THE DISINTEGRATING BRITISH IDENTITY – THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD

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Abstract:This paper proposes to analyse the way in which the British identity is seen to disintegrate with the demise of past models of being. The focus will be on a modernist text – Virginia Woolf's The Waves *– and on a postmodernist one – Doris Lessing's* The Fifth Child*. The disintegration of the earlier model of the Victorian Age of Empire leads to the failure of the colonial identity in the modernist text and of the family as a building block for the national identity in the postmodernist one. Thus, the centre that these ways of constructing identity created disappears on two different levels, resulting in the creation of the beleaguered and frayed identity that characterizes the twentieth century.*

Keywords: British identity, disintegration, frayed identity, colonialism, family

Introduction

This paper proposes to analyse the way in which the British identity is seen to disintegrate with the demise of past models of being. The focus will be on a modernist text – Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* – and on a postmodernist one – Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*. In both cases, the basic model that disintegrates is the earlier one of the Victorian Age, the Age of Empire for Britain. In that age the discourse of nationalism and the British national identity were in large part based on two tenets – the existence of the family as the basic unit of society and the existence of the Empire responsible for the British dominance of the world. W.B. Yeats's poem *The Second Coming* provides the second half of the title since the colonial identity and the familial one are seen as centres in these novels, yet these centres do not survive and are unable to hold together the fragments of the frayed identities.

In her novel, Virginia Woolf seems to indicate an early end to the British colonial identity. Percival, the central character, leaves the centre of civilization, London, for the marginal colony, India, and dies there in an absurd accident. During his stay in the colony his superior British identity is clearly set in opposition to that of the primitive locals. Described as a medieval commander, a hero, a god, Percival's absurd death signals the end of an era. Percival was the one who had brought together the other six friends and his death tears them asunder. He is described as the centre by Bernard, and the emptiness he leaves in his stead points to the unfulfilled potentialities of all the friends, and the various aspects of the British identity they each embody. Percival's death marks the beginning of the end in terms of what was expected out of the colonial identity. But the disintegration is seen as spreading from the centre represented by him to the margins embodied by the other six friends: Bernard, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, Jinny, and Susan.

Doris Lessing's novel focuses on the dissolution of family ties. The earlier Victorian models of the close-knit family, the angel in the house's dominion of the domestic sphere, and the patriarchal dominion over the public sphere are the ideals upheld by the Lovatts. They create their fairy-tale family and home and become the holiday destination for the extended family. However, their idyllic world – already showing signs of deterioration after the first

four children – quickly crumbles like a pack of cards after the birth of the fifth child. The familial drama unfolds as the Lovatts, once at the centre of their extended family, are marginalized and their family unit falls apart. The dismantling of their family starts with the creation of a dichotomy between Ben, the fifth child, and the rest of the family – Ben is seen as primitive and violent and as an atavistic throwback, while they are civilized and loving. This othering that occurs in Ben's case turns him into an outsider and Harriet, his mother, into a scapegoat. Ultimately, Harriet is left all alone, as the exodus of the family is completed with Ben's departure from home. Thus, the image of the happy family with the mother and the father at its centre becomes frayed since the mother and father fail at fulfilling their roles.

Theories of National Identity and Alterity

Class, gender and culture, alongside ethnicity, are all factors in the creation of a nation, of a common identity that speaks of us as we speak it. (Easthope 5) Marxists would have us see nation as class dominance, as an ideology "designed to promote the interests of a particular social group." (Easthope 6) On the other hand, Benedict Anderson focuses on nation as an "imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." (Anderson 6) He explains throughout his seminal work that this community is imagined because its members accede to it and see themselves as part of it without actually knowing all its other members. Anderson argues that national consciousness was created after the widespread use of printed books, through the development of what he dubs the print-as-commodity. (37) The reason for this was that exchange and communication became unified and that fellow-readers, connected through print, formed "the embryo of the nationally imagined community." (Anderson 44) Language became fixed, building an image of the nation through discourse, and it became the focus point for those striving towards the common goal of creating a nation.

