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Motherhood and Empire Building in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*

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ABSTRACT: *Contemporary interpretations of Virginia Woolf's works increasingly emphasize the significance of political contexts. Her experiences with the threat of war and patriarchal oppression are evident throughout her fiction, beginning with her debut novel, The Voyage Out. This paper explores the impact of British Imperialism on female characters representing English women who faced heightened patriarchal constraints at the turn of the century, particularly in their role as mothers. Employin g socialist feminist and postcolonial theory, the analysis highlights the interconnectedness of British imperialism, patriarchy, and the psychological oppression of these women. Through the interaction of these power structures, English women emerge as both complicit and victims within this socio-political framework.*

KEYWORDS: British Imperialism; English Women, Patriarchy, Motherhood, Sexual Objectification, Psychological Oppression

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Introduction

The scholarly interpretation of Woolf's work has undergone an important transformation in the last twenty years, with feminist scholars now acknowledging the importance of integrating considerations of imperialism alongside gender in her fiction. This shift has brought to light the significant intersection of gender and imperialism within Woolf's narratives. Undeniably, her oeuvre is inextricably linked to England's political history as she deftly intertwines themes of imperialism and patriarchy (Marcus 2004; Phillips 1994). Her nuanced portrayal of imperial expansion, warfare, and gender dynamics, though seemingly disjointed, offers a profound and layered critique of these issues (Phillips 1994, viii). While Woolf acknowledges the subordinate status of women under patriarchy, her focus extends to critiquing the overarching system that sustains this power structure, as it appears from the very inception of her literary writings.

Her novel *The Voyage Out* (1914), written when she was twenty-five years old, masterfully encapsulates the consequent effects of imperialism and patriarchy on the everyday life of English men and women. Featuring a journey from England to a South American colony, the story bears resemblance to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which chronicles a tragic voyage from England to the Congo. Conrad's influence on Woolf's debut work has been noted, particularly with setting and thematic elements (Eliott 1927; Naremone 1973; Fleishman 1975), but while Conrad is celebrated for his profound exploration of imperialism, Woolf's novel has often been glossed over in this regard, typically interpreted as the story of Rachel, a young woman striving against late Victorian societal norms in search of self-discovery (Naremone 1973, 7). However, recent scholarship has brought attention to its imperialist undertones. By drawing structural parallels with Conrad's narrative, Woolf unveils a distinct facet of British imperialism through Rachel's account, shedding light on English women's experiences during that challenging trip. Rather than adhering to conventional marriage plots, the novel sidelines them to foreground the subordination of women who contributed to empire-building by producing the next generation of imperialists.

In this story, Woolf acknowledges that English women in the centre endorsed considerably the ideals and objectives of the British Empire; however, she points to the underlying conditions prompting such a behaviour. Indeed, scant attention has been given to the pressures they faced and the gender roles imposed upon them, including coerced motherhood to further various imperial ambitions. Woolf believes that their unwavering support is moulded by imperialist ideology, reinforced through patriarchy, which fosters their patriotic sentiments toward the nation. This, in turn, facilitates their acceptance of serving the state through their physical contribution, namely birthing. Then, the joint impact of patriarchy and imperialism has had a serious impact on English women whom the author claims may be unaware of their own subjugation- a phenomenon often overlooked. In this respect, this study aims to analyse the factors contributing to English women's oppression, employing recent analytical frameworks that integrate gender and imperialism. To this end, socialist feminist and post-colonial theories are adopted to illuminate the interplay between patriarchy and capitalism and uncover the political motivations of imperial Britain in maintaining women's subordinate position within their society.

1.Socialist Feminist Theory and the White Woman's Oppression

Women's oppression has been interpreted by various feminist theories detailing how patriarchal societies limit their agency, self-expression, and sense of belonging. Contemplating women's subjugation through the prism of patriarchy, capitalism, or psychoanalysis engenders distinct methodologies that interrogate the social, economic, and psychological determinants underpinning this phenomenon. The traditional theories that analysed in depth women's oppression are Radical feminism, Marxist feminism, and Socialist feminism. On the one hand, Marxist feminism scrutinizes how capitalism exploits women's labour, including both their formal employment and unpaid household responsibilities, which leads to economic gaps between men and women and strengthens patriarchal hierarchies. This theory with its central focus on

class struggle does not fully consider the intricate dynamics of gender and power within patriarchal structures and tends to minimize or ignore the hardships women undergo beyond economic exploitation, disregarding the influence of social and cultural aspects on women's lives. On the other hand, Radical feminism explores women's condition through the fundamental structures of society, particularly patriarchy. It delves into the systemic roots of women's repression, spotlighting entrenched power imbalances and advocating for radical social transformation to dismantle patriarchal institutions. Nevertheless, the emphasis on gender as the primary axis of subjugation may overshadow intersectional analyses that consider how various forms of oppression intersect and compound, and this limits the movement's effectiveness. As for socialist feminism, a sub-branch of Marxist feminism, it analyses women's oppression, or alienation to use Marx's word, from both angles: the economic and the social one, taking into account the shortcomings of capitalism and patriarchy with a focus on their psychological impact.

