



Conducting Patriarchal Reality in Feminine Consciousness

Işıl ÖTEYAKA¹

Keywords

Virginia Woolf,
stream of
consciousness,
patriarchy

Abstract

Written with stream of consciousness technique, Virginia Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall*, displays its narrator as a character who seems to be lost in digressions into a free flowing consciousness that includes remarkable existential questions about self, social constraints, and gender roles. However the female narrator is free and content in her flow of ideas through her mind, her reality is reflected within a male world in which her ideas are entrapped by the patriarchal influence. A small mark on the wall becomes the center of many connections that represent the patriarchal domination in Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall*. Narrator's stream of consciousness embodies a rage against the domination of reality by the patriarchal system.

Stream of consciousness technique enables the reader to access to the flow of thoughts of the character by means of interior monologues, and it shortens the distance between the reader and the character. The readers are allowed directly to the inside of a character's mind which reflects the character's emotional, moral and intellectual world without being exposed to the speculations of the first person or the third person narration. Character's uncensored private thoughts within his mind together with the way they are represented, either logical and orderly or scattered and disorganised, provide clues to the character's personal traits such as his mental condition or emotional stability. Moreover, throughout the interior monologues, the reader learns a lot about the character's understandings of his external reality. Virginia Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall* displays its narrator as a character who seems to be lost in digressions into a free flowing consciousness that includes remarkable existential questions about the self, the social constraints, and the gender roles which inform the reader about the narrator's perception of life and reality that seems to be entrapped and dominated by a patriarchal system, and this system is reflected through the subjective manner of the narrator who draws an image of a female narrator who seems more expressive and articulate in her inward world that gives her an area for a free speech. However she is free and content in her flow of ideas through her mind, her point of views are mostly concerning the problematic aspects of the gender roles. Her digressions when she looks at the mark on the wall lead her to the various levels of consciousness in which a small mark becomes the center of many connections that represent the patriarchal domination on the identity of the narrator's external world. As a result, her ideas are also entrapped by the patriarchal influence.

¹ Corresponding Author. Res. Assist., Dumlupınar University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, isil.oteyaka@dpu.edu.tr

In the Mark on the Wall, the narrator projects her inner vision of the things on a small dot on the wall which later turns out to be a snail. Her consciousness converts the objectivity of the object, which is a mark in The Mark on the Wall, into subjectivity of the vision of the character. Harvena Richter states that "*It is the emotional experience of the object, rather than the object itself, which is known.* Thus the object may be altered or colored by the character's mind and emotions; it becomes a mirror image, an extension of the self" (67). So it is the character that colors the object with her own emotions and attitudes, and endows a meaning to the mirror image that reflects the complex state of mind.

From the very first moments of her realizing the existence of the mark, her ideas are mingled and interrupted with the male presence: "I thought of the cavalcade red knights riding up the side of the black rock" (Woolf 2425). That male existence becomes dominant as she jumps from one thought to another moving between past and present while speculating on the mark and its possible reasons. At first she thinks that the mark was made by a nail for a miniature of a lady and she describes the lady like a doll with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks and lips that represent the woman like an object of fun. The lady image is rendering women to the image of a puppet, which positions them as mere objects of pleasure, a source of delight or joy. The narrator seems to be mocking that image without referring any rational, educational or intellectual traits which would grade a woman at a higher level in a society. Reversely, the lady is described like a woman who displays superficial values lying in outward appearance that is shaped by the admirations of a male mentality. Just as the narrator is speculating on the possible people who might have liked that picture, she says "...so he said,..." (Woolf 2425) which is a sudden, unexpected expression implying the existence of male authority in the presence. That situation also puts the reader in a kind of curiosity to find out whether the last sentence expressed before "so he said" or the whole idea about the miniature and the people belong to that male voice or not. The male voice continues in the narrator's mind by portraying the women in the image of an "old lady about to pour out tea" while men are represented by "a young man about to hit the tennis ball in the back garden of the suburban villa" (Woolf 2425). This male voice depicts women as devoted to home duties and pleasures in domestic areas in a passive motion whereas men are represented as active figures and free individuals in open air. That kind of masculine point of view puts restrictions on the female identity and narrator's female mind seems to struggle against male rooted restrictions and identifications when she imagines herself at London subway: her hair flying back without any single hairpin, "all so casual, all so haphazard" contrary to the stereotyped behavioural manners.

