

**'Martin was in the jungle alone, and the sun was sinking':
The Weather, Culture and Identity in Virginia Woolf's
*The Years***

Verita Sriratana

Abstract

Depictions of the weather as cultural representation in literature, particularly in Virginia Woolf's *The Years* (1937), challenge the construction of meanings, identity, and culture. Basing my argument on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of colonial ambivalence, I propose in this chapter that though the weather is often portrayed in our daily life as an essence, it is, at the same time, portrayed as the very 'thing' which constantly escapes essentialisation and, therefore, can be compared to an individual's complex sense of self, sense of place, and sense of culture. There are numerous attempts to regulate the weather, as there are numerous attempts to regulate and pigeonhole one's identity and mind-set. Endeavours of this kind are, according to Woolf, constantly challenged by the weather and the self's dynamism and unpredictability. Also, the weather endows place with a sense of identity, a spatial consciousness. Its very physicality contributes to the construction of an imagined community at both regional and national levels. However, in the text, the weather's ambivalence and changeability, as reflected in human beings' past and present obsessive attempts to control and rationalise it, shatter its very essence and challenge our fixed concepts of identity, sense of regionality and sense of nationhood.

Key Words: Place, race, region, nation, the weather, Englishness, British Imperialism, Virginia Woolf, Homi K. Bhabha, regional and national stereotypes.

When we think of Virginia Woolf, the so-called 'high modernist' who has often been portrayed as 'very British,' we might not expect to see issues regarding interculturalism in her works. Some might argue that it might be more apt to look at the literature or reflections of diaspora writers in postcolonial literature, in works of the displaced or the marginalised. However, I believe that the term 'marginalised,' a spatial term and metaphor, is based on the assumed fixity of the so-called 'centre' or 'centralised' subject position in terms of social class, for example, when in truth what we consider as 'centre' is just an illusion, an ideology which must be maintained by careful construction and reconstruction of the 'margins.' A creative and interesting way to question this 'centre-margin' paradigm, I propose, is to look at the discourse of power embedded within the minds of people whom we regarded as 'central' or 'canonical.' In Woolf's case, sense of place in relation to sense of self can be seen portrayed, represented,

exposed as unstable, and interrogated in ways that we least expect and in things we think of as ordinary and mundane like the weather condition.

In a 1936 letter to Hugh Walpole, Woolf wrote from Monk House, Sussex: 'There's a raging wind; some of Leonard's crocuses are up, the churchyard is full of snowdrops, and old Mrs Mockford was buried yesterday. This is said to bring back the sense of England.'¹ The wind, the crocuses, the snowdrops, and the death of a local woman all uncannily contribute to what she considers to be 'the sense of England' which she wants to share with Walpole. The question that concerns this chapter is why and how such common images of plants blooming, the common sensation of the wind on one's skin, and universal notions of birth and death, for example, come together to shape and make up something so specific as 'the sense of England.'² Focusing particularly on the weather in her novel *The Years*,³ I propose that the weather can be regarded as a 'technology of place'⁴ which constructs and, at the same time, deconstructs our sense of self and sense of place.

Descriptions of the weather help establish scenes. They provoke one's imagination of an 'other' place. The conjured up visions in one's mind transform the way one sees, experiences, and understands 'home' or home country. As Eleanor reads her brother Martin's letter from India on a cab ride to watch Morris, another brother, practice law in a court session, she suddenly feels that she is in the middle of an Indian jungle instead of Oxford Street:

'I had lost my way; the sun was sinking,' she read [Martin's letter from India].

