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**A Phenomenological Reading of Virginia Woolf's Fictions: The
Process of Self-Formation**

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BY

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Abstract

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One of the most challenging issues in Woolf's novels was the notion of selfhood. Woolf tried to explain the nature of humanity through fundamental concepts such as temporality and intentionality. The same notions were the coral focus in Husserl's philosophy. Husserlian phenomenology was also an attempt to clarify the notion of consciousness and sense of selfhood. In a comparative attempt to adapt Husserl's philosophy and Woolf's viewpoint of the world, it has been shown that Woolf's characters develop their senses of selfhood through temporality, healthy displacements, intersubjectivity, epoché, categorial intention and other phenomenological characteristics. On the contrary Woolf depicted that those with unhealthy mental faculties do not have a complete sense of selfhood. Some of her characters who suffer from mental disorders or physical malfunctions have different notions of themselves than those with healthy consciousnesses. In three novels reviewed in this thesis, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf beautifully zeroed in on the importance of awareness of self-awareness as one of the most important criteria in defining who her characters are.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Edmund Husserl, Phenomenology, Selfhood, Consciousness, Sense of self.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is one of the foremost literary figures of twentieth century. Throughout her life she wrote nine novels, as well as letters, diaries and essays. Among her novels two or three are considered as masterpieces for she experimented with new techniques and subject matters that were uncommon in her era. One of the techniques which she usually used in her novels was the direct narration from the characters' point of views through stream of consciousness which is a technique of writing in which the writer lets the unconscious thoughts and urges emerge in her writing. She mostly focused on the development of her characters; rarely do they remain the same at the end of the novel; usually their cognition of themselves, their identities and their selfhood change at the end of the story as in the case of Mrs. Ramsay or Clarissa Dalloway. Her novels go beyond mere representations of life; on the other hand with a deeper look at them the reader can find fundamental philosophical issues in them. The common point among her novels is her unique representation of her protagonists. The way they form their selfhood i.e. the way they are aware of themselves as individuals; the ways they suffer from lack of subjectivity, uniqueness of being, or the way they see the world.

On deeper levels a phenomenological outlook helped delving into the heart of her writings and discovering the basic structures lying under the surface of the narration. It is a branch of philosophy primarily dealing with the individuals' consciousnesses and their relation to the world outside. Phenomenology is divided into many branches; one of which is Husserlian phenomenology. Husserl and his writings help us expanding

our views toward the world and reality; he rejects any dogmatic presuppositions about the world in order to find out the exact structure of consciousness in perceiving reality (Moran 9). Woolf and Husserl were contemporary; but it is not important if any of them happened to read each other's works and were influenced by them. What is worth noting is that thinkers and writers in twentieth century cared about the nature of human beings and the structure of their consciousnesses. They both took a huge step toward understanding human beings. Woolf was one of the experimenters in twentieth century; she, along with Joyce, began to experiment the uncommon narration in her writings; the unusual discovery of human beings and their consciousnesses; the process of comprehending themselves as selves; the significant role time plays in the construction of subjectivity and above all the existence of others, or in Sartre's words "the hell", which complements the notion of what we have of ourselves. In their case understanding humanity paralleled to understanding consciousness. She made an effort in order to understand the still unresolved mystery, consciousness, through detaching herself from her characters and their consciousnesses. This was a new technique to understand how they perceive the world. The epitome of this technique can be found in *The Waves*. She was also resolute to be a mediator as little as possible; the passages in *Mrs. Dalloway* which are dedicated to Woolf's voice can hardly be found. She usually stepped aside and let her characters decide how to perceive the world. Woolf was obsessed with our understanding of reality; of how we perceive the details and the way our consciousnesses respond to it. As a great writer, she was endowed with the extraordinary power of understanding human beings; on the other hand Husserl tried to find out the same mystery in philosophical terms. A phenomenological reading of Woolf's novels lead

the readers, in a different way, to the comprehension of her works on deeper levels.

