



Virginia Woolf's *Modern Fiction*: A Critical Study of Modernist Narrative and Literary Experimentation

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Abstract

Looking into the dynamics of *Modern Fiction* we find that it is one of the most valued essays of Virginia Woolf. On April 10, 1919 it was published as *Modern Novels* in The Times Literary Supplement. It was again revised and printed as *Modern Fiction* in The Common Reader in 1925. In contemporary writing, this essay is like a manifesto; in it varied themes and techniques that do not exist in the traditional and conventional writing of fiction. Therefore, it could be considered to have defied the norms of literary fiction. This essay occupies a prominent role in the history of literature for having defined a visionary approach and conception of fiction in the modern period. Literature has gone through various changing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In modern period, writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce have openly defied the linear plot structure and predictable characters and traditional narrative. The present essay entitled *Modern Fiction* provides fresh insights to modern writers and it can be one of the reasons that it gave immense popularity to Virginia Woolf. Critics and scholars are of the opinion that this essay was a response to traditional literary landscape which failed to capture the complexities of human behaviour. Virginia Woolf has tried hard to redefine the genre of fiction by following experimental and introspective form of writing. It is interesting to note that *Modern Fiction* also changed the perception of readers and they understood that a true fiction can project the complexities of human behaviour. A good fiction must project the intricacies of life and it can be one of the reasons that a linear and chronological method of storytelling was questioned by Virginia Woolf. She has stated that nothing is fixed in life and thus, there must not be any prejudices in fiction. The subjectivity of human consciousness has been well expressed in the essay *Modern Fiction*.

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Woolf has remarked that traditional form of storytelling failed to capture the true moments of life because life is unpredictable. In modern form of writing fiction, we can find that a character is analyzed by different perspectives. True essence of human thoughts and emotions are well expressed through techniques like stream of consciousness in modern form of writing. In traditional literature we cannot find such techniques because it is a result of continuous experimentation with different plots, narrative forms and characters. By exploring the inner minds of characters Woolf has highlighted the modern sensibilities of life. Feminist undertone of *Modern Fiction* is another reason for its immense popularity

because Woolf continuously talks about equality of gender, freedom and independence of women in a patriarchal society. We can find that in her novels most of the women characters are complex because they deviate from their stereotypical identity. Woolf argued that one-dimensional stereotypical representation of women characters was not fair because society was changing towards a continuous journey of progress and development. Women were no more a subject of suppression and there were equal opportunities for them also. The prevailing portrayal of women in literature was pathetic and Woolf critiqued such conditions. She remarked that a more authentic representation of women was required in traditional literature. In *Modern Fiction* one of the key features is its subjectivity. In 1921 when Woolf was writing this essay then novels were in great demand. These novels strictly followed rigid and linear narrative structure. Woolf presents an argument that potential of fiction was limited by adopting conventional methods of writing. She believes that a true fiction should be able to present the inner lives of characters. Their thoughts, emotions and perceptions must be recognized because it generates interest among readers. A deeper connection between readers and characters is established by adopting new methods of writing. The subjective experience of characters is highlighted by the use of stream of consciousness and interior monologues. The fragmented and nonlinear presentation of human consciousness adds a sense of realism to modern form of writings. The fixed and objective reality of fiction has been challenged by Virginia Woolf. In *Modern Fiction* Woolf remarks that language is an expressive mode of communication. She has talked about limitations of language in this essay (Woolf 171). In traditional form of writings language fails to capture the depth of subjectivity. It is her observation that language is inherently limited by its structure and conventions. It is noteworthy to find that words, phrases and sentences are not capable enough to present the vast range of sensations, thoughts and emotions because they are finite and fixed. Woolf further highlights that language generalizes and simplifies our perceptions. By doing so it distills our concepts and ideas. It can be one of the reasons that in translation true essence of human emotions, consciousness and expression is lost. To solve these problems Woolf has given us an idea that there must be a flexible and fluid mode of storytelling (Woolf 165). Thus, we can find that in most of the writings of Virginia Woolf the mode of storytelling is fluid and flexible. She is aware about human perception that it cannot be fixed. It is ever-changing in nature so, it becomes evident that she explores innovative methods of narrating story to readers. The elusive and transient method of subjective reality is well grounded in her essays and novels. By using unconventional structures, stream of consciousness techniques and fragmented narratives writers can show us the complexities of modern life. The fluid and flexible approach of Virginia Woolf also suggest that she had a strong belief on herself. She knows the power of literature and it might be the reason that she challenged the traditional use of language in fiction writing. The flow of human perception and ideas is not an easy task to express in words. The fleeting nature of emotions clearly reveals that it is multidimensional in subjective reality and Woolf emphasizes on projecting this kind of subjective reality in fiction. It provides an opportunity to writers to establish a deeper connection with readers.

