



Mothering the mother: The Un-being, the maternal and modernist trauma in Virginia Woolf

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Received: 11 Nov 2021; Received in revised form: 15 Dec 2021; Accepted: 21 Dec 2021; Available online: 31 Dec 2021
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Abstract— *The essay explores the intricacies of how Virginia Woolf rehabilitated the erstwhile masculine inter-war trauma and memory back to the maternal, the source of civilisational guilt and collective advertent amnesia. It unravels a concomitance and convoluted relation between the Maternal trace and Modernist trauma of anonymity. It elucidates the Modernist existential trauma while resuscitating the silenced voice of the maternal forces, both creative and destructive.*

Keywords— *Maternal, Trauma, memory, authorship, textuality, sexuality, gender, Modernism, War.*

The *narrativisation* and *denarrativisation* of the self is resonant with the presence-absence of maternal apparition, mothering and mothered by an overbearing trauma of loss and vacuousness. It is evident in the epistemic collapse and dissolution of the inter-war subjectivity. The anxious imagery of a mother with a protruding womb holds an analogy with the enumerable countless tombs of the war massacre.

Virginia Woolf disseminates a female discourse of trauma as an alternative to the prevalent masculine and phallogocentric inter-war narrative.

The loss and bereavement is not gendered per se but the lost signification of a mother's epistemic, ontological or cultural presence is held at direct relation with the unfathomable war experience where the agential and literal annihilation is not and cannot be registered, culturally or epistemologically.

The discourse in 'Mrs Dalloway' or 'Orlando' is the almost usurpation of the masculine war eulogy. However the feminine void with the overbearing mother overtakes and assimilates the Modernist discourse.

The motherlessness is privy to Woolf's lack of maternal presence in the formative years and the forced creative asphyxiation when the doctors prevented her from mothering. The literary offspring are consequentially unmothered and motherless.

The meta-discourse also works at a literary and historical level which Woolf underlines in

'The Room of one's own' where an unrecognised yet haunting tradition of Writers foremothers are levitating around the narrative offspring of Woolf, however the resonance and repulsion are colliding and co-existing.

The post-structural spectre or trace of feminine consciousness is pre eminent in Woolf's novels. The modernist maternal phantom subverts the high culture masculinist war trauma to restructure trauma and cultural rememory back to a forgotten yet insidious counter-discourse. It *denarrativises* and *renarrativises* the textual and sexual agencies, pertinent to the palimpsest like texts of Virginia Woolf.

The almost pathological image of a mother, tending and tethered to the sickly, deteriorating and diseased, is evident in Woolf's mother's pamphlet on allegiance and care for the diseased, called 'Notes from Sickrooms,' the maternal trace almost became the extension of infirm, devious yet sickly, analogous to the modernist existential and disintegrated consciousness. (1.)

Biographically, Julia Jackson tended to her ailing mother as a young woman. Perpetuating a pathological tradition, contaminated yet life-affirming, mothering the child and mothering the sickly, mothering and being mothered by life and death respectively.

Virginia Woolf claims in her autobiographical 'Moments of Being' to have been incessantly baffled by a "non-being" lurking across the fictional accounts in her novels, the work of art—"behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern," this

artistic spectre is the mother, the metatextual trace of traumatic “non-being.”

“The presence of my mother obsessed me.” (2.)

Woolf attempted a materialisation of the fleeing ghostly maternal signification in her novel, ‘To the Lighthouse.’ However Mrs Ramsay couldn’t alter the traumatic disavowal of creation, epistemic and reproductive. Creation from which Woolf consistently shirked away, her trauma in the form of her art couldn’t completely erase the phantom. The therapeutic characterisations are at best a masquerade.

The repression of that maternal trace augmented her distance from integrated literary being.

She couldn’t ritualistically obliterate or adopt the foremothers. The self-flagellation and selfassertion in the maternal trace are revealed through a self-effacement in the stream of consciousness where her texts define and consume themselves at the same moment.

The maternal trace is evident in the queering of modernist discourse where established platforms are bygone. “I leant out of the nursery window the morning she died.” The aberration, the liminality of the maternal agency is always on the threshold, vacillating between covert revelation and overt secrecy.

“There is the memory; but there is nothing to check that memory by...” Woolf is enunciating about the literary foremothers, her own mother, her lost offspring, her literary offspring, trauma, memory and the void of female creativity, holding an analogy with mass destruction of nameless, anonymous people in the world war, artistically dismembered and scaffold by hindsight toward the unrecognised mother, whom they couldn’t bear though she bore them.