'The sun was sinking...' Eleanor repeated, glancing ahead of her down Oxford Street. The sun shone on dresses in a window. A jungle was a very thick wood, she supposed; made of stunted little trees; dark green in colour. Martin was in the jungle alone, and the sun was sinking. What happened next? 'I thought it better to stay where I was.' So he stood in the midst of little trees alone, in the jungle; and the sun was sinking. The street before her lost its detail... The cab stopped. For a moment Eleanor sat still. She saw nothing but stunted little trees, and her brother looking at the sun rising over the jungle. The sun was rising. Flames for a moment danced over the vast funereal mass of the Law Courts.⁵

The sinking sun, its heat and light, is transported to London through Martin's words and narrative. London's scenery viewed through the cab's window has increasingly 'lost its detail' and, hence, become questionable. London as a concrete place is, in turn, tinted and reshaped by Eleanor's imagination of India as an abstract place. When the physical and mental experiences of place meet and

merge, there emerges a sense of ambivalence. Eleanor is living in the empire's seat of power but, at the same time, her mind follows Martin to the empire's margin: India. Her brother's landscape descriptions, particularly weather descriptions, induce her to make a mental tour with him to the jungle. She envisions the place on which the empire thrives and bases itself. This paradox of being both 'in' and 'out' of place leads to Homi K. Bhabha's 'moment of discursive transparency'.⁶ Eleanor's imagination of India clashes with the London she knows and the reality she later on sees in the courtroom. As Eleanor realises the constructedness of her world and of the imperial power, she realises that the pomp and ceremony which the judges and the barristers adopt as a tradition are part of the façade:

[T]he Judge came in. He made one bow and took his seat under the Lion and the Unicorn. Eleanor felt a little thrill of awe run through her. That was old Curry. But how transformed! Last time she had seen him he was sitting at the head of a dinner-table; a long yellow strip of embroidery went rippling down the middle; and he had taken her, with a candle, round the drawing-room to look at his old oak. But now, there he was, awful, magisterial in his robes.⁷

Weather descriptions are important to the construction and reconstruction of a sense of nationhood in that they contribute to the making of racial and national 'signifiers' and stereotypes. In the 1911 section,⁸ twenty years after Eleanor's 1891 cab ride and the courtroom scenes, we are shown here a 53-year-old Eleanor who has just returned from a trip to Spain. The air in England makes her reflect on her recent travel experience:

Eleanor sat back under the shade of her white umbrella. The air seemed to hum with the heat. The air seemed to smell of soap and chemicals. How thoroughly people wash in England, she thought, looking at the yellow soap, the green soap, and the pink soap in the chemist's window. In Spain she had hardly washed at all; she had dried herself with a pocket-handkerchief standing among the white dry stones of the Guadalquivir. In Spain it was all parched and shrivelled. But here—she looked down the High Street—every shop was full of vegetables; of shining silver fish; of yellow-clawed, soft-breasted chickens; of buckets, rakes and wheel-barrows. And how friendly people were!⁹

The heat and 'the smell of soap and chemical' in the air propel Eleanor to think back and compare her 'sense of England' with her 'sense of Spain.' She juxtaposes two different places and climatic conditions: England's clean air and vegetation in

full bloom and Spain's air 'all parched and shrivelled.' Here, her encounter with the weather leads her to mentally revisit not only the place she has been to, but also the people she has met on the way. National identity is mainly constructed through repetitive acts of defining and redefining the 'other.' In the extract above, Eleanor perceives the English as more hygienic than their Spanish counterparts because they breathe more 'sanitised' air. Nation and its 'civilisation' are here defined by how frequently one gets to wash or cleanse oneself from the foreign dust and heat. As McClintock points out in *Imperial Leather*, 'Victorian cleaning rituals were peddled globally as the God-given sign of Britain's evolutionary superiority, and soap was invested with magical fetish powers.'¹⁰ In this respect, commodities such as soaps on display in High Street shops are, especially for Eleanor, laden with symbolic meaning. The sight of soaps on display induce her to assess and reassess what she thinks of herself as an Englishwoman and what she thinks of Spanish people as the other. The Victorian obsession with hygiene and self-purification reflects people's agitation caused by the need for an individual or a nation to constantly define oneself against the other. McClintock explains the significance and connotations of soap as a commodity which has the potential to foster and further sexist, classist, nationalist, and imperialist agenda:

Both the cult of domesticity and the new imperialism found in soap an exemplary mediating form. The emergent middle class values—monogamy ('clean' sex, which has value). Industrial capital ('clean' money, which has value). Christianity ('being washed in the blood of the lamb'), class control ('cleansing the great unwashed') and the imperial civilizing mission ('washing and clothing the savage') — could all be marvellously embodied in a single household commodity.¹¹

The fact that the air in England, for Eleanor, is cleaner than the air in Spain hints at the idea that the people in England are better or 'more civilised' than the people in Spain. Eleanor's grasp of 'Englishness' is defined and redefined against the backdrop of the 'white dry stones of the Guadalquivir.' In the same manner, her understanding of 'Spanishness' is shaped and reshaped amidst the milieu of the bustling High Street in Peterborough. The ambivalence in one's attempt to stereotype and characterise one's own and other national identity can be seen in a conversation which follows the High Street scene. Peggy Pargiter, Eleanor's niece, makes her forecast on the following day's potential weather condition. This not only reaffirms Eleanor's sense of nationhood, but also reminds her of her obligation, as a part of the English nation, to sustain its values and significance:

'It's going to be another hot day tomorrow,' said Peggy. The sky was perfectly smooth; it seemed made of innumerable grey-blue

atoms the colour of an Italian officer's cloak; until it reached the horizon where there was a long bar of pure green. Everything looked very settled; very still; very pure. There was not a single cloud, and the stars were not yet showing.

It was small; it was smug; it was pretty after Spain, but still, now that the sun had sunk and the trees were massed together without separate leaves it had its beauty, Eleanor thought. The downs were becoming larger and simpler; they were becoming part of the sky.

'How lovely it is!' she exclaimed, as if she were making amends to England after Spain.¹²

Eleanor comes to acknowledge and appreciate the English weather, with its blessed purity and tranquillity, to a more intense degree only when she experiences it 'after Spain.' Woolf makes it clear that Eleanor's reaction is dictated by nationalist discourse, not by her own sentiment: 'she [Eleanor] felt no affection for her native land—none whatever'.¹³ Thus, the urge to make amends or to compensate for England is part of the urge to persistently classify what one means by 'Englishness' and what one means by the opposite. As the 'truth' or the essence of 'Englishness' cannot be defined, when the English weather is evoked in thoughts or in conversations, there will always be anxiety and ambivalence. Here, anxiety is caused by strenuous attempts to construct, reconstruct, and contain the 'signified' or meaning of Englishness into its hollow label of a 'signifier.' Ambivalence is caused by the fact that nationhood is essentialised only through negotiations between binary oppositions constantly set up and pit against each other. As Bhabha points out, one always imagines the weather condition elsewhere whenever one tries to conceptualise the English weather:

To end with the English weather is to invoke, at once, the most changeable and immanent signs of national difference. It encourages memories of the 'deep' nation crafted in chalk and limestone; the quilted downs; the moors menaced by the wind; the quiet cathedral towns; that corner of a foreign field that is forever England. The English weather also revives memories of its daemonic double: the heat and dust of India; the dark emptiness of Africa; the tropical chaos that was deemed despotic and ungovernable and therefore worthy of the civilizing mission.¹⁴

The changeability and unpredictability of the weather shatter the so-called essence of a 'nation.' Straddling the physical experiences of 'here' and the mental pictures of 'there,' the weather functions as a technology of place in that its ambivalence fabricates and tears apart the sense of nationhood. The weather operates as both a fluid 'signified' and an empty 'signifier.' Its truth claims can claim nothing but a vague impression of what it means to be part of a national community: "Peculiar weather' has always been common in England, but the English had no ready answers as to what, if anything, was wrong with their weather, much less how to correct it."¹⁵

