

The Extent of Dissociation in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

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Adeline Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941) is regarded as one of the major modernist authors. *Between the Acts* (1941), posthumously published by her husband Leonard Woolf, stretches over one June day in 1939, in which year World War II broke out. The two major characters, Giles Oliver and his wife Isabella, suffer from a tense relationship. Their marriage bond is meticulously, yet fragmentarily, revealed during the annual village pageant. Apart from other issues in the novel, Woolf portrays these two characters as being poised in hurting each other psychologically, though the marriage has been embedded in love. This covert war between these two encapsulates dilemma in romantic affair, and hints at some future aspect of literary trend. A modernist in all her writings, Woolf foreshadows postmodernism in this last novel. The two characters are dealt with through stressed condition. However, by the end of the novel, they unite, despite their antagonism, and can look forward to prolific continuance of life. This essay attempts at finding how Woolf treats this couple for nurturing her new look, and for questioning familial bond, through the apparent dissociation and fragmented narrative of language, thought and relationship in her final novel.

Between the Acts opens on a summer night for a discussion among some neighbours, and ends the next night in the same place: Pointz Hall, home of Giles and Isabella Oliver. The opening scene of the novel creates an image of transgression of system as well as of values. The problem with the cesspool is paralleled with the flow of emotion between Isa and Mr. Haines, a gentleman farmer. Like the cesspool issue, this emotion is unsettled, and there is little or no chance that it can be fixated. Isa is infatuated about Mr. Haines, the way Giles flirts with Mrs. Manresa. The novel maintains a fragmented narrative, with broken sentences ornamented with periods.

Through its narrative Woolf brings the past into present, but it is neither fully flashback nor fully stream-of-consciousness. Rather, it is diffused. Woolf's language here is "a litter of word-plays, recollected fragments of poems, snatches of nursery rhymes, yet . . . these cannot shape themselves into any kind of elegant whole" (Minow-Pinkney 191). For this lack of proper expression, Isa finds herself, nothing but, "In love" (Woolf 11) with the gentleman farmer. Among the characteristics of postmodern fiction, a few are, Tim Woods suggests, that it uses narrative fragmentation and narrative reflexivity, explores how narrative mediates and constructs history, and incorporates that history as fact (65-66). Woolf introduces all these features in this novel.

Donnel Stern defines that dissociation is a process by which a person fails to potentiate some portion of the verbal, nonverbal, or subsymbolic meaning available in the interaction of which s/he is a part (13). In other words, dissociation develops a sense of reservation which prevents a person from spontaneous communication with his/her surroundings. Dissociation in a person can be the outcome of numerous societal or psychological incongruities, which cannot be coped with properly. Isa's failure in understanding herself appositely lies in her obsession with time and romanticism. The novel re-presents the primeval and points at its stalemate that stretches over life. The past does not shadow the present; it is shadowed in the present. In this novel, as Gillian Beer says, "the prehistoric is seen not simply as part of a remote past, but as contiguous, continuous, a part of ordinary present-day life" (*Arguing with the Past* 162). That is why the whole place bears marks of Roman period and is utilized by the pageant; that is why Giles plays with a "barbaric stone; a pre-historic" (Woolf 61) and brings back issues of human dilemma, out of which a goal must be set and obtained for the sake of continuation. But that past harmonizes with the present in numerous forms, some of which are reflected in violence. Indeed, violence plays a major role in understanding the battle between Isa and Giles, who embody Woolf's foretelling of postmodernism in the novel.

