

## Re – reading of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* and Charlotte Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* through Trauma Theory

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### Abstract

The present paper aims at to study the work of Woolf and Gilman in the light of trauma theory. It mainly focuses on the interpretation of the characters i.e. Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus Smith from *Mrs Dalloway* and an unnamed narrator from *the Yellow Wallpaper*. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a cradle of suffering, pain, dissolution, fear and depression due to the two World Wars. During that age there were many theories comes into existence such as feminism, nihilism, psychoanalysis, trauma theory, existentialism, etc. The situation after post-wars was very different, people tried to lead a normal, smooth and simple life but some people couldn't come out from the memories of wars and some feel loneliness in the crowd. As a result they felt severe depression which is the beginning of traumatic experience; consequently this theme became the part of literary genres. Though Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins Gilman were the prominent leading figures of feminine writings but one can find some aspects of traumatic experience in their writings. Thus the aim of the present paper is to evaluate the situation of the select characters through trauma theory.

**Key-words:** Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Gilman, Trauma Theory, World Wars, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus Smith, Unnamed narrator.

### Introduction:

Literature finds its material from the society and the world around it. The consequences of wars on society in general and people in particular were presented by many writers during

20<sup>th</sup> century. Woolf and Gilman were not the exemption. They represented the society and their issues in an artistic way. Woolf is ideally situated to appreciate and experiment with the art of writing. Her works like *The Voyage Out* is the experiment with several literary tools, including compelling and unusual narrative perspectives, dream-states and free association prose while her novel, *To the Lighthouse* shows her early childhood memories. But her fourth novel, in 1925, *Mrs Dalloway* produced interior monologues and raised issues of feminism, mental illness and homosexuality in post-World War I in England. In the same way, Charlotte Gilman was also a writer and a social activist during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Gilman experienced a severe depression and underwent a series of unusual treatments for it. This experience inspired her to write her best-known story *The Yellow Wallpaper* which was published in 1892. Same way, Gilman was also a successful lecturer and intellectual, her greatest works of nonfiction is *Women and Economics* which represents the societal problems of women and their rights. Gilman also established a magazine, *The Forerunner* that allowed her to express her ideas on women's issues and on social reform. In her magazine she gave reasons for writing the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. She said, 'Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*'. For the first time, the literary potential of trauma is examined in Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction*, bringing trauma theory and text together. It focuses on the ways in which contemporary novelists explore the theme of trauma and incorporate into their writings. Thus the endeavour of the present paper is to examine the works of Woolf and Gilman through the trauma theory.

To understand the traumatic experience of select characters, first of all it is necessary to understand the theory. Trauma is a medical term which comes in literature through Sigmund Freud's history of the Jews entitled *Moses and Monotheism* in which he presents the hallucinations or repetitive actions of Jews people. It also refers to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society. The popular theory employed today depends upon the abreactive model of trauma, which is used to assert the position that traumatic experience produces a "temporal gap" and dissolution of the self. Hurt Kali Tal, the pioneer of trauma studies believes that the accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of normal conception. This Freudian concept of trauma and memory emphasizes the necessity to recreate or abreact through narrative recall of the experience. Yet, the same time this model claims that the remembrance of trauma is always an approximate account of the past, since

traumatic experience precludes knowledge and representation. Trauma theory is a body of 20<sup>th</sup> century psychological research into the effects upon people of various traumatic events such as assaults, rape, war, famine, incarceration, etc., leading to the official recognition in the 1980s of Post-Traumatic Disorder. (Chris; 340) Since 1990s it has been taken up and developed as an interdisciplinary field of study involving literature, psychology, history and philosophy with a concentration upon questions of memory, forgetting and narrative. Hence it is interesting to interpret Woolf and Gilman's work through it.

*Mrs Dalloway: Re – reading through Trauma theory*

Writer herself writes about the novel that it 'attempts to present "the world seen by the sane and the insane" side by side'. For Woolf, the concept of madness is not intimately concerned with the loss of communication with the world outside but it is the inertia of one's mind and the resultant loneliness and desperation. This is most clearly evident in the character of Septimus Warren Smith, a soldier, who feels like an 'Outcast who gazed back at the inhabited regions, who lay like a drowned sailor, on the shore of the world'. (MD; 101) The failure of emotional energy and feelings in the modern times and circumstances, the fact that one gets crushed and numb under the pressures of modern existence and loses communication with the outside world is a most terrifying tragedy related to world. Septimus Warren, the shell shocked victim of First World War, describes these pressures related to disorder, degradation, futility, sordidity and corruption of the modern life in the following words: "the world has raised its whip; where will it descend?" (MD; 70) This emotional paralysis is the earliest symptom of mental breakdown in Septimus. When his officer Evans gets killed in the war just before the Armistice in Italy, Septimus far from showing any emotion at the end of such a valuable relationship, congratulates himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably . Four years of war had blunted his feelings and emotions and made him brutal. The war for a while had provided him with the false identity of being a brave survivor and a decorated hero:

The war had taught him. It was sublime. He has gone through the whole show, friendship, European war death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive.(MD; 91)

It is only later when Evans memory begins to haunts him and he undergoes the panic situation which he could not tolerate and overpowered by the feelings of shame and disgust.