On a regional level, different stereotypes of different locales threaten to disintegrate one's complacent sense of nation-ness.¹⁶ These stereotypes are abstract semiotic spaces demarcated through concrete impacts of regional weather: 'As the weather can be understood as an interaction of regional and global movement of air, so can a nation be defined as a negotiation between an overlying national character and its regional idiosyncrasies.'¹⁷ As Eleanor listens to her sister-in-law Celia's quavering Dorset accent, she reflects on the purity of her English language as opposed to the strangeness of other foreign languages she has heard:

After all the foreign languages she had been hearing, it sounded to her pure English. What a lovely language, she thought, saying over to herself again the commonplace words, spoken by Celia quite simply, but with some indescribable vurr in the r's, for the Chinnerys had lived in Dorsetshire since the beginning of time.¹⁸

However, it can be inferred from Eleanor's observation that Celia's pronunciation and intonation are different from her own. Here she sits at the Chinnery family's house in Peterborough, comparing and contrasting the different dialects and weather condition of more than two different regions. If there is such a thing as a fixed or wholesome 'nationhood,' the extract reveals numerous fractures which jeopardise its harmony. More importantly, the passage reveals that the idea of an absolute 'nation' comes with a price to pay. Eleanor's seemingly harmless remarks signals violence which is caused by our tendency to obliterate differences in order to achieve a 'sanitised' sense of nationhood:¹⁹ 'The very idea of a pure, 'ethnically cleansed' national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood.'²⁰ Here, Dorsetshire's unique 'vurr in the r's' is also mechanically incorporated into Eleanor's imagination of her 'Englishness.'

Notes

- ¹ N. Nicolson (ed), *Leave the Letters till We're Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI (1936-1941)*, Hogarth Press, London, 1980, p. 12.
- ² One's sense of self is, I believe, dependent upon one's sense of place. I refer to Karol Chrobak's discussion in his paper entitled 'Culture from the View Point of Philosophical Anthropology' at the conference. What marks us human beings, the generator and agency of culture, from animals is precisely the ability to grasp the boundaries of our own bodies against the backdrop of our environment.
- ³ *The Years* first originated from Virginia Woolf's 1931 lecture at the National Society for Women's Service, London. At that time, Woolf wanted to experiment in a new form of writing which she called the 'novel-essay.'
- ⁴ For more on 'technology of place,' see my article 'Unleashing the Underdog: Technology of Place in Virginia Woolf's *Flush*'.
- ⁵ V. Woolf, *The Years*, H. Lee (ed), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 103-104.
- ⁶ Bhabha explains in *The Location of Culture* that the moment of 'discursive transparency' is 'the moment when, 'under the false appearance of the present', the semantic seems to prevail over the syntactic, the signified over the signifier' (p. 155).
- ⁷ Woolf, op. cit., p. 105.
- ⁸ In terms of the novel's structure, the book's sections are divided into different periods of time and headed by numbers such as '1880,' '1891,' '1907,' etc.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 185.
- ¹⁰ A. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Routledge, 1995, p. 207.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 208.
- ¹² Woolf, op. cit., pp. 195-196.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 189.
- ¹⁴ H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 2006, p. 243.
- ¹⁵ Janković, p. 2.
- ¹⁶ At the conference, Tuuli Lähdesmäki demonstrates in 'Representations of European Cultural Identity in Mini-Europe' that Mini-Europe, a theme park in Brussels which was morally supported by the European Commission and the European Parliament, is intended to be a mini heritage sites which seek to construct and reinforce 'European cultural identities.' The theme park is, ironically, an indicator of pan-Europeanist ideology which seeks to 'sanitise' cultural differences between different regions.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 80.
- ¹⁸ Woolf, op. cit., p. 197.
- ¹⁹ The discussion at the conference after Aga Jarzewicz's paper 'The Challenges of Cultural Transgression: In Search of Lingua Franca' supports my argument of