



Wired For Marriage: The Neural and Genetic Links to Virginia Woolf's Feeble Voices

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Abstract

Researchers have identified neural and genetic mechanisms associated with marriage and attachment, which is maintained not only through subcortical brain regions but also higher order centres of the brain. Virginia Woolf promotes her case for women's hardship by contrasting victimized, helpless wives with their authoritative, virile counterparts. Woolf suggests that the docile wives discipline their desires, in part, by internalizing a vision of their feeble voices subsequent to marriage. This article provides an overview of the literary history of the matrimony tussle in the characters of Virginia Woolf and the author's diary entries before placing Woolf's heroines alongside twentieth century theories about masculinity and femininity. She envisions the wives who welcome their husbands' voice with a performative flair before asserting the authority of their own feeble voices. In the process, Woolf transforms a degrading cultural imperative into an impetus for the women's empowerment. The paper attempts to excavate the propensity to sustain the wired and tangled marital relationships, which often gets affected by genetic variability, specifically with genes associated with oxytocin, vasopressin, and dopamine.

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ers have excavated the genetic and neural connections to relationships, love and marriage by using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and genetic analysis, this paper attempts to critically analyse Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts* using the same methodology in order to enhance our understanding of the cultural circumstances and emotional tussle behind Woolf's idea of inevitable conjugal hardships. The conjugal relationships represented in her works are presented in an uncanny sense, wherein the readers frequently claim that her final novel could not have been written any other way without diminishing the tussle both Woolf and her heroines experienced.

The novels work against established critical tendencies to read Woolf primarily as a feminist writer, one who happened to spend the greater part of two decades in contemporary women's movement, and to consider her primarily as a woman author involved with suffragism or the pacifist and working-class women's cooperative guild, principally informed by the techniques of a single genre. Woolf's docile heroines steer Woolf further away from the feminist overtones, positioning Woolf's conjugal life with Leonard Woolf among the emotional tensions and upheavals along with the patriarchal structure of the society.

As Bianca Acevado puts it, maintaining a conjugal relationship is in part a broad mammalian strategy for reproduction and long-term attachment that is influenced by complex cognitive processes, circuitry and genetic factors. Essentially, human beings are wired to sustain love, even if it is forced, to maintain a successful marriage and the family units, owing to neurotransmitters like dopamine and a suite of genetic mutations. In the whole process, the genes are examined with pair bonding behaviours which includes fidelity, sexual and social behaviours.

In *The Voyage Out*, when Virginia Woolf wants to strike an anxious chord in her readers' hearts, she describes the fate of her wedded women-

“When two people have been married for years they seem to become unconscious of each others' bodily presence so that they move as if alone, speak aloud things which they do not expect to be answered, and in general seem to experience all the comfort of solitude without its loneliness.” (V. Woolf, *The Voyage Out* 1915)

Woolf hopes to influence male readers- the 'superior intellects' directly addressed in her novels- by reminding them of the personal stake they have in their wives being feeble voiced. Those wives might someday voice their imprisoned mind and what will happen to the patriarchal authority in the hands of powerfully voiced women?

In *The Voyage Out* meticulous narrative, Rachel Vinrace emerges as a partner influenced by- and indebted to- the paradigm of female initiation that encourages the young women to imagine marriage and maternity as the destiny that will fulfil their lives. (Froula 1986) Woolf's heroines define Woolf not as an author who happened to sketch helpless heroines but as a victim of the same paradigm provoked to vent her frustration through the characters.

Together these novels extend our understanding of Woolf's oeuvre across emotional and patriarchal boundaries, moving in the direction of the speaker in *A Room of One's Own* who posits-“Women

have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.” (V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 1929)

Written towards the end of her life, long after Woolf had suffered from the outbreak of war, *Between the Acts* cautions critics who might be ‘tempted’ to read the novel merely from the perspective of war. Despite of not having feminist characters or explicit references to feminist ideas on the surface level, the opening passages are abound of patriarchal identifiers- “Mrs Haines, the wife of the gentleman farmer”, “Isa, his son’s wife”, “Mrs Giles Oliver”. (V. Woolf, *Between The Acts* 1941)The patriarchal identifiers heighten Woolf’s concerns for emotional and social justice, along with showcasing the abuses of patriarchal power while honing her insights on dearth of significant moments between women. The general lineaments of male bonding are evident, yet as Marcus and Little argue feminism thrives in *Between the Acts*. (Schlack 1983) Woolf provides nuance, clarification and scholars’ understanding of her heroines’ relation to England’s politics, gender structure, literary transition and landscape.