Easthope provides in his book different definitions of the nation, out of which the main elements worth considering are the commonality of culture, national consciousness, myths, territory, and a sense of solidarity. (13) For him, however, the way in which nations are disseminated through discourse are highly significant. (Easthope 12) The focus of this paper will be on the idea of nation as culture as presented by Antony Easthope in light of Friedrich Meinecke's distinction between *Staatsnation* and *Kulturnation*.The nation as culture will be defined based on the "jointly experienced cultural knowledge." (Meineckeqtd. in Easthope 44)Furthermore,in "Literature – Nationalism's Other? The Case for Revision," Simon During points out that the 18th and early 19th century were crucial in the creation of literature and nationalism in their modern forms, linking them together. (140) He further argues that the discourse of literatureconstructs nationhoodby discussing its "ability to function as a signifier of national identity or heritage." (During138) Another critic, continuing in this line of nation as culture, argues that a nation constitutes a spiritual principle through reference to the past and the present, as a legacy left by the ancestors with which one may identify and as an acceptance of the contemporaries that are part of the community, respectively:

> A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories, the other is present-day

> consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage
> that one has received in an undivided form. (...) The nation, like the individual, is the
> culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion. Of all the cults,
> that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we
> are. A heroic past, great men, glory (...), this is the social capital upon which one
> bases a national idea. (Renan, 19)

In this way, Ernest Renan demonstrates how the national idea is created. This can be easily applied to literature since through its tradition it builds an image for co-nationals to identify with.

On the other hand, nationhood is also constructedthrough opposites. Such is the case for the creation of alterity, which deals with "the treatment of the alien objectified other." (Overing and Rapport 9)The use of exclusion and inclusivity, as processes to separate those similar to oneself and those different from oneself, led to the inferiorization of excluded others. This type of reasoning was present with the Greeks who called any other population barbarian, as was with the Romans later on. Centuries later, the discovery of America led to further interactions with civilizations different and less developed than the Western European one, leading to the persuasion that indeed the Eurocentric civilization was the epitome of progress. The 19th century was particularly disposed towards this development since it was a time when, for the British, the extended territorial holdings of the Empire meant constant interaction with those they believed their inferiors. It was, however, not only in terms of civilization that this view developed. The discourse of evolutionism stressed "the progressive move of humankind from the primitive to the civilized" leading to the implication that those people who were colonised by the British Empire were clearly inferior, since they had not reached as high a level of development,enabling colonisers to claim a higher purpose for their economic enterprises, namely a civilizing mission. (Overing and Rapport 14)

When one ethnocentricallyconstructs the identity of the other, this process will be streamlined by reducing it to the differences and the familiar, which, according to Overing and Rapport, has "more to do with the establishment of self-identity than with the empirical reality of the other."(12) The Western imperialized otheris present in any of the territories visited by the European and it is created as a product of a process of exclusion. (Overing and Rapport 13) Joanna Overing and Nigel Rapport point out that the characterization of indigenous populations was done in terms that made them inferior to the cultured European who was adult, rational and gentle – the other side of this, was "child-like, irrational, and savage"– constructing identity through the principle of inversion. Consequently, indigenous cultures in any of the colonies were defined "as an ensemble of negations to be contrasted with the civilized and cultured society of the developing ruling classes of Europe."(Overing and Rapport 13) The Eurocentric viewwas meant to include those hailing from Western countries and nations and exclude the Eastern ones. Theimagery of the exotic used for thenatives of any less civilized lands was "but a projection of the imagery signifying both lack and excess already in use by the European upper classes for their own internal other." (Overing and Rapport 13) In other words, the Europeans, in conquering these lands, fixed the status of the indigenous populations"at the level of the lower echelons of their own society, placing them alongside the Jew, the mad, the wild, the child, the peasant, the Gypsy and the witch."(Overing and Rapport 13)

