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The Time Conscious Middle-Aged Women in the Novels of Virginia Woolf

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf was highly conscious of the complexity of the inward life of human being. In her later work, her focus was only on inner process of mind unlike her predecessors whose focus was the outer action. According to psychologists outer actions are but the half reality of the human personality. Virginia Woolf was much influence by Freud, Jung and Dorothy Richardson to understand the inner drama or conflict of human mind. Present paper is an effort to focus on her life-like portrayal of middle-aged time conscious women. She portrays all type of characters; the young beloveds and lovers, men of action, religious men, men of lower society and the old but she could portray beautifully only middle-aged women for she herself was a middle-aged woman.

Keywords: Frustration, Individualistic, Aspirations, Disappointments

Later work of Virginia Woolf shows this fruitfulness of character portrayal in the portrayals of a few middle-aged women. Virginia Woolf uses stream of consciousness technique in their presentation. The conventional mode didn't suit her. Novelist portrays middle-aged woman successfully because the mental experience of young woman is not as rich as that of the middle aged woman. At least this is evident through the portrayal of their characters. Some women have but two responsibilities before them; to provide all sorts of mental and physical comforts to their husbands and to look after the household as these women are married to husbands who are not interested in anything except their studies. When they think that they are unable to share joys and pains with their husbands, they become pensive. They do all the household work happily. They never reveal their real feelings, as they were sensible enough. They Channel their frustration in benevolent activities; in their outside interest. Mrs. Ambrose of *'The Voyage Out'*, Mrs. Hilbery of *'Night and Day'*, Mrs. Ramsay of *'To The*



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Lighthouse' are full of selfless interest in others. They are not complaining against like, thought they can, but living life as it comes.

Mrs. Hilbery is a little different from the other woman of this category. She is personified as an exaggerated Feminine sensibility though she shows a rare insight into the truth of life like love and affection but she is poor to deal with the ordinary facts of life. With a mysterious smile, realizing it full well that her daughter's affairs are gradually reaching their climax, she goes in and out of house like an all knowing deity. When her absence would be of some help to Katherine and Ralph she disappears from the house. The absence helps in bringing both into closer contact with each other, setting things right for them she returns back only on receiving the telegram of her husband. When she comes back from Straford on Avon she looks like an angel. She Strew the Floor with Flower and leaves from Shakespear's tomb. And she crowns the occasion of her daughter's happiness with a little song about a miller's daughter. In the office of Ralph talking to him she uses lots of parentheses in her speech "..... do me a favor and Anderson won't keep his horse waiting (Anderson is a perfect tyrant but he drove my dear father to the Abbey the day they busted him). I made bold to come to you Mr. Denham, not exactly in search of legal assistance (though I don't know I'd rather come to, if I were in trouble)...."¹ There is something odd in her because of which she looks like Shakespearean fool. In the "Time Literary supplement, a critic rightly said, "..... we laugh a delighted assent and go on to remember that we are laughing at one to whom alone love and everlasting woman wisdom have given the power of putting thing right for her bewildered."² If she were the character of a mouthpiece, she would have received her place with the famous eccentric characters of English fiction like Mr. Collins and Micawber. But she is part of an, unsatisfactory novel like *'Night and Day'* some inabilities of the novelist come in her way of making her walk out of the novel. They have an identity of her own. There remains something undramatic about her. Virginia consciously crafts all this for her.

Among the women of this category Betty Flanders, the unacknowledged heroine of *'Jacob's Room'* holds a special place. Two other middle aged women, Mrs. Ambrose and Mrs. Hilbery had been portrayed by Virginia Woolf before she portrayed Betty Flanders. She portrayed Mrs. Flander in relation to the past. But she didn't portray other women in this relation. It is the latter's fate to dig up the past memories. She was left with three sons after the death of her husband. These sons pursue their own career. Leaving her with only memories of him, Jacob, one of her sons, in the end dies. The memories of his symbolized by his old shoes; ".....what am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy"³ Ms. Flanders is a definite step towards Mrs. Alloway. She is the chief character of her first major novel. She is mainly the character of past. Her character-portrayal shows how she is rich of the mental experience of the middle age woman.