As some of her personal letters from the late 1940s indicate, she was feeling a sense of isolation and barrenness that had increasingly haunted her life since the outbreak of war. For years, Woolf had been searching for suitable machinery of a social system that produces hegemonic gender constructions- the process through which identities and stereotypes are constructed within a network of power relations, (Ortega 2012) conditions that had made “*women do not write about men*”. Indeed, writing to Shena, Lady Simon, looking back to her years during 1940, Woolf noted that she had been thinking “how far is the women’s movement a remarkable experiment in that transformation?” projecting “Mustn’t our next task be the emancipation of man?” (Black 2004)

In the occasionally happy folly of fate, during the Great Depression Period in United Kingdom, Woolf contrary to her own words in *A Room of One’s Own*- “women do not write books about men...Why are women, judging from this catalogue, so much more interesting to men than men are to women?,” (V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 1929) proceeds with a fiction that challenges fixed gender identities and the power relationships between men and women by providing extensive, multilayered and complex representations of masculinity. From her traditional work- *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* to more experimental work- *Mrs Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*, there is a constant gender subtext throughout her whole work. Considering the extremely political work, Woolf’s lucid approach to society and an impending craving for social change pushed her to scan the machinery of a social system that produces hegemonic gender constructions. (Ortega 2012) After unleashing the hegemonic gender construction, Woolf’s awareness of the arbitrariness

of male superiority and the inescapable constraints imposed upon the male subject becomes apparent.

Woolf adds meaningful complication and detail to the narrative. Woolf lived in Asheham from 1911 to 1919 and was issued a notice to vacate the house within six months. Reluctant to leave the neighbourhood she had grown to love, Woolf along with her husband secured Monks House at Rodmell, across the Ouse valley from Asheham, where they spent the rest of their lives. (Quentin Bell 2008) During the same period of turmoil, Woolf expressed in her diary on 28 November, 1919, "Friendships with women interest me"- the apparent simple remark out of a tangle of thoughts after reading Katherine Mansfield's review of *Night and Day*, which had insinuated that the novel was old fashioned apart from making Woolf feel like "a decorous elderly dullard." More significantly, the remark about 'friendships with women' comes out of her extremely complicated relationship with Katherine Mansfield, throwing light on a friendship which was intimate but guarded, mutually inspiring but competitive, the kind of companionship her heroines have with other women characters, where refuge to crisis is easier to seek among the male companionship than the female solidarity. As the case of *The Voyage Out* shows, the wedded women do not get on well with other women. Mrs Ambrose is jaded by women of her own age and believes that her young niece, Rachel will be even more lacklustre. She is constantly seen looking down on other women, attempting to make Hirst laugh over a fat woman.

On the other hand the male camaraderie in Woolf's novels represents different generations of men stretching from Pre-Victorians- the founding fathers of her contemporary ideals of manliness- to the new generations of men- the captains of the new gender formations of modernity. Richter's two broad figurations of masculinity- the 'rigid' men and 'fluid' men- trapped in a set of rules that fix their identities, (Richter 2010) are shown how they are represented as tyrannical and narrow minded, exhibiting the desire of power and control and the inability to communicate with women.

The 'fluid' men entail the capacity to sense and undergo a transition, but at the same time are marginalized and disempowered- "As in the case of Septimus Warren Smith, these 'new men' are doomed to death." On the one hand, the 'rigid' men such as Richard Dalloway, Dr Bradshaw and Percival are proved to be fierce perpetuators of hegemonic gender expectations of British manliness, but on the other hand, 'fluid' men like Bernard, Septimus Warren Smith and Mr Ramsay are presented as ambivalent characters who do not fit in the rigid definition of masculinity assembled by their predecessors easily.

Subversion of gender roles is palpable in the close readings of *Mrs Dalloway* where Clarissa Dalloway is identified less as wife and more as cloistered nun or even potential lesbian lover and Rezia not as a contented 'Mrs Smith' but an alien to both her husband and surroundings. (Garvey 1991) The repetitive exploitation of water imagery attempts to undermine the patriarchal institution of marriage and eventually create a female vision of the cityscape. Clarissa fluctuates between her public identity as 'Mrs Dalloway' and the private self that seeks to blend into a heterogeneous multiplicity. When she gazes herself in the mirror she finds- "her self- pointed; dart like; definite. That was herself when some effort, some call on her to be herself drew the parts together, she alone knew how incompatible and composed for the world only into one centre." (V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 1925)

Though Clarissa does not turn her life into a combat with the patriarchal systems, she nonetheless engages in private skirmishes, constructing an attic room of her own just as she has rebuffed 'normal' marital relations, in fact, the intriguing connections of the akin facet is witnessed in the life of Virginia Woolf herself. On the other hand, Rezia submerges her life in her husband's, identifying completely with Septimus Warren Smith, having forsaken her country, family, language and even the prospect of motherhood. Like her letter writing, divergence among her women counterparts compliments Woolf's fiction and provided a way of relating to distraught power relations between her women characters.