In *Modern Fiction*, Virginia Woolf has used various narrative techniques and literary devices to convey her ideas. To represent the flux of thoughts and ideas she has primarily used techniques like stream of conscious. We have already talked about this technique in detail in the previous chapter of the present research work. Apart from this technique she has also employed intertextuality to establish a connection between this essay and other literary works. By incorporating other literary works to her essay, she engages in broader literary conversation and it provides a sense of accuracy and authenticity to the essay. To evoke emotions and deeper contextual meaning she has used various symbols in this essay. These symbolic elements can easily be found in the narrative. It is a subject of interpretation and readers find themselves engaged with the essay on multiple levels. The use of metaphoric language successfully creates vivid imagery and evokes different sensory experiences. In the essay we can also find that Woolf repeats certain phrases and by doing so she emphasizes upon her ideas and themes. It also helps her in maintaining the rhythmic flow of ideas. In *Modern Fiction* there is a reflective narrator who addresses

the readers directly and it seems that he is self-aware and he knows the intellectual taste of the readers. The conversational and intimate tone of the narrator establishes a connection with the readers. The possibilities and nature of fiction has been disclosed by him in a dialogic way. Let us talk about the motifs and symbolic elements in the present essay in detail. The thematic exploration has been deepened by the use of symbols. It is noteworthy to find that these symbols act like a literary device that adds layers of meaning and beauty to this essay. In this essay we can find the symbol of waves and it represents the idea that life is similar to a wave full of ups and downs. It also represents the flux of human consciousness that it is not fixed but it keeps on growing with the advancement of the time. The movement of waves has been compared beautifully to the movement of ideas, impressions and emotions of the mind. The ever-shifting nature of human consciousness has also been represented by the waves in this essay. Another symbol is that of mirror and Woolf has tried to show us that modern period was going through a change. Through the use of mirror as a symbol, she has tried to show us the fragmented and multifaceted nature of reality. Different perspectives of life and multiple ways of perceiving things have been highlighted by the symbolic representation of the mirror. Mirror also stands for self-reflection and introspection. So, it can be said that readers can contemplate their own experiences and perspectives through the symbol of mirror. Critics and scholars are of the opinion that window has also been used by the essayist as a symbol. Windows reflect a boundary between the internal and the external world (Woolf 33). It acts like a ventilator for characters to find themselves in both the world. We can also say that it stands between virtual and the real world. Virtual world is the false perception of the societal constraints on the other hand real world is full of pain and sufferings of the characters. It can have different interpretations based on the plot and the setting. Thus, it becomes evident that the symbolic representation of the window shows us the artistic creativity of Virginia Woolf. It is amazing to find that we can find such symbols in almost all of her writings. There are also masks and veils in *Modern Fiction*. It is needless to say that Woolf has used masks and veil as a symbol to conceal the layers of identity and true selves. A Woolf remark that time has come to unmask the superficiality of the society (Woolf 170). She always advocated a true sense of reality and talks about authentic human experiences. One of the most important symbols used in the present essay is the representation of time. It reflects the temporal nature of human existence. The essayist Virginia Woolf has significantly raised the issue of time that everything is a subject of decay. Time keeps on running continuously and it is almost impossible to capture the wings of time through our memories. It can be one of the reasons that Virginia Woolf has immortalised her ideas by writing fiction, essays and others. It is remarkable to note that the internal thoughts of characters are also a subject of time because it keeps on coming and going. Virginia Woolf has tried to capture such flux of ideas and thoughts through the use of stream of conscious technique. It can be said that time is at the centre in stream of consciousness technique. We have already seen in the previous chapter that consciousness of human beings has been represented by the image of a snowball. It keeps on rolling and growing in size with the advancement of the time. In most of the novels of Virginia Woolf We can see that there is a sudden shift from past to present and vice versa. Characters undergo a journey through memory and it describes their whole life. This kind of journey is not an easy task to describe in words and it can be one of the reasons that writers like Virginia Woolf rejected the linear and traditional movement of the plot. With the onset of modernism there were new ideas and beliefs that were incorporated in literature. We have talked about the symbolic elements in the essay *Modern Fiction* and we have also seen the motifs behind incorporating these symbols. It is noteworthy to find that Woolf encourages readers to have their own understanding of the reality. They should be aware of the complexities of their own reality.

