



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Theory of the Mind and the Creative Process Underlying the Works of Virginia Woolf

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Abstract: Virginia Woolf's writings have the stamp of tenacity as well as the evanescence and mystery of a butterfly's bloom. Her famous enunciation in *Modern Fiction*, that life is a luminous halo containing in it the essence of Reality, is seen to be working out in her fiction. Reality was for her a unity reconciling discordant elements. Delving into the stream-of-consciousness, the inner recesses of the mind, she explores the poetry of existence. The variegated flux of life comprising of the antinomies of love and hatred, the comic and the tragic, the physical and the psychological, life and death are juxtaposed side by side. She writes how Truth is to be pursued by all our faculties so that nothing is stunted yet some perceptions evolve into valuable insights into the nature of life. The contrary elements in her works can be explained in terms of her theory of the androgynous capabilities of the mind and its creative approach to the problems of living. In *A Room of One's Own*, she explains that the androgynous mind is a mind fully fertilized and harnesses all its faculties and indeed this collaboration between the male and female part of the mind is vital to the art of creation. In a memoir piece, *A Sketch of the Past*, she is emphatic about her intuitive belief that underneath the cotton wool of the quotidian element of life, there is hid a pattern of coherence, meaningfulness, truth and beauty of human existence. Virginia Woolf records the mind's conversation with life and triumphantly asserts what a power there is in the human mind with a balanced perspective, to transform the deserts of existence into a flowering garden of life. This has real-world resonances.

Keywords - flux, stream-of-consciousness, multifold perspectives, poikiloblastic, antinomies, androgynous, Reality, art of living.

INTRODUCTION

"I want to trace my own process." (AWD, p.104)

Virginia Woolf explores the unknown and uncircumscribed spirit of man. Her main preoccupation is the nature of reality itself and its apprehension by consciousness. In her famous essay, *Modern Fiction*, she wrote that life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged, rather life is a flux and her effort in her writings is to find the still point where this poikiloblastic unstructured flux comes to a pause, where all the disparities merge into a complete whole in a syncretistic manner.

DISCUSSION

Virginia Woolf was acutely aware of the complexities of life which she describes as a phantasmagoria: "a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences" (*The Waves*, pp 173). Life is a luminous halo but at the same time having in it "the essence of reality" (*Modern Fiction, The Common Reader I*, pp 149). Reality was for her a unity reconciling discordant elements. Woolf was cognizant that if a work of art was to capture and exhibit beauty of form, reflect an emotional and intellectual panorama of life, this multi-faceted reality, the artist's mind could not operate on a single plane. Commenting on a fresco by Perugino in 1908 she wrote: "I attain a different kind of beauty, achieve a symmetry by means of infinite discords, showing all the traces of the mind's passage through the world; achieve in the end some kind of whole made of shivering fragments; to me this seems the natural process" (Quentin Bell, I, pp 138). Antinomies and paradoxes, the juxtaposition of love and hatred, the comic and the tragic, the physical and the psychological, life and death constitute the kaleidoscopic sweep of her novels. In one of her memoirs *Old Bloomsbury*, Woolf recalling her brother Thoby Stephen's friends at Cambridge wrote: "they wished for the truth.... I thought this courageous of them but unsympathetic.... Why should intellect and character be so barren? It seems as if the highest efforts of the most intelligent people produce a negative result" (*Moments of Being*, pp 197-98). In her essay *On Not Knowing Greek* she wrote that "truth is to be pursued with all our faculties. Are we to rule out the amusements, the tendernesses, the frivolities of friendship because we love truth?... It is not to the cloistered disciplinarian mortifying himself in solitude that we are to turn, but to the well-sunned nature; the man who practices the art of living to the best advantage; so that nothing is stunted but some things are permanently more valuable than others" (*The Common Reader, I*, pp 42). The contrary elements in Virginia Woolf's works can be explained in terms of her theory of the mind and its ideal relation to the world of experience.

