

Fragmented Selves: The Stream-of-Consciousness in Chandani Lokugé's *If the Moon Smiled*

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Abstract

The stream-of-consciousness novel fell from grace after James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* due to varied reasons. However, a return to the stream-of-consciousness techniques have been affected in several modern and postmodern fictions. Contemporary novelists continue to choose and employ stream-of-consciousness techniques as the right and proper tool to record the mental meanderings – aptly providing a peep into the innermost recesses of the human mind of the characters. Chandani Lokugé, a contemporary South Asian writer employs the stream-of-consciousness techniques along with other narrative techniques in some of her novels. The novel *If the Moon Smiled* is not a sterling example of a well-acclaimed modern stream-of-consciousness fiction. However, like in a typical stream-of-consciousness novel, the characters in *If the Moon Smiled* are not acting as Lokugé is more concerned in representing their feelings, their mind and essence of their personality. In this paper, an attempt is made to examine how Lokugé accommodates stream-of-consciousness techniques in her novel *If the Moon Smiled*.

Keywords: stream-of-consciousness, inner psyche, fragmented narrative, interior monologue, association of ideas, flashback techniques

The stream-of-consciousness novel rose in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It met initial oppositions from the public. In the 1920's the resentment against the stream-of-consciousness novel induced provocative statements like, "Writing is not a private game to be played at a private party". (Rabinovitz 6) These narrative techniques that were

once criticized was adopted later by many writers such as Marcel Proust, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner.

However, despite its condemnation and fall from grace, the stream-of-consciousness novel is recognized as an apt approach of representing the internal mental landscape. Contemporary novelists continue to choose and employ stream-of-consciousness techniques as the right and proper tool to record the mental meanderings – aptly providing a peep into the innermost recesses of the human mind of the characters. Till date, the stream-of-consciousness techniques continue to tempt and attract readers and writers both alike due to personal factors or specific or peculiar artistic requirements. Writers continue to employ the stream-of-consciousness to meet the exigencies of their desire to faithfully represent human consciousness. In fact, stream-of-consciousness techniques prove a boon to writers aspiring for expression of inner realism or invisible mental reality. Stream-of-consciousness techniques can never fall to insignificance. It will be accommodated in writings as long as writers pursue psychic reality. It will be employed to represent the intimate thoughts of a subjective mind.

Chandani Lokugé, a contemporary South Asian writer employs the stream-of-consciousness techniques in some of her novels in the line of Virginia Woolf. She is critically acclaimed contemporary writer known for probing into her characters inner psyche, especially her female protagonist's subjective consciousness. She uses the stream-of-consciousness techniques along with other narrative techniques. In this paper, an attempt is made to examine Lokugé's novel *If the Moon Smiled* through the lens of stream-of-consciousness.

To depict the characters from within, to render the soul or psyche truthfully and realistically as possible, Lokugé uses stream-of-consciousness – interior monologue, free association of ideas, flashback techniques along with many other devices. Stream-of-consciousness techniques are elaborately and magnificently exploited to explore the inner consciousness of the characters and create *If the Moon Smiled* as a remarkable diaspora fiction.

The novel *If the Moon Smiled* is not a sterling example of a well-acclaimed modern stream-of-consciousness fiction. There is a certain amount of plot or storyline, though the actual occurrence of action is thin. Like in a typical stream-of-consciousness novel, the

characters in *If the Moon Smiled* are not acting as Chandani Lokugé is more concerned in representing their feelings, their mind and essence of their personality. The characters are shown experiencing life qualitatively. In the narration more time is given to the inner processes, that is, the movements within the consciousness of individual personages. The novel does not progress coherently. The connection and continuity of the events in the narration one after another is not driven or urged by the preceding events.