Both ways of constructing the nation are present in the novels discussed in this paper. In Virginia Woolf's work Percival epitomizes the type of British identity all his friends would be willing to identify with. The cultural references to the legends of King Arthur and the Round Table and the mythology behind that make it a uniquely British way of constructing the national identity. On the other hand, Percival's encounter with India and his take charge attitude in solving the problems of the other is a typically Eurocentric way of highlighting the inferiority of the other. In Doris Lessing's work David and Harriet Lovatt are from the very beginning seen as other or outcast to the 1960s due to their desire for a large family and their idyllic dreams about what family life is about. Nevertheless, the extended family nearly moves into their home during the holidays and seem partly envious of their relationship and their numerous children. Thus, they too are seen as an ideal version of what a family should be like. Nevertheless, once more, there is an alien in their midst and through the rejection of the attributes of that other entity and the exclusion of the *alter*, the identity of the entire family, and by extension of the nation, is constructed. In both cases, it is the other's fortuitous contribution that leads to a disintegration of the British national identity. In *The Waves*, Percival dies as his flea-bitten mare throws him off its back and all the potential he harboured is wasted, while his friends who had been brought together by his presence seem lost and in doubt regarding their own identities. Percival's death signals the demise of the colonial identity and the passing of a figure of legend. On the other hand, in *The Fifth Child*, the British national identity created by means of the cornerstone of society – the family – fails lamentably when confronted with what is seen as an alien in its midst. The reference might as well send us to social problems in existence in terms of immigrants from the former colonies and the racially motivated urban riots. Thus, the two centres provided by the two novels are in shambles and are unable to maintain their integrity.

The Victorian British Identity

In the Victorian Age, the identity of the British was based on certain coordinates – empire, Age of Progress, strong economy, monarchy, class, family, gender and a sense of pseudo-scientific superiority. The Empire's growth towards the end of the 19th century determined the subjects of Queen Victoria to the certainty that their country had acquired primacy in the world and that it was a well-deserved position that they would hold indefinitely. Great Britain was a power to be reckoned with in terms of the greatness of its territory, the economic power developed both due to industry and the products of the colonies that they were trading as well as due to the military power of the Empire. The British monarchy provided a stabilising influence for the people, even though the Regency was a period characterized by turmoil and that at the end of Queen Victoria's reign several monarchs succeeded on the throne. Moreover, the British identity was clearly established along class lines in a hierarchy in which each class knew its place and behaved in accordance with rules that were not to be transgressed. The family was the cornerstone of society providing stability, due to Queen Victoria's example in her own marriage. Furthermore, gender roles were delineated by the line separating the domestic and the public spheres, with the domestic sphere belonging to women and the public sphere to the men.

After Queen Victoria's death, the next monarchs reigned for shorter periods of time destabilizing the monarchy. In addition, the First World War continued this trend of

destabilization and the decrease of the British economy and the loss of control over the colonies all colluded to a lesser position for the British Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. Several factors were at work here, but in the end the British national identity which held primacy in the world in the recent past, was now under question.

The Disintegration of the Colonial Identity

In Virginia Woolf's novel, *The Waves*, the British national identity is illustrated as being fractured, through the introspective soliloquies of the six characters: Bernard, Louis, Neville, Susan, Rhoda and Jinny. The seventh character's thoughts, namely Percival's, are never heard, instead the readers make his acquaintance through the perspectives provided by the other six characters, who construct the central identity as they do the carnation on the table of the restaurant where they meet before Percival's departure for India.

From mediaeval commander on the cricket playing field, to hero for his coevals, to god for the colonised other, Percival's identity is constructed through mediated means, rather than directly. His is a voice never heard in *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf, whereas the voices of all his six friends are ever-present. From his namesake, the Arthurian knight who reached the Fisher King's court, not once but several times, and failed to ask the right questions, finally fulfilling the quest for the Saint Grail by being pure, to the battlefield of cricket is quite a long way to go. Woolf's Percival is upheld as a paragon by his coevals from the very beginning. He is felt to be the most likely to succeed in life due to a myriad of attributes that make him everyone's superior, the one to follow, the one to emulate. Yet, he himself is but a poor copy of the original from the Arthurian legends. He is no longer worthy of the name of knight, and the names used for him – mediaeval commander, hero, god – show how high he is placed in other characters' esteem, but they also seem mocking by comparison.

In this episodic novel, Percival's identity is constructed by increments. During childhood, Louis describes Percival as a resolute leader whose life is expected to end on the battlefield: "His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander. (…) Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep, for he will certainly attempt some forlorn enterprise and die in battle. (…)' said Louis." (Woolf 30-31) Louis – who is envious of Percival – remembers a time in their childhood when everybody followed the latter and compares him to a mediaeval commander.This comparison is fit considering the name given to this character, belonging to a knight of the Round Table. However, in their childhood, Percival's field of battle is the playing-field of cricket. The weapons are not those of warfare – swords are replaced by bats, and armour by protection pads – even though competition is present even during a game. Percival's magnificence determines the rest of his friends to follow in his footsteps – like faithful servants or like sheep. Louis's choice of words is highly salient since the faithful friends are seen as the loyal retainers of a mediaeval commander, ready to go into battle under his banner. As a result the comparison with sheep ready to be shot the instinct of humans to follow a leader to the bitter end is revealed. On the other hand, Percival's tendency to undertake forlorn enterprises is most likely to lead to his demise. Nevertheless, the magnificence displayed and the association with a mediaeval warlord show that the death is expected to be a heroic one, on the battlefield. In light of Percival's actual end, which is absurd by comparison, we realise that despite the expectations created, Percival ultimately fails to achieve his potential.

