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# MENTAL UNDERREPRESENTATION IN JOYCE CAROL OATES' *WE WERE THE MULVANEYS*

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Joyce Carol Oates' works focus on the violence in American society. Mostly her novels revolve around the theme of exploitation of women's sexuality in the middle of decaying familial identity, and expose the trauma of women in American society. One of her novels *We Were the Mulvaney*s is taken for the present study to explicate the primary event that unsettles the protagonist physically and psychologically. The culmination of Oates' narrative is sexual trauma. In its unique representative method. Particularly, in this novel which employs alternative methods of representation, and as argued here, mental underrepresentation to enable its narration to emphasize the severity of sexual trauma. The paper is the study of a different narrative technique through the memory of the character which employs mental underrepresentation.

**Key Words:** Sufferings, Love, Sexuality, Familial Identity.

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## Abstract

Joyce Carol Oates' works focus on the violence in American society. Mostly her novels revolve around the theme of exploitation of women's sexuality in the middle of decaying familial identity, and expose the trauma of women in American society. One of her novels *We Were the Mulvaney*s is taken for the present study to explicate the primary event that unsettles the protagonist physically and psychologically. The culmination of Oates' narrative is sexual trauma. In its unique representative method. Particularly, in this novel which employs alternative methods of representation, and as argued here, mental underrepresentation to enable its narration to emphasize the severity of sexual trauma. The paper is the study of a different narrative technique through the memory of the character which employs mental underrepresentation.

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Joyce Carol Oates was born on June 16, 1938, in Lockport, New York. She is a prolific American writer who had published numerous novels, plays, poems, and short stories. Oates began her writing at the age of fourteen, with the typewriter which she got as a gift from her grandmother Blanch Woodside. Oates is the first person who completed high school in her family. She earned a scholarship to pursue a degree at Syracuse University, where she wrote numerous novels. Her first novel, *With Shuddering Fall*, was published in 1964, a story where two lovers, Karen Herz and Shar, move toward a relentless climax because of the tragic segments which they have undergone. Her notable work, *Them*, was published in 1969, and it is highly recognized with the National Book award. Some of her works were added to the finalist for Pulitzer Prize viz., *Black Water* (1972), *Blond* (2000), *What I Lived For* (1994), and some of the short story collections *Lovely, Dark, Deep:*

*Stories* (2014) and *The Wheel of Love* (1970).

Oates works were mostly based on the personal experiences of farm life as she was brought up in the working class farming community, and the works are the products of the impact which she gained in Detroit during the 1930s to 1960s. She proved herself as an academician through her writings. At the same time, she began reading the works of Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Mann, and D. H. Lawrence, and those readings influenced her works. In 1960, she completed her B.A. and continued her post-graduation in the University of Wisconsin. She is become a full-time writer since 1961, and met Evelyn Shrifte, the chief proprietor of the Vanguard Press. Oates frequently touches upon several themes such as violence, adolescence, female childhood, poverty, and so on. Violence is the standard theme in her work. Oates herself gave reason for her theme in her essay "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?".

The novel, *We Were the Mulvaney*s, taken for the present study is published in 1996. The novel deals with the fragmentations of the American family. The characters of the novel carry their ancestral name, "Mulvaney" suffixing to their name as a sign of their identity. The story consists of four plots viz. Structure titled "Family Pictures," "The Hunstmans," "The Pilgrim," and "Hard Reckoning." These four plots were further divided into several sub-plots detailing into the story of the aforesaid family. In the introductory chapter, "Story Book House," Judd introduces all of his family members, and he says that the readers could blame, envy, and praise them in every situation. The story begins with the narration of Judd from the age of six, who is currently at the age of thirty. He expresses the painful movements of the family from his memory. To justify the blurred memory of the young boy, Oates employs Mental Underrepresentation, a

technique through which Judd's narration is conveyed without any interruption. Mental Underrepresentation is a relatively common phrase in psychology and cognitive science that refers to the phenomenon in which an individual fails to consider or recognize certain information, perspective, or possibilities due to various factors such as bias, limited knowledge, or cognitive limitations. Oates using this as a narrative technique in which she makes the narrator deploy the thoughts, innermost feelings, and emotions of the other characters continually. The unknown scenes and faded memories are assisted by the representation of the actual characters explaining the story through the narrator.

