

Rhoda's Non-Identity in Virginia Woolf's *THE WAVES*

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Abstract— Virginia Woolf in *THE WAVES* questions binary thinking regarding gender identity severely because it is reductive and restrictive. For this reason, Rhoda celebrates and welcomes diversity and ambiguity of gender. To Rhoda, featurelessness or facelessness is desirable, since it is malleable and opens up a space for more possibilities. Rhoda's relation to language and identity does not follow a very clear-cut path, like that of Susan, for instance, who identifies with the mother, and Jinny, who identifies with the father. For Rhoda, accepting existing identification paths which are predetermined and prescribed will trap and imprison her, and will not allow for emancipation or multiplicity. She is disdainful of identity, society and language. Rhoda revels in featurelessness and then it becomes clear that featurelessness *is* Rhoda's particular identity. She defines herself through not being like her other friends who try to claim their identities at their two meetings. In short, non-identity is Rhoda's identity.

Key words: Non-Identity; Identity; Gender; Facelessness; Language; Rhoda;

We are ourselves sea, sand, coral, sea-weed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves....Heterogeneous, yes...She is dispersible, prodigious, stunning, desirous.
- Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

1. Introduction

The Waves is Virginia Woolf's most poetical work; she once described it in her diary as "a play poem" (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 203). Woolf in *The Waves* recounts the life stages of her characters. The readers perceive them through their mental experiences and the way they respond to life. There are seven characters in the novel, but Woolf only gives voice to six of them, each of whom is first introduced as a child, and form the disparate consciousnesses of the novel. There are three female characters, Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda, and three male characters, Bernard, Louis and Neville. All six characters narrate the novel in turn, describing what they see, each according to their own sensibilities. In the beginning, they only show their ambitious and individual reactions to things around them. But as the narrative progresses, the children mature and are sent to school. At this stage, the boys and girls are separated save for holidays, when they are reunited again. At the boy's school, the character of Percival—who will come to be adored by all six characters—is introduced; his sudden death later in the novel will eventually affect them until the end of their lives. As the characters grow up, they begin to form individual identities.

2. Rhoda and Non-Identity

Rhoda stands for the waves in the novel. She is described in terms of the sea, water imagery, and waves. She is the one who is allured and attracted to "the call of the mother." However, Rhoda's status in the novel is privileged, since she neither rejects language like Susan, nor is willing to identify fully with the paternal world and become socialised entirely, like Jinny. She does not intend to occupy a fixed role and identity within the rigid and restrictive realm of the symbolic. Throughout the novel, Rhoda never accepts reconciling and identifying with the paternal; she is mostly drawn and depicted through sea imagery which stands for the maternal function—she is "the nymph of the fountain always wet" (*The Waves*, 146). With regards to Rhoda's divided identity, Taylor notes that:

Rhoda grasps for words, the moon's hand, but is swept under by the sea's crashing waves, its whispered rhythms, and is driven mad, "leaps," proving. It would seem, the dangers Kristeva notes for women who listen to "the call beyond time," of remembering the mother's voiced breath without, like Susan, identifying with it. (70)

Unlike Jinny, Rhoda is not able to confirm her identity by looking in the mirror, but she does attempt to subvert her so-called symbolic identity, which is no more than an illusion to her: "That is my face...in the looking-glass behind Susan's shoulder—that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face" (*The Waves*, 23). Mirrors to Rhoda offer only a delusional conception of a well-defined identity: "I hate looking-glasses which show me my real face" (*ibid.*). She knows that "wholeness is in fact a hallucination" (Davis, qtd. in Leitch, et al. 2399), and the unified reflection offered in the mirror is a mere outcome of linguistic effects.