In *Modern Fiction*, Virginia Woolf also talks about issues of feminism. This essay has not been exclusively labelled as a feminist essay but her feminist beliefs have been highlighted as she critiques the norms of patriarchy prevalent at that time. It has already been said that she criticizes the traditional narrative structure. Apart from this she also criticizes the limited role of women in fiction. She presents an argument that a true work of fiction should never be inclined towards rigid conventions that restricts

female characters to domesticity. She remarks that women have their own desires and individuality so they must be given a proper space in any work of fiction. Woolf also challenges the notions of a male dominated society and says that women must not be compelled to adopt male qualities to be considered equal in the society. She further presents the argument that there is a need to understand that women can have their own choices and preferences in life. Their voices cannot be ignored because they also share the same nature of humanity and they too exist independently. In the male dominated literary canon women writers have been marginalized and Woolf presets a critique to this system. Earlier women writers used to write using a pen name mostly of men. Woolf speaks for those writers and says that it is the loophole of the society where gender is valued much in comparison to intellect. Thus, it becomes evident that she advocates for inclusion of female voice in literary discourses (Woolf 138). By doing she talks about the importance of diverse perspectives and experiences in the society. By emphasizing on the works of lesser-known women writers she is trying to encourage the feminine intellect and she also challenge the established literary hierarchy of the patriarchal society. In the essay *Modern Fiction*, we can also find that the essayist has highlighted the importance of incorporating a more progressive and inclusive approach towards literature. It is believed that this essay is the precursor of her most seminal work entitled *A Room of One's Own* that got published in 1929. It is remarkable to find that *Modern Fiction* and *A Room of One's Own* are the two most significant essays of Virginia Woolf that talks about liberation of women by empowering them through the tools of knowledge and education. Critics and scholars are of the opinion that there are feminist ideas in both the essays but their tone, approach and focus is different. *A Room of One's Own* is more subjective in nature because it exclusively talks about feminism and the constraints of society. *Modern Fiction* is a short essay where Virginia Woolf is trying to show us that traditional narrative forms and representation of women in literature is incompetent in modern period. A time has come to review the traditional approach of the society towards literature and life of women. Earlier women were not given proper education but with the advancement of the time women stand equal to men in terms of education and opportunity. It can be one of the reasons that Virginia Woolf emphasizes more upon her women characters in most of her writings. It is important to note that there are several important themes in *Modern Fiction*. It provides us a glimpse to modernism because society was going through a lot of changes during that period. The theme of individuality and identity is recurring throughout the essay. Mrs. Woolf has emphasized upon the identity of an individual and it was one of the central themes of modern period. Pre-established notions related to individuality and identity were challenged by the modern writers. It was thought by the modern writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf that every individual plays a significant role in the society irrespective of his sex, race, class and gender. The departure from conventional mode of writing is clearly visible in this essay. The exploration of diverse voices and celebration of individuality makes this essay interesting and popular among readers. Still today writings of Virginia Woolf are widely read and circulated in all across the world. In this essay Woolf has also tried to show us the fragmented society following the devastations of the First World War. It seems that Woolf was aware of the consequences of the war and in her novels, we can also get some references of the war. A sense of disillusionment and chaotic nature of human existence permeated post-war society and it can be felt in the present essay. Mrs. Woolf projects such elements of modernism through fragmented narratives along with the techniques of stream of consciousness. Critics and scholars are of the opinion that the shattered realities of the modern world are well reflected through nonlinear and fragmented style of story-telling. It was the need of the time to do experimentation with innovative methods of narration techniques. The unconventional approaches of writing have been advocated by Virginia Woolf in *Modern Fiction*. It can be one of the reasons that the idea of external plot has been criticized by Woolf and she argues for importance of experiences of characters based on their real-life incidents (Jones 81). Internal lives and experiences of characters are important because it adds subjectivity to the plot. Virginia Woolf was a kind of writer who always laid emphasizes on interior monologues and stream of consciousness techniques because it provides subjectivity to the plot. By rejecting the traditional methods of story-telling Virginia Woolf has highlighted the idea of evolution that we need to change our techniques with the advancement of time.

It is the process of evolution that provides us the ideology that old order is replaced by the new with the flow of time. It has been suggested by the essayist of *Modern Fiction* that true insights and understanding are reflected through the inner workings of the human mind. A genuine and psychologically rich form of story-telling is possible through the portrayal of characters inner thoughts, emotions and perceptions.

When the essay *Modern Fiction* was published then it gained immense popularity and critical appreciation. The bold expression of literary conventions and the innovative ideas of the essay sparked considerable attention and it also influenced readers of different age groups. *Modern Fiction* was well responded by contemporary critics and they have different opinions for it. Critics and scholars are of the opinion that it is stuffed with fascination and scepticism. It is remarkable to find that the concept of id, ego and superego propounded by Sigmund Freud is also applicable in most of the writings of Virginia Woolf. In *Modern Fiction* let us find the applications of psychoanalytic theory in terms of id, ego and superego. Id is the primary desire of any individual. In *Modern Fiction* Woolf has tried to figure out the raw emotions of her characters. Their impulses and desires have also been highlighted through the techniques of stream of consciousness. The untamed and unfiltered thoughts of the characters describe the chaotic and illogical aspects of human nature. It should be kept in our mind that id represents the impulsive desire of any human being. He or she actively wants to gratify such desires and this leads to uncensored action of the individual.

