

Stream of Consciousness Technique in “Mrs. Dalloway” By Virginia Woolf

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Abstract:

Virginia Stephen, who came to be known as Mrs. Virginia Woolf after her marriage with Mr. Woolf, was the younger daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen and Julia. She was born at Hyde Park Gate, Kensington, on January 26, 1882. She passed her childhood in London and Cornwall. She became parentless when she was twenty-two- her mother died in 1895 and father in 1904. Virginia Woolf's values were those of Bloomsbury, the group of writers and artists that included, in addition to Roger Fry, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, J.M. Keynes, Desmond MacCarthy, and rather on the fringe E.M. Forster. In a younger generation their tradition is carried on by Mr. Cyril Connolly, Mr. V.S. Pritchett and Mr. Edwin Muir. They were called the Bloomsbury Group because many of them at one or another time had flats in that agreeable district of London, called Bloomsbury. The Bloomsbury Group flourished from soon after the death of Queen Victoria until the Second World War. They were all followers of the Cambridge philosopher G.E. Moore, the author of *Principia Ethica*, who taught them the importance of good and pleasant states of feeling in the individual human life.

Introduction:

Mrs. Woolf portrays the incessantly flowing stream of human consciousness composed of various elements- thoughts, past and present, beautiful and ugly, relevant and irrelevant. This stream is both clear and muddy and flows arbitrarily in the past and the present. She presents the streams as an artist and not as a photographer. "Virginia Woolf's picture of human mind is in close harmony with her aesthetic vision of life. Her picture of life as a thing of beauty is enlivened all the time by little strokes of humour and observation; it is diversified by an incessantly changing procession of moods; it is made vital by her unsleeping curiosity about everything great and small that comes within her line of vision." (P120)

"Mrs. Woolf sees the great evil in human conduct, the sin of possessiveness, the grasping after that which is not in the true nature of things a man's own, but which is by inalienable right another's; It is through

a deliberate process, by gradual stages, that she works out boldly a new artistic form. In their complete originality, her novels are impressionistic renderings of the infinitely small and infinitely transient elements, out of which the web of man's daily experience is woven. Her novels are internal monologues. The plot is quite simple, cut down to a minimum of facts, and there again almost entirely internal". (P123)

Virginia Woolf's novels depict the psychological time, involuntary memory, instincts and intuitions, so much stressed by Bergson. The stream of-consciousness technique has been adopted by her in most of her outstanding novels. She has experimented with a variety of techniques to unravel the mystery of mind, and has blended the traditional devices with the stream-of-consciousness technique. She has not explored the unconscious, regions of mind. Although she follows the technique of the internal monologue and the stream-of-consciousness, yet her work does not

wallow in filth, nor does it seem to be sick and distraught. She has a greater sense of order, restraint, a greater dignity of bearing. She is clean, though we seem to breathe in a rarefied atmosphere. She illumines' the dark, subterranean caves of the human psyche and though she brings up weeds, rank grasses, mud and oozy slime to the surface, yet her cargo does not sink with evil odours as does that of Joyce, nor is she sick at heart like the creatures of Marcel's fancy. She is, however, bloodless and anaemic and it seems absurd to pose these shadowy phantoms of her fancy against the massive creations of an earlier generation of novelists. What redeems her work in the imagination of the reader is the poetic quality of her fancy, the lyricism behind her writing. It may be claimed that her work presents the stream-of-consciousness school at its best, when the process of digestion and assimilation has already been in partial operation. Marcel Proust's work has a faded aroma about it, the air of a sick-room, the quality of a rose-garden fallen into ruins. His achievement as a novelist was considerable, in that he carried his probing of human psychology to further depths and recreated a world that lives only in the memory and affections of man. The work of James Joyce was bold and daring like that of a surgeon, but his achievement was negative. He was pulling down obstructing walls; removing barriers, In comparison with the work of Proust and Joyce, the canvas of Virginia Woolf is very small and limited. Her work has a lyric rather than an epic quality. But it has a greater sense of order about it, also of cleanliness and purity. She has greater concern with character than with plot. She believes that all novels deal with character. Mrs. Woolf is a prose writer of genius. Each of her great novels is composed like a piece of music, proceeding note by note, phrase by phrase, with crescendo and diminuendo, that beat of time

being actually marked by the voice of Big Ben. Serious as the author is, she is not solemn.... there is gaiety and insidious irony in the picture of human faculty ... but there is tenderness too.