Rhoda is also terrified by the idea of society, community or any kind of gathering, and implores that, "Hide me, I cry, protect me, for I am the youngest, the most naked of you all. Jinny rides like a gull on the wave...but I...am broken into separate pieces; I am no longer one" (*The Waves*, 58). Society for Rhoda epitomises the symbolic order, with its fully masculine and false conception of the self. But in the end, Rhoda seems to be unable to strike a right balance between the symbolic and the call of the mother, and teeters towards the sea; she sees herself part of the waves: "I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness" (59). She is dipped into the sea, and unable to take the moon's hand, which stands for language and patriarchy (and gendered male): "the moon rides through blue seas alone. I must take his hand; I must answer. But what answer shall I give? I am thrust back...I who long for...pools on the other side of the world where the swallow dips her wings" (58). Torn and divided, Rhoda is not able to decide which parent to identify with. Rhoda makes an analogy between her present anonymous situation, and that of fish caught on the shore: "What a humiliation! The old shivers run through me, hatred, as I feel myself grappled to one spot by these hooks they cast on us...Yet they have only to speak, and their first words...shake my purpose" (*ibid.*). As Taylor states:

Still caught between longings for the sea and for stability within the symbolic, Rhoda initially feels her existence on land or in society to be like of a fish on a hook, feels hatred and fear, humiliation, but words assuage her, she is drawn back to the world, desiring also that realm in which there is speech. (72-3)

Rhoda accepts that identity has "failed" her, and commits suicide. "We are nothing, I said, and fell" (*The Waves*, 34). Her suicide can also be interpreted as a kind of female resistance to the patriarchal system of language, which does not offer women a means of expressing their sexualities. Studies by Patricia Cramer or Annette Oxindine, for instance, read Rhoda as a lesbian: Cramer argues that "*The Waves* can be read not merely as a classic of literary modernism, but as a founding text for lesbian literary conventions" (459). She notes that:

Rhoda's characteristic gesture—'rock[ing] [her] brown basin from side to side'...suggests an auto- and homoeroticism. The sexual meaning of Rhoda's back and forth motion becomes clearer in a later passage when she says that she was 'rocked from side to side by the violence of [her] emotion' when a woman she admired sat opposite drinking tea.' (450)

Cramer also considers the images of Rhoda as a "nymph of the fountain always wet" to have a lesbian underpinning (451). Oxindine, meanwhile, argues that "Rhoda's suicide [is]...a sign of the lesbian's effacement within a social and linguistic system that denies her an articulation of self" (204). Rhoda is unable to find a proper language to express her sexuality and desire, which are defining markers of identity. Rhoda's deconstruction and disturbance of the symbolic is twofold, in terms of language and identity. She overtly questions the narrative language which Bernard speaks, and does not succumb to the prescribed gender roles, like those of Susan and Jinny. I argue, however, that she cannot be easily categorised as a lesbian, since it is not indicated very clearly in the novel. Instead, Rhoda is a sight or a meeting place of multiplicity. Her body speaks much louder than her words. 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) and in this novel Rhoda's body gains significance as it helps construct a unique identity for her; an identity which is not necessarily based on language. Montashery in another 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 (preoedipal, 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 to Rhoda, she seems not to be fully oedipalized and hence a potential figure to construct identity not according to Lacan's configurations and formulation of identity.

3. The Unbearable Weight of Identity

At the beginning of their reunion dinner at Hampton court, Neville notes that "we are laden. Being now all of us middle-aged, loads are on us. Let us put down our loads" (*The Waves*, 120). This "load" refers to the identities they have respectively acquired over the years. Rhoda's status is privileged, since she is the only character who does not identify with either parent, and claims no identity. She desires anonymity in the maternal space—since there will be no "load" on her there, being free from language and the pressure of identity, i.e., to be Rhoda. While the other characters try to demonstrate that they have distinct and different faces, Rhoda states: "I have no face" (18). This is repeated again in the reunion party, where Rhoda is

reluctant to claim identity for herself or acknowledge others' individuality:

I perceived, from your coats and umbrellas, even at a distance, how you stand embedded in a substance made of repeated moments run together; are committed, have an attitude, with children, authority, fame, love, society; where I have nothing. I have no face. (126)

But as the narrative progresses, Bernard's initial craze for fixed identity dissipates and he begins to question his own well-defined identity, and moves towards an estranged, faceless stance that is closer to Rhoda's; he finally comes to the realisation that the sequence in his language is an arbitrary element. Since the main proposition in the novel is the fact that identity is constructed through language, Rhoda fails to construct one of her own because she does not believe in that sequential order, either as manifested in the world or in language.

