



Elucidate that Virginia Woolf Conveys Human Consciousness and Inwardness Through the Use of Imagery and Symbols in Her Novels.

Md. Sujan Sekh

Research Scholar

University Department of English
B.R.A.B. University, Muzaffarpur, India.

Abstract: Symbol suggests anything, animate or inanimate, which stands for something else beyond an idea conventionally associated with it. It combines an image with a concept that can be universal or private. Symbols increase the expressiveness of the language and enable the writer to convey what cannot be conveyed by the ordinary resources of language. Images and symbols are important because they give concrete meaning of the abstract ideas or concepts. Stream of consciousness novelist Virginia Woolf presents deep sensations and emotions fleeting through the three layers of human consciousness: conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious. She explores the inner lives of the characters and this exploration can be done only through symbols since the unconscious is by definition unknown and knowable only through the symbols. Assuming the images to be a major means of the expression of such feeling, this paper is concerned with the examination of a set of imagery in *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* – the four most important novels of Virginia Woolf. Hopefully in doing so, certain emotional thought of Mrs. Woolf will be perceived, showing her attitude to the body, a technological age, death, relationship and other factors relating to the human consciousness and process of living.

Key Words: Symbol, Animate, Inanimate, Consciousness.

A highly educated writer and member of the famous literary Bloomsbury Group, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is the principal figure of the modern movement who takes immense pleasure in writing novels, essays, letters and diaries. She seems to have dedicated a large amount of her time and thought determining the nature and scope of symbols. She expresses an opinion about her preference of images and symbols in the last stage of her life.

What interests me in the last stage is the freedom and boldness with which my imagination picked up, used and tossed aside all images, symbols I had prepared. I am sure that this is the right way of using them – not in set pieces as I had tried first, coherently, but simply as images, never making them work out; only suggest. (*A Writer's Diary* 169)

She asserts that there must be some community between the thing symbolized and its meaning because, otherwise, it would not be a symbol but only empty imagination. According to her a novel is not from which you see but from emotion through which you feel. Mrs. Woolf takes a fresh, almost revolutionary approach to symbolism. Mitchell A. Leaska's opinion of Woolf is that "She knew how an image could grow to symbolic potential in order to carry her narrative forward; and she was sensitive to the way poetic connotations occur to define the numerous inflections upon which the meaning of her novel would rest." (Mitchell 150)

Mrs. Woolf desires to express some genuinely new ideas or inner thoughts of human mind which cannot be conveyed through the conventional medium of language in its literary capacity. So she uses images and symbols to evoke and suggest them. Woolf uses the sea, the waves, the lighthouse, and painter to render the psyche or consciousness of her characters. The lighthouse in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is the most important and complex symbol in the novel. It represents human desire and inaccessibility which the Ramsays family tries to fulfil and access. Different characters have attributed different feelings to the lighthouse. James Ramsay passionately longs for a journey to the lighthouse at the very beginning of the book. Mr. Ramsay determines to go to the lighthouse after ten years. For James and Cam, who no longer have any desire to go to the lighthouse, their father's insistence of reviving memories of the past is just one more instance of the crass blindness and tyranny with which he poisoned their childhood. It is associated with the many images of light and darkness that occur in the novel. Mrs. Ramsay, as she bargains with death and darkness, attempts to create and preserve the light. Feeling all of a sudden aged and defenceless, she avoids her face in the mirror. Turning instead to gaze at the beams of the lighthouse, she comforts herself with the thought that within its persistent beauty and strength lie the true reflections of her own relentless determination to withstand life's challenges. The image of the lighthouse binds together various levels of consciousness of various characters and it once more co-relates the whole structure of the novel with the nature of reality at subtler levels. On the narrative levels Mr. Ramsay and his two children finally make the journey to the lighthouse, and on the symbolic level Mr. Ramsay, James, Cam and Lily Briscoe accomplish an internal journey until they can accept that truth is frequently contradictory. Again darkness is the symbol of destruction and death in *The Waves* (1931). All the six characters are fully aware that we have to face inevitable natural force i.e., death. In the last para of the final interlude, effect of darkness is minutely described.

