

Diary-Writings: Expressing the ‘Female Repression’ with special reference to Virginia Woolf’s diary narratives

Priyanka Panwar

Research Scholar

Department of MIL&LS

University of Delhi

ABSTRACT

Judith Butler in her book ‘Gender Trouble’, emphasizes upon the **performative** aspects of gender and delineates how **gender** is ‘constructed’. She describes how gender is not about ‘being’ but ‘doing’. Turning the pages of history, one observes how women were associated with certain functions in a society and creativity was seen as an absent feature in them. When we talk about the norms concerning gender, the issues of ‘desire’ instantly springs up, which in the case of ‘feminine’ norms, remains ‘repressed’ and this issue is fairly addressed by Butler in her critical theories where she talks about the idea of ‘**repressive hypothesis**’. The laws and the norms which are meant to repress feminine expression simultaneously invites and invents the female desire of expression. The presence of discourses by women writers substantiates the observation that the repressive gender norms for women can have a productive function as well. Going back to the earliest kinds of literatures produced by women, ‘Diary’ as a form served as an essential function of being an agent of catharsis for them. It served as a tool of unleashing their ‘repressed desires’ by being a potent medium of expression. The Diary as a form can be seen as a

literal and metaphorical fence between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ which is synonymous with the position of these women who dare to transcend their ‘gendered spaces’ by attempting to express through literature which was deemed as a ‘masculine’ activity. These women, thus become ‘plural’ or ‘androgynous’, occupying a middle ground between a normative ‘male’ and a ‘female’, very much like the medium they choose to express themselves.

Looking at the diverse ways of diary-writing from ‘Fanny Burney’, ‘Mary Shelley’ to ‘Virginia Woolf’ and ‘Elizabeth Browning’ to ‘Katherine Mansfield’, one encounters interesting perspectives on the idea of ‘gender’ in a particular society. **Diary-novel** as an interesting and experimental literary form can also be viewed differently in works like Helen Fielding’s ‘Bridget Jones’, Doris Lesing’s ‘The Golden Notebook’, where the genre itself becomes a voice to sensitively express the feminine concerns of the society. It would be interesting to look at the diary as a literary form which seeks to ‘express’ the repressed desires by bringing out their experiences and emotions in a way where the dichotomies of the ‘personal’ and the ‘public’ overlap and hence, gives way to ‘hybrid’, multi-vocal and plural **identities**. The paper thus, attempts to chart the multi-layered realities of the ‘gendered’ space within the purview of ‘literature’ and the related aspects.

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Diary writings, termed as ‘that profoundly female and feminist genre’ by Adrienne Rich(Cynthia,(I)6) occupy the unnamable space, between the private and the public spheres, endowing women with the agency to resist and express, which they are otherwise not allowed in the real world. Virginia Woolf says this in ‘The Second Common Reader’, “Diary is a female aesthetic manifesting an emotional texture, a

structural expression of mutuality.”(Cynthia(I),7) Lying on the juncture of the private and the public, it is a form which captures the emotional landscape of an individual within the ambit of language. Occupying the space between the conscious and the unconscious, the spoken and the unspoken, the literary and the banal, the real and the fictional, a diary is “the gray area between the close of our day and the beginning of our dreams.” (Cynthia(I),9) Since, it is a genre which cannot be straitjacketed or brought down to one category, it ventures out of the ‘normative’ literary male tradition of genres which rely on the aesthetics of meaning-making and structural patterns.

Virginia Woolf records her perception about how her diary should be like in the following words,-“What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through.” (Cynthia,7) Flipping through the pages of her diaries, one notices a sense of progression in her persona as a literary artist who ventures from the ‘visible’ spaces of the society into the deep, unknown recesses of her mind.

Diaries were a source of ‘authentic representation of women’s lives in the times where they were being projected through the male perception. The act of diary writing, by endowing the self with the dual responsibility of being a writer as well as a reader, becomes a powerful act of self assertion and self validation. Diaries might not entail the gospel truth of one’s life but it definitely had a therapeutic effect on women by being able to look at themselves as individuals with their own self-worth.

