

Exploring Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

Tialila

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Peren Government College, Peren: Nagaland
tialila82@gmail.com

Abstract

Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), is perhaps one of her best known novels to have generated the most critical attention and offers a portrait of life in England after World War I and how society, particularly soldiers continue to be affected by the traumatic events of war even after the war is over. This paper aims to explore the representation of mental illness and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in literature with special reference to Woolf's character Septimus Warren Smith, using trauma theory which has attracted broad research over the past two decades or so. Septimus's post war trauma is aggravated by a culturally prescribed process that silences and marginalizes people suffering from mental illness and traumatic disorders. Woolf reflects upon the negative effects of war on human nature, as well as on social and political institutions which is not ready to embrace the truths about mental illness and recovery, whereby encouraging further interdisciplinary research to explore the possibilities of understanding trauma psychology through literature.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, trauma, war, psychological, shell-shocked

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is recognized as one of the most innovative writers of the 20th Century. She was a prolific writer of essays, diaries, letters and biographies and her work captures the fast-changing world in which she lived and wrote. Woolf's work explores the key motifs of modernism, including the subconscious, time, perception, the city and the impact of war. Her 'stream of consciousness' technique enabled her to portray the inner lives of her characters, as well as depict memories imprinted like montage in their minds. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) is perhaps one of her best known novels to have generated the most critical attention and offers a portrait of life in England after World War I and how society, particularly soldiers continue to be affected by the traumatic events of war even after the war is over. This paper aims to explore the representation of mental illness and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in literature with special reference to Woolf's character Septimus Warren Smith, using trauma theory which has attracted broad research over the past two decades or so.

Literary trauma theory employs psychoanalytic theories to analyze emotional suffering in texts as well as the language of loss, disruption, and frustration. Impact of trauma's effects on individual psyche are often employed to explore the individual experience of a collective traumatic event in a text, thereby creating a connection between the individual experience and cultural groups or between the personal and political worlds. The first half of the twentieth century is marked by historical catastrophes and has witnessed countless physical and psychological turmoil as a result of the two Great World Wars. Nonetheless, contemporary fiction is shaped by the representation of those hitherto events and literary theorists have turned to the concept of trauma as an important tool for cultural studies. Whereas, trauma is not only a word for wound and physical disaster, but also a method of interpretation to unfold the

post-traumatic effects of the traumatic events. As maintained by James Berger in his *Contemporary Literature* (Vol.38) that “a traumatic analysis is both constructivist and empirical” (572), trauma theory largely rely upon traumatic events and hence, it is of great value in historical and cultural studies within literary works.

Trauma studies explore the impact of the disruptive experience of trauma on individuals in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance. The representation of psychological trauma in language and the role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities are the central concerns that define the field of trauma studies. Trauma studies first developed in the 1990s as a theoretical movement in the academia and relied on Freudian theory to develop a model of trauma that imagines an extreme experience and has contributed some of the most influential and far-reaching insights about trauma. The term “trauma” was originally derived from the Greek word meaning physical injuries or the “wound” inflicted on the mind. The modern concept of trauma varies according to context and discipline, however, there is a general consensus that trauma presents a unique set of challenges to understanding because traumatic events often happen due to social forces that has an inherently political, historical and ethical dimension. Over the last two decades or so, the emergence of creative work and critical theories on trauma has made a profound impact in the field of literature and beyond.

The field of trauma studies and literary research gained significant attention as a result of Cathy Caruth’s publications, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), an interdisciplinary collection of essays and a full-length study of trauma, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). With the publication of these two groundbreaking works, Cathy Caruth has been recognized as a pioneering figure of trauma theory. The more recent contribution in the field of trauma studies by Shoshana Felmen in her book, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (2002) has also extended brilliant insights to the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. Both thinkers, prominent members of the Department of Comparative Literature at Emory have been working creatively on the borders of trauma, literature, and psychoanalysis and have radically altered the way we think about trauma.