In *Modern Fiction*, Woolf touches upon the psychological aspects of writing and storytelling, indirectly referencing the id, ego, and super ego. She critiques the traditional narrative structures that strictly adhere to the rules of realism and advocates for a more liberated and experimental approach to literature. Woolf suggests that traditional fiction, heavily influenced by the ego and super ego, often fails to capture the true essence of human experience. She argues that writers should explore the depths of their characters' consciousness, embracing the raw and instinctual nature of the id. By doing so, they can create narratives that are more authentic and reflective of the complexity of human existence.

Furthermore, Woolf's call for a shift in narrative style aligns with the concept of the ego. She urges writers to break free from societal expectations and conventions, allowing their creativity to flourish. By challenging established norms, they can highlight the depths of their characters' psyches and provide a more profound understanding of the human condition. Although Woolf doesn't explicitly mention the id, ego, and super ego in her essay, her ideas echo the fundamental principles behind these concepts. Her plea for a more intuitive and unconventional approach to writing reflects the id's drive for raw expression, while her emphasis on breaking free from societal constraints resonates with the ego's desire for autonomy. Thus, it can be said that *Modern Fiction*, serves as a testament to her deep understanding of the human psyche and its relationship to literature. Through her exploration of unconventional narrative techniques and her critique of traditional storytelling, she indirectly incorporates the concepts of id, ego, and super ego. By challenging the norms and exploring the depths of characters' consciousness, Woolf encourages writers to reflect the complexities of human existence through their writings and leave a lasting impact on readers. Virginia Woolf's *Modern Fiction* and *A Room of One's Own* are both thought-provoking works that showcase her insightful observations and unique literary style. While they differ in their focus and approach, these essays share common themes and shed light on Woolf's progressive views on literature and women's roles in society. *Modern Fiction* primarily centres around Woolf's analysis of the state of fiction writing during her time. She critiques the traditional narrative structures and emphasizes the need for more experimental and intuitive approaches to literature. Woolf challenges the restrictions imposed by realism and encourages writers to delve into the depths of human consciousness, capturing the complexities of the human experience. Through her essay, she advocates for a shift in narrative style and a greater emphasis on individual creativity and authenticity. In contrast, *A Room of One's Own* highlights the broader societal context in which literature is produced. Woolf explores the limitations and obstacles faced by women in pursuing their creative ambitions. She highlights the importance of financial independence and personal space for women to

freely express themselves and engage in intellectual pursuits. By examining the historical exclusion of women from literary spaces, Woolf emphasizes the need for equality and opportunities for women in the realm of literature. Despite their differing focuses, both essays reveal Woolf's feminist perspective and her commitment to challenging societal norms. In *Modern Fiction*, she critiques the limitations imposed on writers by existing conventions, advocating for a more inclusive and diverse literary landscape. In *A Room of One's Own*, she confronts the patriarchal structures that hinder women's creativity and underscores the importance of women's voices and perspectives in literature. Both essays showcase Woolf's eloquent and evocative writing style, characterized by her use of stream of consciousness and poetic language. She engages the reader through her thought-provoking arguments, weaving together personal anecdotes, literary references, and social commentary to convey her ideas effectively. So, it becomes evident that *Modern Fiction* and *A Room of One's Own* differ in their specific themes and focus, they are united by Woolf's commitment to challenging existing norms and advocating for creative freedom. These essays offer valuable insights into Woolf's progressive ideas on literature, gender equality, and the power of individual expression. It is interesting to see that there are some parallels between *Modern Fiction* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. In Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*, there are certain elements and themes that resonate with her essay *Modern Fiction*. Woolf's exploration of the complexities of human consciousness and her experimental narrative techniques find echoes throughout the novel *Mrs Dalloway*. One prominent element is Woolf's use of the stream of consciousness technique, which she extensively employed in both her essay and the novel. In *Modern Fiction*, she advocated for a more intuitive and introspective approach to writing, exploring the depths of characters' minds. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf masterfully employs stream of consciousness to immerse the reader in the interior thoughts and perceptions of her characters. Through the fluid transitions between characters' perspectives, she presents a multi-layered portrayal of their experiences, capturing the height of human consciousness. Additionally, both *Modern Fiction* and *Mrs Dalloway* explore the themes of time and subjective reality. In her essay, Woolf criticized the traditional linear narrative structures and proposed a more fragmented and fluid representation of time.

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