Virginia Woolf developed the habit of keeping a diary at a considerably young age, i.e. since she was a teenager and continued the habit till the end of her life. Her inclination towards this form could be reasoned out in several ways. First, the form served as a 'healing agent', a medium to unleash her most bitter experiences as well as a substantial pastime. One of the claims made by her husband, Leonard Woolf (who compiled and got her diaries published), in the preface to his editions of 'A Writer's Diary' is that she used her diary as a form of rough draft before sinking deep into the writings she composed for the world. Woolf herself confesses to the idea of having improved her writing abilities due to constant practicing of a diary. The third reason, is a methodology she employs to build up the character sketches of people, a technique she constantly felt was very instrumental in the art of writing a novel. Apart from these reasons, the most crucial one is to lay claim to her battered, fragmented self, a process of coming to terms with her own life as a female in a very strongly patriarchal society. In a world which denies females the agency of expression, Woolf constantly struggles to find 'A room of one's own' by bravely standing up and voicing herself through her works. The diary, then becomes a manifestation of her idea of 'A room of one's own', a space which she constantly strives for. This in no way means that she never had disappointing moments with this form. She often encountered the mortal problem of a memory fading away after the passage of time and the failure to reproduce the event in the diary in its exactitude. Not that she always found diarizing a cake walk, her frequent references to the demanding task of recording events testifies to her random moments of discomfort with it. The manner of recording events in her diary is co-related with the

wider context in which she writes. Writing as a woman in the chaotic and hopeless times of the two World Wars, where writers were constantly struggling to find new ways of expressing themselves, Woolf was hugely influenced by the Modernist tendencies of her times. On a close inspection of the linguistic landscape of her diaries, one visualizes a perspicuous modernist streak in the way language fails to capture the emotions of her inner psyche and at times, seems distant and ambiguous. While dealing with Woolf's diaries, one chances upon the appalling claim made by her nephew Quentin Bell who mentioned how her husband, Leonard Woolf after going through her narratives realized that some of them had 'not a word of truth in them'. There have been similar such claims leveled on her by recent scholars. This can be seen in the light of the modernist times where the language in itself becomes a medium of obscuring the reality. Thus, language gets involved in the indispensable act of fictionalizing the expressions. Also, the construct of 'time' and her preoccupation with the idea of representing self through temporal shifts explains the idea of her fictive self in her diary records. As the writer Joyce Carol Oates records in her journal,—" We don't think of ourselves in the past tense : we are always present tense: to consciously record the past is therefore to invent a self to perform in it, consciously or unconsciously- that's where artifice comes in." (Judy,183) Like Clarrissa Dalloway in her novel 'Mrs. Dalloway', who keeps on going back to her past, Woolf's act of looking back and recreating herself in her diaries can be understood in a similar vein. Therefore, the scope of fictionalization of the events remains unavoidable due to a looming gap between the 'narrating self' and the 'experiencing self' in a diary.

So, the significant question is that what is so insightful about her dairy-writings? What dimension of her persona do we come across in these ‘private’, self-reflective narratives of hers? In these seemingly clichéd acts of recording everyday events in an apparently hurried, non-artistic manner, Woolf is on a constant lookout to locate herself in the turbulent, hopeless times of the modern world. The diary is an endeavor to entangle the deep, knotted layers of her complex psyche. However, her persistent awareness of an audience while diarizing hints at her refusal to express her inner turmoil fully, not even in her private records. Her response to this form hence, always borders on ambivalence owing to her simultaneous yet contradictory desires of laying bare her inner strife and not letting herself out for public scrutiny. This frustrating ambiguity is recorded in one of her diary narratives where she writes,-“How it would interest me if this diary were ever to become a real diary, something in which I could see change, trace moods developing.” “But then I should have to speak of the soul and did I not banish the soul when I began?” (February, 1923). What we can make of these lines is Woolf’s evident and pervasive confrontation with her fragmented and multi-layered self. The question which follows then is whether diary becomes the space of ‘fragmentation’ of herself by meddling with her public and private selves. The modernist take could be crucial to help us get out of this interesting juxtaposition which claims that every individual self is convoluted and fragmented. However, the diary becomes a psychological balm to comfort her disoriented persona by making her acknowledge her splintered self and through this awareness, make a sense of the world she inhabits. The ‘convoluted self’ of the women writers is more pronounced as compared to the common

women since they are caught at loggerheads with their ‘public literary self’ and ‘the private, conscious diary self’ with the shadow of the inner, unexpressed desires looming over them. Woolf assumes different roles in the process of diarizing, sometimes adopting the role of a careful observer and taking down interesting character-sketches, at times expressing concerns about her ‘feminine’ self and most often than not, dealing with the intricacies and complexities of being a writer. The idea of the self hence, comes across as the most defining feature of her diary-writings. Thus, she exclaims in a narrative, - “How queer to have so many selves. How bewildering!” (Judy,183) Woolf constantly experimented with different styles and touched upon diverse issues which is one of the reasons why, her diary-records cannot be straitjacketed under a single theme or issue. Her anxieties as a conscious writer, always sensitive to her reception as a writer have been conferred with a considerable space in her records. This heightened sensitivity to being judged and perceived crept into her diary writings displaying a very transparent picture of Woolf, struggling to not give away herself fully. One of her jottings captures the fear and terror she experienced as a writer who is inevitably under public surveillance. “I’m going to be beaten, I’m going to be laughed at, I’m going to be held up to scorn and ridicule,” (Judy,185) she says.

