Chapter V

VIRGINIA WOOLF – A TREND-SETTER IN ENGLISH FICTION
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Virginia Woolf moves round time, space, relativity, flux and the unconscious. Everything that happens in her novels is naturally connected with the whole and assimilated into the total structure while lighting up the dark regions of the mind. Her way of looking at experience underwent significant changes Freudian methods taught to analyse mental states beyond the normal bounds. Her novels also serve as ironic social epics dealing with modern history as an immense panorama of futility and anarchy. The novelist is aware of the fragments lying helter skelter in the mind; this itself is an interesting experience. Like other modern novelist, to Virginia Woolf also, the subconscious part of the mind meant much as this trend emphasized the unconscious levels of the mind, the atmosphere, the feeling and the mood. Therefore, among the chief architects of modern fictions in Europe, Mrs. Woolf occupies a very significant place. In fact, some of the critics like Joseph Warren Beach and others have placed her along with James Joyce and such other eminent novelists particularly for their technique, she has used this technique in making a new
exploration in the realm of human consciousness. She has been as anxious as Joyce to cut her slice of life depth-wise and breadth-wise. Similarly, there are many fundamental points of likeness of her intention and technique to be found in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses.* But her career as a novelist and her emergence essentially as an experimentalist has to be examined for a better understanding of her works.

Virginia Woolf, daughter of the eminent biographer, and literary critic Sir Leslie Stephen, was born in 1882 in London. Her tie with her sister, Vanessa and brother Thoby was very close but with the sudden death at the age of twenty-five had a profound effect upon her work. She enjoyed the long walks through the parks and squares and streets of London with her father during her early days. This habit remained one of the persistent of Mrs. Woolf's occupations, fruitful of ideas for work, background for her novels and the subject of one of her most charming essays "Street Haunting." She in her memoirs stressed upon the atmosphere of freedom in their family life ------ "the right to think one's own thoughts and to follow one's own pursuits," and choose one's own profession. She suffered a frail health which did not allow her to have the
conventional schooling like other young people of her family and time. She was educated at home, and also learnt Greek with other subjects.

Mrs. Woolf herself recalls in her Diary, 19th, December, 1938 about the art of writing: "absorbing ever since I was a little creature, scribbling a story in the manner of Hawthorne on the green plush sofa in the drawing room at St. Ires while the grown up dined."

The death of her mother, when Virginia was thirteen was the first blow that affected her deeply. She came to regard life as an arbitrary trickster. Many distinguished and great literary personalities like James Russell Lowell, Thomas Hardy and Henry James were frequent visitors and guests of the Stephen family. Mrs. Woolf enjoyed this good company and took the opportunity to gain the knowledge from such an intellectual gathering.

Mrs. Woolf started to write literary reviews in 1905 when the connection with the *Times Supplement* which lasted more than thirty years was established. She continued to be closely associated with the Bloomsbury group and the members like Lytton Strachey.
She got married in the year 1912 to Leonard Woolf. At thirty she had published only book reviews. Some of the deepest interest that were to shape her work is very clear in retrospect. She was a Londoner, born and bred, and as such, London is seldom absent from her novels. The summer spent in her childhood at St. Ires in Cornwall left vast sea memories that haunt her works, especially, of course the sea novels. She had haunted libraries over the years as she had haunted streets; before she could write of the experience in a magical pattern of thought and imagery. The free reverie in an ideal library expresses the delight in reading the sense of the long past of English history, the sharp realization of the present moment ---- the inner and the outer steams mingling ---- and the continuing interplay of life and literature - all to be found in the disciplined critical writing of the Common Reader.

Two years after her marriage, the First World War broke out, ending that period of relative security and stability which all those, at least in the Western world, who grew up before 1914, look back upon the nostalgia. "Then suddenly, like a chasm in a smooth road, the war come for". Virginia Woolf expressed such sensitive feelings in her essays. Now she suffered from constant fits of depression.
She continued to work hard and though she was living in London as the wife of Leonard Woolf and the daughter of Leslie Stephen, on the virtue of her own attainments, she was highly honoured by the Bloomsbury circle. Her close association with this literary club and the members who were the greatest men of letters of the day was an enriching experience and a constant source of inspiration and did much to stimulate her creative activity.

Both husband and wife started the Hogarth Press in the year 1917 as a “hobby of printing rather than publishing.” During these years in Bloomsbury, her life was filled with her writing. But wars had a very bad impact upon her. As it is she fell into bouts of depression after the horrible experience of the First World War, now with the World War II her desire to live was destroyed. For Mrs. Woolf war was a horrible and nerve shattering experience. This led led to end her life. She committed suicide by drowning.

