



Rationalizing 'identity' through Virginia Woolf's Lily Briscoe in To the Lighthouse

Amjad Alshalan

Department of English, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
amalshalan@ksu.edu.sa

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Abstract:

The 1927 publication of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (2007) was a landmark for both the author and the development of the novel in England. Since Woolf's death in 1941, *To The Lighthouse* (2007) has risen in importance as a focus of criticism concerning issues of gender, empire, and class. This paper will not be focused on the narrative techniques used by Woolf as the 'stream of consciousness' has been covered excessively by many scholars. It rather repositions the novel within the critical framework laid out by Toni Morrison in two of her critical works, *Playing in the Dark* (1992) and *The Origin of Others* (2017), to extend Edward Said's argument on hegemony as discussed in his *Orientalism* (2003) to rationalize Woolf's own understanding of identity within a 21st century racial framework. The discussion of Morrison's critical text invites, as I argue in the paper, re-positioning the link between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe into a new perspective, beyond the representation of Briscoe as simply an 'Orient'. Morrison's critical framework presents a more concise understanding of identity within the creative framework of literary texts to reflect a subjective conviction of the author in question.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 1927 publication of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (2007) was a landmark for both the author and the development of the novel in England. Since Woolf's death in 1941, *To the Lighthouse* (2007) has risen in importance as a focus of criticism concerning issues of gender, empire, and class. The complexity of Woolf's writing in *To the Lighthouse* (2007) lies in the fact that the novel is not concerned with the plot, but instead it paints a verbal picture of the Ramsays and their friends. It is a complex novel due to its density that requires many levels of interpretations. Moreover, it is one of the most widely read and critically scrutinized of Woolf's novels and has been examined in relation to every modern phase of literary criticism from formalism to postmodernism and postcolonialism. This paper will not be focused on the narrative techniques used by Woolf as the 'stream of consciousness' has been covered excessively by many scholars (Yaxiao Cui (2016), Graham Fraser (2020), James Harker (2011), Marco Caracciolo (2010), James F. Wurtz (2010), Jane de Gay (2012), Ann Marie Adams (2012), Angela Frattarola (2009), Helen Tyson (2021), Vid Simoniti (2016) Fan Wang (2020) and Amber Jenkins (2021) to name a few). It repositions the novel within the critical

framework laid out by Toni Morrison in two of her critical works, *Playing in the Dark* (1992) and *The Origin of Others* (2017), along with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (2003) to rationalize Woolf's own understanding of identity within a 21st century racial framework that might help in projecting the link between Mrs. Ramsays and Lily Briscoe into a new perspective. To go beyond the view that paints Briscoe as a representation of the 'Orient', Morrison's critical framework invites a novel understanding of identity within the creative framework to reflect a subjective conviction rather than politicizing subjective concerns.

Identity

Identity within social sciences can be said to be divided into two 'senses', social and personal. James Fearon (1999) explains that the social meaning of the concept "refers simply to a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes" (Fearon, 1999, p. 2). The personal meaning of identity is linked to a group of distinguishing characteristics, as explained by Fearon, "that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable" (Fearon, 1999, p. 2). The different meanings of 'identity' might explain the reason behind the concept having a double sense within literary criticism as it is interpreted by three different agents: the author, reader and critic. In the case of Toni Morrison, her writings seem to approach the concept as a reader, writer and critic all at once through her exploration of literature as an African American writer and critic, which makes her view on the integration of the notion of identity within a literary narrative adequate as it is placed within the spectrum of personal vs social senses (Fearon, 1999, p. 2).

