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SEPTIMUS AND HIS DOUBLE: PSYCHOLOGICAL CHAOS IN *MRS. DALLOWAY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF*

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf discarded the realistic fiction of Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy and expressed her concern to portray the inner turbulent world of her characters. It is recorded that Virginia Woolf (1977) was hospitalized because of her trauma and depression, “wearisome headache, jumping pulse, aching back, frets, fidgets lying awake” (Woolf 125). Woolf intended her novel “to give life and death and to criticize the social system; to show it at work, at its most intense” (Virginia Woolf *Diary* 2, 248). The novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is full of scenes of death, disability and psychic injury. The novel has been hailed as a classical novel of modernist trauma literature. Cathy Caruth characterizes trauma as a “wound of the mind” (Caruth 4) that defies

comprehension. Traumatic events themselves make known to consciousness through repetitious calls for a witness who can receive trauma narrative. Such re-externalization can restructure traumatic wounds repetitious calls as coherent narrative. Jonathan Judith Herman is of the view that Woolf created a narrative out of characters' pre-speech level of consciousness and preserved the fragmentation of consciousness" (Herman 3). The novel begins with the details of preparations of a dinner party of Mrs. Dalloway she is giving for her husband. Two unique things are observed in the early pages of the novel; the party symbol and the role of Big Ben giving time consciousness to Mrs. Dalloway. The parties of Mrs. Dalloway are a routine matter and symbolize her mechanical and artificial existence. Septimus Smith is portrayed as a victim of war neurosis, "the victim's faith in the assumptions he has held in the past about himself and the world" (DeMeester 650).

Key Words: Turbulent, Neurosis, Wearisome, Psychological, Chaos, Traumatic, Consciousness, Fragmentation.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf in her essay *Modern Fiction* (1925) contended that "the modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement upon the old" (Woolf 1). Woolf's essay is a critique of the works of contemporary writers. She urges modern writers in her seminal essay to "have the courage to say that what interests them is no longer this but that" (4). Woolf inspires the modern writers to dig out the inner psyche of the characters; the real interest lies in "the dark places of psychology" (Woolf 4). With the publication of her novel, Virginia Woolf merged as the greatest literary artist experimenting in the

technique of stream-of-consciousness. Jonathan Shay describes the fragmented nature of consciousness of the trauma victim thus: "Severe trauma explodes the cohesion of consciousness" (Shay 188)

In this research paper, the main focus is on the psychological neurosis of Septimus who is depicted as the double of Mrs. Dalloway in the novel. Judith Herman is of the view that Woolf created a narrative out of characters "pre-speech level of consciousness and preserved the fragmentation of consciousness that occurs in the aftermath of trauma" (Herman 3). The plot of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is set in London on a single day of June, 1923. The novel begins with the details of preparations of a dinner party of Mrs. Dalloway she is giving for her husband. Two unique things are observed in the early pages of the novel; the party symbol and the role of Big Ben giving time consciousness to Mrs. Dalloway. The parties of Mrs. Dalloway are a routine matter and symbolize her mechanical and artificial existence. Septimus Smith suffers from war trauma: "the victim's faith in the assumptions he has held in the past about himself and the world" (DeMeester 650). Mrs. Dalloway is busy in the party at the end of the novel and she hears the news of the suicide of Septimus who throws himself out of the window. This tragic episode shatters the mind and psyche of Mrs. Dalloway who thinks that she herself should commit suicide. Septimus becomes the double of Mrs. Dalloway who is under the pressure of psychological trauma and leading a desperate life. Her husband Mr. Richard is an impotent person and her friend Selly Seton and Peter Walsh are enjoying life but she is living with