Woolf intersperses one piece of news of the *Times* in her novel, that of rape of a deceived girl. Its impact on Isa is forensic because of the way she twitches reality, emotion, fantasy, frustration, commotion, and violence. The violence on the girl has its temporality on Isa, but then things are interrupted with the reality of a hammer and Mrs. Swithin. The "mahogany door panels" (Woolf 15), hallucinated through real events by Isa, become a caricature of violence of time not against the girl alone, but against herself as well, "she loathed the domestic, the possessive; the maternal" (Woolf 14). The news unveils Isa's silent thoughts and the girl's public speech and her suppressed anger, and initiates her private struggle toward speech and, by extension, calls women's desire and speech out from the crevices, the secret account books, of a civilization still mired in barbarism (Froula 295-96). And the conversation between Bart and Lucy becomes a monotonous "chime" (Woolf 16), from which there is apparently no escape. Woolf emphasizes on Isa's thoughts for creating an impasse of bond, language and actions, albeit a great hope that World War I might bring major change. The hope is now smashed with the hammer of the crime of transgression.

Woolf further illustrates such fragmented build-up of Isa in the mirror, where she remembers her being "In love" with one who is not attentive to her fancy. Moreover, during the pageant, she looks over her shoulder at the gentleman farmer, and later seeks him, and finally starts crying, "had we met before the salmon leapt like a bar of silver," had George "been his son" (Woolf 123). In all these tears flow Giles's silhouette. She dives, not in the real pool, but in the pool of her memory, her tears, which are due to the negligence and "infidelity" of her husband. She is frustratingly disgusted, and seeing Mrs. Manresa beside him, "could feel the Manresa in his wake. She could hear in the dusk in their bedroom the usual explanation. It made no difference; his infidelity – but hers did" (Woolf 68). Thus a modernist standoff between these two is created to refashion it through romantic offence. Isa subconsciously, but paradoxically deliberately, imagines herself being "In love" and no other expression. Like in the mirror, she is fragmented into three selves. Her cry is a cry of debilitation, of challenge, but of helplessness. Her passion for a farmer cannot be fulfilled by Giles,

who is a stockbroker, who, "[g]iven his choice, . . . would have chosen to farm" (Woolf 30). Out of these frustrations, she finds her love split into two. For her subconscious passion, there is love, which "addresses and responds to an image of herself; insofar as it is prompted by an external object of love, he is represented as manifest stereotype . . . and the force of his attractions is in their absence" (Bowlby 189); but for her reality, it is adorned with love and hate. Thus, being in between, Isa discovers a harsh truth: she is not satisfied with herself.

Isa's hatred towards domesticity and Giles, and her self-disgust have chained her in that domesticity further. Because of it, she finds "escape" in "the myth of romantic love, endowing Haines . . . with all the attributes of the romantic hero" (Ingman 140). The romantic duality of Isa flows with time, which can manipulate Pointz Hall through its prehistoric presence in the disjunctive discourse between Bart and Lucy, and in the pageant's disjointed presentation of English history. Thus, in the novel, time is differently treated. Time's narrative here synchronizes with the present, "past and present lie level, culled as needed by the individual's associations. The novel is a spatial landscape, not a linear sequence" (Beer, *The Common Ground* 20). The individuals no longer remain individuals; their individual agony turns into a united front. Isa's sudden approaching Dodge to show him the greenhouse is echoed in Giles, when he suddenly approaches his fascination Mrs. Manresa with the same question, in the same tone, "Like to see the greenhouse?" (Woolf 89). Though Isa hums, "Dispersed are we" (Woolf 59), somehow they are not so; they belong to the same whirlpool of spatial sufferings. Woolf utilizes this land in a different way. She introduces dissociation among the characters' association, and vice-versa, and leads to redefining modernist notion of spatial time. Pamela Caughie says that though a modernist author, Woolf here, like much postmodern writing, puts into question the expectation of shared meaning, questioning the supposed collectivity of 'ourselves' (310-11).

