



## THE AESTHETIC VISION OF VIRGINIA WOOLF AS REFLECTED IN HER FICTIONAL WORLD

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### **Abstract**

*This paper evidently projects the aesthetic vision of Virginia Woolf by displaying her fantasy of life through her novels; bringing home the point that there is concrete order and selection in her novels, whereas form and pattern are imposed by her vision of life and shows how she wants to paint a real picture of life with her own vision of ultimate beauty of life and emphasises on Woolf's delight in beauty that makes her acutely conscious of the frailty and transience of life attesting to the fact that life-fleeting and changing like a cloud which results in sadness and bewilderment. Anyhow, she has succeeded in imposing form and order in her novels step by step.*

**Key Words:** *Consciousness, Sensibility, Aesthetic Experience, Myriad Impression, Mutability, Subjectivity.*

Virginia Woolf is a great creative artist, in the sense that her works introduce the readers to “a unique and living imaginative world” (Marcus 93). Like all other artists, she also wanted to paint a picture of real life as she saw it. She had her own vision of life and wanted to convey it through her novels. She found that the conventional novel imposed order upon experience, an order which did not correspond with reality. This explains her break with the traditions and conventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel. Her views find expression in a famous passage in “Modern Fiction”, an essay included in *The Common Reader*, first series. She writes:

“Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelops surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. However, had she followed her theory literally in its entirety, the effect would have been chaotic” (Woolf 62).

The very basis of art is order and discipline, which results from a process of careful selection and elimination. There is order and selection in her novels also, and only those aspects of experience are picked out which harmonise with her sensibility, with her vision of life and order is in this way brought out of disorder. Form and pattern is imposed by her vision of life on the chaotic world of experience. Mrs. Woolf was an aesthete, a great lover of the beautiful and it is this love of beauty which influences her selection and ordering of reality. Only the beautiful aspects are selected and the ugly ones ignored, or they are introduced merely to provide a contrast, when aesthetic experience flags and capacity to enjoy beauty flags, life becomes meaningless for her characters, sadness then assaults the spirit. Like Keats, she loves the principle of beauty in all things. Walter Pater is of the view that “To treat life in the spirit of art is to make life a thing in which means and ends are identified to encourage such treatment, the true moral significance of art and poetry” (112).

Aestheticism means the pursuit of beauty through the medium of art. So the pursuit of art becomes an end in itself. Virginia Woolf also thinks the novel to be a means to the lofty end. It aims at exploration of the human soul. And just like all other artists, she also wanted to paint a picture of real life as she saw it. But she had her own vision of life; she wanted to accept only the ultimate beauty of life, which is the beauty of the spirit and aimed at conveying it through her novels. To Virginia Woolf, life appeared as a mass of myriad impressions, all beautifully and spiritually collected and her chief aim was to communicate the sense of reality through fiction. To her, “life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end’ and the task of the novelist is to ‘covey this varying this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible.’ She strongly believed that the proper stuff of fiction is something other than custom would have us believe it.’ Human consciousness is a chaotic welter of sensations and impressions. And as David Cecil puts it, “Through the eyes of one or more of her characters, she strove simply to record the actual process of living, to trace the confused succession of impression and thought and mood as it drifted cloud like across the clear mirror of consciousness.” (P 60)

Virginia Woolf was a great lover of beauty and this love of beauty guides her in her selection and ordering of reality. According to one critic, Virginia Woolf could find beauty “as much in a scrap of orange peel lying in the gutter as in the Venus de Melo; as easily walking down the Hustom Road as with the consecrated portals of the National Gallery” (34). As presented by her, the aesthetic life is vigorous and satisfying as any other kind of life. Emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of life makes her novels contemplative, for “aesthetic experiences are contemplative affairs”. There is very little action in her novels. The sight of a London Park in autumn occupies the front, while stirring and thrilling events like the great war or some death or marriage, are kept in the background. The second result of emphasis on aesthetic experience is that her characters as



presented to us are essentially lonely figures. Their inner life is what matters to them and this they do not share with anybody else. Even in Company, they seem to be alone, absorbed in private thoughts. Their relations with others are important to them, only in so far as they enrich their inner life. Like Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus, they guard enviously their spiritual privacy and do not tolerate any attempts to possess it. Septimus goes to the extent even of committing suicide.

