Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) still remains a landmark in the history of English literature with regard to her innovative style of writing. Because of her originality, vision and preoccupation with the form of fiction she continues to sway the minds of the readers. Although she wrote in the first half of the twentieth century, she has been studied very seriously for more than half a century. Her fictional work has not ceased to attract critical opinions. When questions about time and consciousness, and technical innovations are raised Virginia Woolf’s novels have become exemplary. Perhaps this marks why her works are more accessible now compared to the 1940’s.

Though Virginia Woolf was a tireless writer of letters, diaries, reviews, criticisms, essays and short stories, she was best known for her novels. By the
time of her death in 1941, she had written nine novels which include *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Night and Day* (1919), *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *The Waves* (1931), *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941). Like all writers, Virginia Woolf too was influenced by the age in which she lived, that is, the early twentieth century. Like every age, the twentieth century too observed a brave new world growing apace the older one, but at the cost of traditional values and certainties that went with it. All over the world, the old institutions, old traditions and old ways of life either disintegrated or became outmoded. The two World Wars were symptomatic of the change observed during the twentieth century.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the industrial revolution in Britain had reached its loftiest pinnacle and had brought about it enormous social changes affecting the lives of individuals in every way, both positively and negatively. A complete breakdown of the agrarian way of life led to the migration from villages to cities. The resulting overcrowding and all the evils of congested urban living ultimately induced a significant increase in vice and crime, a laxity of sexual morality and a general ugliness all around. But the muck affected the people in different ways. Most people, quite unable to do anything just accepted it without grumbling too much and carried on with the dailiness of
their daily lives. However, an increased inwardness was a natural corollary to
the turmoil in the world outside. Where there was a growth in the scientific
spirit and rationalism, there was on the other side a rise in the scale of
skepticism and doubts questioning the accepted social beliefs, conventions and
traditions. The agonizing loneliness sent people sensitive to the problems
around them like Virginia Woolf ‘within’. This inwardness in a creative writer
like Virginia Woolf was beneficial for it told us of person’s innermost thoughts,
disjointed as they might be.

Besides, there were many persons who either did not realize that they
were in the midst of a revolution, or knowing it, found it convenient to ignore its
resistance. For the fact remains that many of us dislike change either because
we are accustomed to the habitual and the traditional or because change
endangers that which is dear to us. The “Materialist”, Arnold Bennett, H.G.
Wells and John Galsworthy were representatives of this class of people. Virginia
Woolf was one among those who sought to unearth its roots. They were of the
general agreement that the chaos observed in the early twentieth century was
the product of the failure of the nineteenth century ideas and patterns of life to
fit the twentieth century conditions. Notably this is true of the doctrine of the
economic man and political nationalism. Either singly or together, many of the
institutions built around these two concepts made for disunity and social disintegration and failed to safeguard the masses of mankind individually and collectively from the recurring ills of insecurity, of frustration, of internal and international chaos.

And as no hard and fast rule exists in the field of literature, it was not immune to the changes taking place around. With the life changing around him, the writer’s comment on life was changing too. In England, France and America writers strove to work free from the irksome bondage of convention. Virginia Woolf joined them so that she might stand easily and naturally in a position where her powers could have full play upon important things. She demanded the freedom of “modern fiction” from conventions. Like a bold innovator, she came out to remind her generation that it was time for fiction to make a fresh start for it had already spent enormous skill and industry in making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and enduring. For she admits:

... as the current answers don’t do, one has to grope for a new one, and the process of discarding the old, when one is by no means certain to put in their place, is a sad one.
Indeed her doing away with convention is a kind of renunciation which is inevitable as:

You cannot cross the narrow bridge of art carrying all its tools in your hands. Some you must leave behind, or you will drop them in midstream, or what is worse, overbalance and be drowned yourself.²

Indeed one can well trace a development in the course of Virginia Woolf’s literary career. She did not do away with the traditional fetters completely. No doubt Mrs. Woolf experimented with the forms of fiction in her whole literary career ultimately leading to the mastery of her mature style. But Mrs. Woolf also attempted to absorb the traditional method of writing novel in her first two novels *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*. She was inevitably influenced by the whole tradition of writing fiction. However, she soon realized that the convention fell short of the new perspectives. By the time Mrs. Woolf finished her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, she had an intention not only to modify the technique of writing fiction but also to transcend it. From *Jacob’s Room* onwards, she made a total break up with the conventional ties and got herself
set up to go for a higher and innovative flight where her perspectives would get full expression.