Bernard's perspective on Percival shows him as conventional and heroic: "He is conventional; he is a hero." (Woolf 97) He also enlightens the reader on the need of the young children to follow Percival as a perceived leader and to imitate his example, as well as their failure in this attempt: "They blew their noses as he blew his nose, but unsuccessfully, for he is Percival." (Woolf 97)Bernard is also the one to put into perspective their meeting before Percival departure to India: "We have come together, at a particular time, to this particular spot. We are drawn into this communion by some deep, some common emotion. Shall we call it, conveniently, 'love'? Shall we say 'love of Percival' because Percival is going to India?"(Woolf 100) It is this love and admiration of Percival that turn him into a centre for the six friends. Bernard underscores Percival's power of bringing the friends together and acting in a more dignified manner: "We who yelped like jackals biting at each other's heels now assume the sober and confident air of soldiers in the presence of their captain." (Woolf 30) Neville also pinpoints Percival's power over them by showing that he brings order to their world and that he makes life come into focus: "Now (…) my tree flowers. My heart rises. All oppression is relieved. All impediment is removed. The reign of chaos is over. He has imposed order." (Woolf 97)Neville is the first to highlight the differences between the six friends in the restaurant who seem to wait for life to happen to them and Percival who is enterprising and ready to act: "Percival is going (…). We sit here, surrounded, lit up. (…) We are walled in here. But India lies outside." (Woolf 107) This dichotomy between action and inaction is what transforms Percival in this perceived centre of existence in his friends' eyes.

Percival's identity as the centre is further enhanced when he is perceived as ready to act, impose order and solve problems once he is in India. In addition, there he is perceived as a superior being by virtue of his pale complexion and his colonial identity. As a result, an additional dichotomy is set up between the British identity and the indigenous identity, the former being set up as superior and the latter as inferior. Bernard describes India as filled with "tortuous lanes of stamped mud", "ramshackle pagodas", "gilt and crenellated buildings (…) [with]an air of fragility and decay" and asan Oriental exhibition. (Woolf 107) Moreover, his description of the indigenous population as incompetent, indolent and passive is seen in their lack of action when a cart is stuck in the rut: "innumerable natives in loin-cloths swarm round it, chattering excitedly. But they do nothing. Time seems endless, ambition vain. Over all broods a sense of uselessness of human exertion." (Woolf 107)On the other side of the dichotomy, Percival is set up as the doer, the conqueror, the saviour, using violentlanguage and decisive gestures, solving the problem in an expedient manner:

> But now, behold, Percival advances; Percival rides a flea-bitten mare, and wears a sun-helmet. By applying the standards of the West, by using the violent language that is natural to him, the bullock-cart is righted in less than five minutes. The Oriental problem is solved. He rides on; the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were—what indeed he is—a God. (Woolf 107-108)

Thus, Percival is seen arriving as a Messiah, and after setting things to rights, he is described as a God. From mediaeval commander he has moved on to hero, and from there there is only one step before he becomes a God in the colonies.

However, his transcendence to this higher level of being is of short duration, as Neville informs the reader of Percival's death:"'Now Percival is gone.'" (Woolf 116); "'He is dead. (…) He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown. (…) All is over. The lights of the world have gone out. (…) He died where he fell.'" (Woolf 119) These short sentences used by Neville are indicative of the difficulty he experiences with dealing with his friend's death. They point to the disbelief experienced in facing the incomprehensible. The effect of Percival's death under such absurd circumstances is to have taken the light out of the world, since the six friends cannot comprehend what has happened. It is in fact their astonishment that such an occurrence could have ever take place that once again points to Percival's importance in their lives, not simply as their friend, but also as a model to emulate, as a leader to follow and as the centre in terms of their identities. Bernard's words best illustrate these feelings:

> Percival is dead. (…) I need silence, and to be alone and to go out, and to save one hour to consider what has happened to my world, what death has done to my world. This then is the world that Percival sees no longer. (…) About him my feeling was: he sat there in the centre. Now I go to that spot no longer. The place is empty. (Woolf 120-121)

It is not merely the incomprehensibility of death Bernard feels the need to confront, but the loss of a centre, of all the potential Percival embodied as a paragon of what was best in the British identity. The emptiness left behind by the centre Percival represented is impossible to fill and it points to a disintegration of the British identity.