For Woolf, the writing of *The Voyage Out* was indeed about the quest for a more conscious and fruitful way to respond to and work through sexist oppression and sexual abuse than the symptomatic retelling through psychomatic or hysterical illness. (Swanson 1995). Rachel's dream in *The Voyage Out* about being trapped in a tunnel "alone with a little deformed man who squatted floor gibbering, with long nails," mirrors a dream that Woolf herself had persistently and described in a letter to Ethel Smyth as concerning "that end of a drainpipe with a gibbering old man." (Banks 2008)

The Victorian ideals of gender is palpable in *To the Lighthouse* in the portrayal of Mr and Mrs Ramsay, when seen in light with Woolf's diary- "I used to think of him and mother daily, but writing the Lighthouse laid them in my mind." Closer analysis of character and action indicates by gradual disclosure how Mrs Ramsay negates the integrity of the family, chiefly in her egocentric relationships among Mr Ramsay, James and herself. (Pedersen 1958) Mrs Ramsay is identified as the centre around whom all the familial activities revolve- the act of acquiring the head of the table underlines the role she assumes in the family. She boasts of her 'capacity to surround and protest'

until she had given all of herself entirely, but her concern and protection do not include Mr Ramsay. The extent of exclusiveness of Mrs Ramsay and James is evident in the narrative- “she stroked James’s head; she transferred to him what she felt for her husband,” identifying Mrs Ramsay as predominantly a mother figure even when she should be a wife.

Unlike the hegemonic patriarchal structure in *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs Dalloway*, the power structure in *To the Lighthouse* is lead by a matriarch, an Oedipus son and a usurped father-husband. The novel oscillates between ‘the fatal sterility of the male’ plunged into the ‘delicious fecundity’ of the female. Holding up her own marriage as a model- “the thing she had with her husband”, Mrs Ramsay tries to push Minta and Paul in the nuptial bond. While going to Mr Ramsay, she is performing a shallow duty, unprompted by her own desire to appease her counterpart temporarily avoiding the talk about themselves or their conjugal bond. The silent backdrop against which Mrs Ramsay’s words and actions should be viewed is revealed when wishing to go to the beach with young people “she was withheld by something so strong that she never even thought of asking herself what it was.” Mrs Ramsay fails to give a noticeable form to desire. This progression of unconscious thought reveals Mrs Ramsay coming to her husband of her own free but unconscious will. (Pedersen 1958) Mr Ramsay is introduced through the eyes of James as a monster who took pleasure in “disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife” and is surrounded by the antagonism from both his matriarch wife and oedipal son, consequently becoming alone in his marriage. Only after Mrs Ramsay passes away, James, Cam and Mr Ramsay become free of her negating influence, restoring Mr Ramsay to the status quo of the make head of family.

The profound differences between patriarchal and matriarchal groups are evident in *Between the Acts* with goddess figures being worshipped within each group. Manresa, who is the reigning goddess of the patriarchal family, is worshipped because she nurtures patriarchal men; on the other hand, Lucy is vital to Isa and Dodge as she nurtures women and non-heroic men. The patriarchal goddesses transform into projection of male desires and fears, Manresa with her “cornucopia running over”, “who restores to Old Bartholomew his spice islands” and make Giles “feel...more of an actor”, is distinctly a goddess of patriarchal structure, while Lucy comes across as the great goddess figure from pre-patriarchal times. The portrait of Lucy and Manresa illustrate the political significance of the images of women that cultures favour. (Cramer 1993) As the novel moves towards conclusion, Bart takes Manresa’s hands and “pressed it, as if to say: ‘you have given me what you now take from me’ and Manresa ‘like a goddess, buoyant, abundant with flower-chained captives following in her wake’” and with “Giles attendant departs.” Around the same time, Dodge imitates Bart’s gesture, taking Lucy’s hand and praying his homage to her.