Superficially, the plot or storyline highlights the childhood of the female protagonist Manthri, adolescence, marriage, motherhood and late middle age experiences. Manthri is a young woman from Sri Lanka. She grew up in an idyllic Sri Lankan village. Her childhood was immersed in traditional Sinhala Buddhist values. On reaching adolescence her entry into womanhood was celebrated with the first bath ritual. Then she moved to Colombo for higher studies. After completing her studies, she was married off to Mahendra. She then gave birth to Nelum and Devake. Their family migrated to Australia when Devake was two years old. Occasionally, Manthri visits her homeland, Sri Lanka, sometimes with her family and sometimes all by herself. Nelum completes her MBBS and pursues PG in England, while Devake is unable to meet his father's expectations and ends up working as a part-time in a pizza shop. Mahendra remains alone at home after retirement and Manthri is eventually confined at a nursing home.

The plot pattern is not coherent. Actual events happen in the novel such as Manthri's first bath of her first period – celebration of her entry into womanhood, Manthri's marriage to Mahendra, Manthri and Mahendra's first wedding night, migration of Manthri and her family to Australia, Devake's suicide attempt after he failed his matriculation exam, etc. Characteristically, all these events are seen on the screen of the mind. The novel is mostly confined to a premise, the consciousness of the characters. What the readers get are fragments of life (of the characters) interspersed with their inner psychic process. The plot or storyline is delivered in bits, all disjointed.

One of the shortcomings of the stream-of-consciousness novel is its incoherence and chaotic form owing to the very nature of the movement of consciousness. In the words of Virginia Woolf: "The method of writing smooth narration can't be right; things don't happen in one's mind like that". (*A Writer's Diary* 106)

Rather writers should record:

. . . the atom as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. (Woolf *Collected Essays. Vol. II* 107)

A truth about the nature of the movement of consciousness that surfaced following William James and Henri Bergson is that – consciousness in its movement is fluid and that movement of consciousness is not bound by arbitrary time. Consciousness does not follow mechanical or clock time. Hence, consciousness in its movement is fluid, not necessarily a smooth flow. And time to time the flow of consciousness is checked by interferences from the outer world. The flux of consciousness absorbs the interferences resulting in a momentary break in the flow of the consciousness. Besides, consciousness is always in a state of motion. It cannot remain focus on any one thing for very long but momentarily. This flow of consciousness is checked by association of ideas. A hint or a cue – a partial or whole resemblance, a common quality or contrast may influence and suggest another idea.

This is exactly what Chandani Lokugé renders in the opening lines of the novel *If the Moon Smiled*. The novel opens with Manthri in her garden in Australia, watching the full golden blossom of the wattle during the autumn season. Through the wattle haze she reminisces her childhood days in her father's village in Sri Lanka.

The wattle is in full golden blossom and in the garden the most beautiful thing just now. The araliya that I take so much more trouble with, that I have nurtured for years, has shed all its leaves. It is autumn . . . In the wattle's haze, I see my father's village. There, the araliya is laden with succulent green leaves and clusters of white blossoms. It is poya day. My father wakes up early and stands under the tree with his long stick, plucking flowers for the temple . . . I see him through the window from my bed. He twists a bunch with the hook at the end of the stick and lowers it. Then, carefully, so as not to damage the petals, he removes the flowers from the bunch, one by one, collecting them in a small rattan basket. . . She pauses often to caress her face with the white-gold petals, and feels them delicate against her skin . . . The village temple is small and built in the centre of lands . . .

‘You must try to be like that nelum flower,’ her father often says to her, pointing to it. ‘Blossom free of the mud in which it is born, unsoiled by it.’

. . . She looks around at all the people and grows subdued in the quiet atmosphere . . . Their faces stamp on her memory. They look weary and resigned. Their lips move eternally in chant.

Later, she would recall their story: the futility of their search for detachment in a world that passionately demanded and offered attachment. But now, she accepts the scriptures without question and is made tranquil.
(Lokugé 1-4)

A shift in the narrative from the present to the past is observed at the very opening of the novel. Manthri who is physically located in Australia observes the flowers in her garden. The wattle haze in Australia serves as a cue and transports her back to her past in Sri Lanka. Chandani Lokugé makes use of leitmotifs to impose unity and control over psychic realities. Flowers such as wattle, araliya, lotus and frangipani are used as leitmotifs to control the characters consciousness. The araliya in Australia evokes the memory of the araliya in Sri Lanka. Their resemblance regulates Manthri's consciousness. From the present, she recollects her childhood days, a fine spring day on a poya day with her father collecting flowers for the temple offerings. Manthri's fragmented thoughts are portrayed. Her mind swings from the present to the past, the past to the present and back forth to the past. The readers experience a sense of being actually in the mind of Manthri. Without any explanation or guide the readers follow the jagged narration.

