The Pursuit of "A Room of Her Own"—Virginia Woolf's Search for Female Subjectivity in Her Individual Space in The Hours

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Winning Pulitzer, Pen/Faulkner Award and the title of "The Best '98 Fiction of Publishers Weekly", Michael Cunningham's well-known novel The Hours, has aroused a new wave of fervor for Virginia Woolf and her works among readers and critics. In fact, Cunningham himself also pays great tribute to this great female writer in his intricate story. Being a protagonist rather than a writer in this novel, Virginia Woolf's life and literary creation has been represented through a new lens of postmodern interpretation which provides us with a better understanding of her identity first as a woman, and then a writer.

Due to Virginia Woolf's dual identity (both a writer and a character), many critiques and studies, both abroad and domestic, focus on features such as intertextuality, postmodernism, feminist and gender issues, psychoanalysis perspectives and so on. In the mean time, there is no lack of research from a spatial point of view. However, either the subjectivity (identity issue) or spatiality is...
always treated as a unitary and a unilateral problem; very few of the critiques have made links between these two and scrutinize both coherently. This paper tries to study the subjectivity issue through the perspective of human geography’s definition of space (especially individual space), thereby draw the contour of female’s lost, exertion and limitation of her identity which is respectively in terms of her confined, enlarged and limited individual space.

I. Introduction to “Space” and “Individual Space”

To make the topic more distinct and logical, the introduction of “space” and “individual space” is both necessary and critical. As the famous geographer Aharon Kellerman observes, “Time and space are two of the most basic dimensions of human life. They envelop all human beings from birth to death.” Generally speaking, there are a lot of definitions of space in fields like physics, mathematics, philosophy and geography. As the “space” discussed in this paper is a geographical concept, those definitions from physical and mathematical point of view will be left out.

Immanuel Kant regards space as a kind of passive adminicle waiting for the possession and occupancy of human ideology, while some humanist philosophers have gone further by advocating that “human beings are the measure of all things and that space, relatedly, is the setting of human actions: a stage that humans can design and control.” Human geography, however, merges the two positions into an organic whole: “Human geography was related to as the interrelationships of Man and Space.”

Geographers go on to divide human space into individual space and societal space. Individual space is the major concern of behavioral geography and environmental geography, which dwell on the relative small space—comparing to societal space—of people, in other words, the dimension of human’s basic activities such as eating, living, and communication. Sometimes the movement, organization, and even the utilization of this dimension are concluded in this study. Based on the fundamental idea about society, man and space, Kellerman clarifies the individual space mainly into three parts: macrospace, mesospace, and microspace. Macrospace, as implied by the term, refers to the largest range of one’s activity, including the contact with other members of the community. In other words, macrospace is the area where individual performs social activities and interactions, gets involved in the society, realizes personal values and exerts personal influence on others. Mesospace relates to home and neighborhood, where people live with family.
members. Generally speaking, one has fixed roles at home, and the space he/she possesses is more private than that in macrospace. Thus, mesospace is somewhere to share one’s relative personal life with his/her relatives and friends. Traditional geographers used to regard space relating to family and domesticity as feminine, while public space, where people perform social activities as masculine. Some feminist geographers have vehemently attacked on this dichotomy for its discrimination against woman’s economical and political rights. Microspace refers to the personal space which will “constantly surround human beings” [5]. Microspace is the most personal and private level of individual space, an inner world where people’s thought, value, feelings, etc., develop step by step. Cavallaro’s comment on space has stretched the boundary of microspace to psychological domain: “Space is always a matter of partial and relative geographies based on both conscious and unconscious experience.” [6]

II. Limited Individual Space of Virginia Woolf

As is discussed in the previous part, there are three layers of individual space: macrospace, mesospace and microspace. Hence analysis of Virginia Woolf’s individual space will be conducted from these three levels.

1. Confined Macrospace

In Cunningham’s book, the story of Virginia, a devoted writer who suffers mental disease, takes place in one day when she lives under the custody of her husband in a small town—Richmond. However, she is not satisfied with Richmond but eager for London: “She despises Richmond. She is starved for London; she dreams sometimes about the heart of cities [...]. Here all she desires is a return to the dangers of city life.” (83) [7] Since comparing to the suburb city of Richmond, “ [...] all London implies about freedom, about kisses, about the possibilities of art and the sly dark glitter of madness” (172). Virginia cherishes freedom and passion so much that she believes that “[B]etter to die raving mad in London than evaporate in Richmond” (71). She is not attached to this suburb place; she even feels stuffed and suffocated to die here. Her husband Leonard, however, insists that she should live in countryside for the sake of her own health and the stability of the whole family. If she leaves Richmond without his permission, “[...] he’ll be furious, he’ll demand that she return immediately” (169). In Leonard’s opinion, keeping Virginia in his custody is the best thing he can do for her. He takes it for granted that what he has done is for the benefit of Virginia who, on the contrary, confesses that Leonard is
“[...] entirely right and horribly wrong at the same time” (169). Leonard has not realized that his custody at the same time, prisons Virginia, because his behavior has reinforced the prevailing gendered space which has been observed by Mitchell.

