



Characters are the Authors in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931)

Faiza Zaheer ¹

Abstract: *The main purpose of this paper is to explore and examine the absence of an author in Virginia Woolf's The Waves (1931) while applying Roland Barthe's concept of 'Death of the Author.' This paper aims to explore the nine sections and the complex monologues of six characters while focusing on the movements of the sun from early morning till the nighttime. This research has tried to examine the absence of the author in the above-mentioned text to understand the six monologues, and characters who utter them and demonstrate their dissociation between the author and the text. This research is an attempt to explore the role of characters and how they delimit the author's interference in the chameleonic status of social and psychological behaviors.*

Key Words: Absence, Monologues, Author, Text, Dissociation, Psychological behaviors & Interference

Introduction

The epoch in which Virginia Woolf lived (1882-1941), can be described as a time of transition encompassing the movement from the latter part of the high Victorian era to new forms, ideologies, and energies of the twentieth century. There is no doubt that the experience of this transformation had a profound effect on Woolf. It appears in some form in all her novels, most clearly in works such as *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *A Room of One's Own* (1929) *The Waves* (1931) where the change in the lives of the characters explicitly parallels the larger historical movement from Victorian to modern times. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) believes, "I am not made like any of those I have seen. I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I'm different (p.10). Though Rousseau wrote this almost two centuries ago, it is still pertinent to how an existence can be defined. Virginia Woolf also focuses on the idea of being different, which represents the major shift from direct expression to self-reflexivity to make the expression entirely objective. *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf was published in 1931 in which characters become the authors of their own lives and actions. She began this manuscript in 1929 and firstly this novel was given the name *Moths*, yet at the time of publication this novel was given the name *The Waves*. Woolf's basic purpose in this novel is to establish a connection between the individual and his *self* (my italics) and this represents a strong engagement of readers to understand the significance of the diversity of their interpretation. The basic purpose of this paper is to examine, analyze, and explore Woolf's writing technique keeping in view Roland Barthe's essay, "Death of the Author" (1967). This paper will also focus on the disengagement of an author to bring forward the strong roles of the reader and the text.

Research Methodology

This qualitative Research is based on Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* (1931) keeping in view Barthes' essay "Death of the Author". The novel's characters have been analyzed to explore this stance that the author is dead. Different aspects of the death of the author have been applied to reveal how characters become the authors to expound their personality traits.

Death of the Author and Woolf's *The Waves*

Roland Barthes, in his essay, "Death of the Author" mentions Mallarme to refurbish the status of both the

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Forman Christian College, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

author and the reader. this, "for Mallarme, as for us' it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is to reach, through a preliminary impersonality... where not 'I' only language functions... (p.50) While mentioning Mallarme, who anticipated the role of language and the reader in the realm of modern Literature, Barthes strengthens the role of the reader and the expression which is a strong attempt to dismantle author's authority. This paper will also explore the reader-language relationship to understand the diversities within the content and context in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. Jaakko Hintikka points out Woolf's approach to writing:

"the new awareness of the complexity and depth of the reality that faces one, and the consequent sense of puzzlement and loss of order. Thus, Virginia Woolf is not only primarily groping for a method to represent this or that character's world view, different from her and different from some reader's." (p.8)

According to Hintikka, Woolf demonstrates complexity and perplexity while describing the characters and their surroundings. She tries to reduce the author's role to free the characters' approach towards life. Michel Foucault mentions in one of his essays, "What is an Author", "...today's writing has freed itself from the theme of expression. Referring only to itself, but without being restricted to the confines of interiority, writing is identified with its own unfolded exteriority (p.206). Foucault is of the view that the author leaves the textual interiority and exteriority to the reader to deconstruct the multiplicity of interpretations. As Barthes mentions, "The removal of the author...is not only a historical act or an act of writing: it utterly transforms the modern text...(p.51). According to Barthes, the absence of an author leads the reader to understand the text without any interference. The absence of the author makes the text experimental. Woolf's *The Waves* can be taken as an experimental text that brings forward six different characters along with six different narratives and stories. This is the story of six friends, Brenda, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, Jenny, and Susan. Written in lyrical expression, the story goes far beyond the conventional classification of plot, structure, character, and narrative. Elizabeth Hardwick points out:

"I was immensely moved by this novel when I read it recently and yet I cannot think of anything to say except that it was wonderful. The people are not characters, there is no plot in the usual sense. What can you bring to bear: verisimilitude to what? You can merely say over and over again, very beautiful, and that when you were reading it you were happy." (p.52)