Through her memory the reader is made to feel whatever Manthri is thinking about currently happening. According to Leon Edel:

. . . consciousness is a process of endless accretion, as long as mind and senses are functioning; that it is "the continuation of an indefinite past in a living present." . . .
(28)

Multiple feelings and impressions of Manthri's past are evoked. Lokugé chooses indirect interior monologue over direct interior monologue to reflect the inner feelings of Manthri (when she was a child). At some part, Manthri is seen through the author's point of view. In the following lines Manthri's stream-of-consciousness is shown through the author's omniscient description of her feelings:

The little girl digs her toes in the sand, relishing the tingle on her bare soles. . . The Buddha stands on a lotus. The little girl barely reaches up to the tips of the pink cement petals. (Lokugé 2-3)

Time to time a third person narrator perhaps the author omniscient delivers the characters consciousness, which is also one of the stream-of-consciousness techniques. The passage depicts that it is not Manthri who speaks rather a third person speaking on her behalf projecting her inner mind.

Manthri's inviolable past is reflected with photographic reality through the use of flashbacks. The readers view Manthri's father plucking flowers for the temple vividly through the mind's eye like a camera. Manthri's sensations 'the delicate touch of the white gold petals', 'the tingle on her bare soles' are re-evoked. Manthri re-experiences the similar moods, sensations and feelings of earlier times (of her childhood days). Another cue, the statue of Buddha standing on a lotus brings her back to the present consciousness. The resemblance or similar quality of her feelings for the tall majestic statue of Buddha brings her back to the present. The reminiscence of her past is broken momentarily by the interjection of her present opinion of the statue of Buddha. Likewise, Manthri's recollection of people in the temple is interrupted by the interjection of Manthri's present opinion of the futility of the old women gathered in the temple search for detachment. Manthri's spiritual contradictions are revealed through the interjections of her present opinions. During her childhood, Manthri accepted the scriptures without question. But through the interjections of her present opinions, the readers become aware of her later convictions which contradict with her childhood article of faith.

The principal voice or focalizer in the novel *If the Moon Smiled* is that of Manthri's. However, besides Manthri is also the presence of the voices of Mahendra, Nelum and Devake. Manthri's point of view or her consciousness emerges larger than that of other characters. Chandani Lokugé devotes more space in the depiction of Manthri's Consciousness. Perhaps by virtue of her sex, Lokugé knows more of the world of women and attempts to present at first hand. In exploring Manthri's consciousness she explores her sex. In the line of Virginia Woolf, she writes of women's consciousness in her novel *If the Moon Smiled*. Isolate moments from Manthri's life – all fragmented, discontinuous and discrete are organised to depict the conflicts and emotional turmoils in her life. The narrative structure unravels Manthri's mental state, shifting from a linear childhood to a recounting of her

childhood and then to a fractured, disjointed form that echoes the shattering of her family and her own psychological collapse. In the words of Dolores Herrero:

Revisiting and narrating the past becomes an existential necessity for Manthri's mind feels the compulsive need to remember the past, to tell her story, if not to wholly resolve her crisis, at least to partly understand how she has arrived at this moment of utter confusion and darkness. (28)

Readers are drawn inside character's memories of the past, yet living in the present. Cues continue to provoke memories in the minds of the characters throughout the novel, especially after the entry of Mahendra in Manthri's life. The characters Manthri, Mahendra, Nelum and Devake recall their past associated by cues, a similar event or a similar situation. Memories flow into their consciousness through flashback. The readers are taken into the stream-of-thought of characters as in the following:

Home, she must think, staring up through green into spot of clear blue sky. Where is home?