It seems almost natural that the world is separated into “separate sphere” for men and women. For the former a public space of public social interaction; the space of the city; for the latter a private sphere of domesticity, emotional bonds, and the maintenance of family; the space of home and suburb. [8]

In the gendered space, women are expelled from men’s space of the city and confined in the space of suburb and home. It is apparent that city is more open to the society, and suburb or home is far away from the society. The partition of suburb and home from public society has, deliberately or not, expelled woman from the larger society that has been masculinized. And with the support of the “reinforcement of domesticity”, the male has successfully marginalized the female to a smaller space which is not as public or sociable as that of his, even she is as gifted as Virginia Woolf.

To some extent, the “city” and the “suburb” form a pair of dichotomy which is parallel to culture/nature and public/private in patriarchal society. Comparing with the productive and vitalized “masculine” city, the “feminized rural realm” is the place where patriarchal norms dominates and regulates woman’s life. No wonder that Virginia believes that “She is better, she is safer, if she rests in Richmond; if she does not speak too much, write too much, feel too much [...] and yet she is dying this way, she is gently dying on a bed of roses” (169). While living in Richmond, she can feel better only if she blunts her mind and senses, in other words, not to think, and hence no writing, which to some extent, is another form of death for a gifted writer as Virginia Woolf. It is “gently dying” rather than staying safe in Richmond, because here she has no chance to communicate with other members of the society except her husband and servants of her family. Thereupon Virginia Woolf has been expelled from her original macrospace (from London to Richmond) and imprisoned in her mesospace (from society to family).

2. Trapped Mesospace

Trapped in the mesospace, or to be more specific, her home, Virginia appeared odd and weird in other’s eyes. Even a passerby who is “a hale and suspicious old wife” shows her disdain by “her ostentatious ignoring of Virginia” (82). Another
representative of traditional women, the servant Nelly, has also made Virginia feel “guilty of crimes” (34) and “difficult to command her [Nelly’s] respect and her love” (87). In the morning before she goes to work, Virginia “skulked straight away to her study, fearful that her day’s writing (that fragile impulse, that egg balanced on a spoon) might dissolve before one of Nelly’s moods” (85). “Nelly’s moods” stems from her recognition of the gendered space produced by patriarchal society, and she believes that the housemistress should care more about “the welfare of their people” (85), that is, the whole family, but not her own work. To people around the family represented by Nelly, Virginia has failed to perform like a real woman because she does not take the responsibility of her role as a good wife and hostess.

For a married woman, her job is, first and foremost, a wife and mother. In this case, woman cannot be evaluated from what she herself has contributed to the society through her labor directly; instead, her value is judged from what she has contributed to her family. Beauvoir also notices this problem and observes woman’s situation in this way: “Shut up in the home, woman cannot herself establish her existence; she lacks the means requisite for self-affirmation as an individual; and in consequence her individuality is not given recognition.” [9] That is why Nelly regards what Virginia has done in her study as something no more than “solving puzzles” (85), which are complicated as well as worthless. Virginia Woolf’s talented writing has been well recognized, highly praised and even carefully studied by people all over the world for almost a century, however at the same time, belittled by her contemporary in such an unimaginably humiliating way. It is not difficult to conjecture her agony of being a writer and a woman.

As Beauvoir indicates, “[...] in order to find a hearth and home within oneself, one must first have found self-realization in works or in deeds” [10]. However, woman is restricted in the place doing work at home, and “[... Her] work within the home gives her no autonomy; it is not directly useful to society, it does not open out on the future, it produces nothing” [11]. So it is safe to conclude that patriarchal society entraps woman in the house with the responsibility of domestic work, through which she cannot assert her own subjectivity. Mesospace is almost her entire sphere of living. Being trapped in this space, woman is forced to perform her roles as a wife and mother while losing her essence of a subject as an independent human being.
3. Repressed Microspace

Confined in macrospace and trapped in her mesospace, Virginia also suffers psychological morass which accordingly seems not surprising at all. To put in another way, her microspace is also repressed. Microspace is closely related to human psyche to which both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan make intensive research. According to their studies, sexual difference is the decisive factor for an individual (especially when he/she is only a little baby) to form its own self. Be it Freud’s “angry father” or Lacan’s “Name-of-the-Father”, the male sex definitely sets up the doctrine in the world of psyche on his own account. In this sense, woman must accept man’s authority as long as she needs to identify herself and get involved in the society. She has to build up her own identity on the basis of this patriarchal system of value.