In fact a comparative reading of Virginia Woolf’s first two novels *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* with the latter novels *Jacob’s Room, Mrs Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, Orlando, The Waves, The Years* and *Between the Acts* highlights the difficulties she had to overcome before she successfully fused form, method and idea. Though Mrs. Woolf wrote *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* in the conventional vein, she introduced certain new aspects of novel writing which she was to fully develop in the later experimental novels. Perhaps Mrs. Woolf started feeling the pulse of her originality in the course of writing these novels by which she felt the need to change the method of novel writing. By the time of writing *Jacob’s Room*, Mrs. Woolf had certainly settled the question of form and design appropriate to her vision of life and reality. With all the means at her disposal, she followed the windings and recorded the changes which were typical of the modern mind and reality. She got inside the heads and hearts of her characters, at the same time squeezed and expanded the moment of experience. Consequently she switched on to her own style which handed the “Stream of Consciousness”, where events are remembered not in chronological order but as free association brings them to mind.
In contrast to the “Materialists”, Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells and John Galsworthy, Virginia Woolf took up a body no longer opposed to the mind to voice mental experience. And if Mrs. Woolf neglected the body in favour of consciousness – it was achieved through extensive use of new technique, the stream-of-consciousness, along the line of James Joyce, William Faulkner and Dorothy Richardson with minute deviations. Mrs. Woolf anchored the traditional characterization of modernist narrative told from within the subject’s mental interiority, as a transcription of mind rather than plot. Henceforth negating the body and endowing the mind with an accurate transparency. Indeed English fiction in her hands became an index of what went on within the minds of the characters. In the fabric of her narration as well as in her delineation of characters, we see small flashes of psychological insights and also indications of Woolf’s lifelong concern with intense but fleeting perception of truth, reality or experience.

Virginia Woolf endeavoured her whole life to examine and render the course of life in all its hopelessly disorganized form without any reduction. Here it is worthwhile to quote Thomas C. Caramagno who rightly observes:
In this she duplicated both the scientist’s and the biographer’s work of marshaling evidence, but with one advantage: fiction enabled her to avoid reducing the complexity of life experiences in the service of a psychological model.

The outcome to this orientation is the highly puzzling and complex form of her novels almost making them unreadable for a layman. Nevertheless, it provided Mrs. Woolf with a means to procure a design which could appropriately represent the perplexing and biographically meaningless disorder in perception and mood.

An attempt is made in this proposed thesis to cast a shallow light on the understanding of her four major experimental novels — *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. The other novels are left behind not because they are of least importance but because to include them would widen the scope of the thesis. To prevent such an extensive study, this thesis focuses its attention on the narrative approach and art of characterization adopted by Mrs. Woolf with psychological overtones in her four major experimental novels. For it is in these aspects that Mrs. Woolf had given a vital use of her genuine talent of free self-invention more than anywhere else. The
studies are attested to the extent at which Mrs. Woolf had focused on the study of human nature from inside, as well as the simple means at her disposal used to materialize her purpose. The thesis also highlights how in different ways Mrs. Woolf moved beyond the confines of the traditions of narrative form and mode of characterization. My own argument can be read as demonstrating the ways in which Mrs. Woolf had given a psychological insight of her character’s mind, via, her mode of narration and characterization, at the same time dissolving reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness.

But before going through the tentative chapterization of the thesis, a slight attempt is made to throw light on the term psychology (in literary context particularly with reference to fiction). Psychology, here is used in a different sense from the psychology as understood by the Professors of Science. It should be borne in mind, not to relate it too closely to the scientific use of the world. Its application in fiction implies – use of narrative art concerning with the psyche, the subjective aspect of experience. The disposition to concern oneself with the subjective aspect of experience observed since Henry James reached its peak with James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The rendering of this subjective experience resulted in the disappearance of objective elements in fiction, of
plot, of the linear sequence of events and actions. It prevented the author from intruding himself between the reader and the story. The author became engaged in giving detailed presentation of feelings and mental processes of people. The reader is from time to time rendered more particularly of how the characters feel in a given situation, how he reacts to a particular predicament, what conflicts arises in him with regard to his course of action, what are his motives of action, what are his motives for acting as he does, and so in general how his feelings and mental processes in a given situation reflect the general character of him.