In *We Were the Mulvaney*s, Oates pictures a traditional and religious family who were living in High Point Farm in the small city of Mt. Ephraim, upstate, New York. The story revolves around the misery of a girl named Marianne, daughter of Mr. Michael John Mulvaney, Sr., and Mrs. Corianne Mulvaney. She was raped by her school mate Zachary Lundt. It is a prosperous and happy family with four children. The elder son is named Muke or Mule Mulvaney Jr., who is always away from the family and is interested in joining the army. The next son, Patrick or P. J., is an excellent and highly knowledgeable student doing his research in biology and waiting to execute his own justice against Zachary to avenge Marianne, an innocent and beautiful daughter, who is also called as Button or Chickadee. The last son is named Judd, pampered by all the other family members, and he is often referred to as Baby, Dimple, and Ranger. Their farm is well known to everyone in the surrounding because they have given work to more than a hundred and fifty people in their farm. All the members were scattered from their home in the beginning of the story because of a painful act happened to Marianne Mulvaney in 1976. In spite of Judd's point of view in the novel, Marianne Mulvaney is considered to be

the protagonist of this novel who becomes a vital reason for the family being scared, and spoiling the reputation in society: "For a long time you envied us, then you Pitied us. For a long time you admired us, then you thought Good! – that's what they deserve" (*We Were the Mulvaney*s 3).

In the sub-plot of "St. Valentine's 1976," Corinne Mulvaney appears to narrate and Judd becomes passive. She is a good mother and business woman, running an Antique material reselling shop in the name of "High Point Antiques Bargains and Beauty." She is capable of understanding her husband Michael Mulvaney Sr., and her children through their appearance and voices. A party was organized by Marianne's school mates in the name of St. Valentine on Saturday evening. Marianne is grandly dressed like an angel and leaves her home with a glowing face to attend the party, and she was expected to come home at night on the same day. Due to excessive drinking, she could not come home as she was expected. She could not pass the information to her family, and she stayed back. On Sunday Mid-afternoon, she called her family and requested one of her brothers to pick up her from her friend Trisha's home. Fortunately, Corinne was there to attend the call in spite of their busy routine. This behavior is very new to her actuality from her childhood. Marianne's innocence is known to everyone in her family, and this is the first time that she was staying at someone's home during the night time. The family strictly follows such rules, and this time Marianne could not stick with the rule.

Marianne feels guilty to speak to her mother because she could not remember the actual reason to propose. She gives a vague reason that she could not come home the previous night and that she could not make any phone calls regarding her stay. Corinne accepts the reason and sends Patrick to drive her home. The narration of Corinne gradually

fades away, and Judd continues his narration. Oates employs variations in the narrations of characters through the Mental Underrepresentation technique. Patrick goes to pick up Marianne from Trisha's home in Corinne's car and receives Marianne into the car. She opens the rear door and sits in the back seat. This unusual behavior of Marianne puts Patrick in a serious dilemma, for she always prefers to sit in the front seat. Patrick does not say anything to her and starts the car. Until they reach home, there is no conversation between them. It seems a very different day to Patrick because of the unusual behavior of Marianne. Then in another sub-plot of "Strawberries and Cream," they both reach home Marianne gets out of the car and takes her bag along with her and goes directly to her room. She takes her wonderful angel strawberry color party dress and hides it in a washing place. The stains in the dress remain a mystery to Marianne, marking the gloomy opening in the story line in the minds of the readers. The narration shifts to Marianne, but the readers could get through Judd's memory. The perspective of the entire family on Marianne changes after that night because there are lots of changes in her behavior. She becomes silent and often she locks herself in her room: "She'd whimper aloud with the strain of a painful bowel movement, a sudden flash of sensation almost too raw to be borne, now the sound forced itself from her, through her clenched teeth- "Oh God! Oh Jesus!" She seemed fearful of releasing her weight entirely; her legs quivered" (71). For the first time, she could not urinate, and the intensity of innermost pain is known only to her, but Oates describes it through Judd's narration. So to the readers, Marianne's words have been directly explicated, but the narration is handled from the memory of Judd.

Later, Marianne comes to know that something has happened that night and she starts recalling the moments. She wishes to enjoy the party because the

school days are going to end, so she drinks heavily. Drinking is not her habit but she likes to have that particular moment and it is also limitless. She has become unconscious and that's why she could not return home at night and also could not inform her family. Zachary Lundt one of her classmates who was also attending that party, has taken advantage of the situation. He offers a ride to Marianne to drop her at her home, but she refuses. Marianne recalls that he took her to a separate room and has put her on a bed. She could not recall anything further exactly due to her heavy drinking. Trisha, one of her friends who attended that party, met Patrick and told that Zachary Lundt offered a ride to Marianne but he never did. Patrick comes to know of the truth and tells it to the family.