'I'm going home, Mahendra. I can't live in this country any more, Mum would say. 'Nelum, Devake, come and listen to this. Mum has now two different homes. She's leaving home to go home', Dad sneers.

Home.

'Now, children,' Aunty Pat at the Montessori says, 'take your colour pencils and draw a picture of your home' . . .

Aunty Pat talks to her mother after school and lays the picture before her. . . She listens to them discussing her picture.

Her mother's face grows tense as she absorbs the image . . .

Aunty Pat shows them what the other children have drawn. One in particular, of four stick figures standing hand in hand in a flower garden in front of a bright pink house. .

'Ammi, don't show the picture to any one,' she pleads.

'Yes, you must never draw another picture like that. See, everyone will think that there's something wrong with you, with all of us. You must never draw another picture like that again.

Now, high up above her, the sky and the trees break up into fragment and merge into liquid patterns of colour. Nelum wipes her eyes to free them of the blur and turns to David. (Lokugé 131-133)

Nelum and David wanders off alone in a trip. Their conversation of home reminds Nelum of her home at Sri Lanka. Lokugé employs time montage, a cinematic device is affected here to depict the continuous flow of episodes in Nelum's consciousness forming a 'composite perspective'. In the above excerpts, Nelum is fixed at a point of space with David. But her mind moves backward and forward through memory. Incoherent and fragmentary impressions of her parents' conversations, her mother and Aunty Pat at the Montessori school are recollected in her mind. She then returns to her present consciousness and turns to David. Time montage is employed here evoking multiple impressions of several people – Mahendra, Manthri and Aunty Pat in the mind of Nelum at a given moment. In the course of the novel montage, particularly time montage is abundantly used to represent the character's psychic reality.

Besides time montage, Lokugé employs other cinematic devices occasionally such as 'fade ins', 'fade out', 'flashbacks' and multiple view. In the early part of the novel, Lokugé preferably chose indirect interior monologue to render Manthri's reflections of her childhood. Readers are taken into the consciousness of little Manthri indirectly through the writer. However, after her marriage to Mahendra onwards, her consciousness is rendered through direct monologues. Readers are taken directly into her stream-of-thought without mediation. Manthri's troubled conscience is displayed more through direct interior monologue and occasionally through soliloquies. Manthri's emotional and mental fluctuations are sometimes communicated through soliloquies. For instance:

So I transfer from my father's house into my husband's. I leave behind the temple, the river, the lotus lake. I write to my mother. In a postscript I ask her if Thilakasiri has returned. She writes back unhurriedly, distancing herself from my life. . . For months I scan the newspapers for reports of murders in my village. One day, without warning, . . . I hear of corpses of hundreds of young insurgents floating down the Kelani River. Was Thilakasiri among them?

I feel uneasy, something like guilt overwhelms, and draws sweat. I must extricate myself from the memory of a dream, I remind myself. (Lokugé 39-40)

Through the soliloquies, Lokugé exhibits the psychic content and process of the characters directly from the character without authorial intervention.

The novel *If the Moon Smiled* presents a very narrow range of characters – a small canvas almost-like in a short story. The major characters serve as multiple focalizers, with Manthri being the primary focalizer. Diverse levels of consciousness are exploited. Multiple minds are transcribed, especially Manthri's. Following their consciousness, the readers to a great extent could grasp why Manthri behaves like this and not like that. Why Devake behaves the way he behaves. In other words, the idiosyncrasies of the characters are brought forth, as in:

"Mum, I think I'm having a period. Can I have a pad please?' . . . The shock of being excluded in her transition. There was no containing Nelum. No shielding her from evil eyes. No auspicious bath to cleanse impurities. . . Nelum to whom becoming a woman was nothing but a nuisance of a pad.

And for me? The auspicious bath time was at dawn. (Lokugé 140)

Lokugé juxtaposes Manthri and Nelum through Manthri's stream-of-consciousness to show the sharp contrast of the mother with the daughter when they first entered into womanhood.