Tunnelling about, she seemed to have intuitively arrived at an androgynous perception of the creative processes of the mind. While observing the complex nuances of the relationship of her parents, Julia and Leslie Stephen, she realised how their diverse and contradictory qualities blended seamlessly creating harmony. Leslie Stephen's domineering presence and rational temperament stood out as a foil to her mother's sensitive, submissive and intuitive sensibility. They completed and complemented each other: "each rested secure for a second in the other's embrace.... he worshipped in her something as unchallengeably high as the lofty remote peak which she honoured in him. And each sprang rejoicing to do homage to qualities unlike their own --- how sweet, released from the agony and loneliness of thought to recognise instantly the real presence of unquestionable human loveliness!" (*Reminiscences*, pp 43). The complement of the percipient mind and the perceived world is to be found in all her writing, be it the novels, the critical essays, or her non-fictional works and her Diary. Most of the characters in her novels feel the contrary pull and tension between thought and action, the life of solitude and the life of society. Life is made up of two realities --- the inner and the outer. A simultaneity of awareness of the eternal and the temporal, the "brevity and diuturnity" of life (*Orlando*, pp 62) constitutes the core of her novels. This dualism of matter and spirit separates her from and explains her critical reaction to the 'materialists', Galsworthy, Bennett and Wells. Whereas they are concerned with the surface reality, she is not only concerned with the inner depths but with the harmonious collaboration of the outer and inner realms of life. This harmony she explains, exists in the androgynous mind.

The term 'androgynous' is derived from the Greek 'andro' meaning male and 'gyn' meaning female. By maleness of the mind, Woolf meant the faculty by which is perceived the quotidian material facts of life, and the female faculty is that which delves into the spiritual significance of physical happenings, events and actions. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf speaks of "the unity of the mind" and elaborates saying: "there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body" and "the normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating.... It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, anymore than a mind that is purely feminine.... the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (*AROO*, pp 92-94). Further she believed "it is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly and man-womanly" and this "marriage of opposites has to be consummated" to attain "perfect fullness". This "collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished" (*AROO*, pp 99).

The mind is "a very mysterious organ.... about which nothing whatever is known, though we depend upon it so completely" (*AROO*, pp 92). Although the mind is a mystery, reasoning from its activities, Virginia Woolf goes on to infer that it is a composite of the "dark side that comes uppermost in solitude" and "the light side that shows in company" (*How Should One Read a Book, Collected Essays*, II, pp 3). The mind is made up of male as well as female qualities. The conscious mind or the "upper mind" absorbs the sights and sounds of the daily life around us, it absorbs the impressions "in the order in which they fall.... however disconnected and incoherent in appearance". The mind receives a "myriad impressions --- trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel". These impressions come from all sides like an "incessant shower of innumerable atoms" (*Modern Fiction*, pp 148). The upper mind functions in the manner of the scientific, rational recorder and reporter. The outer mind gathers indiscriminately the details of the surface reality but after a while it withdraws into a meditative cocoon-like state, becoming chrysalis. The under mind, the female part of the brain which has been sunk into nothingness now awakens. The eye that has been observing so far now turns inward, like a fish it slips from the rocks into the depths of the sea. The inward journey now begins and the female intuitive part of the brain starts amalgamating the diverse elements into a recreated whole. She confides her own testimony to her diary: "and so the unconscious part now expands; and walking I notice the red corn and the blue of the plain and an infinite number of things without naming them; because I am not thinking of any special thing. Now and again I feel my mind take shape, like a cloud with the sun on it, as some idea, plan or image wells up...." (Quentin Bell, II, pp 198). In the absence of this synergism with the unconscious, the feminine part of the mind, the life force will not illumine the work. Though it appears to be a static moment, there is beneath the surface an intensely dynamic activity. Once the inherent pattern has been perceived, the upper mind relates it to the world in definable terms. Thus, the androgynous mind is "on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, it's a miracle, it's an ecstasy" (*To the Lighthouse*, pp 186). Thus, an organic whole emerges from the close collaboration of the two faculties of the mind. Woolf explains how the androgynous mind is a naturally creative, incandescent and undivided mind which moves with great felicity from the outer to the inner and is able to balance harmoniously the claims of both. It possesses the range and resilience to perceive with finesse and equanimity all the components of a fact or situation. It reconciles discordance into a single unified comprehensive perspective. This is exemplified in *To the Lighthouse* where the lighthouse becomes the androgynous principle of unity which is a mystical mode of perception. Multifold perspectives coexist in simultaneity: "for nothing was simply one thing", is the thematic strand of this novel. The lighthouse is both "a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye" and also a "tower, stark and straight.... barred with black and white" (pp 172). Mrs. Ramsay is able to harmonise the male-female duality in herself and is thus able to apprehend Reality which is an undifferentiated unity. In a moment of solitude, sinking to her innermost self the "wedge-shaped core of darkness" which is invisible to others and is the source of energy, the region of acute awareness where "the range of experience seemed limitless", Mrs. Ramsay sees into the nature of things. She arrives at a "platform of stability", when "losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir" and identifies herself with "the long steady stroke" of the lighthouse which stands for permanence. Mrs. Ramsay's tender intuitive self identifies itself with the light of the lighthouse, with "the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her" (pp 60-62). Mrs. Ramsay has experienced the wholeness of the androgynous mind. The "wedge-shaped core of darkness" has united with the light of the lighthouse to perceive Unity like the Chinese concept of reality which is made up of 'Yang' and 'Yin' or light and darkness.