Though the characters are speaking to each other and the story has to move coherently, the conversations are under the narration of Judd passively, because his voice is entirely stopped and the characters themselves portray the scenes to the readers directly. Marianne mentions: "I was drinking. It's so hard to remember. I can't swear. I can't be certain. I can't bear false witness" (142). Throughout the novel, the word "Rape" is repeated intentionally to make the impact on the misery of Marianne, especially in the plot "The Penitent." The entire members of the family come to know that Marianne was raped by someone through the medical checkup and they could not file and complaint legally against Zachary Lundt because Marianne is not sure:

"They said, *Tell us.*

She said, *Only what I Know.*

They said, *Tell us! – so that justice can be executed.*

She said, *I was drinking. I was to blame. I don't remember. How Can I give testimony against him!"* (142)

The family could not tolerate the misery that has happened to Marianne. So

everyone comes in silent, and the conversation with Marianne is stopped. In the sub-plot "One by One"; Judd starts the first person narration again: "One by one, we went away. It's the story of American farms and small towns in the latter half of the twentieth century: we went away" (189). Days are gone and the children separate from the family one by one. Now Marianne is staying at Salamanca far away from Mt. Ephraim, in her Aunt Ethel Hausman's home. Michael Mulvaney Sr. is dropping his roofing business and becomes a full-time drinker because he is not able to tolerate the situation and also by the words of the surroundings. Patrick willingly came out of the home and stayed in a separate town. He is a knowledgeable person who won a scholarship from Wisconsin University and continued his higher studies in biology. Patrick is the only person who wanted to take revenge for his sister towards Zachary Lundt. Oates often uses Patrick's needs to execute his own justice. Judd helps to take a gun from Michael's drawer and gives it to Patrick to execute justice. He has not been in touch with his family for the past four years. In "The Bog" again Judd's narration is hidden and the plot is narrated through Patrick. He planned well and kidnapped Zachary Lundt without showing his identity. Even Zachary Lundt could not find the reason why he is kidnapped:

*"Say it: I'm a rapist*

*I'm a – rapist.*

*Say it : I deserve to be punished.*

*I – deserve to be Punished.*

*Say it: I deserve death."* (298)

The Bog is a muddy place in a forest, and Patrick went to that place along with Zachary by kidnapping him in gunpoint. Zachary slowly recognizes the sin that he has done to a young seventeen-year girl Marianne, but he is not sure of the reason. The conversation between Patrick and Zachary is so lively that Oates has been executed. At in the last scene,

Patrick himself secures Zachary who is dying at the muddy spot, reveling his humanity and good nature his parents taught him, through which Oates diversifies goodness from Zachary's character. Zachary realizes the pain of death at the time.

Marianne joins and works in a "Green Isle Co-op," a private catering company, and earns a lot of good humans around her. She starts living her own life. She forgets all the bad things that had happened to her, but the pain remained as a scar in the family, and it haunted them for a long period. In "The Pilgrim" an essential plot of the novel, Marianne gets a call from her aunt saying that her grandmother Ida Hausmann, Corinne's mother and she is very close to Marianne has passed away. She wishes to take part in the funeral to share the grievance, but she is not invited by her mother and other family members showing their unwillingness of her presence. She is certainly broken and cries a lot because of her unknowing mistake that happened on the Valentine's day night.

The emotions and love towards her family could not be expressed through the voice of Judd, so Oates hands over the scene to Marianne to convey the intensity of her emotions to the readers: "*Resisting – temptation*. Marianne hadn't known she was strong enough but yes, she was" (332). Marianne goes to the funeral along with Hewie, a co-worker. She stands at a distance and expatriates herself from the family members due to the fact that she was not invited by them. She stands numb to all the questions raised by Hewie about her past: "Out of obscurity I came. To obscurity I can return" (320). After twelve years, Marianne at the age of twenty-nine, is living with Dr. Whittaker West, a Veterinary Doctor. At the end of the novel, Michael Mulvaney Sr. suffers from lung cancer, During this time Corinne called Marianne and informs that her father wishes to see her. The uninterrupted happy

life of Marianne gets in hurdled with the news of her father's final call from death bed:

"Corinne said, "Honey, wait – we're in Rochester. At the University Medical Clinic. *Hurry.*"

So Marianne knew what it was, what it must be.

*Hurry. Hurry. Hurry.*

After twelve years of exile. *Hurry!*." (399)

Marianne visits her father in the clinic and expresses her grief through tears, and Michael identifies his daughter as a grown woman. Twelve years of time has discarded the anger he possessed within himself, and he touches her and calls her name. Marianne is very happy to hear her name from her father after a long time: "He called you 'Marianne'. That's what I heard." Marianne said, "I guess he's forgive me? I mean – he loves me again, he's not ashamed of me?" and Judd said, "Dad always loved you, Marianne" (428).

In spite of introducing Judd as a narrator of the novel, every character has his or her role in expressing their points of view, so that readers could feel the intensity of longing and love of the family. In the concluding part of the novel, there is an Epilogue entitled "Reunion: Fourth of July 1993," which is fully narrated by Judd. In the Reunion program, all family members have come, and they were addressed by the youngest son, Judd, the Mulvaney's are seemingly blessed by everything in the sweetest order. They live on the picture-perfect High Point Farm.

The narrative technique of *Mental Underrepresentation* has been done through the narrator Judd throughout the novel. Oates employs the technique to keep the readers intact with the family and to travel through the story line of the Mulvaney's.

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