void. Septimus Warren and Clarissa Dalloway are two displaced characters suffering from the psychological trauma. Both are the victims of the social and political systems and are seen struggling to find a peaceful space. The publication of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* invited mixed reactions from the reviewers and the critics of Virginia Woolf. Bernard Blackstone (1949) states that “Mrs. Dalloway is an experiment with time and point of view” (76). Ralph Freeman (1963) observes that “the novel’s subjective relation to its objective world, proposing that the substance of Mrs. Dalloway lies in the opposition of an external world of manners and internal symbolic world” (Freeman 216). Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith are the victims of war and both suffer psychological trauma and lead a hellish life full of agony, threat and chaos. Roger Poole observes that *Mrs. Dalloway* is the “finest war novel that World War 1 produced” (Poole 79). In her diary Virginia Woolf wrote that her novel Mrs. Dalloway is a “study of insanity and suicide” (*Diary*2; 207). Janet Pierre (1992) describes trauma as “a delayed response” (45) and Sigmund Freud (1992) states it to be “deferred action” (12). Freud further avers that a man is traumatized “precisely to be possessed by an image or an event” (5). Freud further avers that a man is traumatized “precisely to be possessed by an image or an event” (5). The images of haunting memories of the past shatter consciousness of the characters of Virginia Woolf.

Judith Herman (1992) states that “traumatic events destroy the victim’s fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world; the positive value of self, and the meaningful order of creation” (Herman 5). Virginia Woolf

depicts the devastating effect of the global turmoil. Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus suffer from trauma because it is very difficult for them to forge an identity and to build any trustworthy relationship. Trauma is considered as a world from disaster.

Tammy Clewell in his book *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism* (2009) observes that Woolf is exploring “ongoing mourning” (10). James Burger (1997) states that “a traumatic analysis is both constructivist and empirical in weighing upon traumatic events” (Burger 572). Septimus Smith had witnessed the tragic killing of his friend Evan.

Thus “Smith Warren Smith aged about thirty, pale-faced, beak-nosed, wearing brown shoes and a shabby overcoat, with hazed eyes which had that look of apprehension in them which makes strangers apprehensive too” (21). Bradshaw tells Septimus to think of himself “as little as possible”. He senses that “human nature s on him” (98). Septimus is really uncomfortable around Bradshaw. Septimus feels uncomfortable in the presence of Bradshaw. Rezia feels deserted as the doctors fail to treat him well. Freud observes that psychic disorder is caused by traumatic memory. Woolf reports: “He had grown stranger and stranger. He said people were talking behind the bedroom walls...He saw things too-he had seen an old woman’s head in the middle of a fern...All the real and yellow are out on the grass” (50). Woolf has depicted the inner turbulent world of Septimus:

He looked at people outside; happy they seemed...But he could not taste, he could feel. In the teashop among the tables and the chattering waiters the

appalling fear came over him; he could not feel. He could reason, he could read. (88).

Woolf has dramatized the neurotic condition of Septimus in the novel. Septimus was already damaged psychological state. In fact Bradshaw is responsible for his tragedy. When he finds Bradshaw in his room his mind disintegrates. He realizes the consequences of his commitment to mental asylum.

Septimus cannot see reality as his vision is damaged because of inner turmoil. He cries that: “there was a man outside. Evans presumably; and the roses which Rezia said were half dead, had been picked him in the field of Greece” (69). Septimus thinks of the colour of the rose and is lost in the world of paranoia and schizophrenia. “The trees waved, brandished” (52). Septimus’s mind is haunted by the apparition of Evan: “He sang. Evans answered from behind the tree. The dead leaves were in Thessaly, Evans sang among the orchids. There they waited till the war over, and now the dead, now Evans himself” (52). Clarissa and Septimus suffer fragmentation of consciousness as their thoughts shift from past to the present. No character has the power to order the series of actions; no character in *Mrs. Dalloway* tries to order his the thoughts into a coherent whole. The survivor cannot think of the traumatic event in chronological terms as “This was my life before....This is what happened....This is what I became” (Shay 191). Clarissa is an epitome of repression and denial and like Septimus she is also experiencing neurosis.

Septimus looks upon the car “with fear as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames” (15).

Clarissa feels lonely and ignored and has to live under the umbrella of her husband Richard Dalloway like a puppet. Richard is a political leader and Clarissa wastes her entire life to promote the political career of Richard. Clarissa longs to throw away the chains of slavery: self-rejects this slavery and domination of her husband as a strong rebellious spirit is observed beneath her actions. Herman Lee observes that “Traumatized persons sustain a damage to the basic structure of the very self; they lose trust in themselves, in other people, as well as in the surrounding world and their assumptions of love, kindness, morality and values; their identity is disrupted” (Herman 26). Clarissa represents free individuality repressed by Richard. Dominated by Richard, she is pathetically oppressive.