The initially seven-sided flower "to which every eye brings its own contribution" (Woolf 101) has become "a six-sided flower; made of six lives" (Woolf 180) with the departure of Percival from among the living. The unifying principle that was Percival made the six friends come together "like separated parts of one body and soul." (Woolf 108) The differences inherent in each of the six friends – like distinctly melted patches of wax – are presented by Bernard: "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." (Woolf 190) He also points out that with Percival's demise they suffered and were separated into their own identities rather than remaining the whole he had created: "We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies." (Woolf 191) Bernard is the one who articulates the unified identity the six friends had and the need to separate that identity with Percival's death: "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." (Woolf 218) Years after the friends' initial meeting at the restaurant to wish Percival a good journey, when they meet once more they see there in the middle the missing Percival, the unreached full potential that was curtailed: "We saw for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time, cannot forget. All that we might have been we saw; all that we had missed, and we grudged for a moment the other's claim." (Woolf 218) Once again, Bernard underscores the fact that all six friends wanted to emulate Percival. Thus, his demise signalled only the end of the British colonial identity but also the unified and self-sufficient identity each of the six

friends might have enjoyed. By Percival's death they were robbed of a chance to see that identity grow into a fully-fledged one. Furthermore, Percival's death represented the beginning of a frayed identity for each of them.

The Disintegration of the Family

In Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, the protagonists attempt a return to an Arcadian space of the idyllic life, opposed to the ideal of the age in which they live. "The greedy and selfish sixties" were opposed to what the Lovatts regarded as ideal life – a life defined by a large family, a roomy house where to raise the family, the traditional role of the husband as the breadwinner and of the wife as mother. (Lessing 21) Their family, friends and acquaintances, better adapted to the times, condemned their ideal and the society at large attempted to "isolate, to diminish their best selves." (Lessing 21) The centre of the British identity is created by means of the home and the family in this novel, as David states: "*We* are the centre of this family." (emphasis in the original text, Lessing 27) However, once more, the centre cannot hold, since the idyllic family from the beginning is dismantled with the arrival of the fifth child.

Harriet had always known what she wanted – not a career, but a family – since she had been educated in that spirit by a family that had taken this view for granted: "that family life was the basis for a happy one." (Lessing 7) On the other hand, David, being raised by divorced parents and their new families had had two sets of parents and two homes; therefore what he was striving for was to have one home: "with Harriet, he would create another, an extension and amplification of it." (Lessing 7) Thus, Harriet wanted a man who would hand her the keys of her kingdom, while David wanted a wife who "knew where happiness lay and how to keep it." (Lessing 8) These two outcasts find each other and set about creating the perfect family they had been dreaming of. However, from the very beginning, they are unable to sustain the ideal they had set up for themselves. Financially, they rely on James, David's father, for the mortgage, for supporting their growing family and for the education of their children as they grow up. On the other hand, Dorothy, Harriet's mother, provides the labour that allows them to keep having children, while reuniting the extend family in stays for the holidays, Christmas and Easter. Thus, David, as the supposed breadwinner, is a failure, while Harriet, as a housewife and stay-at-home mother, is unable to cope with everything their ideal lifestyle presupposes.

