Ambivalent Women's Roles in Virginia Woolf’s Fiction

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts (Literature) to Yarmouk University

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family…

Especially to my beloved parents for encouraging me, and instilling the importance of hard work and higher education.

My sister, Dr. Lamia Hammad, who was always motivating and inspiriting me to do my best in this thesis.
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Abstract

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This Thesis discusses the ambivalent roles of women in Virginia Woolf's works in the context of the biographical factors and social ideology of the Victorian Age. It studies three of Woolf's novels; The Waves (1931), Mrs. Dalloway (1925), and To The Lighthouse (1927).

The thesis illustrates that Woolf's viewpoints towards women roles are ambivalent and contradictory, and this is a reflection and a result of many aspects that took place in her personal life and the social system of the Victorian Age. Therefore, this study follows the historical-biographical approach by referring to Woolf's own diaries and essays to provide evidence of Woolf's ambivalence.
Introduction

Virginia Woolf was an eminent English novelist, short story writer, essayist, critic, and one of the pillars of modernism and feminism whose works span the period of the early decades of the twentieth century. Woolf was born on 25th of January, 1882 at Hyde Park Gate, London. In addition to her very interesting novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs.Dalloway* (1925), *To The Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *The Waves* (1931), and *Between The Acts* (1941), Woolf is best known for her influential feminist views, especially in her famous works *Three Guineas* (1938) and *A Room Of One’s Own* (1929). She tried to commit suicide twice but did not succeed. However, her third attempt worked out when she drowned herself in the River Ouse in 1941.

As a modernist author, Virginia Woolf is famous for using the Stream of Consciousness, a technique invented by William James, in most of her novels such as *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931). In her essays, such as "Modern Fiction", she refers to the Stream of Consciousness and confirms that the mind must be open to experience,
and that the writer should record all the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall. Furthermore, she composed many other essays, which are considered influential and central documents of modernism where she developed a theory of realism, a theory that establishes the relationship between art and the real world. In this regard, Lydia Blanchard says that Woolf “is a writer who wanted to change not only the shape of modern fiction but also the shape of the modern world” (96).

Because Virginia Woolf was born in the Victorian Age, it was uneasy for a woman like her to stand out and break the rules and constraints of such a patriarchal society. Women in that era were taught to be submissive, and were supposed to stay at home so they could fully perform their domestic duties as wives and mothers. In Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction, Jenni Calder explains the role of women by saying that a woman’s purpose is to “‘improve the character of men’ and thus of society” (34). Confirming the importance and validity of Woolf’s feminist achievements, in her essay “Virginia Woolf and Her Critics: ‘On the Discrimination of Feminisms’ ”, Lydia Blanchard says that “A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas are required readings not only for literary critics interested in Woolf but for all feminists” (96).
Besides, in *Virginia Woolf: Feminism and The Reader*, Anne E. Fernald argues that Virginia Woolf was an unusually subtle feminist thinker.

If one traces female characters in Virginia Woolf’s fiction, one will find that Woolf portrays two types of women in her works: the traditional sacrificing mother, and the rebellious 'New' woman. In some of her novels, she shows us the successful woman, for example, as a writer who surpasses the boundaries and restrictions in order to achieve her own goal. As an activity, writing, in particular, explains the attempt to gain equality with men, for it was considered as a manly duty. In “Women Knitting: Domestic Activity, Writing, and Distance in Virginia Woolf’s Fiction”, Sayaka Okumura says that writing “has been associated with masculinity, as a mode of highly demonstration and self-centered action” (1). Furthermore, the feminist theorists Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert argue that when a female writes a text she becomes in control of it just like a powerful and dominant man over his woman. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gubar and Gilbert claim that “the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power” (6).

In addition, in *Virginia Woolf: The Major Novels*, John Batchelor confirms that Woolf “writes sensitively and at length about the identity of the woman writer because how a woman can, and should, write, is a
question that never ceases to preoccupy her” (44). This is very obvious in her fiction and essays; for example, in *A Room of One's Own*, she suggests that if a woman is to write fiction, she has to have money and a room of her own which means that privacy and a good financial status are essential elements for a woman to start writing.

Similarly, Woolf brings in her works other female artists who excel in different forms of art such as painting. For example, in *To The Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe is a painter who completes her painting by the end of the novel; her completion of the painting indicates her determinism to fulfill her vision. In “Challenging Gender Roles Through Narrative Techniques: Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*”, Ozlem Uzundemir says that “Woolf’s transmission of the authority to a female artist displays her deviation from the traditionally accepted roles of women” (9). From this perspective, Woolf creates a possibility for women to go beyond traditional social roles towards achieving new roles.

However, in some other works by Virginia Woolf, one can clearly observe a different portrayal of women: women take such roles as sacrificing mothers and domestic inferior wives simply like Susan, in *The Waves*, and Mrs. Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse*. Such critical views support my thematic perspective which focuses on Woolf’s variant ways of portraying womanhood in the patriarchal society in that period.
After the previous survey of some of Virginia Woolf’s female characters and some of the critical studies of her works, one notices that much has been said about the role of Woolf as a revolutionary woman author who expressed and played revolutionary feminist roles. However, Woolf’s ambivalent treatment of womanhood has not received much attention by scholars. I can say that my study will examine Woolf’s ambivalent, or variant views of womanhood in her novels. Therefore, I will shed light on this variety in *The Waves*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse*.

The purpose of this study is to show that Woolf’s different characters reflect the impact of the Victorian Age during which women were torn between their inherited domestic roles and their modern ones that started to appear when some women became aware of their rights. In other words, women at that time had two ambivalent desires: one is a search for independence and creativity while the other one is a return to their traditionally domestic roles. In addition, the fact that Virginia Woolf herself was prevented from going to school, and instead got educated at home, plays a significant role in making her views ambivalent and contradictory to some extent. I believe that most women in the Victorian Age suffered from ambivalence, for revolutionary women were
negatively perceived by society so they ended up having troubles and depression which may have led to suicide.

In my thesis, I will follow the historical – biographical approach which implies that any literary work is seen as a reflection of the author's life and times. This study analyzes the writer's biographies to prove the relationship between the author's life and her literary works. Hippolyte A. Taine, a french critic, is one of the pioneers who practised the historical-biographical approach. In his *History of English Literature* (1890), Taine generally argues that the environment, times, and situation of the author are always reflected in the author's works. He also suggests that the analysis of the environment could give a good understanding of the work of literature. In this regard, Taine's most famous sentence 'race, milieu, et moment' means in English 'nation, environment or situation, and time.'

Therefore, my own focus in this thesis is on the views and perceptions of Virginia Woolf herself; Virginia herself is somewhat vague and ambiguous. Many previous studies tackle her feminist writings and emphasize the idea that Woolf is extremely feminist throughout her works, yet I am here trying to prove that she gave weight to the traditional role of women exactly the same as the revolutionary one because she does not want to take sides. In other words, she does not