

Lily Briscoes's Lose of Language and her Trauma in *To the Lighthouse*

Chonnam National University

EUNHA LEEM

Judith Butler examines unintelligible life in *Undoing Gender*. She argues that the binary gender norm deprives individuals of “humanness” and differentiates human existence as “the less-than-human” (Butler, 11). Life recognized as humanness leads to a “viable life” which is considered as a “grievable” life when people die but in the opposite case, the life leads to a “unlivable life” and “ungrievable life” (11-12, 35). In the perspective of Butler, being recognized as human being seems to be a matter of whether individuals’ life can survive as a living being. The problem with lives of the less-than-human such as sexual or racial minorities is to become “unrecognized” and “unreal” even though they actually exist in the world (54). The unreal lives’ languages are so “hollow” that even though the oppressed argues that they are alive, there will be no recognition as human beings (55). Therefore, it is important to find “legitimizing lexicon” for the unreal lives to make the possibility of being (55). Existing means to be found by the other, and without the other, I do not exist either.

Virginia Woolf tries to find a legitimating language to make women’s unrecognized and unreal desires and love intelligible ones. She thinks that the unreal lives are not represented with normative language but they exist as one of the spectrum of gender complexity. For example, Woolf explains her moment of capturing the unreal lives in her book *A Room of One’s Own*. Reading imagined author Marie Carmichael’s *Life’s Adventure*, she meets one sentence: “Chloe liked Olivia”(Woolf, 125). The sentence comes to Woolf as a vibration to make a big change to the space. This sentence referring that two women like each other propose the possibility to recognize the lesbian sexuality in the unreal life and spread out their lives and relationships into the various and complex spectrum(128). This sentence makes the sexual desire of women intelligible which is not recorded or recognized because its existence is as dim as a shadow of a moth at ceiling(129). Thus, Woolf seems to believe that it is possible for literature to represent women’s oppressed lives which is unspoken or half-spoken while stuck in the unreal space(129). Her language knocks and resonates the unintelligible life like women’s desire or sexual minorities excluded by the norm’s language and then causes a stir through the imagination of readers’ mind.

However, the problem is that it is not easy to find a legitimating language that resonates with unintelligible life beyond these normative languages. Woolf says in Chapter 6 of *Her Own Room* that only a writer who has acquired a

androgynous mind can create a resonating language beyond the binary category of women and men (149). Here, Woolf refers to a mind which is creative, radiant, undivided and open to other's mind, deviating from the gender norm and transmitting emotions without any interference (149). The language of the androgynous mind is the language of balance between men and women, and it becomes a legitimating vocabulary that recognizes unreal lives and makes it a possible life. Woolf says it is very rare for writers to learn this androgynous mind. Therefore, Woolf's writing can be seen as an attempt to constantly "seek a positive mind" (Lee, 207). Woolf would have hoped for a moment of finding a legitimating language that resonates and finally recognizes unintelligible lives behind the normative languages.

One of the attempts to represent women's desires and love would be the process of completion for Lily Briscoe's painting in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily Briscoe wants to represent her desire for Mrs. Ramsay into her painting. Her painting is her legitimating language for expressing her love for Mrs. Ramsay. However, she experiences a failure of representing Mrs. Ramsay and sudden loss of her for her death. For the unfinished legitimating language, after ten years later, Lily has traumatic experience as a unintelligible less-than-human who cannot have method to represent her desire. Her traumatic symptoms appear with a shock of revisiting the Mrs. Ramsay's house and they are repetitive. In this presentation, I will talk about my analysis of the absence of legitimating language representing the Lily Briscoe's desire and the failure of finding the legitimating language makes her traumatized after the loss of her desire.

Lily Briscoe's Loss of Language and her Trauma

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf argues that women should try to get out of a conventional angel in the house fantasy. The phantom of an angel in the house implies that women are a material belonging to the patriarchal society without any sexual desire of their own. So, there are no sexual desire and feeling of love for the angel in the house. Published in 1927, *To the Lighthouse* focuses on Lily Briscoe's love and desire for Mrs. Ramsay. However, like what Judith Butler points out, women's sexual desire especially for the same gender is unintelligible for being laid in the unreal space. Thus, normative languages in a patriarchal society cannot represent Lily Briscoe's desire as it is. Instead of using normative languages, Woolf tries to use a detouring way to represent the unintelligible desire. Through Lily Briscoe's painting, Woolf would attempt to find legitimating lexicon to represent a women's sexual desire toward the same gender.

Lily Briscoe who is invited from the Ramsay family's summer house loves Mrs. Ramsay who is beauty that everybody admires. Mrs. Ramsay's beauty doesn't

mean just her pretty appearance. Her beauty implies her unique feminine charisma that even male characters are persuaded and attracted by her (Lee 24). Lily Briscoe is also fascinated by her charismatic feminine beauty. At the same time, Lily Briscoe captures "other side" behind Mrs Ramsay, the incarnation of beauty, and recognized the flaws of it (*TL* 73). Nevertheless, just as any person cannot choose only the good side of who they love, Lily knows for herself that she loves Mrs. Ramsay's everything. But the problem with Lily's sophisticated love is that it's in a state of confusion where she doesn't know "what to say" about her love (31). In other words, she doesn't have any legitimating language to contain her feeling that she loves the same gendered person. It is because it is "ridiculous and impossible" to say a woman's feelings of love for a woman, and she thinks that it is absolutely impossible and inappropriate to express her thoughts accurately in words (31). Instead, she chooses painting her as a way to represent her love. She models Mrs. Ramsey and her son, James. But when she paints a picture in place of her language for her desire, she feels that something like a demon that weighs down and frightens her, interfering with her actions.