Apart from the misunderstanding of the same sex who regards Virginia as “less woman”, the other sex’s denial of her values is definitely a hard hit. Since her job is writing, the evaluation of her work means a lot to her. Virginia’s husband Leonard is an editor who “refuses to distinguish between setback and catastrophe; who worships accomplishment above all else and makes himself unbearable to others because he genuinely believes he can root out and reform every incidence of human fecklessness and mediocrity” (74). With the empowerment of what Robbins calls “patriarchal authority of art”, Leonard successfully possesses the slight claim of power in the symbolic order[12], and with his self-affirmative attitude, he judges other’s work—“Leonard looks up at her, still wearing, for a moment, the scowl he has brought to the proofs. It is the expression he brings to all written work, including, especially, her own.” (32) It is the work of Virginia that makes him more sulky and fastidious, because he hates “fecklessness” and “mediocrity”. In his mind, more or less, Virginia’s work is “less than art”[13]. In this way, the male asserts his authority in the symbolic order of language and, of course, writing. That is the reason why Virginia found it difficult to ignore the disapprobation from male—“Even now, in this late age, the males still hold death in the capable hands and laugh affectionately at the females [...]” (119) As Irigaray has pointed out,

She [woman] needs these dimensions in order to create a space for herself (as well as to maintain a position from which to welcome the other), but she is traditionally deprived of them by man who uses them to fabricate a sense of nostalgia for this first and ultimate dwelling-place. [14]
Actually Irigaray traces the reason back to its source—the very beginning of woman's desire and self-consciousness. Instead of possessing her own space, woman has been restricted both physically and psychologically.

As is discussed earlier, Virginia's macrospace that is symbolized by Richmond the suburb is relatively small and far away from the heart of the society; in her mesospace Virginia is not a "qualified" hostess and wife who is supposed to regard family as her everything; as for her microspace, her inner world cannot bring her peace and joy either, and even worse, she undergoes severe self-denial and pessimism that finally lead to her suicide. To suffer so much pain does not mean that she has done nothing to improve her situation. She chooses to maintain her job—writing—as a way to expand her individual space.

III. Writing as an Enlarged Individual Space of Virginia Woolf

As Beauvoir indicates that "[woman] have no past, no history, no religion of their own," without a history means that there is no record of woman's activity in the world, that is, there is no space for generations of women to assert their subjectivities and perform social activities. Therefore, to make herself heard and known is of great importance for woman, as Helene Cixous proclaims, "But writing! Establishing a contract with time. Noting! Making yourself noticed!!!" For women writers like Virginia Woolf, their first mission is to smash the fetters of masculine values and logics of literature.

In order to recall her lost memory woman must write; to revive her once silenced history, she must write; and to reaffirm herself, she must write. As Cixous suggests, woman must write herself. On the first day to write Mrs. Dalloway, a story focused on woman's daily life and psychological world, Virginia begins to wonder whether the content she is going to write is acceptable: "But can a single day in the life of an ordinary woman be made into enough for a novel?" According to Helen Haste, writing herself can help woman "[... to] find those aspects which are different from the masculine, in order to reject the phallic tyranny of our [women's] self-definition." To Virginia, "the phallic tyranny of self-definition" also exists in the field of literature. She has given her own poignant comment like this: "Men may congratulate themselves for writing truly and passionately about the movements of nations; they may consider way and the search for God to be great literature's only subjects; but if men's standing in the world could be toppled by an ill advised choice of hat, English literature would be dramatically changed." She has
already recognized that, if men have not possessed the dominant position in this society, the so called “doctrines”, “principles” and even “values” of literature would be shaken from their groundwork. Hence Virginia strengthens her stand and perseveres to finish what she plans to write—one day, or the whole life of a woman.

Being a devoted female writer, Virginia is, undoubtedly, aware of the significance of writing. For her, it is more of a cause rather than a living job. Writing is her belief, her backbone and the reason of her “sanity”. Writing shortens her course of self-seeking— “She can feel it inside her, an all but indescribable second self, or rather a parallel, purer self” (34). Cixous elaborates the philosophical significance of this sort of feeling: “Not the operations of sublimation. She doesn’t give herself, in the text, derived satisfactions. She doesn’t transform her desires into art objects, her solitude and her sorrows into priced products. No reappropriation.” [18] Writing herself, woman no longer fears to be “otherized” by masculine context of literature and culture, because she can obtain her own value in this process. Due to this specific function of writing, Virginia is endowed with more hope, energy and passion. The pleasure and enthusiasm writing brings to her is the same as what a party does: “ [...] she is anxious to join it the way she might join a party that had already started downstairs, a party full of wit and beauty certainly.” (34) She can find beauty, fineness, unspoken secret, treasure and everything. Thus Virginia is immersed in the happy atmosphere of writing, “fresh and full of hope” (34). With hope and power, Virginia becomes more confident and self-assured when she writes something which naturally flows out from her heart.