The Socialist feminist theory provides an analytical tool to uncover the subjection experienced by white women in European societies namely the English one. It integrates Radical feminist and Marxist theories to highlight the correlation of capitalism and patriarchy in women's oppression, labelling it 'capitalist patriarchy' (Eisenstein 1979, 5). This perspective emphasizes the mutual reinforcement between capitalist class structures and hierarchical sexual structuring, as underscored by various scholars (Linda Phelps 1971; Ann Foreman 1977). It recognizes that women's subjection is shaped by both gender and economic factors and reveals how their foundational ideologies restrict women's agency through sexuality and motherhood, stressing their inferior social status.

1.1. Gender Roles, Sexual Objectification, and Psychological Oppression

Although Socialist feminism draws its ideology from Marxist feminism, it distinguishes itself by accentuating women's oppression not only through waged labour within the capitalist economy, but also through their productive endeavours in the unpaid domestic sphere, encompassing caregiving, housework, and child-rearing. Even absent direct participation in the labour force, women endure alienation under the dual system of capitalist patriarchy (Jaggar 1983, 308). The domestic work, which is performed without financial compensation, is essential to the functioning of capitalist societies but keeps women economically vulnerable. Their subordinate status, in turn, reinforces their traditional gender roles as housewives and mothers. In the same way, the worker is exploited in the capitalist system, the woman is taken advantage of in the family under patriarchal norms through marriage or what Christine Delphy calls the 'gender contract' (1977). Accordingly, marriage becomes the field where women lose control over their bodies as they will have to conform to the societal expectations. Thus, labour division serves as a fundamental basis for women's oppression deeply ingrained in what Zillah Eisenstein terms as 'institutionalized gender roles' (1979, 24-25). The subordination of women is then acknowledged socially, and they are subsequently reduced to an instrument of human pleasure and reproduction. Women are not oppressed only as sexual objects, but also as biological beings who have no control over their birthing ability. Whether encouraged to bear many children for labour or urged to limit childbirth for economic reasons, women's reproductive decisions are merely dictated by capitalist interests (Jaggar 1983, 310). Ultimately, motherhood becomes a function of economic necessity with women supplying the capitalist state with their children to perpetuate its existence. Moreover, mothers are bound to inculcate their children the bourgeois ideology to ensure the continuation of the patriarchal and capitalist systems. As Jaggar notes, raising children, more so than childbearing, is invariably carried out in accordance with prevailing standards of acceptable behaviour in children and the desirable qualities in adults (Jaggar 1983, 311). Women are, then, reduced to mere vessels for the perpetuation of the race and the transmission of the ideology, entirely estranged from their own selves.

Women's lack of agency over their bodies is unquestionably an instance of psychological oppression as described by Sandra Lee Bartky. Drawing on Fanon's description of the psychic oppression of the black man in *Balck Skin, White Masks*, Bartky identifies three types of psychological oppression: stereotyping,

cultural domination, and sexual objectification. She argues that all women face these forms of oppression, with sexual objectification being particularly significant as she defines it as the reduction of a person's sexual parts or functions to mere instruments or representations such is the case for prostitutes, Playboy bunnies, female breeders, and bathing beauties (1990, 26). Furthermore, Bartky also explores how the psychological effects of sexist oppression resemble those of racism and colonialism, leading to the internalization of feelings of inferiority among the oppressed (1990, 22). She notes that psychological oppression is institutionalized and systematic, serving to diminish the morale of the oppressed and maintain the dominance of those in power avoiding overt violence (Bartky 1990, 23). Thus, the white man establishes a psychological structure in women's minds that enforces adherence to patriarchal norm, and this structure is maintained through childrearing practices that reinforce societal expectations of gender roles, contributing to the perpetuation of the patriarchal capitalist framework (Jaggar 1983, 311). Despite being oppressed, women may inadvertently defend the system that constrains them, illustrating a complex pattern of domination through sexual objectification and complicity.