The idea of God makes her consider the afterlife where "there will be nothing but spaces of light and dark, intersected by thick stalks, and rather higher up perhaps, rose shaped blots of an indistinct colour- dim pinks and blues" (Woolf 2426). The narrator's consciousness gives her a kind of dream state of happiness, a sense of liberation. In this world, she wants to "sink deeper and deeper away from the surface" (Woolf 2426). Marder states that "caught between the two worlds she searches for something intermediate between the two" (131) and "significantly, it is Shakespeare, the man of luminous mind, who is her symbol of reconciliation,

combining the opposites" (131). The image of Shakespeare "sitting solidly in an armchair" and looking into the fire and having "a shower of ideas fell perpetually from some very high Heaven down through his mind" is very much like the mirror image of the narrator unwilling to move from her chair while having a stream of various thoughts while sitting in front of the fire. The narrator reflects Shakespeare like a double image. Shakespeare as a male figure becomes a representative of her state. She finds her double in a male world. As she continues her digressions, she finds herself in the conflict ones again and now she thinks about the period of the reign of Charles the First, which is again a male figure in her digressions. She speculates about the flowers grew in the reign of Charles the First, and becomes a romantic figure lost in the deep forests searching for a peace of mind in her inner world instead of being curious about the "shell of a person" that makes the world "an airless, shallow, bald, prominent" place. Her inner world makes her happy and helps her to find freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions. Just as she has deeply plunged into the depths of her inner world "leaving the description of reality", she suddenly finds herself caught by the word "reality": "The military sound of the word is enough" she discerns. She characterizes reality with military sounds which associates it with masculine power. The reality is embodied with patriarchal rules. Like an army, it has its strict rules and obligations set by patriarchal mentality. She goes on: "It recalls leading articles, cabinet ministers- a whole class of thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation" (Woolf 2427). Marder depicts that "the mention of 'leading articles, cabinet ministers,' points to an association between the world of facts she has been writing about and the masculine principle" (132). The existence of this masculine principle becomes more obvious as the narrator jumps to her childhood memories. Her memories consist of a world of order including "Sunday afternoon walks, Sunday luncheons, and also ways of speaking of the dead, clothes, and habits" (Woolf 2427). It is a world of rules, a world that decides even about the shape and the colour of a table cloth according to some strict rules and standards, and then she reaches a decisive point: "What now takes the place of those things I wonder, those real standard things? Men perhaps, should you be a woman; the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker's Table of Precedency" (Woolf 2427). The reality set by those rules gives "an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom" which is not a real release and in this regard, people do not become liberated, self decisive individuals but figures of slaves that are governed by a false reality and a false freedom.

The mark on the wall catches her sight again urges her mind toward the circle of contradictions in which "the narrator sits imagining a utopian retreat into a feminine world" (Marder, 132). Her mind finds freedom in "a quiet, spacious world, with the flowers so red and blue in the open fields" (Woolf 2428). It is a world "without professors or specialists... a world which one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin...How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world..." (Woolf 2428). She finds her freedom in her mind as she imagines, yet she is suddenly interrupted by the existence of masculine power. Patriarchal order thrusts itself into her dreams: "if it were not for Whitaker's Almanac- if it were not for the Table of Precedency!" (Woolf 2428). It is Whitaker that informs her about the hierarchy in the society telling that "the archbishop of

Canterbury is followed by the Lord High Chancellor; the Lord High Chancellor is followed by the Archbishop of York” (Woolf 2428). Whitaker is a representative of masculine reference that stands for hierarchy, ranking and measurement that restrict and suffocate her. She is always reminded by those forces that her freedom and her own “reality” are restricted and governed by patriarchal order. It is only nature that consoles her and reminds the danger of collision with reality.

The mark on the wall both confuses her with conflicting emotions and also saves her from these confusions. She again fixes her eyes on the mark and grasps a plank in the sea which makes her really happy and which gives her “a satisfying sense of reality” in which all the patriarchal formalities and restrictions turn to mere “shadows of shades”. It is only nature that reminds her that she lives, that she is alive and free, yet it is again a male figure that interrupts her in her dream. It is a male voice saying that he is going to buy a newspaper which she responds by saying only “Yes?” without having any inclination of getting into contact with the male world.

The narrator of *The Mark on the Wall* is entrapped by the patriarchal society and she is enclosed within the borders of masculine propensity. Her state of consciousness is in search of a freedom which will give her a satisfying sense of reality enabling her to tear down the walls of masculine orders. Nevertheless, she is intruded by the echoes of masculine existence during her seeing, feeling, thinking and experiencing moments. Her entire world of consciousness is driven by remarkable existential questions about the self, the social constraints, and the gender roles. Her stream of consciousness embodies a rage against the domination of reality by the patriarchal system. The subjective manner of the narrator draws an image of a female character whose inward world serves as a place of search for freedom. Nevertheless, her inner world also gets a share of the pie of that patriarchal system. However she scorns the limitations and rules set by the masculine mentality; it is again a masculine figure which represents her double: Shakespeare.

References

- Marder, Herbert. *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Richter, Harvena. *Virginia Woolf : The Inward Voyage*. United States of America: Princeton University Press, 1970.
- Woolf, Virginia. “The Mark on the Wall.” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: Norton & Company Ltd., 2006. 2424-2429.



© Copyright of Journal of Current Researches on Social Science is the property of Strategic Research Academy and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.