Cathy Caruth provides a clear and coherent description of trauma in her introductory essay to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and further presents a compelling explanation on the specific conceptual challenges of its impact. According to her, the onset of traumatic pathology (post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD) cannot be fully determined by or located in a given traumatic event and proposes that trauma compels imagination of the traumatic event and fracture the very experience of time. She explains that, “the pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself – which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally – nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significance attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event (4-5) which comes into being “belatedly.” She continues to explain that “the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (9).

Septimus Warren Smith, a young shell-shocked war veteran continues to live with the hell and terror of the trenches in his head even after the war has been over for five years. Septimus, a young man in his twenties, was one of the first volunteers to join war. He was a young, naïve, and romantic who “went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square” (Woolf, 86). In the trenches he “developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew attention” and leaves the army with distinction (86). He marries a young Italian woman named Rezia and returns to England with honour. However, the effects of “developed manliness” exhibited through detachment from emotions, while trying to be a brave soldier and not be distracted by death, fails him ultimately after the war ends. He has seen men killed and maimed for life, especially, the death of his friend Evans disrupts his reality, as he fights the voices in his head. As he fights against his internal turmoil and nightmares that are steadily invading his reality, his relationship with society in general becomes estranged. Even as he yearns for a healing from the traumatic memory, which can be achieved only through a connection with empathetic people, he fails to find any in an indifferent and antagonistic world, not ready to offer any understanding.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth further states that “trauma is an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the events occur in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other intrusive phenomenon” (5). Therefore, the salient characteristic of belatedness asserts that trauma is actually not fully experienced at the moment, and instead happens over time, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. Hence, a traumatic event is a strange sort of an event which must be understood in terms of “absence” – the absence of something that failed to become located in time or place rather than a positive presence. This absence at the heart of the traumatic event leads to its constitutive ghostly quality, whereby, people who suffer traumatic experiences become so “possessed” by them and often dissociate themselves from actual living.

Septimus watched shells explode with indifference and despite sharing a very close friendship with Evans during the war, when Evans was killed in action, he thought it was sublime to survive the war like a brave man and congratulated himself very reasonably. The absence of emotion at the event of his dear friend’s traumatic death, and the feeling of sublimity during the war turned into a nightmare in the five years of peace after the war ends. His lack of emotion at Evan’s death and his feeling of guilt numbs him to the present surroundings and emotions which permeates every relationship he tries to engage with and regards human nature as evil, and when he gets engaged to Rezia, “the panic was on him,” because “he could not feel” (86).

Although Septimus had survived the war physically unscarred, his psychological injuries transform him into a hallucinating, traumatized, guilty young man who believes that he has committed a crime. Nevertheless, his mental suffering becomes double when his unsympathetic doctors, Sir William Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes, instead of empathizing with Septimus by trying to understand the patient’s symptoms, Dr. Holmes continually tells Rezia that “there was nothing the matter” with her husband (23). His only medical advice is for her to make Septimus “notice real things, go to a music hall, play cricket” (25) while “brushing it all aside – headaches, sleeplessness, fears, dreams” and declares it as “nerve symptoms and nothing more” (91). On the other hand, Sir William Bradshaw claims that Septimus is “very, very ill” (97) and his only solution for Septimus’s illness is to take him away from his home, his wife and put him away in an asylum. The inhumanity of these supposed solutions, shows their callous

attitude and indifference towards people suffering from traumatic disorder. They completely fail to help Septimus because they never tried to understand the actual help he needed. Instead of listening to him, empathizing with him, and treating him as a casualty of war, they wanted to separate him from Rezia, isolate him, and declare him mad.