Edward Said, in *After the Last Sky* (1986), links the notion of identity with the concept of the Other as he states the following: "Identity—who we are, where we come from, what we are—is difficult to maintain in exile (. . .) we are the 'other', an opposite, a flaw in the geometry of resettlement, an exodus" (Said, 1986, pp.16–17). Said's way of exploring the notion of identity, generally speaking, parallels Morrison's utilization of identity in gauging the presence of blackness within American literature. In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Morrison explains the way Othered writers use their writings to extend their own identity to become a social category that would acknowledge or validate their own personal struggle, she writes: "when other writers work in highly and historically racialized society. For them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. it is (. . .) becoming" (Morrison, 1992, 4). The similarity between Said's and Morrison's critical perception of identity has been pointed out by Susan G. Cumings (1997), stating that Morrison is the "descendant of Edward Said's *Orientalism*" (Cumings, 1997, 45). Whereas Cummings focused on the American Africanism presence within American literature, I attempt in this paper to broaden the scope of Morrison's understanding of identity to rationalize Woolf's construction of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe within a creative framework. Through her critical writings, Morrison used the notion of identity to argue against the innate nature of racism (Cumings, 1997,46). In a larger perspective, she tackled systematic racism from a literary point of view to announce a form of literary hegemony based on the marginalisation of the black presence within literature. Whereas Said referred to it as a Western postmodern tendency that "has seized upon the ahistorical weightlessness, consumerism, and spectacle of the new order" (Said, 1994, 329), Morrison generalized it for being a flaw within literary

criticism that promotes a discriminatory exclusion of the black presence (Morrison, 1992). Interestingly enough, both writers affirm that Western masterpieces were never questioned by assuming, as Said puts it, “the integrity (...) of their cultural masterpieces, their scholarship, their worlds of discourse” (Said, 1994, 259). Morrison’s critical texts broadened the application of the notion to be more traceable within literary texts. Morrison’s rhetoric easily removes the negative connotation of being Othered as a flaw, to it being a sign of difference that disables the hegemony of the superior force that aims for stability through abuse of power since “Racism precedes race” (Morrison, 2017, p. xi). The position of a black writer and an Arab writer within American criticism highlights the importance or the versatility of the notion of identity within a postcolonial discourse. They both agree that Western masterpieces pose a challenging case in regard to racial presentations and perceptions of fictional characters. This does not reflect a need for a form of censorship or ban of certain stories, but it calls for an updated mode of reading and criticism that would comply with our cosmopolitan time.

Since Morrison’s criticism is an oppositional one that stresses the importance of the reader in relation to the text (being positioned as white) (Morrison, 1992, p. xii), it poses the hypothesis of having the reader of literature being predominately white (Morrison, 1992). Would Woolf’s way of presenting Lily Briscoe be problematic now as it is not being read through the perception of a ‘white reader’? An exposure to a piece she wrote prior to the publication of the novel might present a new take on the way she ought to present the Chinese character. In *On being Ill* (2014a), Woolf discusses the exclusion of pain within the thematic representation of human experience of literature (Woolf, 2014a). It specifically tackles the inability of literature in portraying pain to the reader as a sentiment since it has an empirical value attached to the body (Woolf, 2014a). The short piece might draw a similarity between Woolf’s and Morrison’s critical stands for being both propositional and centered around the reader. It should be noted that the short piece has a reference to Chinese people (Woolf 2014a), which might be interesting in relation to the representation of Briscoe as Woolf expressed envy towards them as they would “know the sound of Antony and Cleopatra better than we do” (Woolf, 2014a, p.9). For Woolf, Briscoe does not represent only a different race and language than hers, rather Briscoe represent “a tremendous breach of tradition” (Woolf, 2014b, p. 23). So in a way, it might poses the question of whether Woolf’s treatment of Briscoe is racist. Through the examination of the way Briscoe was presented in the novel, we will be able to understand further Woolf’s own rational regarding other races, a method that is promoted by Morrison when examining literary texts that deal with racial issues (Morrison, 1992, p.11). It is not necessarily to say that Woolf’s treatment of race is racist but we cannot hide the racial connotations that were exhibited in the novel (as it would be clarified in later parts). The way Woolf presented race in her short piece, *On being Ill* (2014a), as something that is linked to tradition and how it can enable outsiders in understanding English literature (something she affiliates herself with) better than native speakers parallels what Morrison describes as race in her works. In *The Origin of Others* (2017), Morrison defines race explicitly as “a constant arbiter of difference as have wealth, class, and fender—each of which is about power and the necessity of control” (Morrison, 2017, p. 3), she later adds “Race is a classification of a species – othering expresses the social/psychological need for a stranger an other in order to define an estranged-self” (Morrison, 2017, p. 15). Morrison’s critical voice becomes stronger when