Virginia Woolf in her novels strives to mother the mother, her mother and the lost mother, the unceasing trauma and guilt in the literary and biological offspring of women authors who neglected the mother, who were neglected by the mother.

The slight allusion to the parenthetical death of Mrs Ramsay in ‘To the Lighthouse’ highlights this maternal guilt cognisant of the Modernist identity disintegration. The madness of discourse is the unsaid, the literary margins, the uprooted maternal presence in Aphra Behn’s overcompensating philanderer protagonists or Charlotte Bronte’s Bertha Mason’s nonsequitur discourse, in the Austenian domestic haunting.

The decease of characters like Septimus is abrupt and linguistically imploding, unable to register itself, pragmatically and semantically. It alludes to the erasure of the menstrual blood, life affirming and fatal like the forgotten mother.

The suicidal reverberations in death of the mother in childbirth, more metaphorical and semantic than literal, are ascertained by the ineffectual suddenness of death, ceasing to exist, un-recognising trauma. Woolf’s later suicide is prophetically engorging her narratives.

The anonymity of being and by extension, the impregnated non-being is blatant in Modernist trauma and cultural memory where the masses died, suddenly, with no teleology or rationale.

“Among your grandmothers and great-grandmothers there were many that wept their eyes out... They are now and then mothers and daughters.” (3.)

The borderline queer affiliations with the female muse of Virginia Woolf, writing through her mothers, embody the impulse for reparation of the butchered maternal presence. (4.)

However the fleeting trace is belligerent, antagonistic and more destructive than creative. The repressed, unnamed, unheard return to disembark the narrative. The elliptical narrative of Woolf with the coexistence of the incommensurable and the commensurable, self-effacing and self-asserting in her novels, like ‘Between the Acts’ where the abscess, the purulent, the pathological tries to return.

Woolf created an alternative discourse of the “un-being,” subverting the textual-epistemic and physical fetishisation of the female in High Modernism. She revised and recovered the trauma of maternal trace and reinstated the politics of gender in the twentieth century Modernist conception of identity and trauma.

The recurrent homelessness, the whimsical selflessness of the narrative dispersion and textual breakdown is the split in consciousness, the one she refers to in ‘A Room of one’s own’ – “sudden splitting off of consciousness... when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical.” This split is between mothering and being mothered, urge to announce the maternal trace and the repulsive trace unwilling to register itself in the phallogocentric discourse.

Virginia Woolf realigns the High Modernist masculine war narrative which had been exclusive and donning different names over ages like the Bardic poetry, the picaresque, the Bildungsroman.

She retraces it to the trauma of anonymity, anonymity mothered by the mother, the bludgeoned creator whose siren like presence in a Medusa like appearance becomes overbearing amidst the interwar trauma, men suffer and experience what they had inflicted, trauma of anonymity, and the consequent recognition of the mother.

Woolf's texts are belligerent and radioactive; they instigate the lost multiplicity of maternal discourse to eventually resuscitate the same, out of the grave of wilful amnesia, the modernist trauma, debilitating and unspeakable, mothered by the unspoken mother.

The *counter-denarrativisation* by Virginia Woolf is as radical as is vicious like in 'The Voyage Out' or 'Night and Day.' The peculiarities of the motherly like over indulgence or eccentricities are a masquerade to untether the narrative from the traumatic presence, both maternal and modern. The texts consume themselves in the process of creating themselves, signifying the mother.

Woolf mothered the texts while the texts mothered her, consuming and creating, birthing and executing at the same time.

The monstrosity of the mother is not inherent to her but a memory, exfoliated from the lost narratives of enumerable, lost to the unknown and the unknowing, it's the raking guilt of a civilisation, the decadence in renewal, it's the epiphanic pre-modern self-consciousness, gendered and gazed at by Woolf's text, the identification between the lost subjectivity and forgotten maternal is however eluded as the narrative implodes.

Virginia Woolf redefined, returned and rehabilitated trauma to the feminine, the maternal and the unnamed.

CONCLUSION

The Research essay investigates a latent yet undeniable concomitance between trauma narratives of diversified discourses, women harbour the trauma of unrecognized mother throughout their textual self-narrativisation essentially corresponding with the Modernist trauma of the unknown.

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