Virginia Woolf discovered a rich and rare pattern for fiction, which does not spring from story telling in the customary sense as explained by E.M. Forster who believes that patterns spring from the plot and the characters are all in the novel contributing to it.
Mrs. Woolf like Dorothy Richardson, believed that a novel should pierce through the flesh, in order to reveal the soul, to pocket the whole mind.

Her protest directed against the materialistic writers, made her react against the rigidity of conventional novels having a beginning, a middle and an end in its story and being made up of external action. She abandoned the chronological sequence in description and narration found in great writers like H.G. Wells, Galsworthy and Bennett. Her determination to tread upon a different path had been indicated by her in the beginning of her career, in her essay on Modern Fiction. She, in her fiction, intends to "record the atom as they fall," and to "trace the pattern however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon that consciousness,"¹ which according to Isaacs, is pure impressionism.² Mrs. Woolf desired to communicate the changing, the unknown, the uncontrolled spirit of life with as little mixture, of the alien and external as possible. She found similarity of her ideas with the stories of Chekhov and made popular by Katherine Mansfield in England which precisely was lacking a beginning, a
middle and an end. Their stories provided a link between the conventional novel and the Steam of Consciousness novel.

The Stream of Consciousness novels select moments in life and import to them a conspicuous richness of consciousness. Virginia Woolf considers these moments both poetically and artistically. The uniqueness of the Stream of Consciousness technique lies on enabling the novelist to penetrate into the mind and discover the texture of experience in all its complicacies. The psychological novel of the modern era added a significant milestone and a new dimension by giving the reader a curious mental experience in the history of fiction. This awareness of the new manner of perception of external reality in the modern world and the consequent need for a new form of art was constant in Virginia Woolf’s theories and practice, a criticism as well as fiction. Throughout her career she had a serious interest in breaking free from an inadequate and a limited vision. She devoted her essay, ‘Modern Fiction’ in The Common Reader (First Series), as an answer to the destructive criticism of the Edwardians who she considered to be materialists concerned not with the spirit but with the body writing of unimportant, trivial, transitory thing to appear true and enduring.
The traditional novel, for Virginia Woolf, has no “richness of perception or selectivity of experience, but rather ....... made of tyrannical restraints, the elements variously called plot, comedy, love interest, and a general air of probability and verisimilitude. She wanted “life, more life”3 She inherited variants of nineteenth century realistic practice and found a way out of the realistic career.

Being a very conscious artist she knew her method. Her approach was sensitive, for she wanted to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind, in the order in which they fall” and to “trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.”5

The meeting of the Bloomsbury group began in 1904 that included great persons from several avenues like Virginia Woolf, the novelist and critic, Vanessa Bell, the painter, E. M. Forster, the novelist, Roger Fry, the artist and critic, John Maynard Keynes, the influential economist, Victoria Sackville West, the poet and writer, Lytoon Greant, the artist, Sesmond MC Carttay and Leonard Woolf. Perhaps Mrs. Woolf with her Bloomsbury associations, as David Garnett considers, “learn something about
her art from the painters and the art critics,”6 watching Vanessa and Duncan Grants painting and listening to Rogen, Fry and Clive Bell.

Virginia Woolf has been considered to be one of the chief exponents of the Stream of Consciousness technique in her novels. Her theories regarding the stream of consciousness in modern fiction were fully practiced by her. There is gradual growth and development in her use of this technique. She was also a serious exponent of the technique of symbolism which she connected particularly for her new form of fiction in the field of modern aesthetics. Being an ailing person throughout, her illness both supplied her ideas and showed her the ‘mystic quality’ of words - what lay beyond their surface meaning.7

At the end of her career as a novelist, Virginia Woolf finally emerged as an extra ordinary artist having set new trends in English fiction and revealed varied manifestation in the last decade of her life. Hence, critics began to cite her as a great pioneer in England as Waldo France in America. In her novel Jacob’s Room, her primary intention is to give a unique impression of the personality of a young Englishman in altogether a different innovative device. In
this method she comes close to what Waldo France aims to do in his book *City Block*. In other words it can rightly be said that Virginia Woolf establishes herself essentially as a pioneer modern novelist. Modernism is in her bones. She can write novels in many ways, in any way but the traditional one. Above all she can very well drink the spirit of all the modern schools of art, impressionism, expressionism, and manifest them very well in her well known works like *The Waves*, *Orlando: A Biography*, *To the Lighthouse* and others obviously her achievements very well give her a unique place in modern fiction.
NOTES

1. ‘Modern Fiction’ : The Common Reader, First series, p-190

2. : An Assessment of Twentieth Century literature p.33


4. Ibid, p. 544


7. : On Being III 1930, p. 27