

# Human Body in the Society: The View through the Prism of Literary Corporality

Iryna Galutskikh

**Abstract**—The article focuses on the research of the impact of social factors on human body through the prism literary texts of modernist period. The material of the analysis is the corpus of literary prose by Virginia Woolf. By means of linguistic (semantic and conceptual) analysis of the literary text the vision of corporality characteristic of the modernist period is revealed as well as specific features of interaction of human being and society that found bodily reflection in the imagery space of V. Woolf's prose.

**Index Terms**—Corporality, human body, literary text, society.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of human body has been in the focus of attention of multiple scientific paradigms since ancient times. It has been in the spotlight of numerous investigations in various branches of modern science – biology, anatomy, physiology, chemistry, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, literary studies, culture studies, cognitive science, etc. [1]-[7]. All of them focus on different dimensions of the body and corporality, starting from its biological, physical, organismic facets up to its phenomenological, social, cultural, etc. ones.

The significance of *body* for a human being can hardly be overestimated as far it is not only what we are, but it is the instrument of understanding the outer world, being the key component of the mental lexicon and playing important role in the processes of conceptualization and categorization [7] due to the rootedness of thinking in bodily experience [1].

Eventually, the phenomenon of corporality becomes obviously significant in the literary text [8] (in which it can be termed as “literary corporality”), since any poetic world requires certain correlation of a human being (human body) and its surrounding. I suppose literary corporality is a perfect object of analysis for the research of the concept of *human body* affected by the socio-cultural factors viewed through the prism of a certain literary text or a corpus of texts of a particular literary trend.

In literary texts more pronounced foregrounding of the human body is observed in the period of modernism due to the changes in people's outlook stimulated by the drastic events of the epoch. The period of modernism being the epoch of the search for new types of thinking by the humanity, reflecting its helplessness and vulnerability, stipulated by the events going

on in the world, was the stage of transition from contemplation to comprehension of ontological phenomena, human body being one of them.

Thus, the material of the research is a corpus of literary texts by the English modernist writer Virginia Woolf, among them being her novels “Mrs. Dalloway”, “To the Lighthouse”, “Between the Acts”, “The Waves”.

The article is aimed at the research of human body in the society with the help of linguistic analysis of corporality as the basis of imagery formation of literary text by means of studying the ways of conceptualization of HUMAN BODY domain in V. Woolf's literary prose.

The aim is realized with the methods of semantic and cognitive types of linguistic analyses applied, which imply the process of reconstruction of conceptual metaphors in the text. The methodological grounds of the research is the theory of conceptual metaphor [2], [9], the theory of conceptual integration [10].

The results obtained of conceptual analysis demonstrated the role of HUMAN BODY domain in the imagery formation as a target domain and revealed specific vision of the human body as part of society in Virginia Woolf's literary prose.

## II. “BODY” AND “CORPORALITY”—THE TERMS DEFINED

Analytical study of the works proved the vagueness and obscurity of the term “body” itself. Its difficulty derives in part from the fact that it is thought of in various ways [1], [2]. The wide range of interdisciplinary and multiaspectual scientific approaches stipulated a considerable debate as to what the term “body” actually means. A series of questions can arise in this concern. Is the “body” merely a physical, casually determined entity? Is it a set of organic processes? Is it a felt experience of sensations and movement? Is it the individual physical body, or does it includes the social networks such as families without which it would cease to exist? Or is the body a socially and culturally constructed artifact? [11].

The questions that arise reveal the distinguishing of the types of the body. Being incorporated into multidimensional space of existence and functioning within its different subsystems, human body acquires different levels of being. On each of them in accordance with the laws (of nature, society, culture), being interrelated and interacting with other elements of the corresponding system (natural factors, social institutions, cultural norms) the human body is constantly modified and appears not as one, but three basic incarnations: biological (natural) body, social body and cultural body [12].

Whereas *biological body* is understood as the entire structure of a human organism, consisting of a torso, its parts,

Manuscript received February 28, 2013; revised May 1, 2013.

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limbs and the organ systems of the individual complying to the laws of existence, functioning and development of a living being, *social body* is the result of its interaction with the social environment. *Cultural body* is the product of culture congruous formation and employment of bodily principle of a human being, it is the quintessence, the accomplishment of the process of transition of impersonal, purely corporeal preconditions to properly human existence of the body [12].