Literature provides us with numerous examples of women who seek to challenge their oppressed lives by constructing their own world where they are endowed with the agency to express themselves. In the Indian context, RabindraNath Tagore’s short story ‘The Exercise Book’ is a deeply moving account of the protagonist Uma, whose attempts to project herself through her version of a diary, an exercise book, are severely rebuked

and thwarted by the world she lives in. One witnesses the journey of Uma as a growing up girl, who keeps a diary to jot down her random musings, passing moods, deep feelings to being a married woman who uses her diary as an endeavor to express her 'repressed' desires. Judith Butler's idea of 'Repressive Hypothesis' comes into play here, which says that the laws and the norms which are meant to repress feminine expression simultaneously invites and invents the female desire of expression. Butler in her book 'Gender Trouble', emphasizes upon the **performative** aspects of gender and delineates how **gender** is 'constructed'. She describes how gender is not about 'being' but 'doing'. Within this context, it is significant how Uma, who gets married at a tender age is warned by her mother not to indulge in the art of 'reading and writing'. This signals the fact that the acts of reading and writing were seen as essentially 'male functions' and a woman who attempts to encroach into this 'reserved space' was seen as a deviance from the 'normative'. The sense of alienation she experienced in her in-laws' house could be shared with none other than her exercise book. "It brought a brief savor of tender freedom to the little girl in the midst of her premature wifeliness." (Tagore,47) Her act of writing within the closed doors is representative of her way of dealing with the 'taboo' of diarizing by a female. The idea of 'panopticon' is instrumental here, in the way she is gazed at by the women of the household, constantly surveilling her act of writing. This becomes an elucidation of how the idea of 'the other' is conceived, where Uma dons the role of a woman who in the act of writing loses her 'normative' female self and hence, occupies a ridiculed space lying between the male and female zones. It is noteworthy how her husband Pyarimohan, an embodiment of the patriarchy,

feels threatened when he comes to know about it and looks at this act of writing as a subversive one which would eventually affect the 'gender balance' of the society. "If women began to read and write, novels and plays would soon make their way into the home and it would be hard to uphold the household virtues." (Tagore,48) The story ends with the normative restoration of the gender balance, where Uma is stripped off her agency by being deprived of her exercise book while her husband continues to maintain and write in his.

An analysis of the diary narratives of Woolf who feels excessively tied to her 'worldly image' or Tagore's Uma, whose exercise book becomes synonymous with her identity, gives us a clear impression of how these women in their different social and cultural setups are connected to each other in their ways of resistance to the oppressive forces. The most important idea being projected through this form is not that we are Linda S. Coleman uses the word 'negotiation' to explain the process of diarizing by these women. "Life-writing by the women has been the site where the boundaries (constructing gender) have been negotiated."(Cynthia(ii),895)

Although this form is being revisited by the scholars in the current times, its emergence as a crucial area of feminist discourse is extremely significant to the act of seeking insights into the female psyche. However, due to the limited material available in the form of diaries, not much can be incorporated into the analysis which has been done in the past. The diary accounts which have been recovered are written majorly by the 'white women'. The paucity of narratives by other feminine identities such as the

colored women and lesbians leave out a lot on the larger perspective crucial to the holistic understanding of the feminine experiences.

What gets fostered through the afore-mentioned analysis is the urgent need to revise the feminist canon by introducing newer forms of critical inquiry like the diary writings, which can be seen as immensely influential modes of female expression. A new epistemological approach is required to discover the alternative avenues of knowledge formation and for that, it is necessary to unlearn our traditional ways of meaning-formation. Diary as a form, aims to find the essence in the banal and the mundane realities of human lives and in the process, manages to hit ‘unexpected bull’s eye’ as Woolf says. Diary-writing in that sense, can be construed as the first step towards female emancipation through representation whereby they seek to cross the threshold of their ‘silenced lives’ by defiantly constructing themselves outside the purview of the normative. This unnamable space thus becomes a link between ‘the home’ and ‘the world’ by acting as a tabula rasa where they attempt to re-write their lives, to reconstruct themselves on their own by acknowledging and asserting their vulnerable selves. As a reader, one should be cautious enough to tread carefully on this fragile space and read the ‘silences’ between the words, while attempting to make a sense of their times and their lives.

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