1.2 The Purpose of the Study

This study which involved the application of phenomenology to Virginia Woolf's fiction showed the common points between Husserl as a phenomenologist philosopher and Woolf as a phenomenologist writer who considered notions of consciousness, temporality, lifeworld which means the usual habit of our everyday lives, intersubjectivity which is the interaction between people, and epoché which is a suspension of our natural beliefs as fundamental issues in understanding the subjectivity of human beings. Instead of articulating the rigid expressions in philosophical terms Woolf tried to embed them in her work of art in the familiar setting, in the everyday life which the common readers have acquaintances with. Now the point in accomplishing this task was not an unrealistic account of application of some philosophy which happened to be burgeoning at the time Woolf was writing. It was the turning point of the century, when modernization ruled everything. There was a great need for a new philosophy which would help people get over the late nineteenth century's "fin-de-siècle". When the Enlightenment era lost its sparkle, the dubitable viewpoint toward science was more and more epidemic (Marcus, Nicholls 25). An inclination toward irrationalism was growing as it was obvious in the writings of Nietzsche. Husserl found himself in such an environment where he objected to Darwinism's determinism and Brentano's psychologism. He responded to the demand of the era. Approximately at the same time Woolf portrayed what was called the new outlook toward reality in her works; she was influenced by the time theories of Einstein and Heisenberg and experimented different kinds of temporality in her narration.

What caused both of them to focus on the same issues was the turn of view inward. A great change in Newtonian physics caused writers and thinkers to doubt about the nature of time and space, the taken-for-granted presuppositions they had of physics. Concurrently Heisenberg's theory of relativity caused a great doubt toward science. All in all an era was created in which great thinkers and writers, with doubts in their hearts about the preceding ideas, began to theorize and write anew. Mostly all of these were the results of living in a specific era. They were both curious about the structure of consciousness and the formation of selfhood, not identity; the formation of which is different from the construction of selfhood as far as the former bear a more ontological status while the latter is formed after an individual becomes aware of her self-awareness. So Woolf's writings are philosophical fictions and they paved the way to find the common grounds between phenomenology and her art.

Phenomenology influenced twentieth century philosophy gravely. It offered lots of new ways that later different schools of thought borrowed their core ideas from. It is not just one school of phenomenology but it is "phenomenologies" (Moran 3). As Heidegger in his 1927 lecture claimed "There is no such thing as the one phenomenology" (qtd. in Moran 3). Heidegger, Ricour, Sartre, Gadamer and lots of other philosophers benefited from the ideas of Husserl and established schools of thoughts. Husserl, at the end of his life, unaware of the possible effects his thought were going to have on his students, claimed that phenomenology is a movement without any followers (Moran 4). Yet Nowadays it is divided into lots of subcategories. With Heidegger redefining this specific school, lots of attentions were drawn toward it. While rejecting the old notions of selfhood, Husserl made an attempt to rediscover

consciousness and its structure. He strongly objected to the genetic discovery of consciousness. He was influenced by psychologist Brentano to a great extent; Brentano was after the scientific description of consciousness. Husserl's philosophy is divided into two eras; the former, which was influenced by Brentano, is called descriptive phenomenology and the latter, which is considered as his mature thoughts, is called transcendental phenomenology which is, as earlier mentioned, accused of being a Neo-Kantian philosophy.