In this concern the term *corporality* – a postmodernist concept associated with the bodily existence – can be treated as the dialectical unity of body and soul, as the integral quality of existential experience of a person, a complex of natural, individual and cultural features of human body, as the field of interaction of inner and outer life spaces of a human being, or as a body that acquired various “languages” as a result of socialization [13]. In other words, corporality is a socio-cultural phenomenon which is understood as a human body which experienced transformations due to the impact of social and cultural factors and possesses, having socio-cultural meaning and fulfilling certain socio-cultural functions.

### III. SOCIETY VS HUMAN BODY IN THE LITERARY TEXT

The HUMAN BODY in terms of its interrelation with the society and SOCIETY itself get several model of conceptualization in the imagery space of V. Woolf’s literary texts, that reveal several key aspects of corporality – how the SOCIETY is viewed in concern with corporality, how the HUMAN BODY is understood and how their interaction is poetically interpreted. Taken together the data provide a round picture of corporeal qualities specific for the modernist period as viewed in the analyzed corpus of literary texts.

The poetic interpretation of the SOCIETY in V. Woolf’s prose sustains the fact of HUMAN BODY foregrounding, since SOCIETY is understood not as a group of people, but of *bodies*. Such vision underlies the implication of the conceptual metaphor SOCIETY IS A GATHERING OF HUMAN BODIES. Moreover, these BODIES, constituting SOCIETY, are featureless, unrecognizable and unmarked. The perception of people only from the point of view of their corporeal aspect is evident in the following text fragments:

“*But we must go; must catch our train; must walk back to the station — must, must, must. We are only bodies jogging along side by side. I exist only in the soles of my feet and in the tired muscles of my thighs. We have been walking for hours it seems.*” [14];

“*I stop. I take stock of this world. I look among the groups of unknown people. Among the lustrous green, pink, pearl-grey women stand upright the bodies of men. They are black and white; they are grooved beneath their clothes with deep rills.*” [14];

“*This, then, serves to explain my confidence, my central stability, otherwise so monstrously absurd as I breast the stream of this crowded thoroughfare, making always a passage for myself between people’s bodies, taking advantage of safe moments to cross.*” [14].

BODIES which seem to be not personified are not only moving along the streets and performing some activity, but

fulfilling social functions as communication, compare: “*I am ready now to join men and women on the stairs, my peers. I pass them, exposed to their gaze, as they are to mine. Like lightning we look but do not soften or show signs of recognition. Our bodies communicate. This is my calling. This is my world.*” [14].

The function of recognition as essential part of communication and social interaction is fully completed by BODY solely that emphasizes not only its significance in the course of socialization, but even more pronouncedly – facelessness of people in the crowd, who seem to be deprived of their personality and their identity as fragments of the crowd. People are losing signs of identification, even face features, compare: “*I do not remember my special gifts, or idiosyncrasy, or the marks I bear on my person; eyes, nose or mouth. I am not, at this moment, myself.*” [14].

This assumption is sustained by the explicit feature ‘faceless, having no face’, compare:

“*Coming up from the station, refusing to accept the shadow of the trees and the pillar-boxes, I perceived, from your coats and umbrellas, even at a distance, how you stand embedded in a substance made of repeated moments run together; are committed, have an attitude, with children, authority, fame, love, society; where I have nothing. I have no face.*” [14];

“*I also see the railings of the square, and two people without faces, leaning like statues against the sky.*” [14].

The following text fragment demonstrates the loss of ‘face’ as caused by the social surrounding that ‘robs of identity’, e.g.: “*But here I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity. We are all callous, unfriended.*” [14].

The author makes the fading of human identity, facelessness and merging with the crowd apparent by means of literary images, formed by implication of conceptual metaphors HUMAN BODY IS A PIECE OF MEAT and HUMAN BODY IS A BLOB OF MATTER, illustrated by the text fragments:

“*But what can one make in loneliness? Alone I should stand on the empty grass ... I should stand in a queue and smell sweat, and scent as horrible as sweat; and be hung with other people like a joint of meat among other joints of meat.*” [14];

“*We grew; we changed; for, of course, we are animals. We are not always aware by any means; we breathe, eat, sleep automatically. We exist not only separately but in undifferentiated blobs of matter.*” [14].

