkin-Gountelas 5).

Therefore, the fundamental condition of human existence, according to Lacan, is "a relation of being to lack" (Parkin-Gountelas 82). Then the desiring subject

occupies "the zone between-two-deaths" namely the Symbolic zone or order.

According to Booker (1996), Murfin and Ray (2003) and Sarup (1988) Lacan's three orders of subjectivity are as follows: the first order of subjectivity according to Lacan is the Real. Of course it must be kept in mind that the Real is not what we call the reality. The Real is the intractable and substantial world that resists and exceeds interpretation. It cannot be imagined, symbolized or known directly, because it lies beyond language. The baby who has only needs which are satisfiable, and which makes no distinction between itself and the objects that satisfy its needs, exists in the realm of the Real. The Real is a place (a psychic place, not a physical one) where there is this original unity. Because of that, there is no absence or loss or lack; the Real is all fullness and completeness, where there is no need that cannot be satisfied. And because there is no absence or loss or lack, there is no language in the Real. Lacan notes that language is always about loss or absence; you only need words when the object you want is gone. If your world was all fullness, with no absence, then you would not need language. There is only complete fullness, needs and the satisfaction of needs, and the world of non-separation. Hence the Real is always beyond language, unrepresentable in language (and therefore irretrievably lost when one enters into language).

Prior to the mirror stage, the infant experiences itself fragmentarily and fragmented. This first stage is called the Imaginary, pre-oedipal or pre-linguistic, in which there is no clear recognition between the subject and the object. Convinced that it is part of its mother, the child cannot distinguish between self and others. The child confuses others with its own mirror reflections; and because of the fact that child's knowledge of itself is based on such misrecognitions; in this stage he experiences a tremendously divided self. Lacan's Imaginary order, which is loosely related to Freud's Pleasure principle, is a blissful fusion of infant and its mother's body.

But this stage is shattered through his recognition of individuality and alienation in mirror stage, when for the first time the child can recognize the Other. In this stage the child experiences his separation from everything and everybody. At this stage, although the child cannot control his body, he is able to distinguish between his own image or body in the mirror and outside world. With his own recognition in the mirror, the child begins and undergoes the introductory processes of identification, in which the child creates a kind of illusory experience of control of the self and the other. What the child anticipates is a sense of self as a unified, separate whole; the child sees that it looks like what "Others" look like. Eventually this entity the child sees in the mirror, this whole being will be a "self", the entity designated by the word "I". What is really happening, however, is an identification that is Misrecognition. The Child sees an image in the mirror; it thinks, that image is "ME". But it is not the child; it is only an image. But another person (usually the mother) is there to reinforce the misrecognition. The baby looks in the

mirror, and looks back at mother, and the mother says, "Yes, it's you!" She guarantees the reality of the connection between the child and its image, and the idea of the integrated whole body the child is seeing and identifying with. Consequently, the child identifies with the image of wholeness. This sense of oneness and also different from others, is established through an image that is both a reflection and a mirage of maturation (a false sense of individuality and independence).

But in order to achieve full subjectivity, the child needs to enter the Symbolic order which is associated with the acquisition of language. It is language which dictates, determines and at the same time constructs positions for the subject, which clearly distinguishes exact boundaries between self and Others. After experimenting the mirror stage, the child is compelled to enter the Symbolic world of language by oedipal conflict, for which Lacan uses the phrases of the Name of the Father and the No of the Father. These phrases imply that how father's emergence between the child and the mother forces the child to recognize alienation and separation and to use language to differentiate between itself and Others. Then the child experiences a system of linguistic differences and therefore accepts language's predetermined position in such binary oppositions as male/female, father/son and so on. Consequently linguistic expressions transform the child from the unity of being to split social being. Montashery in his article under the rubric of "A Short Application of Deleuze and Guattari's 'Schizoanalysis' on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (2012) argues that "Deleuze and Guattari idealize Lacan's concept of the Imaginary (pre-oedipal, pre-linguistic stage). They also see the transition into the Symbolic (Language, culture, and society) as a loss. They see child's entrance into structure and society as a tragedy (340).

As it mentioned above in the Symbolic order, linguistic expressions transform the child from the unity of being to split social being. For Lacan, there is no separation between self and society. He asserts that human beings become social by means of language; therefore it is language that constructs us as a subject. The view that our knowledge of the world, of Others and of self is determined by language is a ubiquitous maxim which pervades and permeates Lacan's works. Language is a prerequisite for becoming aware of self as a distinct entity. It is the I-You dialectic which defines subjects and shapes their very subjectivity. We all need to show and represent ourselves in language in order to make ourselves a distinct and separate being and self from Others. It is of high significance to note that even our access to Others also happens in language territory. There is no relationship outside language.