Lokugé continues to make explicit the thoughts, ideas, desires intentions and memories of the characters. The transition of the thoughts and ideas is governed by association of ideas. A secondary idea crops up due to the intrusion of another character or entry of another quick shifting thoughts.

The narrative of the novel shifts to the multiple point-of-view narration. After tracing the pattern or outline of the inner world of the characters – not only the 'real' Manthri, but also the 'real' Mahendra, the 'real' Nelum and the 'real' Devake confronts the readers. The readers feel how a situation presents itself to the characters. The readers receive a vast series of fragments of experiences, which lacks coherence. The resulting flow of consciousness remains very far away from being smooth. Hence, resulting to disorder of sequence. Time-space limitations disappear posing difficulties to readers. Sudden and momentary switches in perspectives creates discordance. The discordance is at peak in the depiction of Manthri's schizophrenic experiences such as in:

I rise from my bed. I seek among my dresses a nightgown, long forgotten. It sheathes the body in a layer of lucent silk. I descend the stairs to the kitchen. I turn around. She blocks my way. She controls his life; she controls mine. Phantom woman: she rises from the ash. We confront, at last. We sob, we laugh, recognising past lives. I pierce into her. Her scream or mine slits the silence in a spurt of blood. Mahendra rushes in. I will escape his merciless grasping hands. I clutch at nothing. No one. Nowhere. (Lokugé 194)

Isolate moments from the life of all major characters are dispersed in arbitrary motion. Even the different parts of the novel exist with little connection. The novel is not an uneventful novel. A thin storyline runs with sparse elements of suspense. Till the end of the novel the readers turn the pages to find out what happened to Thilakasiri, what comes of Mahendra and Manthri's marital life and what happens of Nelum and Devake. But by the end of the novel, the readers realize that Lokugé never intends to give details or facts. The novel ends without divulging what happen to Thilakasiri.

Sequence of selected moments of consciousness abounds the novel. The readers are given not merely the impression received by one person or consciousness but many persons. This is rendered with frequent shifts from one to another. The impression received by consciousness of different persons so close (almost connected) that reader almost get confused. A remarkable example is when Devake's consciousness intermingles with Manthri's conscious with 'fade in' of Lal's voice:

Devake watches her fascinated. He yearns to merge with the girl's magically changing shapes . . .

Leave it. Subdue your desire, I would plead with him. Seeing in the seeing, I would quote the scriptures. Let not craving enter into your perception.

But Lal's voice seems to merge with mine and quietly fade it away: 'See? You can be anything you want, here, in this country, putha. (Lokugé 93)

At times, characters speak without even talking to one another. In the above excerpt, no physical conversation takes place between Devake and Manthri. They keep their stream-of-thoughts to themselves. The discordance in the narrative requires the implied reader to become an active participant, interpreting and connecting the dots to construct the narrative.

The readers become creative agents. The readers are presumed to construct a linear chronology of events from the random disjointed fragments.

Owing to its fragmented and disjointed structure, a first-time reader may be baffled. However, a second-third reading through a stream-consciousness lens might build momentum. Elements of entertainment are seemingly missing due to lack of an entertaining plot, linear sequence and presence of discordant fragments.

Author's omniscience is minimized. It is scantily utilized as in: "But Mahendra believes in duty and caste and religion. Race: he believes in race. Not in people nor in relationships." (Lokugé 103) Lokugé almost abstains from descriptions till the end of the novel. She never divulges all the details of her characters. The childhood of Manthri, adolescences, marriage, birth of her children are left to the readers be to compiled. The lives of Mahendra, Nelum and Devake are relegated to outlines. No clear information is given about Manthri's illness and Devake's job. No detailed account of Manthri's father's death is given. On the whole, the life of the novel is composed of the multiple focalizers fragmentary perspectives through incoherent sequence of events.

