

## VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MODERN FICTION*: AN ASSESSMENT

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### Abstract

*Modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement upon the old. The traditional types of arts are devoid of life or spirit, truth or reality. The essence of the art, i.e. the reality of life is missing in the traditional method of writing. Here in this type of writings, the writer seems constrained, not by his own free will, but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant. The tyrant is none other than the restriction or the catalogue of types such as plot, comedy, tragedy, treatment of love etc. In dressing up these entire criterions what we receive is the death of life or spirit or spontaneity or flow of conscience behest of terminology or doggerel methods. Literature, according to T.S. Eliot, is like everything else, a process which makes the present. It does not just improve, it always keep changing. Its material is not the same. Mrs. Woolf agrees with Eliot on this point when she says, "We do not come to write better, we only keep on moving now a little in this direction, now in that but with a circular motion." As a critic, she naturally upholds her right to judge the past with debt as well as doubt. She states that a writer should write what inspires them and not follow any special method. She believed that writers are constrained by the publishing business, by what society believes literature should look like and what society has dictated how literature should be written. Woolf believes that it is a writer's job to write the complexities in life, the unknowns, not the unimportant things. Woolf wanted writers to focus on the awkwardness of life and craved originality in their work. Her overall hope was to inspire modern fiction writers to write what interested them, whatever cause and effect it may have, and wherever it may lead to. Woolf makes it clear that the objective of the writer in his or her creation is to look within and life as a whole.*

**Key words:** *Traditional art, restrictions, modern writing, exercise of free will, literary process.*

### Introduction:

*Modern Fiction*, an essay by Virginia Woolf, was written in 1919 but published in 1921 with a series of short stories called *Monday or Tuesday*. The essay is a criticism of writers and literature from the previous generation. It is one of the most effective essays in criticism which makes a clear break of modern fiction from the Victorian novel. In it, Mrs. Woolf traces the progress of the novel from its beginning in the eighteenth century. She traces it on the basis of the philosophy of evaluation in general. According to her, the earlier novelists really did what they actually could within their limited means. In making any survey, even the freest and loosest, of modern fiction, it is difficult to take it for granted that modern practice of the art is

somehow an improvement upon the old. With their simple tools and primitive materials, it might be said that 'Fielding did well and Jane Austen even better, but compare their opportunities with ours, their master-pieces certainly have a strange air of simplicity.'

In the essay Virginia Woolf makes a fair attempt to discuss briefly the main trends in the modern fiction writing. She begins her essay by mentioning the traditionalist like H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and Galsworthy. While they propound new ideas and open out new vistas to the human mind, still they follow the Victorian tradition as far as the technique of the novel is concerned. They believed that a great force on the individual was environment. However, they differed from one another in subject matter. In Arnold and Galsworthy the socialist point of view dominated and Wells, a brilliant writer of scientific romances. Mrs. Woolf referred to these three writers as 'materialist'. While defining the term, Woolf states that these writers as well as their writing are stuffed with unimportant things; they spend immense skill and dexterity in making the trivial and transitory a boost of truth of life. As life escapes, the worth of the literary piece is minimal. Mrs. Woolf while criticising the three makes a pivotal point of criticism on the traditional method of fiction writing of Fielding types. While Woolf criticizes these three authors, she praises several other authors including Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Henry Hudson, Anton Chekhov, James Joyce and host of others for their innovation. This group of writers she names spiritualists. These writers come closer to life and preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them. And in doing so they must discard most of conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist.

Extending the pinnacle of criticism, Woolf further elaborates her point that the traditional types of fictions are devoid of life or spirit, truth or reality. The essence of the novel, i.e. the reality of life is missing in the traditional method of novel writing which is superficial characterization, artificial framework. Here in this types 'writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant'. The tyrant is none other than the restriction or the catalogue of types such as plot, comedy, tragedy, treatment of love etc. In dressing up these entire criterions what we receive is the death of life or spirit or spontaneity or flow of conscience behest of terminology or doggerel methods.

The analogy between literature and the process, to choose an example, of making motor cars scarcely holds any good beyond the first glance. It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries we have learnt anything about making literature. We do not come to write better. All that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty pinnacle. It need scarcely be said that we make no claim to stand, even momentarily, upon that vantage ground. On the flat, in the crowd, half blind with dust, we look back with envy to those happier worriers, whose battle is won and whose achievements wear so serene an air of accomplishment that we can scarcely refrain from whispering that the fight was not so fierce for them as for us.

Literature, according to T.S. Eliot, is like everything else, a process which makes the present. It does not just improve, it always keep changing. Its material is not the same. Mrs. Woolf agrees with Eliot on this point when she says, "We do not come to write better, we only keep on moving now a little in this direction, now in that but with a circular motion." She further says that it is the historians of literature to judge whether the modern novel has really

progressed from its early babblings. It is for them to say if we are now beginning or ending or standing in the middle of a great period of prose fiction, for down in the plain little is visible. We only know that certain gratitude and hostilities inspire us; that certain paths seem to lead to fertile land, others to the dust and the desert; and of this perhaps it may be worthwhile to attempt some account. As a critic, she naturally upholds her right to judge the past with debt as well as doubt.