Here the society is represented as a gathering of bodies, each of them merging with the crowd and being ‘undifferentiated’, unidentified flesh (‘joint of meat’, ‘blobs of matter’). Noteworthy, that such perception of self is concerned with the feeling of loneliness (see the example above), that is a state of a certain psychological discomfort and highlights the correlation of bodily and psychological states.

Besides, the emphasis on sameness, uniformity of human beings is made by means of accentuating the fusion of one’s BODY with others’ accompanied by as if dissolution of the limits of the body and embodiment of one personality in

others, e.g.: *“Our friends, how seldom visited, how little known – it is true; and yet, when I meet an unknown person, and try to break off, here at this table, what I call “my life”, it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am — Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs.”* [14].

Such inability to distinguish one’s BODY from others’, though, does not attest the unity of people in the society.

#### A. Unstable Human Body

Except ‘facelessness’, V. Woolf’s HUMAN BODY is characterized by other features, such as ‘instability’ and ‘deformation’.

The feature ‘instability’ is realized in a series of contexts, where HUMAN BODY is depicted as ‘floating’, ‘restless’, as if ‘not finding fixed place’ and ‘will-less’, ‘having no command of one’s activity’. In most of contexts such characteristics of the HUMAN BODY are highlighted by implication of the images of SEA for the SOCIETY bringing the body (human being) somewhere even against personal will, whereas and images of floating objects – for HUMAN BODY itself.

Thus, the conceptual metaphor HUMAN BODY IS A SHIP ON THE SEA, where CROWD OF PEOPLE IS THE SEA, generalizes the literary reconsideration of HUMAN BODY in the following text fragment: *“I cannot tell you if life is this or that. I am going to push out into the heterogeneous crowd. I am going to be buffeted; to be flung up, and flung down, among men, like a ship on the sea.”* [14], in which the BODY is viewed as deprived of personal will and initiative.

Other bodily metaphors – HUMAN BODY IS A CORK ON A ROUGH SEA, HUMAN BODY IS A RIBBON OF WEED and HUMAN BODY IS A FOAM, applied in the text fragment: *“I am to be broken. I am to be derided all my life. I am to be cast up and down among these men and women, with their twitching faces, with their lying tongues, like a cork on a rough sea. Like a ribbon of weed I am flung far every time the door opens. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness ....”* [14], where HUMAN BODY is viewed through the images of light-weighting objects (CORK, WEED) or objects having vague consistence (FOAM) that can be easily ‘cast up and down’ and ‘flung far’ among crowds of people, their ‘twitching faces’ and ‘lying tongues’, represented by the image of ROUGH SEA, contribute to bringing out the same corporeal features.

Another instance of applying the image of a SHIP to poetically interpret HUMAN BODY, where the idea of floating ‘unattached, ‘unanchored’ is activated, underlies the conceptual metaphor HUMAN BODY IS A SHIP (BOAT) in the text fragment: *“Even I who have no face, who make no difference when I come in (Susan and Jinny change bodies and faces), flutter unattached, without anchorage anywhere, unconsolidated, incapable of composing any blankness or continuity or wall against which these bodies move. It is because of Neville and his misery. The sharp breath of his misery scatters my being. Nothing can settle; nothing can subside.”* [14].

Unstable, unsettled, unfixed character of a HUMAN

BODY in the world where ‘nothing can settle’, and ‘nothing can subside’, reflects psychological uneasiness, dependency, lack of confidence and disturbance of a person in the society and activates the generic-level metonymy FLOATING, UNFIXED BODY stands for WILL-LESS, DISTURBED, UNCONFIDENT PERSON.

Nevertheless, none of the abovementioned features ascribed to a HUMAN BODY, highlight vulnerability and detachment of a human being in the society as the following one does.

#### B. Deformed Human Body

The images of DEFORMED HUMAN BODY reflect the devastating impact of SOCIETY on a person. Various ways of ‘deformation’ of a HUMAN BODY are applied in V. Woolf’s novels such as violation of integrity and limits of the body, the changes of its size and consistence, injuries causing physical pain and the like, to reveal psychological discomfort and suffering of a person in the present-day society.