To sum up, writing can assist woman to explore an untouched piece of space to refind her voice and assert her own subjectivity. In this way woman can get more involved in the society with a better understanding and of her own history. In addition, writing means record and creation. Since female writer devotes to represent woman as a whole, what she writes has provided other women with space to recognize themselves. Therefore, woman’s individual space is enlarged in this way.

However, it does not mean that writing is the ultimate and perfect solution for woman to improve her living situation. Virginia has found that her “access” to the state of satisfaction in writing “comes and goes without warning”. Difficulties and limitations of writing do exist.

IV. Limitations of Women’s Writing

The first and foremost difficulty woman writer confronts is her subordinate
situation in the society comparing to that of male. As Cixous analyzes, “Everything in me joined forces to forbid me to write: History, my story, my origin, my sex. Everything that constituted my social and cultural self.” [19] Here Cixous not only refers to her own case when she comes to write, she has also taken women writers as a whole in her consideration. Without her history to trace back and her right to speak in the field of art, woman’s story is broken and fragmentary, and consequently, her source of writing becomes buried in the masculinized literature.

Therefore, another problem of woman writer crops up. As Cixous finds: “To begin with the necessary, which I lacked, the material that writing is formed of and extracted from: language. You want—to write? In what language?” [20] In order to escape from the trap of masculine writing and compose her history, woman must, first of all, write in her own words and language which is different from that of man. However, under the patriarchal society, can the pure female language and female writing exist? Virginia gets trapped in this dilemma. The harder she tries to get out of the patriarchal clamp of language and literature, the more influenced she is under it. Virginia feels frustrated and suffers the torture of headache constantly when she is unable to write what she wants. “Strands of pain announce themselves, throw shivers of brightness into her eyes so insistently she must remind herself that others can’t see them.” (70) Violent pain hinders her from working. No matter how hard she struggles to concentrate on her own thought, “[t]hey [headache] are indistinct but full of meaning, undeniably masculine, obscenely old” (71). Evidently, “masculine” headaches here symbolize the patriarchal dominance of language.

With the aggravation of headache, Virginia’s suffering of nerve gradually develops into a complex of death. Right before committing suicide, Virginia sinks into despair: “She herself has failed. She is not a writer at all, really; she is merely a gifted eccentric.” (4)

Can there be real “female” language without any influence of the deep-rooted culture which is constructed by masculine discourse? Irigaray in her This Sex Which is Not One talks about the differences between the language of woman and that of man: “Woman’s desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man’s; woman’s desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks.” [21] The difficult position of female writing in the existing patriarchal society is striking. To admit the sexual differences of language, woman must devote to create her own style of writing from masculine literature because her own history is absent; to regard language as neutral and immune to the
patriarchal construction, woman's suffer of confinement in writing will continue, and hence her confinement of individual space.

In conclusion, woman's individual space or her sphere of all social activities is confined in patriarchal society which tends to expel woman to a relative unenlightened and inaccessible space (represented by the suburb in this text). On the contrary, man's space is genderized as the city with vitality and production. In order to realize her own value and bridge herself and the society, Virginia dedicates herself to her beloved job as a female writer. To feminists like Cixous, woman can rebuild her identity and reconstruct her own community through writing from and for herself, hence the enlargement of her individual space. However, women writers are still plagued by one problem: Can an independent female writing exist under the patriarchal society?

Notes:
[1] [4] [5] Aharon Kellerman, *Time, Space, and Society: Geographical Societal Perspectives* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), vi, 6, 13.
[2] To omit the physical and mathematical explanation of space does not mean that they are irrelevant. On the contrary, they exert great influence on people's viewing of space, even the philosophical idea of space stems from the scientific discovery.
[3] [6] Dani Cavallaro, *Critical and Cultural Theory* (London: The Anthlone Press, 2001), 179, 172.
[7] All quotations from The Hours are from Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999). Only page numbers are clarified hereafter in the thesis.
[8] Mitchell, Don. *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), 209.
[9] [10] [11] [15] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed., H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 587-8, 502, 510, xxii.
[12] Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1999), 158.
[13] Ruth Robbins, *Transitions: Literary Feminisms* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and London: Mcmillan Press Ltd., 2000), 91.
[14] Luce Irigaray, "Sexual Difference", trans. Sean Hand. in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed., Margaret Whitford (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell publishers, 1991), 165-177, 170.
[16] [18] [19] [20] Helene Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed,
Deborah Jenson, trans., Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle, and Susan Sellers (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 15, 42, 39.

[17] Helen Haste, The Sexual Metaphor (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 207.

[21] Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One, trans, Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke Ithaca (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 25.

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