Phenomenology has different expressions and ideas; in order to understand the applicability of this school of thought to some literary works one has to perceive the main ideas of it. What was applied to Woolf's fictions was the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl. There are some notions in this viewpoint such as intentionality, epoché, transcendental idealism, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, lifeworld and the notion of time which are explained in chapter two. As it has been mentioned earlier, phenomenology's main point revolves around the idea of phenomenon and its givenness to the subjects; or the way it appears to us, the experiencers. The experiencers' consciousnesses intend on perceiving an object, depending on the modes of the givenness of the objects, act of experiencing happens. As far as every one of us experiences a situation differently perspectivism appears; this caused many critics to accuse it of being a relative ground of philosophy. Yet what Husserl was after was reaching a firm ground of objectivity among the horizons of experiencing, or what is called idealism in phenomenology. Yet in order to reach idealism, he claimed, we have to suspend our everyday understanding of the world; he claims that we have to suspend our natural attitude in order to reach a fresh experience of every phenomenon; this is called epoché. This is an affair done by

every individual in order to comprehend how consciousness works. The primary understanding of phenomena, without any intermediary outlook such as scientific or religious, is at the heart of epoché. While we are experiencing our unique experimentation of the phenomena we are applying reduction; an action which is indispensable in understanding the structure of consciousness.

Three important terms which revolve around the notion of selfhood in phenomenology are subjectivity, intersubjectivity and time. Husserl emphasizes the significant role of time in the formation of subjectivity. What happens to us basically to know who we are is the fact that we can remember what our names are, or our recognition of our own faces in the mirror or the fact that we have a somehow fixed personality; all these contribute to form a unified selfhood through time although we become different people every day of our lives. This astonished Husserl i.e. the capacity of human beings to maintain a monolithic selfhood while they are changing every minute of their lives. Husserl's solution to the problem of selfhood is interesting; he offers uniqueness and social nature of consciousness simultaneously. There is no isolated self in phenomenology (Circosta 93). The idea that human beings can develop a sense of selfhood through their lives if they are living in a cube without any connection to the outer world and other people is preposterous. While an individual's consciousness is unique to her i.e., nobody cannot be aware of her awareness as she is of hers, her selfhood, or, in this case, her consciousness, is also dependent on other human beings' recognition of hers. Other factors are involved in the formation of selfhood in Husserl's idea such as historicity, embodiment and sentiments. How an entity develops the sense of social selfhood depends on the relationships one has with other beings.

On so many levels Woolf has a close affinity with Husserl (Circosta 55). She was aware of the role of time in defining who we are. In *Mrs. Dalloway* she portrayed the development of consciousness and self-awareness through remembering, perceiving and imagining. She depicted Clarissa's understanding of herself through her remembrance of the times in Bourton which was passed with Peter, Sally and Hugh. Clarissa is engaged with the memories of the past; her subjectivity is formed through remembering. Husserl also refers to the act of remembering, perceiving and forecasting as the pearls in a pearl necklace which construct our very subjectivities (Zahavi 2003 81). Surprisingly almost all her characters in this novel are engaged with their past or their future as in the case of Rezia who is always guessing about the future of her marriage. A small portion of the novel is dedicated to the present states of characters; mostly the readers get to know Woolf's nostalgic characters through their remembrance of the things past. She perfectly clarifies the intentionality of the characters' consciousness on perceiving the reality, imaging or remembering. On the other hand she also showed the psychosis caused by the lack of the ability to adjust oneself with time in Rhoda's case or the separation from time as in Septimus's. She portrayed the extent of damage on one's identity when one cannot understand the nature of time and temporality. Apparently she often enjoyed using the stream of consciousness in her novels to reveal the structure of the consciousness working. What she objected to was the materialistic writing in which the writers try to focus on details regarding character's raiment or houses. On the contrary she enjoyed focusing on the streams of thoughts mingling with characters' current situations causing them to separate themselves from the world and drown in the ocean of their thoughts. Not only Woolf never ignored the uniqueness of our individuality formed by our thinking on our own self-

consciousnesses, which is “sui generis” (Zahavi 2003 124), but also she regarded the crucial existence of others in forming social selves.

She was also aware of the influence of history and society on self-formation as in *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*. Somehow humorously she portrayed the changes happening to her character, Orlando, through different eras. She even extended her humor to Orlando's transsexual stages through history. And as in the latter novel her fine example is shown in the repression of the Shakespeare's imaginary sister in sixteenth century. Although some might not consider this one as a novel, it is a great contribution to the understanding of consciousness formation in different eras; although Woolf's main goal by writing this novel, in the first place, was a feminist one.