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discussing the tendencies attached to race as she specifies scientific racism as “to identify an outsider in order to define one’s self. another possibility is to maintain (even enjoy) one’s own difference without contempt for the categorized difference of the othered. (not an innate condition)” (Morrison, 2017, p.6).

What Woolf exhibits in the novel and the short piece is an example of what Morrison refers to as scientific racism that can be interpreted as her own way of rationalizing the notion of identity. A glimpse of Woolf’s interest in the notion of identity is projected in the novel through Mr. Ramsay, who has a dominant presence due to his position as a philosophical figure. Throughout the novel, he expressed ideas and expressions that allude to his struggling state of having an anxiety being the typical white male thinker. This is shown when he was wondering why he can’t reach a state referred to as ‘R’, the narrator of the novel explains:

He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q [...] But after Q? What comes next? [...] Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still if he could reach R it would be something. Here at least was Q. [...] and proceeded. “Then R ...” He braced himself. (Woolf, 2007, p.28)

The fact that he cannot reach R is significant since R is his last name initial. It suggests that his presence in the novel, as the intellectualized male figure, is a metaphor of the an identity that is not identified by itself as it needs an Othered identity to be identified. His contemplation of his own position as a figure in his own culture reflects what Morrison identified as scientific racism; “identify an outsider in order to define one’s self” (Morrison, 2017, p. 6). Such explanation of racism might help in understanding the way Woolf constructed Briscoe and Mrs Ramsay as the dynamics between them can be said to project “racial self loathing and racial superiority” (Morrison, 2017, p. 14), which has been tackled by some scholars as “duality inherent in ruin” (Fraser, 2020, p. 119). The violent imageries within the novel, such as the scene where a fish was thrown back after being mutated by cutting “a square out of its side” to create a bait (Woolf, 2007, 159), and the opening of the middle section that depicts a skull being wrapped with a scarf (Woolf, 2007, p. 101), can be explained through what Morrison described as a reflective figurative tool used by authors to “talk about themselves” (Morrison, 1993, 17). In a way or another, *To the Lighthouse* (2007) reflects Woolf’s own rational on race in away that her own existence can be linked to Mrs. Ramsey herself since like herself, Mrs. Ramsay is obsessed with one thing: “the effort of merging and flowing and creating” because “if she did not do it nobody would do it” (Woolf, 2007, p. 73). The act of merging, flowing, and creating expresses the role of a writer who is focused on creating a universe that reflects her own views.

Mrs. Ramsay

As a reader of this novel, one would see Mrs. Ramsay as a dedicated wife, who pays attention to her house and tries her best to make all her family members comfortable. However, if this character were to be viewed from a different perspective, one would notice that she actually represents a hegemonic role that is linked to the identity of all the characters involved in the plot; since all the characters are defined in relation to her including Mr. Ramsay himself. Even though he is considered an influential figure in this novel, he always seeks Mrs. Ramsay’s affection to secure his position and to demolish his fears of being forgotten after his death. It can be said that she represents Woolf’s own understanding of the notion of identity as she tries