Thus, the loss of integrity of the BODY is obviously emphasized in the following text fragment: *“There is, then, a world immune from change. But I am not composed enough, standing on tiptoe on the verge of fire, still scorched by the hot breath, afraid of the door opening and the leap of the tiger, to make even one sentence. What I say is perpetually contradicted.”* [14]. ‘Not composed enough’ BODY here stands for a PERSON AT A LOSS. Besides, the idea of non-integrity of a HUMAN BODY is realized in a wider context of a SOCIETY, CIVILIZATION as it is understood as a fragment, scrap of the latter, activating the conceptual metaphor HUMAN BODIES ARE FRAGMENTS, ORTS, SCRAPS OF SOCIETY / CIVILIZATION. Compare: *“Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how's this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves?”* [15]. In this context the accent is evidently made on the HUMAN BODY as being able to exist and function only as part of the whole, being nothing without a civilized society.

Disappointment and psychological discomfort are in most contexts interpreted through the images of deviant, deformed or damaged HUMAN BODY.

For instance, in the following fragment of the literary text the author applies the conceptual metonymy DEVIANT / DEFORMED BODY stands for DISAPPOINTED PERSON, as she pictures the BODY of the person (Mrs. Dalloway), who felt rejected by the society (being not invited to the party), as ‘shriveled’, ‘aged’, and even deprived of parts of the body – ‘breathless’ (about woman), as the contrast to the outer world, e.g.: *“She began to go slowly upstairs, with her hand on the bannisters, as if she had left a party, where now this friend now that had flashed back her face, her voice; had shut the door and gone out and stood alone, ... she thought, feeling herself suddenly shriveled, aged, breathless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed, since Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her.”* [14].

The images of DEFORMED BODY in some contexts are created by means of altering its size, which is in most cases

diminished (*minute, contracted*). The following fragment of the text illustrates the implication of the image of a SMALL (MINUTE) BODY, that activates the conceptual metonymy MINUTE BODY stands for MISERABLE, DETACHED PERSON: “*Great clouds always changing, and movement; something sulphurous and sinister, bowled up, helter-skelter; towering, trailing, broken off, lost, and I forgotten, minute, in a ditch.*” [14].

The image of CONTRACTED BODY, based on the same principle of literary diminishing of the size of the human body, is applied in the following context: “*The cold stream of visual impressions failed him now as if the eye were a cup that overflowed and let the rest run down its china walls unrecorded. The brain must wake now. The body must contract now, entering the house, the lighted house, where the door stood open, where the motor cars were standing, and bright women descending: the soul must brave itself to endure. He opened the big blade of his pocket-knife.*” [16]. Evidently, the implication of the conceptual metonymy CONTRACTED BODY stands for OPPRESSED PERSON serves here to emphasize the oppressing impact of the society on the person that produces the effect of contraction, which the body as if has to undertake in order to endure the time spent among people.

The change of consistence and ruining of the body are used by V. Woolf to highlight the extent people are affected by the life in the society. In the analyzed corpus of texts the process of altering body’s consistence is concerned with its softening – melting, thawing, dissolving, etc. up to becoming transparent. For instance, this fact can be observed in the following fragment of the text, in which the conceptual metaphor HUMAN BODY IS A WAXEN FIGURE is activated: “*Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through; my spine is soft like wax near the flame of the candle. I dream; I dream.*” [14].

This idea is developed further in the text of the novel, where the semiotic nature of a human body becomes obvious, since the image of a WAXEN FIGURE is depicted as preserving signs left on the wax coat by the social life events that are printed out on human bodies, and this process goes on in different ways for each person depending on their individual experience: “*But we were all different. The wax — the virginal wax that coats the spine melted in different patches for each of us. [...] our white wax was streaked and stained by each of these differently. Louis was disgusted by the nature of human flesh; Rhoda by our cruelty; Susan could not share; Neville wanted order; Jinny love; and so on. We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies.*” [14]. Moreover, with the age such ‘waxen coat’ is melting drop after drop, compare: “*Thus, not equally by any means or with order, but in great streaks my waxen waistcoat melted, here one drop, there another.*” [14]; “*It is not age; it is that a drop has fallen; another drop. Time has given the arrangement another shake.*” [14].