Woolf's delight in beauty makes her acutely conscious of the frailty and transience of life. Life is fleeting and changing like a cloud and this fact brings sadness and bewilderment. Like Keats, she is oppressed by the melancholy which dwells with beauty. "Beauty that must die" and "joy whose hand is over at his lips bidding adieu" (P 49). This fact of beauty, on the one hand, the fact of mutability, on the other is the two poles on which her panorama of human experience revolves. In Mrs. Dalloway, life is represented as an insoluble mystery providing an explanation. It is just possible that beyond this life, there may be another life more beautiful and more permanent. Perhaps, she suggests in *To the Lighthouse*, there is a permanent principle of beauty at work in the universe behind the visible and the palpable. Death is thus seen as a process of renewal to be welcomed. Her vision of life makes her mainly concerned with the aesthetic aspects of life without caring very little for the moral ones. Hence, her characters are shown as beautiful and ugly, happy or sad, but not bad and good. And the atmosphere is generally cold, unfit for love or hatred. We find Lily Briscoe admiring William Banks and appreciating his friendly attitude. But even then, she watches him with cool critical eyes. And we find her characters not so keen on having intimate contacts with each other; they rather prefer isolation and are happy in it. Thus, Mrs. Ramsay longs for loneliness so that she may muse alone and give free rein to her thoughts. Lily remains an old maid to the end. And to Tansley and William Banks, social gatherings mean a sheer waste of time. Mrs. Woolf's novels are without clash of characters, without action and drama and with very little moral values. Intense love is outside with very range. That is why she fails to convince of the reality of Razia's grief at the death of her husband or that of Ramsay at the death of his wife. In fact, she is bound to fail when she wants to depict something outside the limitations of her vision. We find Lily Briscoe admiring the beauty of Mr. Ramsay's books and Mrs. Ramsay considering it wonderful to marry a man with a gold watch in a lovely wash – leather case in *To the Lighthouse*.

In Mrs. Dalloway, Bond Street in a summer morning is made to appear beautiful to us. In her novels touched by her magic pen even very common views of life like the buses, the policemen and the clamoring shoppers are all aglow with the splendor of a picture by Vermeer. And then she has the superb power of combining beauty with accuracy. "Time Passes", the second part of *To the Lighthouse* illustrates it and hence the credit of poetizing and musicalizing the novel of subjectivity must go to her. Extremely sensitive and observant, she combines beauty with accuracy. She creates her effects not by casting of haze of romantic glamour over her picture, but merely by indication the beautiful aspects of a scene. A true artist, she observes more than there is to observe, and records her observation for the delight and wonder of her readers. "Her picture of life, as a thing of beauty, is enlivened all the time by little strokes of humour and observation, it is diversified by an incessantly changing procession of moods; it is made vital by her unsleeping curiosity about everything great and small that comes within her line of vision" (31). She shows us a world so brimful of strangeness, fascination and delight.

Her first two novels *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* are largely traditional. But soon she realised the inadequacy of the traditional novel, and adopted the 'stream of consciousness' technique in *Jacob's Room*, her third novel. Her art rapidly matured and her next two novels *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* represent the very consummation of the novel of subjectivity. She is not one of the architects of the 'Stream of Consciousness novel', she is not its originator, but it is in her novels that the 'stream of consciousness' technique finds its balance. She has succeeded in imposing form and order on the chaos inherent in the novel of subjectivity. She has brought this particular 'genre' of the novel out of the realm of 'stunt literature' and made it an acceptable and coherent art form. She was also one of the most forceful and original theorists of 'the stream of consciousness novel', and by her exposition of the aesthetics of this kind of novel she did much to throw light on its technique and to bring out its superiority to the conventional novel.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, it may be said that Mrs. Woolf represents the poetisation and musicalisation of the English novel and she has realized that the very atmosphere of the mind, the chaotic welter of sensations and emotions that the human mind is cannot be recreated with the ordinary resources of prose. Therefore, in order to enrich the language of poetry, her prose-style has the assonances, the refrains, the rhythms, and the accents of poetry itself. Her novels have the intensity and immediacy of a lyric and this intensity is achieved by providing them with a narrow-framework. Her novels are nothing but an expression of the "simmeriness of life," of the very sensation of living as great poetry always is. They are composed like a musical symphony, the apparently discordant notes within them forming a single harmony. In the words of Bernard Blackstone, she is "a philosophical writer" and her concern is the "old metaphysical concern with the how of knowing which has to be resolved before the forward step can be taken to what is known" (A Commentary 51). By showing men and women in all sorts of combinations, Mrs. Woolf explores the truth about life and she is said to have feared what is rarely attained, reality, truth to life.