Rhoda is disdainful of identity, society and language. As noted above, identity in the novel is seen as a "load," and all the characters, in varying degrees, try to get rid of this burden. In this light, Rhoda's seclusion is quite justifiable because when thrust into any social scene, she has to be 'Rhoda'—a "load" imposed by society and its patriarchal structures so as to define her individuality. When Rhoda observes "two people without faces, leaning like statues against the sky," she then notes that "There is, then, a world immune from change...I find faces rid of features, robed in beauty" (58-9). Here, Rhoda echoes Susan's "When you are silent you are again beautiful" (73). Rhoda revels in featurelessness; it then becomes clear that featurelessness is Rhoda's particular identity. She defines herself through not being like her other friends who try to claim their identities at their two meetings. In short, non-identity is Rhoda's identity:

We cannot sink down, we cannot forget our faces. Even I who have no face, who make no difference when I come in...flutter unattached, without anchorage anywhere, unconsolidated, incapable of composing any blankness or continuity or wall against which their bodies move. (68)

Rhoda then openly claims that she, like her friends, cannot forget her face, though she does not have face. This paradoxical sentence clearly reveals that Rhoda's facelessness is in itself a face, through which she represents and makes herself distinct from the others. The difference between Rhoda and her friends is that they would find continual definition and redefinition of their identities to be wearisome, since they need to consolidate and confirm their already established identities. In this way, Rhoda's status is

privileged, because she does not need to reassure herself about her identity; her featurelessness and facelessness sums up her identity.

At the end of the Hampton Court meeting, Rhoda sees some anonymous figures coming out of the sea: "These are figures coming towards us. Are they men or are they women? They still wear the ambiguous draperies of the flowing tide in which they have been immersed" (131). Insofar as the figures are featureless and faceless, Rhoda identifies with them, but by the time they come closer, she describes the scene with contempt and disgust:

Now...as they pass that tree, they regain their natural size. They are only men, only women. Wonder and awe change as they put off the draperies of the flowing tide...Now light falls on them again. They have faces. They become Susan, Jinny and Neville, people we know. Now what a shrinkage takes place! Now what a shivering, what a humiliation! (131)

4. Conclusion

To Rhoda, featurelessness and facelessness is desirable, since it is malleable and opens up a space for more possibilities. Woolf in this novel questions binary thinking severely because it is reductive and restrictive. For this reason, Rhoda celebrates and welcomes this diversity and ambiguity of gender. Rhoda finalises her stance and view of symbolic identity with the following comment: "The old shivers run through me, hatred and terror, as I feel myself grappled to one spot by these hooks they cast on us; these greetings, recognitions" (131).

Rhoda's relation to language and identity does not follow a very clear-cut path, like that of Susan, for instance, who identifies with the mother, and Jinny, who identifies with the father. For Rhoda, accepting existing identification paths which are predetermined and prescribed will trap and imprison women, and will not allow for emancipation or multiplicity. In summary, Taylor makes a parallel between the three female characters of *The Waves*, and the three positions of identification that women may take in relation to the semiotic and the symbolic, as described by Kristeva, and argues that:

Susan represents the woman who fully identifies with the mother and rejects language, or the paternal, while Jinny represents the phallic woman who fully assimilates herself into the symbolic, rejecting the maternal and embracing the role defined for her within patriarchy. Finally, Rhoda represents the woman who is suspended in between, but who...eventually teeters on the side of the mother, goes mad, and embraces death (61-2).

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