"Postmodernity is characterized," argues Steven Connor, "by the restless circulation and exchange of spaces and places." He further states that

postmodernity retemporalizes space; the solidity of space and place yields to the uncentred mobility of information and investment (254-55). Giles, the London stockbroker, becomes urbanized, whereas Isa, leading a domestic life, prefers country life. They are polarized. Isa's Irish heritage and Giles's English background are used as a reflection of English-Irish conflict; but as individuals, they are allowed more space for exposing their animosity for the other. Giles fulfils his passion in the presence of Mrs. Manresa. During the performance, Isa and Giles find new company for suppressing their paradoxical love for each other. Within the spatial limitation, they are able to create, partially though it is, and expand, that space-time concept. Whatever they do, they do so for the irritation of the other. Here is a difference between them.

Whereas Isa cries, Giles cannot. But he must do something for self-relief. That is why, when he finds the snake and the toad in their utter miserable condition, he stamps on them, not to relieve them of their deadlock, but to help himself, "it was action. Action relieved him" (Woolf 61). It is the pressure of the two ladies beside him. The question of survival - through violent means - comes to an end through another level of violence. Frustrated with the impending threat of war, and being angry at it, Giles's shoes are marked with a sign of that violence. "In the novel's sheltered world of village pageants, bazaars and cricket matches," says Marina Mackay, "Giles's bloodstained tennis shoes are a powerful emblem of the fall from innocence that comes from reacting with violence to violence." This "fall" concretizes both a spatial space and a spatial time where "Giles, Isa, William and Miss La Trobe, are necessarily in . . . together" (31). But, Mrs. Manresa is not here.

It is because she is not treated exactly as a means of escape for Giles, but as an instrument for shedding his anger, frustration, and disgust. Mrs. Manresa partially vitalizes Bart, and now counts Giles as her "surly hero" (Woolf 58). His apparent response is provocative for Isa, but finally she succumbs to her failure of endurance. The more Giles is able to exhibit his gender-strength, his masculinity, the less is Isa able to tolerate it. Woolf

uses Mrs. Manresa as a ploy for bringing out the psychological ambivalence between Isa and Giles, because as individual, neither attains the exact part in this battle between the acts of time's fluidity through space. The real threat of invasion and blitz is countered with the surreal threat of discontinuance of respect and emotion. In the novel, Sue Roe states, "this structural integration . . . depicts the generation of time and the family, juxtaposing family life with variations on the orthodox relations between the sexes: it represents the conventions and it renews them" (33). This re-enacting of the "prehistoric" silent war between the two is the primary concern in the novel, which accommodates issues like history, war, time, pageant, homosexuality, fragmentation of speech and thought, for upholding it.

This dual feature of romanticism has openness in modernism and postmodernism. While modernism brushes aside any such aspect of life, it gets a new dimension in postmodernism. "What connects Romanticism and Postmodernism most obviously," says Patricia Waugh, "is a shared crisis mentality connected to a sense of the fragmentariness of the commercialised world . . ." She also elaborates that postmodernism preserves a fundamental sense of the aesthetic, and a number of paradoxes, which are more implicit in Romantic thought. Art cannot be separated from living, and this aesthetic position can be identified with postmodernism (15). In the novel, the characters' disjointed poems and thoughts are thematically yet unconsciously brought to existence in the pageant on the one hand, and during the intervals by the audience on the other. Simultaneously, this dissociation of ideas, attitudes and actions introduce combination through diversion within spatial space, which, at the same time, proposes a new trend in Woolf's last novel. Her objective of creating newness comes to existence through the battle of sexes and the search of a disjunctive self, which are overt here, unlike in her other novels.

The duality of sex is further illustrated in the characters of William and Miss La Trobe. With them, Woolf introduces homosexuality. William's impulse for Giles and desire to be with Isa, contradictory though they are,

reveals his unconscious vulnerability in this battlefield. That is why, he, like Isa, suffers from lack of impetus. In comparison to William, Miss La Trobe is far more rigid in her nature, and always stimulated, raged, and dissatisfied. This nature of the producer is another outcome of her frustration, both in her personal relationship and in her theatrical world. Their behaviour is, like that of the Olivers, an outburst of what they miss and long for in their individual life. Woolf's study of this ambivalence is similar to Freud's psychoanalytic studies. Toril Moi argues that, for Woolf, unconscious drives and desires constantly exert a pressure on our conscious thoughts and actions, which lead to 'overdetermined' manifestation of a multiplicity of structures that encompass not only unconscious sexual desires, fears and phobias, but also a host of conflicting material, social, political and ideological factors of which we are equally unaware (10). Thus, Giles, Isa, William and La Trobe are on the same thread, disjointed though they are.