And any work which presents human nature seen from the inside is classed as ‘psychological’, of which Virginia Woolf’s novels are such. If keenly observed, Mrs. Woolf’s subject is what the mind receives on an ordinary day. In her novels, Mrs. Woolf not only records the direct impressions made upon the mind but also elicits an order from these impressions. Mrs. Woolf’s novels can also be viewed as a new way of conceiving reality associated in part with the rise of new psychological waves of the early twentieth century and the related growth in Bergsonian theories, new physics and philosophy. Her novels are indeed mimicry of mental activity going on in the mind. She deliberately abandoned descriptive techniques for the sake of deeper realism. Imbibed with
her father, Leslie Stephen’s liberal education, she felt the traditional dogmas as a fetter, an encumbrance that limited her freedom to the position of a slave. She refused to climb through the usual staircases constructed by the ancestors. She does not sit back complacent with the quietude of the traditional style. For she believed, once any such convention is adopted, she would succeed to give only an artificial picture of life. Rather like the great psychologists, Mrs. Woolf feels her way, anonymously and patiently, in and out of the fibres of the human mind making her characters differ minutely and completely one from the other.

For the sake of proper academic discussion the thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter – I: Introduction, serves as an introduction to the whole study, giving in a nutshell what the thesis intends to present. Again, to understand Virginia Woolf’s work better it is necessary to have a glimpse of the broad surrounding or scenario of her time in diverse aspects. For this purpose, Chapter – II: Backgrounds: Social and Literary, gives a composite of the literary, economic, political as well as social picture of the early twentieth century Britain. The chapter reflects the emerging values of individuals and society at the height of the industrial revolution that ultimately led to the complete breakdown of the traditional agrarian way of life and economy. It throws light on the comparatively swift evolution of modern fiction, parallel to the rapid
evolution of life during the early twentieth century. The publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859, followed by the series of publications of Sigmund Freud’s findings around 1900 swept away the previous centuries of customs and conventions. The new wave:

...displaced a personal God; it was a new world which excited the younger writers of each decade, who plunged in among the new scenes where angels never even thought of treading and which shocked and brought despair to critics too old or too steeped in Victorianism ever to understand fully what was going on.\(^4\)

Nevertheless there was a reverberant pouring out of works to an understanding of man’s life on earth.

**Chapter – III: Virginia Woolf’s Narrative:** A deliberate attempt to grasp human consciousness, explores how Virginia Woolf renders the fleeting impressions in the human consciousness by means of various ingenious techniques and fluidity. For her, the material world constituted one order of reality, while the human consciousness another. It is the second one she purports to recreate through the stream-of-consciousness techniques she
employs. There is no perfectly consistent narrative technique Mrs. Woolf had applied in her novels. However in each of the novels, one finds Mrs. Woolf moving gradually from the narration of social facts to the delineation of shifting states of consciousness for better expression of the new philosophy of life and the phenomenon of consciousness. The chapter illustrates the different narrative approaches adopted in the four major novels, each analysed individually.

Chapter – IV: Virginia Woolf’s Characterization: A Psychological Insight, on the other hand deals with Virginia Woolf’s delineation of characters. Following the tempo of her time, Mrs. Woolf conveys the person ‘within’ which could be done by letting the mind float freely and by recording the impressions as they come upon the mind. She delineates her characters in and out and all round via the complications, involvements and turmoil of their thoughts. We get a chance to know her men and women in the minutest of shades. Above all, the dark side of the mind that comes uppermost in solitude is given more emphasis than the light and obvious side of our being that shows in company. This way human picture is introduced in greater abstraction and purer truth. This chapter analyses the four major experimental novels serially in the light of how Virginia Woolf creates her characters to suit her peculiar vision of life.
Finally, Chapter – V: Conclusion, concludes the thesis by supplementing a few more points on Virginia Woolf’s industry.
NOTES