to unify the individuals by making them ignore the differences and the distinctions between them. Her desire of unifying individuals is demonstrated during the dinner scene, in which she wanted her children to only focus on points of connection and coherence (Woolf, 2007). Moreover, this particular scene presents how an identity is able to unify individuals by creating a stable moment for them to remember. As a catalyst of identity, Mrs. Ramsey cares about the present moment because it is the moment that will determine the past and affect the future. She was so obsessed with making the dinner perfect (Woolf, 2007), because it is going to be a part of the guests' memory and will determine their future relationships. Her deep hegemonic desire to unite people is represented further symbolically through her act of knitting in which knitting represents her desire to stick everything into a cohesive whole; it reflects a focal point shared by Said and Morrison regarding the notion of identity being a product of a hegemonic culture. The hegemonic nature of the Western culture is explored both by Morrison and Said to explain the presence of the Other within a Western narrative. Edward Said declares that it is hegemony "that gives Orientalism" its strength to control the relationship between West and East (Said, 2003, p. 7). Toni Morrison on the other hand, uses the concept of the Other to coin a phrase that parallels Said's Orientalism to refer to the black presence within American literature, Africanism (Cumings, 1997, p. 47). By doing so, she was able to demonstrate how the hegemony of the Western narrative is systematic and based on the way the culture regulates not only its relationship with outsiders but members of its own, which explains Woolf's utilization of Briscoe inside the novel, Morrison writes:

there are also powerful and persuasive attempts to analyze the origin and fabrication of racism itself, contesting the assumption that it is an inevitable permanent and eternal part of all social landscapes. (. . .) I propose here is to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions (Morrison, 1992, p. 11).

What Morrison is referring to as a racial hierarchy is a result of a cultural hegemony that justifies the empowerment of a certain race over other races. Racial superiority has been explored further in Morrison's *The Origin of Others* (2017) where "race has been a constant arbiter of difference as have wealth, class, and gender—each of which is about power and the necessity of control" (Morrison, 2017, p. 3). Briscoe's position within the novel is fundamental in understanding Woolf's rational on identity and race in relation to Mrs. Ramsay if viewed through the lens of 21st century outlook.

Lily Briscoe

The hegemonic nature of Woolf's rationalization of identity can be clearly seen through the interaction between Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay. Briscoe, as perceived in this novel, is a painter who is trying to paint a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay. Her identity in the novel has been set on stone as an extension of Mrs. Ramsay's presence and what sealed her inferior presence is the phrase "Chinese eyes" (Woolf, 2007, p. 13), which Mrs. Ramsay chose as an indirect justification of Briscoe not being married. Such context makes the relationship between Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay a hierarchical one as it illustrates how "Race is the classification of a species" (Morrison, 2017, p.15); a process of Othering that expresses "the social/psychological need for a 'stranger', an other in order to define an estranged-self" (Morrison, 2017, p.15). Such hierarchical nature of the relationship is evident in the scene that groups Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay together, where the 'Chinese' painter "had looked up at last" to have a better view of Mrs.

Ramsay. Not only she had to look up to emphasize the embedded hierarchal inferiority, but she was “ Sitting on the floor with her arms round Mrs Ramsay’s knees” (Woolf, 2007, p. 44). From such scene, one would infer the inferior nature of Briscoe’s identity since she can not be identified as one of the Ramsays. Briscoe’s marriage in the novel is another reflection of how Woolf’s understanding of identity is hegemonic in nature with Mrs. Ramsays attempts in imposing marriage on the Chinese painter. Said’s *Orientalism* (2003) explained how the Western culture gained superiority and created its own identity “by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (Said, 2003, p. 4). In a way, Woolf’s employment of marriage in relation to Briscoe can be seen as an application of cultural hegemony that targets the identity of the Other. The controlling relationship between the two characters is expressed flawlessly by Said through what he calls cultural leadership that is given to ‘European cultures’ (Said, 2003). It was not only marriage that signifies the hegemonic nature of the relationship that controls the two, but also a psychological and creative one which is reflected visually through Briscoe’s paintings.