His sense of guilt and crime is further extended when he gets married to an Italian girl- Lucrezia without really loving her. In the words of Lyndall Gordon: 'He sees no artificial distinction between the organized aggression that destroyed the man he most revered (Evans) and the random callousness of any Tom or Bertie in civilian life, their starched shirt fronts 'oozing thick drops of vice' (199). Woolf herself believes that the social construct of normal and the abnormal is intimately related to one's capacity to be protected and preserved the privacy of one's soul. Septimus could clearly feel this assault on his individuality in the form of Dr. Holmes and Dr. Bradshaw. He confesses this onslaught in the following word:

Human nature in short was on him- the repulsive  
brute with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on  
him..... once you stumble, Septimus wrote on the back  
of a postcard, human nature is on you. Holmes is on you. (MD; 96)

The novel has also been appreciated as a pioneer in the genre of the female asylum trauma narrative in the sense that it depicts male society's 'fantastic' power to 'silent woman' in a most inhuman manner through the surrender of her autonomy and privacy in the hands of psychiatrists (Giovanna Pompele; 233). Septimus being Clarissa's 'double' and 'alter ego' reaffirms Virginia's vehement indictment of the horrors of women's psychiatric incarceration, which she herself had experienced on more than one occasions. Virginia Woolf herself, in one of her introductions to *Mrs. Dalloway* states that, "originally it was Clarissa Dalloway who was to 'kill herself'." The close bonding between the two is also reflected in their manifestations the 'post-traumatic symptoms' and in their antagonistic attitude to the demands of the existing state of affairs. In the words of Nancy Toppin Bazin, 'each of them represent one of the psychic moods of bipolar disorder which is generalized in the sense that each shares to some extent the vision of the other, Clarissa is predominantly feminine and maniac whereas Septimus is predominantly masculine and depressive' (1973: 103). Septimus and Clarissa are both fiercely against any kind of authority or domination and are obsessed in their own ways with a compulsive need for personal autonomy. In the words of Suzette Henke:

through his suicide , Septimus communicates with  
Clarissa, who understands his gestures of defiance  
against an authoritarian society that would force his  
soul. (1981: 139)

Woolf herself believed that the symptoms of madness are to be found in responses too common to strike one as they ought: emotional inertia, loathing of one's kind, psychological as well as physical brutality (202). In the opinion of her sister- Varnessa, Virginia was successful in providing the most extraordinary sense of bigness of point of view as far as understanding the concept of rationality and madness is concerned (203). Through this novel in general and through Septimus Smith in particular, Virginia Woolf is not only able to explore the nature of insanity or madness but also succeeds in liberating the construct of insanity from its marginal position.

*The Yellow Wallpaper: Re – reading through trauma theory*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* represents her own life through unnamed character. Gilman herself wrote in her magazine that, "It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked". *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a symbolic tale of a woman's struggle to break free her mental prison. Gilman shows the reader how quickly insanity takes hold when a person is taken out of context and completely isolated from the rest of the world. The narrator is a depressed woman, who cannot handle being alone and retreats into her own delusions as opposed to accepting her reality. The narrator's echo of suffering shows in her writing, where she cried for rationality but no one eavesdrop her voice and skirts her. In her journal, the narrator writes:

John does not know how much I really suffer,  
he knows there is no reason to suffer and that  
satisfies him. (TYW; 165)

When narrator first time show the wallpaper it makes her depressed , it shows in her words when she describes, "this paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had" (TYW; 159) but her husband refused to change it. Steadily and gradually she studies the incomprehensible pattern in the wallpaper determine to make sense of it. She begins to discern a second pattern – that of a woman creeping furtively around behind the first pattern, which acts as a prison for her. Eventually the narrator becomes a creeping woman. The first indication is shown when she says, "I always lock the door when I creep by daylight" (TYW; 168). Later the narrator and the creeping woman works together to pull off the wallpaper. The narrator writes: "(T)here are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast" (TYW; 168).

Subsequently the narrator is one of many and at one point the narrator observes the creeping women from her window and asks,

I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did. (p.170)

At the beginning narrator's husband, John refused to remove the wallpaper and in the end the narrator used it as her escape. This short story commands attention not only for the narrowing journey into madness it portrays but also for its realism. It is an autobiographical short story where writer present herself through the unnamed character. She also had faced the same situation where her doctor (Mitchell) prescribed her the same treatment which was total bed rest and isolating the patient from family and familiar surroundings. In story, Gilman demonstrates the horror that such a treatment could induce in its subject. Correspondingly through Septimus, Woolf also expresses her own unexpressed desires, dreams, mental breakdown, and the time when she was unable to feel anything. In proportion to this Roger Poole writes:

In this way, and in giving Septimus Smith just precisely this problem, Virginia has created symbol which exactly corresponds to the unspoken and incommunicable elements of her own problem in 1912-13. then shocked and isolated, she could not feel, and she could not express her feelings, she was treated in an entirely external and behavioural way which took no account of her inner dilemma. (217)

In short, both the writers Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Gilman represent the sane and insane society side by side with the help of their own experiences through different characters and different genres. Both were mentally ill and to overcome those experiences they outburst through these works. To sum up the paper in the words of Virginia Woolf: "Every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works". (Quotation)

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