Novelist, into the psychology of this middle-aged woman, shows a surprising insight. Virginia Woolf puts in Mrs. Dalloway all the symptoms of very common lady, and diseases



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that a middle age woman brings with it, it is pointed out by Miss Simone-de behavior in the book *'The Second Sex'*, that a radical change occurs in a woman at this age. She begins to think that she is not going to achieve anything more in life. This makes her miserable. Her body is fruitless now. Her dreams and ambitions are not being fulfilled. The writer further says, "...She reviews the past; the moment has come to draw a line across the page, to make up her accounts; she balances her books. And she is appalled at the narrow limitation..."⁴ And this is the thing Mrs. Dalloway is doing. The basic cause of her dis-satisfaction is the passing of the prime of youth in her life. She had the oldest sense of being herself. ".....invisible unseen, unknown, these being no more marrying no more having of children"⁵. She regrets this because of the desire for a son, because she has no son except a daughter, Elizabeth Mrs. Dalloway of *'The Voyage Out'* her predecessor has an aspiration for a son too. Besides this, she was dissatisfied over the gradual disappearance of the sexual life. "...It was all over for her. The sheet was stretched and the bed narrow"⁶. Though she has good social relationship but she finds herself very lonely in life because her daughter, now an adolescent with her dog and husband is busy in his political work. As a result of this, the thought of repentance come to her as a passing phase for not having married Peter Walsh who is her ardent lover. She feels that had she had married Peter Walsh it would have been greater than what it has been with Richard Dalloway. The news of a tortured soul's suicide intensifies her mental agitation. She hears this from William Bradshaw during her party and thinks it is nothing but the culmination of her own happiness or unhappiness in life.

On the other hand her husband is happier than Mrs. Dalloway and this is very interesting to note. His social status is improving everyday and his achievement seems to be bigger than before with the passage of time. While the curve of his happiness is ascending his wife's is declining. Because, besides, his social status and achievement he has not only a lively wife but a lively daughter too.

It is worthy to note that while Virginia Woolf wrote her important works, she herself was belonging to middle age of her life. When she was four and forty a year after the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway*, she wrote of a slight melancholia', which sometimes overpowered her and made her think that she is old and she is ugly. Her other few dissatisfactions also can be noted. As she wanted to devote herself fully to the writing career so she and her husband decided not to have children. For a woman to take a decision like this is quite unnatural. Quentin Bell in his biography of the novelist writes that whenever she sees her sister, Vanessa in a fruitful condition, she could never hide her jealousy. She has strikingly used the metaphor, throughout his diary, that of a child birth to satisfy her maternal instincts though she may not be conscious of it. Once of a time she writes, ".....pain as a child birth and then too slowly faded, and I lay presiding, like a most solicitous mother over the shattered spintered, fragment of my body"⁷. That Virginia Woolf imparts her own



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dissatisfaction of life to her heroines is a terrible truth. But in so doing she makes them really true.

Mrs. Ramsay is too oppressed by the sense of age. She is frustrated in her way of life though she is ever interested in the well being of others; "... When she wonders why she chose to fall in love with her husband whom she finds full of defects. The youthful glow of one of her guests, Minta's face upsets her and she gets conscious of her own fading beauty; Shabby and worn out, and not presumably (her cheeks were hollow, her hair was white)"⁸. When she goes into that 'no man's land'⁹. Where to follow her is not very easy, and when she feels herself beyond any mortal connection she is herself. To face the problems of life these reflections or temporary lapses keep her sane and strong.

Mrs. Wilcox of *Howard End*, by Forster has also a resemblance with her. Mrs. Wilcox also dies unexpectedly in the novel. She shares with Mrs. Ramsay the qualities of understanding, tolerance and consideration. We are throughout given the impression, after her death, that she is watching from heaven the affairs of Howard End, Mrs. Ramsay is described also as living in the memory of her husband, children and servant. Once upon a time the trip could not materialize when Mrs. Ramsay wanted to take her son to the lighthouse. In the same way Mrs. Wilcox too wanted to take Magarant, to Howards End but she could not do so. While writing, *To the Light House* Virginia Woolf quite likely had Howards End in her mind. Virginia Woolf started her writing career, a year before the publication of Forster's novel in 1910. Virginia Woolf's diary suggests that she had acquaintance with his literary achievements. And E.M. Forster was one of her good friend.

Then, in Woolf's fiction a few of the woman are much more individualistic than those considered so far. In her novel *'The Years'* Kitty Lasswade is only who lives her life according to her own ideals and she marries the man who lest maintain her personality. She dislikes artificiality and loves nature and naturalness. She doesn't like university dons, and rejects the love of Oxford-Scholar Edward Pargiler. She doesn't underestimate the value of human contacts, unlike Susan of *'The Waves'* in the latter. In her middle age Susan feels sorry for the narrow pattern of her life in which human relationships have no place. "...I gape, said Susan, 'like a young bird unsatisfied for something that has escaped me'¹⁰. She is successful as a wife, as a mother and she also maintain her form and contact with nature. Her mission of life in worldly sense is fulfilled. Nature is not a doorway to the spiritual world. However, nature is for her is not a doorway to the spiritual world, but Kitty finds a spiritual solace in nature. She gives her B'day party. It does not cause her any tension; on the other hand Mrs. Dalloway has tensed during hers. She comes back to her country and enjoys the bliss of nature on the open land. "...The land itself, singing to itself a chorus alone, she lay there listening she was happy.¹¹. Kitty approaches nature and human contacts in their right proportions. Both have their peculiar views on nature.