Chandani Lokugé has skilfully employed the stream-of-consciousness techniques in *If the Moon Smiled* to explore the psychological complexities of her characters, especially Manthri. The cultural and philosophical complexities of the protagonist Manthri is brought to light through the stream-of-consciousness techniques. At the end of reading the novel, Manthri's consciousness exhibits symptoms of mental illness. It reflects emotional turmoil and fragmented nature of her identity as revealed through her interior monologues. Perhaps the origin of her mental disorder exists in her lived experiences. Later part of the novel reveals the dreamy unconscious, irrational schizophrenic experiences – such as remembered dreams, hallucinations, fantasies and slips of tongue all expressed in direct interior monologues:

I hold his letter against the light in a stupid attempt to read between the lines. . . I remember a childhood game. Thilakasiri would write on a piece of paper . . . Thilakasiri. He had receded in these long years into a deep cavity within me. Now, in the humid still afternoons, in this familiar adolescent scene, he slithers around me at will. I am defenceless against the memory of the unfulfilled promise.

. . . Once I had sought my body in this mirror – gold-skinned, untouched, unpenetrated. 'Like ran thambili,' Thilakasiri would say to me. 'Baba, your skin is the

colour of ran thambili.’ I look towards the rafters. I think of how I used to get Thilakasiri to do all my odd jobs. Perhaps he would tie the lengths of cloths to the rafters and help me hang from them. . .

. . . The rope twists and twists my neck like menacing, unrelenting fingers. . .

I stare out at white sunlight on green. Then I close my eyes.

There is the laughter of children just outside my window. I must call them back into the house It is too hot outside – Dingiri-Aachi will never listen to me. She thinks she can still boss me around. She must be grinding raw mango into pickle for them. It is too hot. I must get out of this bed and go to the window. But I am paralysed. Will no one fan me awake? I tear at my clothes, but they cling to my body, pasted in sweat. Suddenly I sit up. (Lokugé 163-166)

The dreamy aspects of Manthri's consciousness are highlighted through direct interior monologues. Mahendra's letter (a cue) carries her to the memory of Thilakasiri through flashbacks. She hallucinates – she sees him slithering around her. She is again carried back to the memories of her unfulfilled promise. Manthri's hallucination continues. She sees a rope twisting and twisting her neck like menacing, unrelenting fingers. Once again, she is brought in a trance, intermixing memory of her younger days again, when her children were kids and Dingiri-Aachi was alive. She hallucinates and hears the laughter of the kids. Chandani Lokugé makes use of two cinematic devices ‘fade ins’ and ‘fade outs’ exploited by stream-of-consciousness to manifest Manthri's internal thoughts. Memories of laughter of children enter the consciousness of Manthri. She hears their laughter. She relives her past. She thinks of calling back her kids into the house and ponders on Dingiri-Aachi. Her unconscious mind abruptly breaks her thought flow. She sits up. Her consciousness returns gradually to the present, a fade out effect.

The readers get access to Manthri’s Schizophrenic experiences by the latter part of the novel. In other words, the stream-of-consciousness techniques employed enables the readers to psychoanalyse the characters, particularly Manthri. It would not be an exaggeration to consider reading *If the Moon Smiled* as a collection of the “case history” of a patient by a doctor. Following Manthri’s consciousness by the end of the novel becomes confusing and chaotic, almost neurotic. The readers find more difficulty in following the mental turns of Manthri. The ending of the novel is seemingly vague, which reflects the vagueness of

Manthri's consciousness. Manthri stands by the window of the nursing home – sees a swing which carried her children playing on the swing. She reflects on her children. Her memory floats like:

. . . a perfumed araliya in a dream

I pull down the shutter. (Lokugé 225)

The novel ends with a vacuum in Manthri's life.

Chandani Lokugé attempts to capture the unspoken and inarticulate state of Manthri's consciousness. At the end, we can fairly and reasonably grade *If the Moon Smiled* as a stream-of-consciousness novel. Lokugé is one such contemporary writer who adopts the stream-of-consciousness techniques due to requirements of expressions. She achieves inner realism through the application of stream-of-consciousness techniques and successfully evokes the original emotions in all their complexities.

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