As if there were waves of darkness in the air, darkness moved on, covering houses, hills, trees, as waves of water wash round Darkness rolled its waves along grassy rides and over the wrinkled skin of the turf, enveloping the solitary thorn tree and the empty snail shells at its foot. Mounting higher, darkness blew along the bare upland slopes . . . running streams and yellow vine leaves, and girls, sitting on verandahs, look up at the snow, shading their faces with their fans. Them, too, darkness covered. (*The Waves* 168)

The sea is a powerful symbol in the setting of Woolf's novels. Mrs. Ramsay sees in the sea a reflection of her own state of mind. Thus when Mrs. Ramsay happy and safe, the waves sound soothing but when she feels disoriented and insecure, sound of the waves seems horrible and ominous. The sound of the waves can be heard throughout the novel. The waves continuously move forward and moving waves symbolize the eternal flux of time and life. The waves stand for permanence and we stand for impermanence. The waves also remind constantly that time is going on. Clarissa fears the passage of time and the inevitability of death. Water is also an important symbol in the *Mrs. Dalloway*. At the very beginning of the book, Woolf uses

imagery of water: “the flap of a wave” and “the kiss of a wave”. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 7) When Clarissa was at Bourton she felt that life is an exhilarating adventure if one has the courage to the “plunge”. The water is a symbol of the stillness and permanence of Clarissa’s desires. The fresh morning symbolizes the morning of Clarissa’s life, her happy girlhood at Bourton. When she looks through the window she feels the dangers of the voyage. Sensing that there is something “chill and sharp” beneath the kiss of the wave, she has a solemn feeling “that something awful was about to happen”. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 7) Woolf also uses the waves in *The Waves* as a symbol of the passage of time and smallness of human effort against the great forces of implacable nature. The progression of the six characters from the childhood through the adolescence to the middle age is followed by an image of the wave. The sea represents birth and death, origin and ultimate end of our lives. The existence of the waves is ended as they crash on the shore. The waves are constantly reconstituting themselves out of the permanence of the ocean. Just as ripples rise out of the sea and grow into separate waves then break and subside into the sea becoming part of it again, in the similar way men born as separate individuals, like Barnard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda, passing through several stages of life and separate again. Like waves life in its manifested form is something ever changing and mutable. To portray these characters she interlocks images not as a group but as the singular symbol of our common humanity. All the characters are related to the sea. So psychologically it suggests the collective consciousness.

Lily Briscoe’s painting possesses a symbolic significance in the novel *To the Lighthouse*. She struggles to complete her painting in the patriarchal society. Even after ten years, Lily’s picture is still a blur, an ambiguous crisscross of lines and shadows which no one will ever bother to look at. To Lily, painting represents catharsis. At last she achieves catharsis. Her painting suggesting inward journey is completed at the moment of Mr. Ramsay’s landing to the lighthouse. Lily takes her inspiration from Mrs. Ramsay who is the mental pole standing still to support everyone coming to her. Lily has her final moment of vision when she looks at the steps of the house where she could earlier see an image of Mrs. Ramsay but “they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.” (*Lighthouse* 333)

Knife, blade and scissors are recurrent image in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Jacob’s Room*, which symbolize death, destruction and psychological satisfaction. Peter Walsh carries knife. His playing with knife shows his inability to take decisions and varying emotions and attitudes: “She’s looking at me, he thought, a sudden embarrassment coming over him, though he had kissed her hand. Putting his hands into his packet, he took out a large pocket-knife and half opened the blade.” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 62) There is correspondence between the external expressions of Peter Walsh’s consciousness and his internal process of consciousness and eventual relationship with people. Both Peter and Clarissa express themselves with or through the mechanical instrument, or an element of it. After sharing a kiss with Clarissa Dalloway, Peter feels embarrassed and starts playing with pocket knife. Again it is knife that defends his soul when he enters the party of Mrs. Dalloway:

The cold stream of visual impressions failed him now as if the eye were a cup that overflowed and let the rest run down its china walls unrecorded. The brain must wake now. The body must contract now, entering the house, the lighted house, where the door stood open, where the mother cars were standing and bright women descending: the soul must brave itself to endure. He opened the big blade of his pocket-knife. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 248)