2. Gender and Imperialism in Postcolonial Theory

Socialist feminist theory addresses women's oppression within the capitalist system, particularly through the dynamics of marriage and motherhood; however, it has limitations in comprehensively understanding it within broader social, cultural, and political frameworks. The concept of 'capitalist patriarchy' needs to be illuminated by the postcolonial theory, which considers gender questions under imperialism, for a more exhaustive interpretation of women's subordination as depicted in Woolf's novel. A synthesis of socialist feminism and postcolonialism is proposed to analyse the theme of white women's motherhood because postcolonial theory and gender studies are becoming increasingly intertwined, especially in the context of examining Britain's colonial past and its impact on women. Scholars like Ann McClintock argue that gender dynamics are integral to understanding imperialism, challenging the separation between gender studies and imperialism (1995, 6-7). This change in orientation has led to a deeper exploration of women's roles in the British colonial enterprise, particularly highlighting the significance of motherhood in English imperial history. This intersection has brought forth a new area of scholarship that delves into the impact of imperialism on white Western women at home, emphasizing state policies regarding women's roles as mothers within the imperial narrative (Midgley 1998, 7-8). Motherhood has been, undeniably, a crucial point in the history of imperial Britain.

2.1. Marriage, Mothering, and the British Imperial Policy

The Voyage Out, published in 1915, coincided with the era of British imperialism, marked by overseas expansion and rigid Victorian norms. In this time frame, motherhood was highly regarded; it was considered a woman's greatest achievement. It was idealized as a source of emotional and spiritual fulfilment. Still, it became a societal obligation seen as a duty towards the state to increase the number of the population; children gained outstanding importance, and their well-being became a state concern, leading to fused ideals of motherhood with imperial discourses (Davin 1973, 12-13). Women were often depicted as the carriers and promoters of imperial values, tasked with raising the next generation of imperial subjects.

During high imperialism, authors such as Charles Dilke, J.R. Seeley, and John Ruskin linked the empire with the British, particularly English identity, arguing for the significance of Britain's overseas territories and the English people's capability to govern others (Fhlathùin 2008, n.p). The imperialist ideology promoted marriage and motherhood, urging women to prioritize finding a husband and starting a family, especially for women from the upper and middle classes who were either restricting the number of their progeny or avoiding motherhood at the profit of education or employment (Davin 1973, 14). Women were constantly reminded of their procreative duty to ensure an adequate male population for the colonies. They played crucial roles in shaping colonial policies, supporting imperial expansion and propagating the values of the British empire. Despite the substantial contribution they made, Victorian women were still

constrained by gender roles which promoted obedience to husbands and child-rearing responsibilities. This situation restricted their agency over their reproductive capacities and parenting roles, stressing the impact of British imperialism on their lives and reinforcing patriarchal norms.

3. Motherhood or Women's Psychological Oppression in *The Voyage Out*

In *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf depicts the lives of middle-class Victorian women within a typically patriarchal English society during the era of imperial expansion at the turn of the century. These women who belong to a social class where they are not expected to engage in manual labour such as cooking or cleaning, are instead anticipated to marry, bear children, raise them, and become accomplished hostesses. This institutionalized gender role for Victorian women is encapsulated in the notorious label the 'Angel in the House'. Initially, women were expected to be genteel and marry at a young age, but by the end of the century, there was a heightened emphasis on their role as mothers, particularly in producing sons to support the empire's expansion. Christine Delphy noted that under capitalism, women are oppressed through the family mode of production, which includes domestic services such as cooking, cleaning, sexual intercourse, and childrearing (1977: 13). However, during this period, specific duties are accentuated due to their class and the imperial expectations placed upon them. Woolf describes many of these women who match the image of the ideal Victorian housewife in *The Voyage Out*. Unmistakably, Rachel happens to encounter matrons incarnating that stereotype such as Mrs. Thornbury, Mrs. Eliot, and Mrs. Dalloway reflecting the poised image of women who comply to the role of wife and mother. The most outstanding character is Mrs. Thornbury who has raised many sons serving across the empire. She has wholly achieved her mission for the nation and she is lauded as the quintessential exemplar of a woman who impeccably fulfilled her role, especially as a mother. She is among the first women Terence references while discussing his future matrimonial and parental aspirations with Rachel as they receive congratulatory notes for their engagement. Rachel becomes distressed by these notes, voicing her frustration over others presuming to know the true nature of her feelings for Terence. In an attempt to soothe her, the latter mentions the kindness of Miss. Allan and Mrs. Thornbury, subsequently delineating Mrs. Thornbury's virtues and subtly alluding to Miss Allan's unmarried status. He notes:

