

Research Article

**“Virginia Woolf On Method”**

**Dr. Oorja Ranjan Sinha**

Assistant Professor of English, D.P. Vipra College, Bilaspur (C.G)

**Abstract**

Virginia Woolf proclaimed “on or about December 1910, human nature changed”. Human nature changed.” Nevertheless, the truth is that human nature is what it is and, therefore, to talk of human nature changing is to say that our understanding of human nature is not the same. The basic truth is that man is a psychical entity rather than a biological existence. This implies that the individual human being could not be understood from outside – that is, from what he says or does; he can essentially be known from what he thinks and feels, which may lead him to perform something even unconsciously. With this understanding of man as a being constituted of several psychological facts and forces, the whole perspective of novel writing changed in the early 20th Century. The fiction writer was faced with the problem as to what could be the substance of a novel and what could be the effective way of dealing with the material. She held the view that the proper method of novel writing would be to get to the bottom of the mind. How does Virginia Woolf deploys, defines and perfects this method is the subject matter of this paper.

December 1910 is an important date in the history of novel writing. On this day Virginia Woolf proclaimed, “on or about December 1910, human nature changed.” Nevertheless, the truth is that human nature is what it is and, therefore, to talk of human nature changing is to say that our understanding of human nature is not the same. The basic truth is that man is a psychical entity rather than a biological existence. This implies that the individual human being could not be understood from outside – that is, from what he says or does; he can essentially be known from what he thinks and feels, which may lead him to perform something even unconsciously. With this understanding of man as a being constituted of several psychological facts and forces, the whole perspective of novel writing changed in the early 20th Century. Woolf asked the question: “Is life like this? Must novels be like this?” And she herself gave the answer in these words: “Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being like this”. The realization of this truth that life cannot have a fixed pattern as bearing on novel writing – we do not need a story writer to tell the story of a character for the character’s unconscious mind unravels the man and this natural way of revealing him is more authentic than a third party’s description about him; we do not need a plot – in fact, we do not need anything pre-planned. Life of an individual follows its own course, none can catch it, and none needs to restrict.

The fiction writer was faced with the problem as to what could be the substance of a novel and what could be the effective way of dealing with the material. Woolf realized that life is not a series of gig lamps, serially arranged, (but) a luminous halo, a semi transparent envelope surrounding us. If life does not have a pattern, does not have a non-ethereal substance and a direction to move on, novel writing is a difficult job. Things would become worse if we do not have access to the intricate mind. Therefore, the proper method of novel writing would be to get to the bottom of the mind. How does Virginia Woolf deploys, defines and perfects this method is the subject matter of this paper.

Researches done in depth psychology assert that consciousness is not made of bits but is only a continuum so that anything floating on the surface can be explained in terms of ideas and emotional elements lying at the bottom. This means it is really the unconscious mind that reveals the truth about the man or the character of the individual. The revelations of the conscious mind may be true, but not always. But the unconscious mind always tells the truth. For the purpose of reading the real character of an individual we must understand that consciousness is an undivided whole. And the truths about it can be known by dividing the mind into layers of Consciousness. The conscious mind takes stock of things and events of the present, but the unconscious relates to things of the past. The relation of past time with present time is reflected in the act of remembering. In other words, an event of the past has its place in the unconscious mind, but it can be recalled in the present. Thus, anything lying in the unconscious mind can become the part of the conscious mind as a

component of memory. Ideas and events, which are conceived and perceived in present time, get restored in the unconscious mind and become the treasure of the past, they make possible the experience of an individual person and determine his character in terms of his ideas and feelings. Nevertheless, the being of the individual is not confined to the past and the present; he can always look beyond through imagination. The contents of imagination are not qualitatively different from those of either perception or memory. Thus, consciousness is a significant whole, it is a continuum. In other words, everything in the mind, whether conscious or unconscious, is related to every other thing understood in the abstract sense; consciousness is a flux, but understood in terms of a concrete metaphor, it is a 'stream'. This is how the new literary method got its name – "the stream of consciousness."

Virginia Woolf knew that perception, memory and imagination are the real tools of creative writing. The consciousness of an object in the present is reflected in 'perception', that of a past object or event in 'memory' and of any other thing pertaining to no particular time, in imagination. It means that consciousness runs through Time both backwards and forwards. This has at least two important suggestions: one, a narration need not follow time sequence, and two, the measure of life is not span but quality. An eventful life has greater value than a long life. Herein, we give a short description of how she herself practiced the method in her novels.

"Jacob's Room" is the first novel of Virginia Woolf in which she uses the method in a rudimentary way. She does not create any character nor construct any scene, nor describe any action worth the name. There is no narrator in the novel, but she is present in the novel sometimes as an interpreter and sometimes as commentator. She tries to characterize Jacob by "showing him" – that is to say by describing what functional relationships he enters into with people around him. She held the view that psychology of a person is far more important than his history.

Virginia Woolf turns more invent in her next novel, "Mrs. Dalloway". She could successfully dispense with the idea of time sequence or chronology. Chronology is alright for keeping records for what happens outside man, but what takes place within man is always part of that flux that does not have a definite course to follow. One can go from the past to the future straight way or from future to the past, or come to the present from the past or return to the past from the present, or may go beyond the present in either direction. This particular truth about the stream of consciousness enabled Woolf 'to expand a day into lifetime' or 'condense a ten year period into a day'. The success of her experiments reveal three things – firstly, that the character of man is not what he says or does but what he thinks and feels unto himself, secondly, that the true measure of life is quality and not its span, and thirdly, it is possible to get to the bottom of an individual being and also to get beyond time and space.

In the next novel, "The Waves", Virginia Woolf's chief concern was to bring to greater maturity 'the semi-mystic vision of life' - a vision which grasps both life and reality that lie beyond time and space. The problem before her was to describe the truths of intuition in ordinary language. She knew that the job was very difficult but not quite impossible. She took recourse to writing poetic prose because she could say things in a symbolic and suggestive manner.

The last of her novels, "To the Light House", is almost fluid. There was difficulty in writing the piece of prose, but a reader can read some meaning if his intuition occasionally lights up his understanding. Woolf herself admitted this fact and said in her Diary that writing the piece sub-titled 'Time Passes' was a difficult piece of writing – "all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to."

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