Clarissa Dalloway is also armed with her scissors. When he opens his knife to compensate his embarrassment and tilt toward his green dress, she opens her scissors, dismissing his intrusion into her life. So the knife is a phallic symbol and the scissors threatens castration. The most overt use of destructive imagery in *Mrs. Dalloway* is Peter Walsh's knife, relating necessarily to the knife imagery examined above. The very frequent usage of this image shows again the dominance of the knife image in the novel, enabling it to become perhaps the central image or symbol of this basic emotional reality; it only becomes tediously repetitive if the reader is missing the connecting imagery elsewhere. It is interesting to compare Septimus's knife with that of Clarissa: "she laid the paper-knife on the inlaid table". (*Mrs. Dalloway* 59) The knife is small, used for paperwork and has its special place in the house, if we see the knife here as representing an attitude toward life, particularly a defensive one, we can see here the material means whereby the Dalloways 'defend' or surround their existence, as opposed to Peter Walsh, the adventurer with knife always at hand. We also see this image in relation to Septimus Warren Smith who thinks of using a table knife to kill himself. However he finally throws himself onto the cutting spikes below his room. Septimus in his hallucination gives human beings the actuality of "knives and forts": zigzagging precipices with mountaineers ascending roped together, exactly like knives and forks". (*Mrs. Dalloway* 222) Clarissa and Septimus never meet with each other in the story but there is a deep psychological connection between them. While we are concentrating upon this imagery of destruction and death, we should realize that *Mrs Dalloway* is essentially a balanced book with balancing imagery of growth and fruition, expressed particularly through Clarissa's consciousness, who, while opposite to Septimus Warren Smith in distribution of consciousness, in the final moment of illumination at the party, unites with him in consciousness of his act of death, so that through the living and the dead we reach to 'the mystical centre'. By concentrating upon the imagery of death and destruction, perhaps we can absorb and understand their force within a natural rhythm, and so perceive with Virginia Woolf an ultimately positive relationship of body, feeling, mind and soul; a body that disintegrates as the knife cuts; feeling and mind that are aware of such disintegration and so can express their particular emotional quality in life through use of knife imagery which also conveys growing and declining, creative and destructive perception and rationalization; finally the potentiality of soul that is contained within the rhythm of the universe, released when the knife has been sharpened and cut and so like the body been abandoned.

The image of knife is first used in her third novel *Jacob's Room* (1922) to convey an emotional reality or attitude to life. In this novel Jacob Flanders's consciousness is seen as a child, as a student at Cambridge, as a traveler until he is lost in war. At the beginning of the book, the knife is given objective reality while gaining emotional significance: "She heard the bell for service or funeral that was Seabrook's voice – the voice of the dead. Wouldn't you like my knife, Mother? Said Archer. Sounding at the same moment as the bell, her son's voice mixed life and death inextricably, exhilaratingly. 'What a big knife for a small boy!' she said. She took it to please him." (*Jacob's Room* 14) Finally, as atmosphere builds towards the death of Jacob in the war, the image ominously appears, the knife drops and so cut the cord of life: ". . . the ships in the Piraeus fired their guns. The sound spread itself flat, and then went tunneling its way with fitful explosions among the channels of the island. Darkness drops like a knife over Greece". (*Jacob's Room* 175) Again axe and knife symbolize death in *To the Lighthouse*. Mr. Ramsay seems to be domestic tyrant to the family members. James hates his father who fails to understand his psychological need. His father discourages his son and says that it will be impossible to go to the lighthouse for bad weather. James thinks: "Had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it." (*Lighthouse* 37) This may be interpreted as the result of Oedipus complex. After ten years Mr. Ramsay is ready to go to lighthouse. While sitting at the boat's tiller, James's old antagonism towards his

father is seen in him. The longing to kill his father remains in him even ten years later when he sails to the lighthouse with him. An impulse of murdering his father comes back: "if he does, James thought, then I shall take a knife and strike him to the heart." (*Lighthouse* 296)

Mrs. Woolf shows the direct relationship between the symbol and signified object and also subverts the authority of a symbol to act as a signifier. Symbolism is the presentation of objects, moods and ideas through the medium of symbols. The sea, seascape, wave, water, clock tower, knife, tree, etc. play an important role in the development of each character's consciousness and interaction with the outside world. N.C. Thakur has rightly commented "Virginia Woolf's symbols are aesthetic symbols rationally created to suggest and give insight into the ineffable in human thought and feeling, or to heighten and make splendid the desired emotions and ideas." (Thakur 4) Woolf's use of imagery to connect different moments in the novel, and to form patterns apart from character and plot, becomes more confident and consistent in her novels. Images are carried over from one book to another. In her novels the reader is led in and out of her characters' thoughts and memories without explicit exposition from the narrator to represent the fluid nature of the mind, whereas other mediums are not so easily directed. She creates her own literary psychology using rhetorical pattern of fluidity emerging at the turn of the century, most notably with her use of the stream of consciousness literary narrative technique. In a broad sense stream of consciousness is called continuation of symbolism.

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