It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. Such she often felt herself—struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: "But this is what I see; this is what I see," and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her (*TTL* 12).

The enormous power that interferes with Lily's painting prevents her from representing her desired figure into the painting. The power is so overwhelming and frightening that Lily sometimes blames her inability to paint well because she does not have enough talent to paint. What is this fearful presence she feels? This can be inferred through other characters' narratives. They are Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley. Some critics even allegorize Mr. Ramsey and Charles Tansley as typical figures of Victorian patriarchy. But they are figures who inhibit and hide their essence by the normative language that patriarchy defines as the stereotypical form of men and women (Park 158). For example, in Mr. Ramsey's narrative, he seems to be a person who is sensitive and vulnerable to external influences.

But now, he felt, it didn't matter a damn who reached Z (if thought ran like an alphabet from A to Z). Somebody would reach it—if not he, then another. This man's strength and sanity, his feeling for straightforward simple things, these fishermen, the poor old crazed creature in Mucklebackit's cottage made him feel so vigorous, so relieved of something that he felt roused and

triumphant and could not choke back his tears. Raising the book a little to hide his face, he let them fall and shook his head from side to side and forgot himself completely (TTL 122).

Mr. Ramsay is affected by the scenes of the book which means he has the sensitiveness of empathizing and communicating with the scene. However, this sensitiveness is considered feminine, so it must be suppressed and hidden at that time. Mr. Ramsay has no legitimating language for his inner sensitiveness. So, He just chooses to surrender to as shaking his head and forgetting himself. That is why Mr. Ramsey is always sensitive, anxious, and unhappy (Park 158). Like Mr. Ramsey's case, the overwhelming power to hinder Lily Briscoe's painting is the power of oppression that patriarchal norms have. The voice of the norms of patriarchy interferes with her when she paints a picture to represent her desire.

Lily's painting doesn't go well as she thinks. She cannot easily represent her desires in the painting, so she is surrounded by "would having wept" feeling (TTL 33). So, she cries out three times below the surface: "It was bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad!" This crying out resonates her ear with Tansley's saying "Women can't paint, women can't write... (34)" Even with this frustration, she continues to find a legitimating language for her desires. Lily has laid her head on Mrs. Ramsay's lap and feels like guessing Mrs. Ramsay's secret as her "glove's twisted finger (35)." But she fails to decode it. She has laid on Mrs. Ramsey's lap and hopes of becoming unity with her desire, Mrs. Ramsey's existence. To describe their relationship what she hopes is more than what people conventionally call "loving" or write with "any language known to men (35)." Lily wants to find a legitimating language for the unity and Mrs. Ramsay, but she fails. She cries out below the surface again: "Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing!" This crying out reminds the first crying "It was bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad!" which causes the Tansley's discouraging whispering. This Tansley's discouraging whispering becomes traumatic for Lily Briscoe.

This Tansley's discouraging whispering becomes traumatic for Lily Briscoe. According to Geoffrey H. Hartman, the traumatic knowledge is registered, not experienced (537). The traumatic knowledge is not imitating the actual event, so belatedness and repetition are the symptoms of trauma. Also, it is in a figurative form of the memory (537). This figurative forms of trauma let us momentarily visit the unseen and hidden area of the traumatized person (Caruth 2).

After the first chapter 「the Window」, Mrs. Ramsay suddenly dies. And then, ten years later after the first visit to the summer house, Lily Briscoe, Carmichael and rest of Ramsay family revisit the place again. At night, she feels "the voice" "resume"s saying "why not accept this, be content with this, acquiesce and resign?" What does the whispering voice want to convince her to stop? This whispering voice and how it appears remind the Tansley's discouraging whispering.

Next morning, thinking about the meaning of the voice, Lily recalls the unfinished painting and decides to finish it. She draws brown marks and lines, feeling “curious physical sensation” like “wave towering higher and higher above her (110).” At the same time, this sensation makes her participate in “perpetual combat” and “challenging fight” (110). Suddenly, she feels like becoming naked, vulnerable and hesitated which brings to her Tansley’s words “Women can’t paint, women can’t write...” Tansley never shouts the words, however she feels that the words are shouted. Why does its aspect change? In the past, when Lily paints Mrs. Ramsay, she feels an overwhelming power to hinder her painting. This time again, when Lily decides to finish the painting, the voice of darkness and Tansley’s whispering returns to her mind with a stronger and powerful volume. Also, this norms’ interference has the similar strategy in the case of Mr. Ramsay when he reads the book and shakes his head and forgets it. Therefore, it could be said that a fear and oppression of the patriarchal norms within Lily herself come back to hinder Lily’s successful representation of her desire. In this way, Woolf might attempt to show how the patriarchal norms drive away from representation of their desire.