Mr. Ramsay too resolves this duality within himself. Struggling with his philosophical problems, this "beak of brass" has to dip itself in the "fountain and spray of life", the fecundity of Mrs. Ramsay's harmonised self (pp 38). Mr. Ramsay undertakes the journey to the lighthouse in memory of his wife. Whereas previously he was a selfish egotistical man, on his journey to the lighthouse he learns to give, which is a creative act. He praises his son James for his rowing and learns compassion and thinks of the fishermen and how they live. For him too, the inward journey has begun.

Lily Briscoe, the artist, too unites this dualism within herself. Lily's timorousness prevented her from being involved in the complexities of life and become a balanced integrated personality, flexible and strong. In her creative effort to fill the empty space with significance, Lily recalls and immerses herself in the loving aura of Mrs. Ramsay. She loses consciousness of outer things, her name and her personality and her appearance to achieve a heightened perception: "I have had my vision" (pp 192). The line drawn down the centre of her painting is an act of integration of self. She is now both subjectively involved and objectively detached from life and the lighthouse symbolises the harmony where the intellect and intuition are synthesized. The androgynous mind is thus able to see life whole as it has the right mental focus.

In *Three Guineas* Woolf addresses the problems of society, and becomes the proponent of the creation of a new religion based on the perception of the unity behind things which can be perceived by the integrated mind. The achievement of the androgynous ideal can be traced through her novels. From an impressionistic approach to Nature in much of *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, she gradually moves into a deeper and much more complex level of human awareness especially in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* where the mind becomes chrysalis and meditates on the meaning of life. The journey from the outer to the inner results in a meaningful transaction of the two worlds in the last novels, *The Years* and *Between the Acts* where the integrated self is able to keep its serenity in the midst of the chaos of society. The spirit directs the material activity onto the right pathway and hence becomes the mechanism of redemption and regeneration of man and his society. The message of the last novel is that man can fulfil himself by harnessing his dormant faculties. He is capable of attaining inner harmony and can participate meaningfully in society. The pageant organised by the artist Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts* reveals the twentieth century descendants as "orts, scraps and fragments" (pp 136). Miss La Trobe's aim, like Virginia Woolf's, is to make people see a world of different values, to unite them into a common pursuit --- that of enriching life by the efforts of understanding and connecting. In her diary, Woolf writes how "the creative power at once brings the whole universe to order" (pp 212).

CONCLUSION

Virginia Woolf's concept of the mind finds real world resonances. Lisa Miller, Professor in Clinical-Psychology programme at Teachers College, Columbia University, and founder director of the Spirituality Mind Body Institute, in her latest book, *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life*, (Random House; August 2021) writes of the multi capabilities of our brain. Today we are suffering from isolation and disconnection but our brain has a deep seat of perception which can guide us to a robust and resilient approach to problems. The 'Achieving Awareness' capability of the mind or "outer data" enables a person to strategize, implement tactics and prepare goals. But disruptions waylay our plans and "we need to shift gears and find a way of thinking that squares with the deeper nature of life, the inherent flux and volatility in the world." The 'Awakened Awareness' capability or "inner knowing is real data" and is a receptive form of knowing that perceives value and leads to a different style of decision making: ethical, sustainable and far more profitable. It leads us to "magnificent surprises" as it enters into a dialogue with "the spirit of life". An integrated awareness or collaboration between these two realms of the mind is vital and when "we unify both forms of knowing", it becomes "a jewel box" of inspirational and unlimited possibilities for the individual and employing organizations (*Author Talks*). Therefore, each one of us should awaken the artist, the intuitive self and strive for wholeness and harmony.

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