All in all it makes this image significant for bringing out the idea of human vulnerability and susceptibility, its exposure to hard life experience and pressure of the society.

Another part of the bodily imagery in V. Woolf’s literary

prose is based on the sensory and sensations. Noteworthy, in most cases painful sensations caused by injuries of the body are applied for the formation of the imagery in modernist literature, that serves to denote devastating impact of the society on a person revealed through its effect on a human body.

Thus, such effect is metaphorically depicted through the images of SIGNS ON A HUMAN BODY, activating a conceptual metonymy SIGNS / PRINT ON A HUMAN BODY stand for IMPACT LIFE AND SOCIETY PRODUCE as in the following context: “*Before, when we met in a restaurant in London with Percival, all simmered and shook; we could have been anything. We have chosen now, or sometimes it seems the choice was made for us — a pair of tongs pinched us between the shoulders. I chose. I took the print of life not outwardly, but inwardly upon the raw, the white, the unprotected fiber. I am clouded and bruised with the print of minds and faces and things so subtle that they have smell, color, texture, substance, but no name*” [14]. Painful experience here connected with ‘taking the print of life inwardly upon the raw ... unprotected fiber’ implies the idea of sufferings people experience during their lifetime, associated with the process of socializing. HUMAN BODY in this fragment is viewed as unprotected, exposed to deformations and sufferings, where bodily pain is associated with mental pain.

Even the accustomed way of life in the society with its dogmas and restrictions is obviously disliked by a human being, that is emphasized in the text of the novel through the prism of the image of STIGMA ON A HUMAN BODY made by red-hot iron, activating the conceptual metonymy SIGNS ON BODY stand for ACCUSTOMED WAY OF LIFE, compare: “*I am for ever sleeping and waking. Now I sleep; now I wake. I see the gleaming tea-urn; the glass cases full of pale-yellow sandwiches; the men in round coats perched on stools at the counter; and also behind them, eternity. It is a stigma burnt on my quivering flesh by a scowled man with a red-hot iron. I see this eating-shop against the packed and fluttering birds’ wings, many feathered, folded, of the past.*” [14].

Human vulnerability and devastating impact of the society underlie the conceptual metaphor HUMAN BODY IS A TARGET / VICTIM, activated in the following fragments of the texts:

“*I hate all details of the individual life. But I am fixed here to listen. An immense pressure is on me. I cannot move without dislodging the weight of centuries. A million arrows pierce me. Scorn and ridicule pierce me. I, who could beat my breast against the storm and let the hail choke me joyfully, am pinned down here; am exposed. The tiger leaps. Tongues with their whips are upon me. Mobile, incessant, they flicker over me. I must prevaricate and fence them off with lies. What amulet is there against this disaster? What face can I summon to lay cool upon this heat?*” [14];

“*But I no longer rise at dawn,*” she said. Then Jinny—entertaining, no doubt, some new young man. They reached the crisis of the usual conversation. The room would be darkened; chairs arranged. For she still sought the moment. *Without illusions, hard and clear as crystal, she rode at the day with her breast bared. She let its spikes*

*pierce her*". [14].

In these contexts phenomena causing physical pain – ‘pressure’, ‘whips’ on the body, being ‘exposed to hail and storm’, ‘arrows’ and ‘spikes piercing’ the body, which are in reality scorn and ridicule, losing the illusions, – imply mental pain and psychological suffering of living in a civilized present society.

The analysis of the text fragments above demonstrated that the generic-level metonymy DEFORMED HUMAN BODY stands for VULNERABLE, PSYCHOLOGICALLY SUFFERING PERSON is activated in most of them, that provides rather one-sided but convincing picture of a person in the society as viewed by one of the modernist writers.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In short, bodily imagery in the context of interrelation of human being and the society revealed the major significant points in understanding of a socialized human being as a suffering, detached, psychologically unstable, unconfident, vulnerable and susceptible one, exposed to the devastating impact of the society. The perspective of the present study will be looking into details of specific corporeal features in postmodernist texts.

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