> Of course they are absurd, Rachel; of course they say things just because other people say them, but even so, what a nice woman Miss Allan is; you can't deny that; and Mrs. Thornbury too; she's got so many children I grant you, but if half a dozen of them had gone to the bad instead of rising infallibly to the tops of their trees-hasn't she a kind of beauty-of elemental simplicity as Flushing would say? Isn't she rather like a large old tree murmuring in the moonlight, or a river going on and on and on? By the way, Ralph's been made governor of the Carroway Islands-the youngest governor in the service; very good, isn't it? (Woolf 2012, 390)

Terence initially acknowledges the benevolence of both women but swiftly dismisses Miss Allan, redirecting his attention to Mrs. Thornbury who reared numerous children, especially sons, in accordance with the rigorous expectations of the imperial state. In stark contrast, Miss Allan, a spinster elicits no interest from Terence, as she fails to conform to the prescribed gender roles of the time. Undeniably, Mrs. Thornbury commands his admiration as she occupies an exalted position. He extols her virtues, comparing her to a tree- a symbol of fertility and procreation-thereby praising her nurturing and reproductive capacities, which were deemed paramount for a woman to cultivate in order to be accepted and respected in an English society fixated on hegemony. Additionally, he likens her to a river, "going on and on and on", evoking the trading routes that facilitated English access to the abundant resources of distant lands (Phillips 1994, 53). Terence's perception of her as a paragon of prosperity is further reinforced by his intimate and uninterrupted observation that one of her sons has recently been appointed Governor of the Carroway Islands. By highlighting Mrs. Thornbury's sons' recent promotion and its attendant success, Terence underscores the

invaluable role of the mother whose merit lies in preserving the imperial enterprise through the procreation of sons dedicated to sustaining the expansionist mission ad infinitum.

Mrs. Thornbury is glorified primarily for her procreative abilities, rather than for any intrinsic qualities she may possess as an individual. Terence refrains from enumerating any specific attributes that define her character, choosing instead to emphasize her adherence to the traditional maternal role. Her worth and significance are solely predicated upon her contribution to the spread of the British empire, achieved through the birthing and rearing of numerous sons to satisfy the demands of a state sustained by capitalism, as put by Alison Jaggar: "Women capable of reproduction are perceived as mere "raw material", and their babies are seen as a "product" derived from them" (1983: 309). Under capitalist patriarchy, Mrs. Thornbury ostensibly embraces the motherhood role; she is the one who gives birth and breeds several children for the nation's benefit, yet she is perceived merely as a tool, one among many women who adapt to the evolving demands of capitalist societies in response to historical shifts. These women are primarily viewed as conduits for sustaining lineage rather than as autonomous individuals. Their distinguishing trait lies in their full compliance with and adherence to capitalist patriarchy, executing the mandate of producing sons. The matron, oblivious to her oppression, is thereby subjected to sexual objectification, defined solely by her reproductive functions. Moreover, Miss Allan receives no commendation from Terence beyond being deemed 'kind', and his disregard for her in favour of Mrs. Thornbury signifies societal disapproval of women who do not conform to prescribed roles. Terence's praises reflect a society that encourages and rewards women like Mrs. Thornbury, reinforcing behaviours and gender roles by elevating her as a national pride, further objectifying her. In reality, these Victorian women or mothers adopt, internalize, and revel in the role of mothers without questioning their condition or contesting the fate of their offspring. Their concern has been channelled so as to serve and please both men and state, finding pride in doing so, as they are showered with compliments and highly valued in society upon fulfilling their imperial duties.

4. Child Rearing Dictates and Women's Complicity in *The Voyage Out*

Throughout the novel, Woolf reiterates that Victorian women's foremost concern is to support and enforce the state's policy regarding foreign territories by raising sons who carry out the imperial agenda. From a socialist-feminist perspective, child-rearing has been traditionally assigned to white women under strict rules; women must unquestionably impart bourgeois ideology to both sons and daughters. Historically, women have never had complete control over the child-rearing process; Jaggar claims that: "[I]n male-dominated society, as radical feminists have pointed out, women have never completely controlled the process of childrearing, but have always had to raise their children according to patriarchal standards" (1983,311). Consequently, female characters in the novel do not emerge as agents in their children's education, but rather executors of the white man's will. In this regard, Mrs. Thornbury inculcates her children, especially her sons, not only the patriarchal norms of gender roles but more importantly the imperialist ideology. She even excels in her role as a progenitor by ensuring her children receive 'proper' education, therefore unequivocally bolstering English hegemony. Kathy Phillips's analysis of her behaviour clarifies that patriarchal and imperial motives dictate the old lady's acts:

> Second, Mrs. Thornbury has other sons in the army and navy, implying that she believes *force is justified in appropriating colonies* (113) (my italics). Third, Mrs. Thornbury and her friends assume that knowledge "isn't" what women want," since she believes that the feminine mind is capable only of feelings, not thought (115). Mrs. Thornbury, following the stream of convention, accepts the confinement of women, guards her own financial privilege, and glories in the British Empire, which should be conquered and retained by the fighting sons. (Phillips 1994, 54)

Mrs. Thornbury's pride encompasses her other sons serving in the army and navy, underscoring her unwavering commitment to the imperial enterprise. Indeed, her progeny is dispersed across the colonies;

one holds the position of colonial governor on a remote island, while another delivers speech to the "Union"-seemingly the Unionist party advocating for British unity with Ireland (Taylor 15, qtd. in Phillips 1994, 53). This party champions Irish subordination to the empire through unification with Britain. Hence, Mrs. Thornbury has adeptly instilled patriotic sentiments and imperial ideology in her sons whose devotion to military service, in turn, illustrates her approval of using military power to acquire colonies. The satisfaction she derives from their political achievements attests to her complicity in empire-building, as she wholeheartedly supports the colonial conquest and exploitation of other lands. Furthermore, she upholds the traditional belief that women are inferior to men because they lack the capacity for intellectual advancement, perceiving them as driven solely by emotions, thus, participating in women's relegation to gender roles involving solely feelings such as mothering. She consolidates the belief that English men are intellectually superior to women thereby possessing the inherent right to rule and govern the world and impose their ideals upon women and foreign people. Overall, her adherence to patriarchal norms is evident in her preservation of her financial status and her pride in the British Empire, which she believes should be maintained and expanded through her sons' martial endeavours. Her role and that of all English women is to back up their men by providing inheritors, bred according to the precepts of empire-building, and to rejoice and enjoy their economic success. Women were not supposed to interfere in political matters and question the morality behind the accumulation of wealth from the colonies. This portrayal illuminates the intersection between gender expectations, economic privilege, and imperialist ideology. The influence of British imperialism on women at home, particularly concerning childbirth and child-rearing, is profound as English women possess neither agency over their reproductive capacities nor over the child-rearing process. They are doomed to collaborate in the seamless operation of the patriarchal-imperial machinery.

Consequently, the female character is intrinsically imbued with the imperialistic ideology. Sandra Bartky has pointed out, that women's implication in their own subjugation emerges from the psychological oppression they experience. She explains that like economic oppression, its psychological counterpart is a process that enables the patriarchal structure to gain momentum by wrecking down the cognitive faculties of the oppressed (1990, 22-23). In this manner, it allows those benefiting from the established order to maintain power more subtly, with less reliance on overt violence (Bartky 1990, 23). Accordingly, Mrs. Thornbury fulfils her gender roles as mother and breeder without protest; rather, she delights in these socially and politically designed roles. She is, in fact, incapable of objecting or rebelling against the existing system because she does not act and speak from a position of power, having already been psychologically overpowered by English political dogmas. Besides, her name may imply that she has undergone a process of refinement and rectification, purging her mind of any ideas that might threaten the stability of the empire. The name "Thornbury" can be dissected into the words: 'thorn' and 'bury,' suggesting that her 'thorn'—her potential for self-actualization—has been buried deep within her. This metaphor illustrates how her personal sense of fulfilment has been suppressed in favour of moulding her into the obedient procreative mother the empire desired. Ultimately, she conforms to societal norms, accepts patriarchal limitations imposed on women, and enjoys the economic benefits drawn from the British empire which she believes should be military maintained and expanded.

5.Conclusion

Throughout socialist feminist and post-colonial readings of the novel, and its analysis with concepts of gender roles and psychological oppression, Virginia Woolf's character Mrs. Thornbury emerges as the epitome of the English mother complicit in imperial ambitions, yet also a victim of psychological oppression within the same system she defends. Sandra Bartky's model of women's psychological oppression provides a framework for understanding the impact of capitalist patriarchy in portraying white women as biological vessels for reproduction. Post-colonial theory further reveals the political dimensions of English women's pride and complicity in empire building. Despite gaining high societal respect for carrying out their procreative duties, women like Mrs. Thornbury often experience a superficial sense of

happiness and contentment, masking underlying feelings of subordination and lack of fulfilment. Through this female character, Virginia Woolf scrutinizes the supposed virtues of 'The Angel in the House', casting doubt on any exceptional talent or proficiency that might justify her elevated status. She rather depicts them as excessively ordinary, challenging the stereotypical portrayal of the 'ideal' woman within English society. Finally, Woolf's debut novel is not merely a narrative of the protagonist's quest for self-discovery but also a nuanced exploration of the profound effects of patriarchy and imperialism on English women who serve the empire from their domestic spheres as mothers of the race.

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