"*The New Dress*" is Virginia Woolf's short story about Mabel Waring, who attends a social gathering wearing a new yellow dress. The story is written in a stream-of-consciousness fashion as it describes Mabel's thoughts and actions while she is at the party. According to Lacan's tripartite model of the human mind, Virginia Woolf's main protagonist in *The New Dress*, Mabel Waring is entrapped

in inevitable Symbolic order. Lacan's view is that, from the time we enter language, we always have to "pass through the defiles of the signifier" (Easthope 41). As it went, Symbolic order stands for law, language, society, cultural beliefs, law of the phallus, etc. With her entrance into symbolic order, Mabel has become a tragic desiring subject.

But how is a fragmentary subject constructed? This takes us to Lacanian notion of "the dialectic of recognition". It means that one obtains his/her knowledge of himself/herself through Others' response. And this is most of the time problematic, because he/she can never be certain of the meanings of Others' responses to himself/herself, and then there are possible dangers of pitfalls of misrecognitions. Most of the time he/she has an idea of identity but it has got nothing to do with reality, it does not correspond with real life, and this is mostly because of the fact that he/she has misunderstood Others' responses and consequently misrecognized himself/herself.

Lacan argues that all subjects are to be realized in representations but at the same time these subjects are subject to misrepresentations. We represent ourselves and others interpret it and others represent themselves and we interpret them and both of the cases are subject to misinterpretations. Then any totalization about the Others or self is bound to misunderstanding. Moreover, everybody sees, judges and recognizes himself/herself in the light of others' beliefs, attitudes and responses towards themselves. This process can justify the point that subjects in Lacanian psychoanalysis are constructed through social and relational bounds; and because relationship which is in itself cultural phenomenon, happens in language, subjects are inevitably constructed through incessant interplay of language and society. Now the question is this: Is there any possibilities of mutual recognitions? Lacan answers that intersubjectivity can never be fully achieved; we can never go through another person's consciousness. Lacan continues that there is a kind of gap between the subject and the object, they are divided selves.

Confrontation of self and other is evident in every single line of the story. Characters are like a mirror. They mirror each other. Mabel sees her images based on misrecognition and misinterpretation. Deception is inherent in those images she receives from others. Mabel is confronted with many people in the day of the party and receives very different responses respectively. In an essay Woolf describes what she means by life:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpest of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms (qtd. in Childs 80).

The sources of these "myriad impressions" are people, memories, places, happenings, etc. And these diverse impressions are rendered through the technique of stream of consciousness. No other technique is able to capture the multiplicity and multidimensionality of the modernist experience so well. To show that "an ordinary mind"

receives different responses from outside, Woolf has exploited this experimental method; therefore, this technique is at Woolf's disposal to demonstrate the fact that how a single character is confronted with multiple pictures and responses about him/herself simultaneously and ultimately is torn between diverse and often contradictory responses. The character is unable to strike a right balance among those responses and consequently develops a fragmentary, divided and unstable self. In the party Mabel is wearing a yellow dress that she designed with her dressmaker specifically for this particular occasion. She has taken an image from an old fashion magazine from Paris and has spent hours and hours with her dressmaker to get the design just fit for this social gathering, where she wishes to make an image of perfection of herself. Virginia Woolf in her diary in 1925 wrote that "[m]y present reflection is that people have any number of states of consciousness: & I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness & etc". Woolf has explored and focused on clothes and the problems and pleasures of fashionability. Clothes in Woolf's fiction emphasize women's public visibility. She also explores consciousness and the ways it is constructed and its relation to clothing.

### 3. Susan Bordo and The Body

Montashery in his article entitled "A Feminist Reading of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*" (2012) argues that "[T]he specificity of women's bodies is increasingly becoming important in feminist theory (129). Susan Bordo opens chapter five of her influential book, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, with these remarks: "The body – what we eat, how we dress, and the daily rituals through which we attend to the body – is a medium of culture. ... The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture" (Leitch, et al. 2362); Therefore, for Bordo, the body is a powerful symbolic form; therefore in Bordo's view clothing is closely related to the body structure. On the other hand Woolf's interest in clothing and its effects on consciousness is related to her desire to particularize female subjectivity. She stresses the fact that consciousness is indeed a social, shared phenomenon—never wholly private and enclosed. Fashion or dress clearly has everything to do with the representation of women's public and social visibility. Clothes, like facial and bodily traits always correctly express character. *The New Dress* displays the effects of dress and fashion on female subjectivity. As Mabel arrives at the party and removes her cloak, Mabel sees herself in a mirror and immediately announces to herself that the dress is not right. There is just something wrong with it, although there is no indication of precisely what the problem is. The dress actually sounds quite exquisite from the description Mabel provides, with a high waist, long skirt and high sleeves, made of yellow silk. Preparing for the party, Mabel knows full well that she cannot appear fashionable in the party: "she could not be fashionable. It was absurd to pretend it even.....And getting