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Kitty finds old age quite pleasant. Her attitude to old age is different from that of the woman mentioned previously. Even in her old age she wants to fulfill her aspirations the present, the future that was what she wanted, to keep pace with the changing world. She realizes that at this age (old) she has become her true self. She said "...not to be young; How nice not to mind what people think; no one can live as one likes..."¹². When the aspirations and disappointments of the young days are over. Kitty is a serious attempt at a psychological portrait. Though she remains in the mere background with her latent strength like Mrs. Dalloway but Kitty has the ingredients of being a power character, but on account of the defects of the novel. Jo Robson is socially inferior to her and he is brother of one of Kitty's friends. She is fascinated by this Jo. Once when he was mending something in the garden, and producing the sound of a hammer, she goes to Robson. Jo reminds her that she had her first sex appearance with a rustic lad who had kissed her under the shadow of the haystack while she was in the age of fifteen. It is this sound of hammering that haunts Kitty in whole of her life. And this sound becomes the symbol of her free spirit. The feelings of fear and ambition haunt the unattractive heroine throughout her life. There are attractive dreams of the past that keep on recurring through certain symbolic ways.

In a novel, "*The Unseen and the Unknown Channels*" an Indian Novelist says the feeling of fear and ambition are symbolized in the movement of the cricket and the spider weaving its web"¹³ symbols are not only resort of human mind to give expression to itself but also are the artificial instruments in the hands of artist to express his thoughts. Consequently the symbols of the unconscious mind have been used abundantly by the modern novelists. Virginia's style is an attempt at attaining her distinct way here.

Virginia Woolf presents an exceptional grandeur in the personality of some of these women. Elen Ambrose, as she has something divine about her, she was greatly interested in the affairs of others. She sits with a peculiar way while embroidering, has, "the sublimity of a woman of the early world, spinning the thread of fate"¹⁴. We have already discussed the supernatural flavor of Mrs. Hilbery, and Mrs. Ramsay possessing something exceptional about her is also described. She tells the children that Charles Tansely is not an uninvited guest while scolding her children for criticizing. She looks like a queen 'rising from the mud a beggar's dirty foot...' "¹⁵. She is the epitome. She possessed all the qualities associated with a woman. Joseph L. Blotner in the essay, 'Mythic Patterns in *To the Lighthouse*', writes about Mrs. Ramsay "..... the female principle in life. Clothed to beauty on intuitive and fructifying force, she opposes the logical but arid"¹⁶. There is a mystic, mythic pattern at work here.

In the novels of Virginia Woolf these women continue to be tremendously real inspite of their symbolic significance. Mrs. Ambrose is conceited, non cooperative and jealous - jealous of Rachel's happiness in love with Terence. She is a perfect woman in reality. Mrs. Ramsay exits and existed in the ancient world and she represents it. Described by Angel Clare's father in Hardy's '*Tess of the D'urbervilles*', she is an exact image of the Biblical



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house wife "...for her price is far above rubies. She rises while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her house hold. She girdeth her loins with strength and strengthens her arms. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good, her candle goeth not by night. She looketh well to the ways of her house hold and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth he"¹⁷. The image is everlasting in readers' mind.

Virginia Woolf 's most of these characters invite intimacy and care much for personal relationships. Those who come into contact with them are elated. They begin to express their hopes and aspirations of life, they become valuable. The best examples for this are Mrs. Hilbery and Mrs. Ramsay. They make people like St. John. Hirst, Ralph and Charles Tansley say that they will not easily speak out. Peter Walsh, her friend is excited by her presence when Mrs. Dalloway casts a tremendous spell on him: "What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement? It is Clarissa; he said"¹⁸. 'Presentness' is a term which is given to this quality by Jean Guiquet. Specially in the personality of Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, she finds this quality of presentness; "a sort of power that renders them sensitive to the beauty of life and at the same time makes them mediums through whom other people are sensitized". It is a tribute to both the characters and their creator. More so, to the creator. This is the precious possession of the entire woman discussed in this category.

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