The pageant, preoccupied with English history, includes an unconscious revelation. Its enactment of marriage theme at the end of every scene is what Woolf questions in real life: the continuity of married life. The Victorian concept of a married life gets a hammer-blow in the modern period. Giles and Isa enact unconsciously, yet intentionally, this dilemma all through the novel. Woolf manoeuvres this presentation for her purpose of studying the individual self among the mass. As Jed Esty says, "[t]he pageant's retelling of English cultural history is continuously challenged by the intersubjective and intrapsychic dramas that occur 'between the acts.' And yet, in the course of Woolf's narration, the modernist novel of consciousness begins to look like something new altogether" (87). The novelty floats like "the great carp himself, who came to the surface so very seldom." Others follow, "silver; pink; gold; splashed; streaked; pied." Lucy then murmurs, "Ourselves" (Woolf 121). This is the same carp that Isa looks for when she searches for the "man in grey"(Woolf 51). These two ladies of two different generations are conjoined spatially, viewing the same object as the elementary symbol for their suppressed desire, that lacks proper

voice, like the torn speech all through the novel. That is how the novel is starred with "silence" (Woolf 5).

Linda Hutcheon says that postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations. The representation of history becomes the history of representation. That means, postmodern art acknowledges and accepts the challenge of tradition (55). This acknowledgement is buzzed in Lucy and Isa, and among the audience through their "Ourselves." The play-within-the-novel has its impact on the audience, notwithstanding the fact that its producer considers it as "A failure" (Woolf 124). Prehistory is not only re-echoed in the novel, but is embodied throughout the entire spatial discourse of it as well. Giles is, in comparison to Isa, more involved with information and investment, and can lead to the path of facing that "challenge of tradition." So, he takes the initiative of ice-breaking by offering her "a banana," which she - after that day's experience - refuses. Like Isa, Giles also entertains the same scale of ambivalence. Her refusal of the banana prompts him to extinguish his *desire* in "the raspberry juice" (Woolf 126). Though she refuses this phallic symbol, and is still hesitant about accepting him, who is "[t]he father of my children, whom I love and hate," she cannot but notice his extravagant masculinity, his being "extraordinarily handsome" (Woolf 127).

The pageant willingly yet unconsciously unveils this game. As Elizabeth Abel explains, "La Trobe wants to demonstrate that the bond she struggles to create is impossible in a present whose truth is fragmentation and whose history is the corruption of any principle of unity" (127). The romance is bumped, and it can be left either with fracture or with fixity. So far, they maintain a silenced distance. They can realize what the other thinks, but do not participate in one-to-one dialogue. But when they are by themselves, the spatiality shrinks to minuscule, "the curtain rose. They spoke" (Woolf 130). With these last words of the novel, the disparate centres come to nucleus. Julia Briggs explicates that Woolf has deliberately avoided giving us 'their' story, their loving and fighting. Now that they are alone together,

the narrative seems to slip back to the oldest, most atavistic plot of all. Finally, the plots of love and war come together, since it is the primitive and uncomprehended impulses of love and hate within the individual that nurture the seeds of war ("The Novels of the 1930s" 87-88). They are going to fight, that Isa points at earlier (Woolf 68), and from that fight, from that sex-war, new possibility, new life might spring. In the "final sentences a new act is set to begin: sexual, theatrical, war-like, yet suggesting continuance" (Beer, *The Common Ground* 126). It is not the prolongation of their "strained" (Woolf 65) relationship, but that in a new channel, surfacing from the deep, diabolic past to paradoxically dark womb of uncertain future, with the hope that it will be bright.