The first moments spent in their roomy Victorian mansion allow David to take "possession of the future in her" – in Harriet – by conceiving the first of their children. (Lessing 10) The Lovatts refuse to heed the warning or listen to the advice dispensed by their respective parents, arguing that in other parts of the world having six children would be normal and that only in Europe could they be made to feel abnormal. (Lessing 16) In addition, the Lovatts are convinced that society had brainwashed people out of wanting the type of family they were striving for: "This is what everyone wants, really, but we've been brainwashed out of it. People want to live like this, really." (Lessing 27) However, the argument sounds shaky considering the repetition of 'really'. Harriet and David display a fierce possessiveness and adamant determination to keep the happiness they envisage for themselves: "Happiness. A happy family. The Lovatts were a happy family. It was what they

had chosen and what they deserved." (Lessing 21) The family is not only created as a centre and a cornerstone for society in the Lovatts' family, but also as a fortress to help one survive the turmoil society represents: "Outside this fortunate place, their family, beat and battered the storms of the world." (Lessing 21)

The fifth pregnancy however, puts an end to their dreams. From the very first Harriet has negative feelings about this pregnancy and her crying is seen by David as a breach of contract: "Harriet was weeping again, and he felt, knowing of course this was unfair, that she was breaking the rules of some contract between them: tears and misery had not ever been on their agenda!" (Lessing 35) The pregnancy is so hard on Harriet that she starts taking tranquillisers in order to cope with the family's attendance of what had become traditional holidays at the Lovatts' house. David feels that his wife is possessed and he can no longer be by her side, supporting her through the pregnancy, feeling hopeful and awaiting impatiently the birth of the child: "Harriet (…) had gone right away from him, in this battle with the foetus, which he could not share." (Lessing 39) Harriet's use of sedatives is seen as the only way to keep "the enemy – soshenow thought of this savage thing inside her – quietforan hour." (Lessing 40)

After Ben is born, Harriet's dislike for the baby increases, as she wonders "what the mother would look like, the one who would welcome this—alien." (Lessing 50) In addition, David and Harriet's love life is inhibited by the existence of this last baby, since they had been careful not to become pregnant and yet the baby had been conceived. They were convinced that the baby had willed himself to be born: "had invaded their ordinariness, which had no defences against him or anything like him." (Lessing 58) Several incidents occur – Ben sprains Paul's arm, a little dog and a cat are killed – and Ben is blamed for these events. Harriet and David feel that the baby is destroying their family, since Harriet can only focus on Ben, to the detriment of the other children. The situation escalates so that the extended family and David decide that the child should be institutionalised, ruthlessly going about finding a doctor who would agree to this and locating a place where he could be taken in order to save the family from the enemy within. Despite her dislike of the baby, Harriet is the only one who tries to defend him, yet even she has to concede when David offers her an ultimatum: "It's either him or us." (Lessing 74) Harriet's plea falls on deaf ears, however: "He's a little child. (…) *He's our child.*" (emphasis in the original text, Lessing 74) when David refuses to acknowledge that he might be the father: "No, he's not. (…) Well, he certainly isn't mine." (Lessing 74) reminding us of Freud's statement that '*pater semper incertusest*', while the mother is '*certissima*'. (Freud 239)

Nevertheless, Harriet is unable to stand not knowing what had become of her child, and when confronted with the conditions in the institution, she takes Ben home, since she realizes he would have been killed there. This is the final straw in the disintegration of the family – the children all move to boarding schools or with their grandparents until Harriet is left all alone with Ben, since David prefers to spend all his time at work. Thus, the alien within manages to destroy this family that was striving towards an ideal. The roles of the father and the mother represent only failure and the centre which the familywas supposed to represent for society is dismantled. The fairy tale beginning of the novel has no correspondent in its end, where the happy family is no longer.

Conclusion

The destruction of the myth and fairy tale patterns is present in these two novels from the modernist and postmodernist period. The legend of the Saint Grail and the quest to acquire it, concentrated on the one knight who obtains the Grail, is set up as a model for Percival's identity, yet this is a model that cannot be sustained in the Modernist period. The myth of the perfect family with the perfect mother, father and children is dismantled as well in the Postmodernist period, since it too is not sustainable.The disintegration of the British identity occurs at a macro level in the modernist novel and at a micro level in the postmodernist one. By the time Doris Lessing was publishing her novel in 1988, the world order in which the British Empire held sway had crumbled from the time Virginia Woolf had published her work in which she seemed to decipher the writing on the wall (1931). Thus, in Virginia Woolf's text the colonial identity reminiscent of the Victorian age is clearly rejected and the British identity that emerges is fragmentary and multiple, while in Doris Lessing's text – which could possibly be read as an allegory for the dissolution of the empire – the failure of the family signals another disintegration resulting in a frayed identity. In both cases, what was seen as a paragon/centre fails to live up to the expectations it creates.

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