Relations between women and men in societies which worshipped the fertility goddesses were egalitarian to a greater extent than their relations which ensued under patriarchy. When Lucy nurtures and heals Dodge, she appears as a mother goddess to him- “some majestic goddess, rising from her throne among her peers” and Dodge wants to “kneel before her, to kiss her hand.” Just as Giles, Manresa and Bart are associated by their attraction to violence and dominance, Isa, Dodge and Lucy are drawn together by their necessity and potential for empathy, creativity, and nurturing. The heroines in *Between the Acts* are represented as diminishing goddesses in many ways, the traces of women’s grandeur behind the facade of their existing limitations is perceptible. The purpose of the novel is to awaken the heroines to their long-lost grandeur.

The pageant retells the story of the “patriarchal take over” by illustrating the matriarchal family in its fallen state. Through the portrayal of La Trobe, Woolf attempts to stir the readers and characters to the self-destructiveness of their involvement in patriarchal plots and roles. Woolf asks the readers to identify the pattern of the patriarchal distortion of matriarchal potential in themselves.

Both of Virginia Woolf’s initial novels draw on the traditional concerns of love plots- the fabrication of recently joined heterosexual couples and of quest plots- the ‘*Buildung*’ of the protagonist. (Elert 1979) In *Night and Day* and *The Voyage Out*, Woolf considers the conclusion in engagement to marry and death. However, after *Night and Day* and *The Voyage Out*, heterosexual romance is relocated from a controlling and privileged position in her work. While *Mrs Dalloway* offers thematic and structural debates about romantic love, *To The Lighthouse* has a critical approach to the marriage plot. *To The Lighthouse* expresses the desire for a female bond in a different way, an idea which also surfaces in *Mrs Dalloway* through Clarissa and Sally kinship. The detailed contemplation of an old couple constantly in the process of reformation and affirmation is put in the context of many other ties, networks and communities: “geniality, sisterhood, motherhood, brotherhood.” (V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 1925) By highlighting the death of Mrs Ramsay at the mid-book in *To The Lighthouse*, the affirmation of the romantic, polarized couple is put definitively in the past. (Duplessis 1988) In *Mrs Dalloway* and in *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf has redefined the story of romance by posing the mother-child dyad, pre-oedipal alternatives and lesbian bonding, to rip apart the cultural hegemony of the love plot.

The wives given prominence in Woolf’s novels, answer to the prerequisites of domesticity. Woolf confers an impression of a true love relationship between husband and wife but is disfigured by the lack of sincere communication that adherence to the Victorian code of behaviour inevitably brings in its train. They are trapped within their respective spheres, which reduces both husband and wife.

Woolf's heroines perpetuate the ideological discourse of masculinity rather than only bearing in mind women in positive lights. Nonetheless, Woolf manifests these relationships through a variety of mediums. Not only the women's interactions with the male characters convey the discourse of hegemonic masculinity, but also the male characters' actions are satirized through narration and other characters. Woolf exploits the female protagonists as archetypes of women in her society because they keep watch over masculinity in a way that reinforces the gender binary that in turn oppresses these women.

In her magnum opus, the author sought to make aspects of matrimony legible to the readers and, as Elert suggests, (Elert 1979) more legible to herself, conferring an impression of a genuine love relationship between husband and wife, marred by the lack of sincere communication. Seeking the belief of Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway*, "For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in and day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him," the feeble voiced heroines find it 'intolerable' to allow the male counterpart trespass into their private realm, illustrating why Clarissa has been sleeping alone in "the attic room for some time." In Woolf's world, Richard and Clarissa Dalloway stand as the universal paradigm of suitable and feasible nuptial bond, flawed with a sense of aloofness and impassiveness, which the wedded characters suppose to sustain in order to preserve one's identity in wedlock:

"And there is a dignity in people, a solitude; even between husband and wife, a gulf that one must respect, thought Clarissa, watching him open the door; for one would not part with oneself or take it, against his will, from one's husband, without losing one's independence, one's self respect-something, after all, priceless." (V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 1925)

Woolf uses matrimony to frame the perception that marriage serves as the tool to secure one's position in the society- "Always be civil to the girls, you never know who they may marry," upending it as an establishment of a social status that entitles women to a certain show of respect, affirming it as a prerequisite and not an alternative through Peter Walsh and Lucrezia's opinions, "There is nothing in the world so bad for some women as marriage", "Everyone gives up something when they marry." Subtly, Woolf draws her readers into the dynamics of visual perception and projective imagination as she says, "They spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe." (V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 1925)