With this new hope in the horizon, the curtain falls on them, and on the novel. A new act, that Miss La Trobe anticipates (Woolf 125-26), now will be enacted by Isa and Giles. The novel, says John Mepham, "portrays a simple drama. There is a battle between forces of dispersal and forces of togetherness, forces which tear things apart and those which, by bringing things together, produce and reproduce life and community" (200). After World War I, the modernist outlook of life has not been postponed; rather it continues in writings. However, before the break of World War II, there is installed the same fear over England. The second war might cripple the ongoing human history. The novel, which Woolf completed after the beginning of the war, also focuses on rebirth through the union of Isa and Giles, "From that embrace another life might be born" (Woolf 129). This new life is corporeal as well as circumferential.

Biologically, from their union, a new life will spring. The unity sprouts from the dispersed ideology. But that new life is rooted in the family. They have two children, and now another one might be conceived by the mother. This possibility of the third is the possibility of the end of the war between them, among nations in a civilized world. Since World War II has started during the writing of the novel, the hope now left for people is that of future, and *in* future, uncertain and threatening though it is. With this tone, the novel "ends with a primal scene that includes a cryptic meditation on

the future, not only the future of gender but also, by implication, the future of the family romance" (Gilbert and Gubar 3). This futuristic view of Woolf, ambiguous though it is, is what Miss La Trobe discovers as her new play, and is what she hears as "the first words" (Woolf 126) of it, is what is necessary for understanding the past of the "dwellers in caves . . . among rocks" (130), and is what is indispensable for rewriting history from a new perspective.

Unlike Miss La Trobe, who considers herself a failure, her creator attributes on her paradoxical success in the sense that what she has failed or been successful at is reproduced in, and will be re-reproduced in the lives of Isa and Giles. Woolf's control of time in the novel is related with modernism, yet that crosses the threshold of the spatiality of time. Angeliki Spiropoulou explains that in her last novel Woolf presents the past not chronologically but retrospectively against varying temporalities and historicity, and the present here definitively subverts any conception of modernity as the apex of a historical course to an ideal state of civilization, by exposing it as fraught with violence, frustrations, hopelessness, dispersal (143-44). The novel ends, but through its apparent conclusion, maintains its flow, "They spoke." Even though the conversation – after the curtain's rise – may precede a mandatory "fight" (Woolf 129), that is ambivalent because it systematizes instead of disarranging.

Between the Acts incorporates the three concepts of time, and unties them in the present, where the past is dug out. Finally, being in the present, that time looks forward to the future. In doing so, Woolf demonstrates human extent of family life and romantic relationship at a time when existence itself is threatened. She presents dissociation at a level where the characters vie against each other at a time of socio-psychological turmoil. Thus, they become the objects of disjunction, which, paradoxically, brings them close to each other. Julia Briggs explains that the novel accepts the power of sexuality, both within marriage and outside it. The novel reflects Woolf's love for and doubts about England, and explores her conception of creativity. It celebrates and decries tradition, opening towards a future that

included the certainty of war, but not its outcome. The last words of the novel signify a new beginning. It ends in a world where nothing is concluded (*Virginia Woolf* 391-92). Woolf's demonstration is not narrative in its usual interpretation, but is slashed, soundless and disjunctively interlocated. Being centripetal, Isa and Giles can, at the end of the day, view life axially. So does the producer. The impending war is amalgamated in individuality and threatens its existence like the war, but the triumph lies inside, within its force of transcendence to luminescence, rising from "the heart of darkness" (Woolf 129). Dissociation is refashioned as paradoxical association. That is how that darkness can be defeated by romanticism, and that is how Woolf envisions a new way of life beyond modernism. The dissociative association wins here.

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