Mrs. Woolf is not always without faults. She cannot tell a story. Her formula of story is not humanity in action but in a state of infinite perception. Caring little for the world of fact, she tends to question its value. She sets the quest for truth against the dreary catalogue of outward facts, and seeks a spiritual certainty behind the manifold experiences of life. The world she creates is a limited one; her range of experience also is limited. She knows nothing of life in the raw; she is also unable to study the unconsciousness of people. Although she has been called 'a tireless experimenter', yet, to quote Mr. Chambers, she remains 'par excellence the novelist of the nineteen twenties.' And, the ref ore, as Mr. Cazamian says, "One cannot help believing that the novels of Mrs. Woolf, even if they were to be an isolated portent, will experience a fuller survival. Their audacity is combined with an infinite seduction; the danger that lurks in them is no less subtle than themselves and their charm might allay the verdict of that deeper taste which never wanders for long from a certain means or measure in art." (P128)

Before looking into the use of stream-of-consciousness technique in Mrs. Dalloway, it is necessary to understand what is meant by this technique. The stream-of-consciousness method is the technique of the psychological novel which was propounded by William James in his book Principles of Psychology, 1890, and practised in fiction by novelists like Proust, Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce. Mrs. Woolf also experimented in this new technique of exploring the consciousness in place of exploring the event. The novelists of this method are interested more in the

internal than the external side of life, Therefore instead of filling their novel's with dramatic events and stock characters of traditional type, they indulge in the portraiture of human psyche which they call consciousness, for human soul reveals itself in atoms, like a stream or river. Their main devices are interior monologue, a rich and poetic language, rich imagery and symbolism, etc. Structurally such novels do away with the traditional cauterization of the book; traditional concept of time is rejected by them for a single day in the life of a human being may represent his whole life. Instead of the actions and emotions of the characters, their stress is on thoughts and feelings of their character. There is little doubt that Mrs. Virginia Woolf has followed the stream of consciousness technique in Mrs. Dalloway. It may be said that this novel is a great 'experiment in this technique. In this novel the novelist has used this technique most successfully and artistically. However, there are following points which make this novel a fine example of stream-of-consciousness technique. Virginia Woolf discards the conventional plot-construction. Love-affairs, quarrels, reconciliations, weddings and other traditional stocks do not help her in building a plot, nor the traditional methods of characterization. Mrs. Woolf regards life as a flowing stream and the novelist's task is not to describe the happenings or events in an individual's life or in the lives of many individuals, but to record the impressions of the mind of one or many characters.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the novelist has taken up the incidents of a day in Mrs. Dalloway's life. The novelist has set down to show their impact on the consciousness or relationships of human beings. The aim is to portray the diffusion of experience. The visual, mental and emotional impressions of the character's consciousness are recorded first by bringing into light the environment

and the background of the characters, and then by penetrating into their consciousness through their own consciousness as well as the consciousness of others. But fuller opportunity is provided to the characters to reveal themselves; to unravel their inner realities, their psyche. Few things happen. An old admirer from India calls and there' is an instant of tenderness. Mrs. Dalloway's tranquillity is momentarily disturbed by concern for her daughter and the broken-down spinster who is trying to convert her. An ex-soldier, shell-shocked, commits suicide, and Mrs. Dalloway, hearing of this casualty from the doctor who is a guest at her party, experiences a moment of luminous insight into life and death and time. As external action is ignored and discarded by Mrs. Woolf in her novels, she takes care to select only those incidents which help in the revelation of the inner mind of her characters. Mrs. Woolf plunges deep into the insight of her characters. Mrs. Dalloway goes to the florist's shop to order flowers for the evening party. As she walks along memories from the past float like delicate threads across the present, flash and quiver for an instant in the stream of consciousness, revive old forgotten pains and regrets, and then dissolve insubstantially in the delicious tranquil haze of the summer afternoon. As R. L. Chambers observes, "*In Mrs. Dalloway* the action of the book is limited temporally to a single day in the life of its chief character, spatially to a single place, London, and emotionally of the relations of Mrs. Dalloway with a few other people" (Page No.142). The novel, however, is actually concerned more with the past of its characters than with their present. Virginia Woolf' uses tunneling process by which she tells the past by instalments. "So, in fact, by a succession of interior monologues, set off by some sensation which brings back its homologue from the past and, with it, an associated train

of place and people, feelings and thoughts, we discover in Clarissa on the one hand her parents' summer home at Bourton, her 18-years-old self, her passionate relationships with Peter Walsh and Sally Seton, her meeting with and marriage to Richard Dalloway, and on the other Westminster, and her life as a mother and as the wife of a mediocre politician. By the same process we know that Septimus, a promising clerk in an estate agent's, left his job to volunteer during the war, made friends with an officer called Evans who was killed just before the truce. We learn of his marriage to a Milanese girl, Rezia, his return to his old job and his sudden collapse; the local doctor finds absolutely nothing wrong with him, and when Septimus begins talking to himself he scolds him like a small boy and sends him to consult Bradshaw." (P135)