It all comes down to Clarissa's 'narrow bed', which is clearly concerned with elegiac conventions "marked by learning, craft, playfulness" and the restrictions in terms of minimalism in topics, size and stylistics. When Clarissa thinks at 3.00 am that Elizabeth's relationship prove she has a heart,

she drifts into the present tense of an occasion distant from the events being narrated. Likewise when she comments on Richard who is evidently absent from the little room to which she has retreated, she marks the time 'now' with Richard 'there', suggesting that her account of events has been made at some temporal remove from the context, in which case it seems she has created both the book and herself as the character within. (Hoff 2017)

Switching between features of these discourses, the author maintains the readers' attention by giving the reminiscence of the literary marriage of shared language and imagery that exists between Leonard Woolf's *The Wise Virgins* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. As Leonard Woolf notes in *The Wise Virgins*, "It's the voyage out that seems to me to matter," (L. Woolf 1914) illustrating marriage as a recurrent excursion from the monotonous life, the dogma is established robustly as it precursors Clarissa's dispassionate wedlock to Richard through Harry's marriage with Gwen leaving Peter behind just like Camilla.

Tending to Woolf's biographer, when the author read her husband's novel in 1915, she had already recovered from her third attack of mental illness, which she also manifests in her diary- "The Wise Virgins was very bad in parts; first rate in others...why the good parts are so very good and why the bad parts aren't very bad,"(Lee 1996) leading to her nervous breakdown two weeks later. As for Leonard Woolf's opinion of *Mrs Dalloway*, thirty or more words and phrases have been borrowed from his novel; avowing the assumption of him being guilty for severely criticizing Virginia Woolf in the thinly veiled portrait of her in *The Wise Virgins*. As Salvo observes, "The Wise Virgins is a novel of revenge and betrayal which almost destroyed his marriage,"claiming the novel to be a 'vicious' description of sexually inadequate woman and with Woolf's experiences of incest and abuse, "One of the major causes of Virginia Woolf's ensuing breakdowns and the cause of her suicide attempt and subsequent three years of illness." (Salvo 1994) Through *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf attempts to reverse the image of a "sexually inadequate woman" by portraying the sexually inadequate man, Peter Walsh.

Marrying Leonard Woolf whose Jewishness she loathed and whom she could dominate with her madness and genius solved the author's crisis of spinsterhood, creating a host of new problems. Before consenting to marrying, she wrote him a noteworthy letter, warning him of the difficulties that would await them. Yet she expressed her enthusiasm to take him as a husband in the letter which seems to be a fearfully forthright document, articulating every one of the problems destined to cause them misery. On May 1, 1912 Woolf wrote, "It seems to me that I am giving you a great deal of pain...and therefore I ought to be as plain with you as I can..." The theme of the author's 'giving

pain' to Leonard recurs throughout the marriage and the words "I am giving you a great deal of pain" are repeated almost accurately 29 years later in the suicide note she leaves for her husband. (Szasz 2017)

Just like their creator, Woolf's heroines felt repelled with their respective husbands, both as a person and as a potential lover. Like the author's life, Woolf's heroines articulate many of the conflicts that the couple were no longer willing to acknowledge in their matrimonial bond. Woolf's heroines staunchly reflect a unified view of Woolf's own mind and nature, existing as media through which Woolf can project her own poetic and philosophical sense of values. Through her heroines, Woolf created the characters with a haunting life of their own possessing certain vitality. The heroines are endowed with the author's own perceptiveness which allows them to express insights which although fragile and conceivably over-subtle, yet have beauty and universal significance.

In each of these undertakings, the author sought to make aspects of matrimony legible to the readers and more legible to herself. Woolf questions familial bonds through the apparent dissociation and fragmented narrative of language, thought and relationship. Building upon several cases of characters and Woolf's diary entries and letters, her work newly characterizes Woolf's docile wives-her mixture of different social strata, modernist fiction and psychology of gender. In the ways in which she scores her lines of sight and sound, Woolf dwelled with contradictions, putting them to profitable use of deciphering the hegemonic gender constructions.

This system is interesting as it is implicated in motivation, working for rewards, energy and is associated with corresponding emotions such as euphoria, energy and excitement. If the drive is thwarted then it may also lead to frustration. The research thus finds how the crucial relationships like marriage work on empathy and altruism and its correlation to the brain, leading to not just physical but spiritual and social bonding as well. As Acevedo says, "we are wired to love but it takes work to find and keep love alive." These novels, in ground breaking analyses of significant aspects of Woolf's art invite us to extend, yet again our understanding and nomenclature through neural and genetic links to marriages represented in her works.

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