According to Hardwick, *The Waves* focuses on the dysconnectivity between the text and the narrative. In *The Waves*, the six characters of Woolf are not in search of meaning, rather they want to escape from meaning. These characters want to bring meaningfulness within meaningless in their conversation and their movements. Sounds of nature, movements, description of nature and sea, disposition of characters, and exposition of diversity in human behavior expose modernistic expressions of the chameleonic status of human existence. Based on stream of consciousness, Woolf's *The Waves* exposes the interior monologues of six characters: Bernard, Neville, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda, and Susan. Besides these characters, there is another character Percival, whose absence and silence can be felt by the characters. Characters represent self-consciousness and self-awareness, and they fully understand their surroundings and their search for truths. In this novel, the characters' consciousness has become the center of attraction. The author's absence gives birth to confusion which titillates the reader to explore the text.

Roland Barthes' essay "Death of the Author" (1967) has a significant role in this paper as Barthes focuses on the relationship between the text and the reader according to him reading the text is a continuous process and it gives the reader a central place because reader determines the interpretations of the text, and he is the one who makes text both meaningful and meaningless. Barthes believes that the author is dead as the text will be addressed and analyzed by the reader as he is more important than the author of the text. For Barthes, analysis of the text by the reader is an ongoing process and it will never end because the interpretations of the text can be challenged, constructed, destructed, and then deconstructed. In Barthes' (1915-1980) essay "Death of the Author" (1967) where he asserts:

"...a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, and psychology; he is simply someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted." (p.11)



According to Roland Barthes, the reader is solely responsible for all the interpretations, perceptions, and deconstruction. Readers must define, redefine, identify, elaborate, and analyze the text. Yet this explanation and definition is not absolute; it can be challenged, re-invented, and modified. The true destination of the text is not the conclusion but the interpretation and the analysis which can be adapted, adjusted, and amended at any time. Barthes believes, "Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, and oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of body writing" (p.142). According to Barthes, writing dismantles all the fixed ideas and beliefs that the author tries to put forward. Reader's analysis of the text always sets new standards and devises new philosophies and beliefs. Language cannot be taken as a narrow structure rather it goes beyond boundaries without adopting any system or structure. Roland Barthes puts forward the same notion about the author and the text, "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (p.147). Barthes' major emphasis is to take text not having a fixed and final meaning, rather text detaches itself from the author to motivate the reader to draw his own set of interpretations.

Virginia Woolf and the Absence of Author

Virginia Woolf states, "The author would be glad if the following pages were not read as a novel" (p.20). The development of this manuscript has been revealed through the interior monologues in nine isolated sections and each section moves side by side with the position of the sun. *The Waves* is based on one day, beginning with the characters' childhood and ultimately their deaths. Woolf deconstructs the time, space, and action in this novel as she believes that conventional narrative fails to understand the physical, temporal, and psychological expressions of life. Every section of this novel depicts the inadequacy of the physical world to comprehend the complexity of the human mind and its approach toward life. Woolf states in one of her essays, 'Modern Fiction' "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (p.189). According to Woolf, time is defined and determined by individual perception and this perception provides the possibility to figure out the mysteriously enveloped reality of life. *The Waves* exposes the transition of time, space, and action and it reduces the status and authority of the author as this work of fiction focuses on silence, an outer self of being, and the transformation from the physical world to the timeless one. As Bernard narrates the vision of life: the whole of life, its masters, its adventurers... then appeared in long ranks of magnificent human beings behind me; and I was the inheritor; I, the continuer; I, the person miraculously appointed to carry it on. (p.120) Bernard reveals the continuity of expression and asserts his position as the writer of his own life.

Novel as a Verbal Expression

This novel is a verbal expression of silence and the chameleonic representation of human behaviors. Jean Guiguet points out in his book, *Virginia Woolf, and Her Works*, "...*The Waves* is less an expression of the inner life than an attempt to formulate being" (378). Virginia makes a connection between reality and the characters, while their interior monologues exhibit how they view life and their internal chaos. Woolf also establishes a correlation between the fluidity of water and the ambiguity within the characters. Woolf describes this expression, as "very difficult, yet I think essential; so as to bridge and also give a background- the sea, insensitive nature- I don't know" (p.285). Woolf evokes the fixity, perversity, and emptiness of nature and its response to the being. During the writing of this manuscript, Woolf mentions, "I think resolving itself...into a series of dramatic soliloquies. The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in and out, in the rhythm of waves" (p.312). Sea, waves, ripples, and tides represent human perspectives towards the world. The notion of waves has been presented differently in *The Waves*. N.C. Thakur states:

"just as ripples rise out of the sea, grow into separate waves, rise and bigger, then break and subside into the sea becoming part it again. In the same manner, human beings take different individuals like Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda, and pass them on through infancy, youth, and old age, ultimately resting in reality, and achieving fusion with eternal spiritual principles, continuing to exist." (p.20)

Thakur points out that all six characters in this novel attain the role of such individuals who uphold the mirror towards their life and interpret their existence psychologically and socially. Every action happens in accordance with the movement of the sun. During the childhood of the characters, the sun has not risen yet, while in their school and college life, the sun rose higher. When Bernard, Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, and Rhoda attend the farewell party, the sun has risen, whereas it exposes its full light at the death of Percival, the silent character, yet exists and breathes within every character of this novel. Sun starts to sink, and it sinks when the characters define life, reach their middle age, and finally get together for the reunion dinner. Through the rotation and revolution of the sun, characters reveal their life and struggle to achieve a true sense of identity.

Critical Analysis of *The Waves*

Woolf's innovative spirit is reflected through the delineation of her characters in this novel. While exhibiting her unique sense of creativity, she leaves the characters on her own to understand and focus on the mysteries of life. Through this, Woolf makes an attempt to go beyond the conventional sense of characterization. She violates the traditional boundaries of plots, portrayal, and classical beginning, middle, and ending. According to Leonard Woolf, "(Woolf) wanted to show that these six persons were several facets of a single complete person" (p.1). Characters in *The Waves* are free from the authorial intrusion but ironically imprisoned in their own self. It seems that one character is living six different lives, and this demonstrates the abstractness of one individual existence. Henry James (1843-1916) defines the character in the literary work, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" (p.501). In Woolf's novel, characters are more important than the author because they set the ebb and flow of the incidents that occur in the novel. They struggle hard to define life, which is both logical and absurd, temporary, and persistent, and prolific and sordid. Characters simultaneously maintain and disconnect their relationship with nature. Virginia Woolf in her diary points out this, "I am convinced that I am right to seek for a station whence I can set my people against time and the sea--but Lord, the difficulty of digging oneself in there, with conviction" (p.146). Characters demonstrate individual consciousness which is free from social and cultural interference and focuses on ambiguity, complexity, and contradiction within the nature of the man. *The Waves* helps the character to roam freely in the realm of temporal and physical worlds where Woolf assumes the role of the reader to understand her own creation.

Woolf's and her Six Characters

The Waves displays people, objects, and nature with a certain sense of discontinuity and temporal displacement. The opening paragraph of this novel represents the problems of transposition of time and space and the entwined chord of life:

The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually. As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke, and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused and then drew out again. (p.7)

The sea, sky, horizon, and every natural manifestation focus on the muted representations of human beings. Woolf tries to make a connection between coherence and confusion, time and timelessness, and content and imagery. *The Waves* is both poetic and musical as the development of themes makes this rhythmical. Six characters in this novel are six different images of life and they can also be taken in six different compositions which exhibit diversity of human expression. Jean Guiguet states,

"we can easily recognize in *The Waves* that favorite subject of Virginia Woolf's: the unity and multiplicity of personality, in its relations with the outside world of things and other people" (p.286-7).

According to Guiguet, Woolf's characters exist in the outer and inner world while representing the multiplicity of individuality. Eric Warner points out:



... the six characters all speak the same language. That is to say, they all employ the same 'poetic' devices of parallelisms, repetitions, meta- phorical passion, elisions, etc., often sharing the same key phrases or words. An undifferentiated high style unites them all. (p. 79-80).

Woolf's six characters represent both communal and individual expressions and they are the ones who set the tone, mood, and development of the novel. With the help of parallelism and repetition, they share the same notion towards the narrative expression of the novel, and this notion reduces the role of the author as all six characters assume the full responsibility to exist without the author's help. Woolf mentions these characters in one of her letters:

The six characters were supposed to be one. I'm getting old myself - I shall be fifty next year, and I come to feel more and more how difficult it is to collect oneself into one Virginia; even though the special Virginia in whose body I live for the moment is violently susceptible to all sorts of separate feelings. Therefore, I wanted to give a sense of continuity. (Letters IV, 397)

Characters of *The Waves* demonstrate individuality and community; at one moment, Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis are presented as detached individuals; the very next moment they transform into flimsy shadows escaping from form and substance. They create a text within the text, a character within the character, and an idea within the idea. The novel revolves around the sun time, nine sections of *The Waves* represent nine different stages of the characters and the movements of the sun and time depict their diverse attitudes to life. Their monologues have been divided into nine sections exposing the nine tides of human expressions:

The waves massed themselves, curved their backs, and crashed. Up spurted stones and shingles. They swept around the rocks, and the spray, leaping high, spattered the walls of the cave that had been dry before, and left pools inland, where some fish stranded lash its tail as the wave drew back. (p.100)

Waves in this novel create coherence and confusion simultaneously and they act in the novel side by side. Louis says, "For one moment only, ... before the chain breaks, before disorder returns, see us fixed, see us displayed, see us held in a vice" (p.142). Characters want to escape from the fixity, disorder, and intrusion from the author and they create a world within the world, and they are strengthened by Percival whose silence tries to set the mood and tone of the novel. In this novel Percival can be taken as an outsider as Louis stresses, "It is Percival ... who makes us aware that these attempts to say, 'I am this, I am that,' which we make, coming together, like separated parts of one body and soul, are false" (13). What Percival says is spoken by the other characters, he remains quiet in the novel. His silence transforms this novel into seven different monologues, yet Percival's thoughts are uttered by the other characters. Woolf brings forward both silence and words and while doing this she demonstrates her affection and attachment towards these characters. She identifies herself with these characters without interfering with their monologues which exhibit temporal and metaphysical existence. According to Jean Guiguet:

"She is in love with words, like Bernard: in love with books, like Neville: a lover of action, like Louis: like Susan, feminine, earthy, nature loving: like Jinny, sensual and sociable: like Rhoda, hypersensitive and solitary-must one anticipate and say that like Rhoda she was to kill herself? She is all this, and now one aspect, now another predominates." (296)

Conclusion

Woolf's fondness towards her characters and how she consciously or unconsciously identifies herself with them strengthens her relationship with the text. Yet, she does not overshadow their existence and influence their monologues. She wants to be identified with them but does not want them to be identified with her. The characters in *The Waves* represent the in-depth analysis of diversity in human behavior. Barthes's approach towards the author holds a significant place in this paper as he focuses on the relationship between the text and the reader according to him reading the text is a continuous process and it gives the reader a central place because the reader determines the interpretations of the text, and he is the one who makes text both meaningful and meaningless. Barthes believes that the author should distance himself from the text to allow the reader to explore the rhythm, idea, and thematic expression. Woolf rebels against the conventional notions of writing and decides not to influence the reader while distancing herself from the text. The purpose of this paper was to explore and examine Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

while keeping in view Roland Barthes' famous essay 'Death of the Author'. This research has tried to analyze the authorial role in Woolf's novel in which characters and their monologues remain unaffected by her influence. Characters, through their monologues, represent their inner self, their sense of time and timelessness, and their eternal questions related to their existence.

references

- Barthes, R. (1967). "The Death of the Author." In *The Critical Essays of Roland Barthes*. Illinois, IL: Northwestern.
- Barthes, R. (1982) *Image: Music: Text*. (Stephen Heath, Trans). Glasgow, England: Fontana. (Original Work Published in 1977).
- Davis, R. M., Woolf, V., Bell, A. O., & McNeillie, A. (1981). The diary of Virginia Woolf. III: 1925–1930. *World Literature Today*, 55(2), 328. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40136144>
- Foucault, M. (1998). *Aesthetics, Methods & Epistemology*. (Robert Hurley, Trans). NY: New Press.
- Guiguet, J. (1965) *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*. (Jean Steward, trans). NY: Harcourt.
- Guiguet, J. (1965). (Introduction). *Contemporary Writers. By Virginia Woolf*. NY: Harcourt
- Hardwick, E. (2001). *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature*. London: Penguin.
- HINTIKKA, J. (1979). Virginia Woolf and our knowledge of the external world. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 38(1), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/1540_6245.jaac38.1.0005
- James H. (1993). *A Collection of Critical Essays*. London: Pearson.
- Rousseau, J.J. (2001) *Confessions (1782)*. London: Penguin
- Thakur, N. C. (1965). *The Symbolist of Virginia Woolf*. London, Oxford.
- Warner, E. (1987). *Virginia Woolf: The Waves*. Cambridge: Cambridge.
- Woolf, L. (1957). Virginia Woolf and *The Waves*. *Listener*, June 28, 1957.
- Woolf, L. (Ed) (1953). *A Writer's Diary*. NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Woolf, V. (2000). *The Waves (1931)*. London, Wordsworth.
- Woolf, V. (184). *The Common Reader: First Series*. NY: Harcourt.