One can see that through the image Briscoe used to present Mrs. Ramsay in her portrait, in which she used a purple triangle to present Mrs. Ramsay. This purple triangle is similar to Mrs. Ramsay's own vision of the essence of the individual as a "wedge-shaped core of darkness" (Woolf, 2007, p. 54); the visual representation of reality reflects the character’s own understanding of identity as pointed out by Morrison where she explains: “an image increasingly rules the realm of shaping, (. . .) an image can determine not only what we know and feel but also what we believe is worth knowing about what we feel” (Morrison, 2017, p. 36). So both Woolf and Morrison have an inclination regarding the importance of shapes and symbols in reflecting identity within the creative process. It has been emphasized by making Briscoe finish her paintings by simply moving the tree in her painting more to the middle of the canvas, reflecting a “brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself” (Woolf, 2007, p. 119), as she was “losing consciousness of outer things” (Woolf, 2007, p. 114). Vision becomes a focal element in the way Woolf expresses the characters’ relationship with their own identities. Having Briscoe being a painter and making the characters perceive the same image differently, the lighthouse, indicates such emphasis. The lighthouse to Mrs. Ramsay has a significant value that differs from the way Mr. Ramsay views the lighthouse. To him the lighthouse does not have any value, because it is an object that exists in the background and has no intellectual merit. The narrative of the novel makes it appear as an illusion that has been created to unify the attention of the characters to strengthen the theme of the novel and to create a visual centre of the narrative. That’s why Mrs. Ramsay is always looking at the light and at some point becomes the light itself, “ and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke...she became the thing she looked at—the light for example” (Woolf, 2007, p. 54). The affinity between Mrs Ramsay and the lighthouse explains her everlasting impact on Lily Briscoe. The idea that embodies Woolf’s construction of the image of the lighthouse and Mrs Ramsay is voiced by a character in the novel itself, Mr. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay's philosophy debates whether or not a person can be empirically certain that objects have a distinct and continued existence apart from our perceptions of them, as he tells Briscoe, “Think of a kitchen table then when you're not there” (Woolf, 2007, p. 19). Though Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts are not directly expressed anymore, her influence is apparent; especially, her influence on Briscoe. Some essential, invisible aspect of her character is imparted through Briscoe, who even begins to feel

sympathy for Mr. Ramsay that she was never able to feel while Mrs. Ramsay was alive. Moreover, the fact that she finished the painting after Mrs. Ramsay's death proves the invalidity of Mr. Ramsay's philosophy. That's because Briscoe was affected by Mrs. Ramsay from just thinking of her.

2. CONCLUSION

The notion of identity happens to be the center of Briscoe's characterization that made the narrative of the novel become popular among the 21st century critical landscape. The racial depiction of Lily Briscoe was popular among commentators since the phrase "Chinese eyes" (Woolf, 2007, p. 13) seems to govern a negative connotation. The paper attempts in presenting the notion of race from the perspective of a white writer and a person of color critic to shed some light into the way the creative process makes tracing the racial tendencies of the author hard to be detected. It does not aim in presenting the politics behind Woolf's beliefs of race and the implications of such depiction on the readership of the novel, rather it repositions the novel within the critical framework laid out by Morrison in order to rationalize Woolf's own understanding of identity within a 21st century racial framework. It focuses on the relationship between Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe to go beyond the representation of Briscoe as the orient. The notion of identity became the center of the discussion and the theoretical framework of the analysis as it presents Woolf's own understanding of race and how looking into Briscoe's characterization through the lens of Morrison's critical framework helps in viewing Woolf's own understanding of race rather than projecting political views of race through Briscoe. From examining Woolf's portrayal of Briscoe, it appears that her application of the notion is hegemonic in nature. The exploration presented a major question on Woolf's own understanding of race if it is simply a "classification of a species" (Morrison, 2017, 15). It appears that Woolf's understanding of the notion of identity and race are based on a hierarchical order, which was supported by the visual analysis of Briscoe's visual work and the construction of some of the scenes in the novel. As the notion of identity is divided into two senses (social and personal), analyzing it within a literary framework becomes difficult as the analysis should reflect the author, reader and critic of such literature. Morrison's propositional criticism made it more traceable as her critical pieces presented the notion of identity in a balanced way and allowed for a balanced view of Woolf's own understanding of race within such framework.

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