She depicted perspectivism in depth and when the horizons clashed she began to comprehend the structure of consciousness which perceive it all. In *Mrs. Dalloway* she repeatedly focused on different perspectives of different characters of one phenomenon. One of the scenes in this novel is when a group of people stand in front of Buckingham Palace trying to figure out what the airplane is writing in the air. The various perceptions of Septimus's suicide by the Smiths, Clarrissa and Rezia prove her doubt toward perceiving a phenomenon from one aspect. This also happens in *To the Lighthouse* when Lilli's viewpoint clashes with Carmichael's or that of Mrs. Ramsay.

Woolf's consistent emphasis on the inefficiency of words to express what she really feels meets Husserl's epoché. Woolf suspends what we expect of the phenomenon by describing it in details in an effort to convey what really is happening. Woolf's dubitable outlook toward religious, scientific and everyday attitude we take toward the world is

shown in some parts of her fiction. In *Mrs. Dalloway* she uses every single chance to criticize the pathetic situation of the psychologists such as Bradshaw. She harshly criticizes psychology and accuses it of being a dogmatic science; surprisingly the same attitude is true about Husserl. He did not approve of psychology at all. She accuses Bradshaw and other psychologists in order to show how shallow their diagnoses are about their patients. While Septimus is suffering from a fragmented self, which was caused by the horrifying war, he recommended constant resting in bed. Her harsh criticism toward religion is revealed in her character Miss Kilman whose dogmatic attitude towards the world causes her to miss what others, such as Clarissa whom she was jealous of, experience.

And the weight she puts on the existence of others in formation of the self is again obvious in her novels. She valued the uniqueness of her characters while she illuminated the role others play in formation of the self. Woolf's characters are engaged mentally with each other; they relate to each other; they make comparisons among each other and this way they make up the whole idea of selfhood. Clarissa's selfhood is partly formed by the parties she threw and the people she met in the parties; Hugh's selfhood was also constructed by others' feedbacks and his social status and Sally's youth was defined by what the neighbors and her friends thought of her. Besides all that a subtle example is the old woman in *Mrs. Dalloway* who appears twice at crucial times and she makes a revolution in Clarissa's outlook; through Clarissa's identification with her and her loneliness fundamental issues such as the reason of living triggers in her mind. Woolf's characters are not formed in isolation; their consciousnesses are formed through the interactions they have with the world and other people. Every character of hers acts

as a mirror who reflects the selfhood of others to them. As Husserl earlier mentioned to be aware of our own consciousness is valuable yet in order to live and have a sociable life it is inevitable to mature the social selves through interactions with others (Husserl 149).

1.3 The Significance of the Study

In most literati's views the interdisciplinary study of literature and philosophy is undesirable and, even in some cases, unacceptable. Natanson explains to the readers the ways of the appreciation of looking at a literary work from a philosophical angle which is not an oversight of the basic characteristics of literature in favor of philosophy (qtd. In Circosta 41). Philosophy has always had the task of paving the way to a more vivid understanding of reality, individuals, morality and other certain issues concerning human beings; actually some of the schools focus on a more ontological issue such as the existence of the individuals and the process of the formation of the consciousness while other schools investigate the issues concerning humanity such as morality or the construction of reality. Literature on the other hand is an effort to explore the same issues in a less rigid way. When applying philosophy to literature, as far as they are considering the same issues, it is not necessarily a reduction but it is a way to show what great philosophers have been engaging with throughout history is implicitly embedded in fictions written by great writers; the same issues of being, reality and morality. So it is necessarily required to mention that there is a difference between philosophy of literature and philosophy in literature. While the former revolves around the issues of the nature of literature, the latter is trying to make the implicit philosophical issues explicit in the work of art.