up, she had taken that old fashion book of her mother's, a Paris fashion book of the time of the empire, and had thought how much prettier, more dignified, and more womanly they were then, and so set herself—oh, it was foolish—trying to be like them". For sure the problem with Mabel is not much about her dress than her body. We read in the story that Mabel "dared not look in the glass". Why? Is it because of the shortcomings of her dress or her body? Mabel herself answers the question: "She could not face the whole horror—the pale yellow, idiotically old-fashioned silk dress with its long skirt and its high sleeves and its waist and all the things that looked so charming in the fashion book, *but not on her*, not among all these ordinary people". (emphasis mine). Therefore Mabel's body does not meet the demands of the patriarchal society. Virginia Woolf's *The New Dress* addresses women's struggles against inequality by way of illustrating how a patriarchal society has determined what is physically acceptable and what is not. Mabel is plagued with the knowledge of her own "appalling inadequacy" when faced to confront her physical shortcomings as she prepares for the party. She imagines everyone casting their judgmental and disapproving eyes upon her, making insincere clucks about how lovely she looks when in reality she knows they are lying. She does not live up to the social expectations placed upon the populace by patriarchal decree; even with a new dress, she must endure the heart wrenching stares and whispered comments that drive home this painful reality. Put simply, Mabel is not sexually and physically attractive.

Attending Mabel Waring's body, we see that she is excruciatingly aware of the fact that the limits of her body are the limits of her world. She is overanxious about her body, since it constitutes the very medium through which all subsequent symbolic performances must be undertaken. After coming to Clarissa Dalloway's party, she goes "straight to the far end of the room, to a shaded corner where a looking-glass hung and looked". She goes to shaded corner because of "her own appalling inadequacy which in turn sprang out of her physical shortcomings. And she goes and sits in front of the mirror because she needs it for the construction of her identity. We don't see her so much as we see her being seen. Very rarely we are given anything remarkable about Mabel's appearance; Mabel takes a long look at herself in the mirror and finds a seat on a sofa where she can still view herself in the mirror. As the other guests are enjoying themselves at the party, Mabel is zooming on her dress and obsessing about what the others are thinking about her. When the others attempt to make conversation with Mabel, she endeavours to scrutinise and interpret their words. She is entirely dependent on those people's words and commentaries because those reflections altogether construct her identity; but unfortunately she cannot resolve on their views because they give her different interpretations and reflections. The only time that Mabel thinks anything positive about this entire experience is when one woman tells her that her skirt is just the perfect length. In the next instant, a gentleman refers to a picture

which is very old-fashioned. Mabel misinterprets this comment and thinks that the gentleman is speaking of her new dress. Suddenly she again hates the dress and feels incredibly self-conscious. There in front of the mirror at first "she dared not look in the glass" but then she is soon attracted to the mirror in the drawing-room: she faces with the fact that "she was condemned, despised". Mirror or other people's reflections construct Mabel's identity. Although she anticipates the tragedy she is going to experience in Mrs Dalloway's party, she still insists in going there because she confesses that at her age with two children she is "so utterly dependent on people's opinions". She feels "like a dressmaker's dummy standing there, for young people to stick pins into".

## Conclusion

Montashery in "A Multidisciplinary Approach for the Construction of Subjectivity in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*" (2012) argues that "identities, far from being given in advance for individuals to step into, emerge over time through discursive and other social practices" (300). Based on this remark, Mabel develops a fragmentary, split, and divided self based on Others' responses to her. She is unable to interpret those innumerable contradictory responses towards herself. Consequently, she is a torn and divided desiring subject entrapped in a phallogocentric Symbolic order. At the end, Mabel begins to think of a way to help herself escape the undeniable shame that her dress is causing her. She thinks about going to the London library on the following day and getting books into which she will escape. She imagines herself becoming the characters about whom she will read, and suddenly she has the confidence to approach the hostess of the party. Rather than telling the hostess Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway that she is happy to be in the party, or rather than thanking her for having been invited, Mabel simply tells Mrs. Dalloway that she is leaving and that she has had a wonderful time. As Mabel leaves the party, she continues to contemplate on what others might be thinking of her. She believes they know she is lying about having had a good time.

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