Septimus suffers from severe shell- shock and war has changed him as he “doesn’t feel the once familiar spaces of London that he had known before” (88). Post-stress disorder makes Septimus feel out of place and he is also shocked to find the incompetency of the doctors such as Holmes and Bradshaw in curing his trauma and saving his life. Freud talks of uncanny spaces and Septimus experiences the conflict between the interior and exterior spaces. In desperation Warren Smith thinks “It must be the fault of the world then; that he could not feel” (88). He is sick of the treatment of Dr. Holmes and expresses his anger thus; “You brute! You brute!” (69). Septimus feels “numb and has developed a disillusioned view of humanity and the world. He

has become a vicious and desperate place in which human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment” (Woolf 98).

Septimus’s suicide was Clarissa’s breaking off with the world of a party politics. Septimus is a tragic symbol of the war wounded soldiers who witnesses death and carnage in the World War 1. The trauma inflicted upon the soldiers. The soldiers experienced mental breakdown and created “a crisis of masculinity and a trial of the Victorian masculine ideal” (Showalter 171). Septimus is shattered by the tragic scenes of the war. The fractured state of Septimus declares that it “was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, when her husband threatens to commit suicide” (23). Even the doctors of Septimus say that his behavior would give Rezia an “odd idea of England husbands indicating that he should conform to the role of masculinity that society has established for him and that the option to do so is completely under his control” (92). Septimus realizes that Holmes and Dr. Breadshaw “mixed the vision and the sideboard; saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted” (Woolf 148). Septimus commits suicide at the end of the novel as he says he has committed an “appalling crime and had been condemned to death by human nature” (96). He commits suicide, “there remained only the window...it was their idea of tragedy, not his. (Woolf 149). He throws himself out of the window to his death and gets freedom from the nightmarish hallucinations and trauma. Through Septimus, Woolf holds the ruling class accountable for “over a bloody debate in the name of an England that was

passing away” Larsen 194). Septimus’s psychological pain is depicted thus: “He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did they want” (226). Septimus illustrates the disillusionment and confusion resulting from post-war trauma. Septimus has found the world different when he came from the war. After the war, Septimus interpreted and learned during his time as a soldier. Septimus expresses his faith in God and spiritualism thus: “Men must not cut trees. There is a God. Change the World. No one kills from hatred. Make it known” (Woolf 35). The interesting thing about Septimus is his faith in communication because he feels that communication connect people. He observes thus: “Communication is health: communication is happiness” (141). Septimus, Clarissa is the real double of Septimus who expresses her trauma and inevitability of death: “to study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature” (Herman 7). Mrs. Dalloway blames Bradshaw for having the gall to talk of suicide of Septimus and thus spoiling the mood of the party. She thinks of suicide of Septimus, she confesses that “death was his attempt to communicate in an effort to deny the finality of his act” (Woolf 184).

To conclude, Septimus is presented as the double of Mrs. Dalloway who also has the wish to end her life. Virginia Woolf reveals new insights of an examination of trauma. Peter reacts thus “like a Queen whose guards have fallen asleep and left her unprotected” (42). Peter thinks: “I know what I’m up against...Clarissa and Dalloway and all the rest of them” (46). Being

disappointed, he leaves Clarissa's home. He meets soldiers "with faces an expression like letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England" (51). Peter watches them pass feeling that "life had been laid under a pavement of monuments and wreaths and drugged into a stiff yet staring corpse by discipline" (51). During five years of his absence. Woolf has explored the shell shock trauma from the modern perspectives. The novel begins with the details of preparations of a dinner party of Mrs. Dalloway she is giving for her husband. Two unique things are observed in the early pages of the novel; the party symbol and the role of Big Ben giving time consciousness to Mrs. Dalloway. The parties of Mrs. Dalloway are a routine matter and symbolize her mechanical and artificial existence. According to Bogacz: "There was wide spread acceptance among English psychologists that insanity was a disorder of the mind resulting from a structural or functional lesion of the organs of the mind, that's the brain" (Bogacz 230).

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