In *Modern Fiction* Woolf elucidates upon what she understands modern fiction to be. She states that a writer should write what inspires them and not follow any special method. She believed that writers are constrained by the publishing business, by what society believes literature should look like and what society has dictated how literature should be written. Woolf believes it is a writer's job to write the complexities in life, the unknowns, not the unimportant things. Woolf wanted writers to focus on the awkwardness of life and craved originality in their work. Her overall hope was to inspire modern fiction writers to write what interested them, whatever cause and effect it may have, and wherever it may lead to. As a typical modern novelist and critic Woolf advises the modern novelists to look within and see what life is like, "Mind receives a crowd of impressions – trivial, fantastic or engraved with the sharpness of steel". She does not like "life-like novels, nor in the tyrant plot, nor in the conventional comedy or love-interest". She adds, "Look within and life, it seems, is far being 'like this'. Life is not a series of gig lamps, symmetrically arranged. Life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of the consciousness to the end." Woolf makes it clear that the objective of the writer in his or her creation is to look within and life as a whole. The traditionalism and materialism do not capture at that moment. Thus to trust upon life, a writer is free and he could write what he chose.

Many scholars have attempted to analyse Woolf as a critic. As a critic, she does not take an analytical point of view and it is believed to be due to the influences of impressionism at the time that she was able to do so. Her writing and criticism was often done by intuition and feelings rather than by a scientific, analytical or systematic method. Virginia Woolf says of criticism:

*Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worthwhile. It is a confession of vagueness to have to make use of such a figure as this, but we scarcely better the matter by speaking, as critics are prone to do, of reality. Admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels, let us hazard the opinion that for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide (Modern Fiction).*

She criticises H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy for writing about unimportant things and called them materialists. According to her, they put life into their novels. They are mainly concerned with the body, not the soul of the novel. This is particularly because they are all materialists and are concerned with fixities not with movement. They have excited so many hopes and disappointed them so persistently that our gratitude largely takes the form of

thanking them for having shown us what they might have done but have not done; what we certainly could not do, but as certainly, perhaps, do not wish to do. No single phrase will sum up the charge or grievance which we have to bring against a mass of work so large in its volume and embodying so many qualities, both admirable and the reverse. For Woolf Mr. Bennett is, perhaps, the worst culprit of the three, in as much as he is by far the best craftsman. He can make a book so well constructed in its craftsmanship that is difficult even for the expecting critics to see through which chink or crevice decay can creep in. There is not as much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. His characters live abundantly, even unexpectedly, but it remains to ask how do they live, and what do they live for? Being a kind of post-modernist, Woolf would like the writer to leave the room in his own. According to her, there is nothing in a well-constructed novel worth preserving for the prosperity. She further suggests that it would be better for literature to turn its back on them, so that it can move forward for better or worse.

Woolf speaks of criticism as being vague rather than concrete. In her criticism within *Modern Fiction* of H.G. Wells, for instance, she is vague in what is wrong with writings but focuses more on the abstract ideals of his fiction rather than his work. She added that it can scarcely be said of Mr. Wells that he is a materialist in the sense that he takes too much delight in the solidity of his fabric. His mind is too generous in its sympathies to allow him to spend much time in making things shipshape and substantial. He is a materialist from sheer goodness of heart, taking upon his shoulders the work that ought to have been discharged by Government officials, and in the plethora of his ideas and facts scarcely having leisure to realise, or forgetting to think important, the crudity and coarseness of his human beings. Mrs. Woolf's body of essays offer criticism on a variety and diverse collection of literature in her unsystematic method.

Woolf's analysis of Russian versus British literature:

In *Modern Fiction*, Woolf takes the time to analyse Anton Chekhov's *Gusev* and in general, how Russians write. Woolf spent time polishing translated Russian texts for British audience with S.S. Kotelianskii which gave her perspectives that she used to analyze the differences between British literature and Russian literature. In regards to Russian writers Mrs. Woolf says:

*"In every great Russian writer we seem to discern the features of a saint, if sympathy for the sufferings for others, love towards them, endeavour to reach some goal worthy of the more exacting demands of the spirit constitute saintliness.....The conclusions of the Russian mind, thus comprehensive and compassionate, are inevitably, perhaps, of the utmost sadness. More accurately indeed we might speak of the inconclusiveness of the Russian mind. It is the sense that there is no answer, that if honestly examined life presents question after question which must be left to sound on and on after the story is over in hopeless interrogation that fills us with a deep, and finally it may be with a resentful, despair."*

To Mrs. Woolf, Russian writers see something entirely different in life than the British. In comparison to Russian writers and authors, Mrs. Woolf says of British literature:

*It is the saint in them (Russian writers) which confounds us with a feeling of our own irreligious triviality, and turns so many of our famous novels to tinsel and trickery....They are right perhaps; unquestionably they see further than we do and without our gross impediments of vision.....The voice of protest is the voice of another and an ancient civilization which seems to have bred in us the instinct to enjoy and fight rather to suffer and understand. English fiction from Sterne to Meredith bears witness to our natural delight in humour and comedy, in the beauty of earth, in the activities of the intellect, and in the splendour of the body (Modern Fiction).*

Due to Woolf's work in polishing translations, she was able to see the differences between Russian and British authors. Yet she also knew that 'from the comparison of two fictions so immeasurably far apart are futile save indeed as they flood us with a view of infinite possibilities of the art'. Mrs. Woolf's main purpose of comparing the two culturally different writers was to show the possibilities that modern fiction would be able to take in the future. Woolf does not suggest a specific way to write instead she wants writers to simply write what interests them in any way that they choose to write. Woolf wanted writers to express themselves in such a way that it showed life as it should be seen not as series of connected events. She sets out to inspire writers of modern fiction by calling for originality, criticizing those who focused on the unimportant things, and comparing the differences of cultural authors, all for the sake of fiction and literature.

Life, for Mrs. Woolf, is not fixed, but a changing process. It is a flux, shower of atoms of 'luminous halo'. The human consciousness is a shelter of sensation and impression. It is the duty of the novelist to convey these sensation and impressions. There should be no limitations or conventions. As a pioneer theorist of the 'Stream of Consciousness' she opined that it is a task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit of life. Mrs. Woolf observes, "Nothing, no method, no experiment, even of the wildest, is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence. The proper stuff of fiction does not exist, everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon."

Mrs Woolf makes it clear that the objective of the writer in his or her creation is to look within and life as a whole. The traditionalism or materialism do not capture that moment, the reception of the mind of myriad impression – trivial, fantastic, and evanescent or engraved. Therefore, to trust upon life, a writer is free and he could write what he chose. Hence to jot down what he feels should not be conventionally in comedy, tragedy or love interests in accepted styles. Here is a withdrawal from external phenomena into the flickering half shades of the author's private world. The reality lies not in the outer actions, but in the inner working of the human mind, in the inner perceptions.

Further, analysing the inflow of life, Mrs. Woolf defines life not as a series of tales symmetrically arranged. She says that it is a 'luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelop surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end'. The purpose of the writer should be the delineation of deeper and deeper into the human consciousness. In this respect, she mentions the innovators like James Joyce and Joseph Conrad. Citing an example from *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, she points out that here is in the story apparent disconnection and incoherence as a result of recording the 'atoms of life' in the stream



of conscience. Though ineffable style, fragmented, hazardous, and unpleasant, here is undeniably important spirit or life. Woolf comments, “In contrast with those whom we have called materialists, Mr. Joyce is spiritual”. The externals of personality the habits, manners, physical appearance etc. are altogether discarded as it seems impossible to give a psychologically true account of character by such means. Joyce in his novel loses himself into the complexities and subtleties of inner life.

The new novel on consciousness, as Mrs. Woolf clarifies, is purely psychological. Under the influence of new psychological theories, life is not regarded as a mere tales, but a series of moments. In fact, the psychological theory of the functioning mind is a stream of consciousness. The technique or method by which it is possible to capture them is truly the new type. Here is Joyce and the types, who are to explore the dark places of psychology ignored till date. Mrs. Woolf here observes a key point from Russian literature where, particularly Chekhov is worth mentioning of exploring the world of mind as well as the world of heart. Modern English fiction is influenced by Russian literature – its spiritualism, saintliness, inquisitiveness.

#### Conclusion:

The novels of Virginia Woolf have well-knit plot, perfect structure and coherence, unlike most of modern psychological novelists belonging to the ‘stream of consciousness’ school. She strongly and significantly points out that the modern novel can grow only if a novelist is free from conventions to write from his or her own vision of life and keeps in the view the changing concept of life as revealed by modern psychology and such other scientific discoveries about the working of human mind or consciousness. Mrs. Woolf’s *Modern Fiction* focuses on how writers should write or what she hopes for them to write. She does not suggest a specific way to write. Instead she wants writers to simply write what interests them in any way that they choose to write. She suggests, “Any method is right, every method is right that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers, that brings us closer to the novelists’ intention if we are readers”. She wanted writers to express themselves in such a way that it showed life. She set out to inspire writers of modern fiction by calling for originally, criticising those who focused on the unimportant things and comparing the differences of cultural authors, all for the sake of fiction and literature. The essay also acts as a guide for writers of modern fiction to write what they feel, not what society or publishers want them to write. Mrs. Woolf in *Modern Fiction* pleads not to be narrow-minded and conventional. She says that there are ample possibilities of the art and here is no limit to the horizon. Here no method, no experiment, no extraordinary is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence should be discarded. The proper stuff of fiction does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought if they are saturated by spirit or life in it.

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