So in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf shows the consciousness not only of Mrs. Dalloway but also of the characters such as Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith. Peter Walsh, a former lover of Mrs. Dalloway, has come back from India, and is likely to attend her garden party. Mrs. Dalloway asks him not to forget her party. From this point of view, Peter Walsh's thought shifts backward in time. He recollects his experiences in India, the diseases there, the love for Clarissa, and the change in her. He sees things in retrospect. His mind moves backward to the conditions in India, then it moves towards the present from the past, when he thinks of the speed of the motor-car seen by him. The chiming of the bell reminds Peter Walsh of his past intimate attachment with Clarissa. The memory is visual. The next important character in the novel is Septimus Warren Smith, whose stream of thought reflects the horrors and obsessions with guilt and death. He is terror-stricken, nervous, and thinks of committing suicide. He sees the wrath of his deceased friend Evans, and commits suicide.

Lucrezia Smith's stream of thought mirrors her sense of anguish caused by the illness of her husband and issuelessness, when she realizes that her husband's ailment has not been cured by Dr. Holmes and the psychiatrist Bradshaw her frustration and agony, increases.

Before Virginia Woolf, the novelists like Dickens, Thackeray and Hardy confined themselves to the sequence of events. Their novels can be seen as mere serials. The reader would like to know what would come next in the arrangement of the sequence and the novelist had under rigorous compulsion to adhere to a rigid scheme of 'continued in our next installment'. But Mrs. Woolf's manipulation of time is quite different, Bernard Blackstone considers Mrs. Dalloway "an experiment with time". There are three types of time arrangement: mechanical or clock-time, psychological or inner time and historic time. Of these three, the inner time is much more important in the life of her characters. Mrs. Woolf did not consider life merely a series of happenings. She wrote in *The Common Reader*: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged: life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. It is not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncurcumscribed spirits, whatever aberration or complexity it may display." (P138)

Therefore, Mrs. Woolf's main concern is seen with subordination of observable actions to private thoughts and feelings which well up to from the flux of life in the psyche of human beings. This approach results in the universalization of Mrs. Dalloway's day in London into all days anywhere for everybody. It is also realized that human beings are a part of ever-moving, ever-changing flow of existence, and that, caught up in this stream, they cease to be even discreet individuals, merging their

essences instead with the existence of others. Thus, in Mrs. Dalloway, time symbolizes eternal time. A day represents the whole life of a person. The poetic and lyrical element has also a lot to do with the stream-of-consciousness technique. Mrs. Dalloway is a remarkable novel from this point of view. In the opinion of Bernard Brackstone, “Mrs. Dalloway is like a musical fugue in construction” because the novel has been prompted more by inner rhythm of emotions, feelings, moods or impressions rather than by external events. The novel has a definite movement which goes forward and backward rhythmically.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is an apparent forward and backward movement. At first a point is fixed- a point of consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway*- that becomes the focal point. From that point the movement swings away in space, backward in time, opening up long vistas of experience and character, and then forward again to the particular day of the novel time. Then another fixed point a point in both time and space-the time is a June morning and the place Bond Street. The movement begins again from this point through different points of consciousness in different persons: Watkins, Septimus and Lucrezia, Sarah, and Bowley. Then comes the third fixed point - a point in Septimus-Lucrezia consciousness. There is again a backward and forward movement at this point both spatially and temporally.

Conclusion:

The stream-of-consciousness answered a need of the age. It showed the very age and

body of the time. When we ask what kind of consciousness is revealed, we can only answer that it is the collective consciousness of the age, growing deeper as modern consciousness grows richer and complex. The method may be that of parenthesis, as of Henry James and Conrad, it may be clear and refined like Picasso’s lines or like that of Hemingway, or it may present the stream in rushing, bead long to torrent as Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Dostoevsky have done. The stream-of-consciousness flourished for about twenty-five years from 1915 to 1939, but the war of 1939 put an end to this technique. External action was demanded, not merely the inner movements of consciousness. Social, economic and political problems became pressing. When mental study was required, people demanded, not picture of the levels of consciousness, but of the unconscious mind. This could be done only by means of symbols and irrational conduct, and for this purpose the stream-of- consciousness was inadequate.

Reference:-

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