In a state of despair and hopelessness, Septimus ends his life by jumping out of a window to escape the insensitive treatment of the doctors, even as “he did not want to die. Life was good” (149), yet he resorted to this extreme act because he thought life was not going to get better without help. After Septimus dies of suicide, Dr. Holmes calls him a “coward,” thus, displaying his insensitivity towards the actual suffering of his patient and his inability to comprehend “why the devil he did it” (159). The two doctors are a representation of post-war British culture, which tried to ignore the trauma suffered by war veterans. Septimus is an example of the casualties of war in a pretentious world where everyone is trying to forget the past, not realizing that one’s past shapes present realities and relationships. Thousands of war veterans suffer from “shell shock” and isolate themselves from society as they often become disoriented and fail to express their sufferings and guilt. Septimus’s suicide is an example of the tragic consequences that occur when an individual lacks connection and continues to be isolated in a society that fails to understand that for some people the war will never be over.

The term “shell shock” has “unfolded over the decades of the century under an evolving set of terminologies that would include battle fatigue, combat exhaustion, and most recently, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)” (Beidler, 3-4). Septimus’s post traumatic experiences changed his face in two years “from a pink innocent oval to a face lean, contracted, hostile” (84). In June 1923, he is “aged about thirty, pale-faced, beak-nosed...with hazel eyes which had the look of apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too” (14). Shell-shocked, he transforms into a man plagued by war and as he walks through the busy streets of London, he feels like “some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames and it terrified him” (15). His hallucinations blur his dreams with reality, “there was his hand; there the dead” (25). He continually sees the dead soldiers, especially his friend Evans and his waking and sleeping become one of constant fear and guilt. He suffers the survivor’s guilt, recalling “he had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst; but all the other crimes raised their heads and shook their fingers and jeered and sneered over the rail of the bed in the early hours of the morning at the prostrate body” (91). The “other crimes” represent all the soldiers who died and who now come back to haunt his unempathetic self. He despises himself and views his heart as callous and convinces himself that despite his service with distinction and his promotion, “in the war itself he had failed” and that he had “committed an appalling crime and been condemned to death by human nature” (96).

Janet Pierre also describes it as a “delayed response” (Herman, 45), while Freud states it to be “deferred action” or “afterwardness” (Freud, 12). In Freudian psychoanalysis “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event” (Freud, 5) and thus, the least similar images or events in relation to traumatic memory tend to trigger mental disruption. Traumatic memory is therefore, central to psychoanalysis, which unlike normal mentality is denied a primary narrative capability. Flashback, which disrupts mental representation of its temporal order become a routine occurrence during traumatic experience and encroach into people’s consciousness. The failure to repress traumatic memory is usually confirmed by the return of traumatic events in the form of repetitive and compulsive behaviors. Excessive in frequency, such rebounding to histories finally incur the sufferer’s biological

urge of equilibrium, which is theorized as “death drive” (Freud, 7). People who suffer from trauma are susceptible to suspicious atmosphere, in which trustworthy relationship with people around is difficult to build. In relation to this, Herman has rightly opined 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, 51) therefore, seeking connection and remedy for rebuilding one’s identity and a positive sense of the world must be acknowledged with sensitivity.

Woolf’s characterization of Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*, illustrates not only the psychological injuries suffered by victims of severe trauma, but also suggests the need for giving them meaning to their sufferings in order for them to recover from the trauma. The inability to communicate his experiences to others and give these experiences meaning and purpose leads him to death. Virginia Woolf was increasingly frustrated at society’s lack of awareness about the destructions caused by war and the lingering psychological trauma that persisted well beyond the signing of a peace treaty. Woolf, through the novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, set five years after the Great War had ended, illustrates the fact that the pain and suffering does not simply disappear. She was chiefly concerned with her “portrayal of individuals as victims of war... and the possible annihilation of civilization” (Bazin and Lauter, 14).

The perpetual effects of World War I are evident in her characters, Septimus Smith’s mental unrest and Clarissa’s repressed emotional pain. Hence, *Mrs. Dalloway* is undeniably a profound representation of a society that collectively suffers, despite individual efforts to uphold a “perfectly upright and stoical bearing” (Woolf, 9). Septimus’s post war trauma is aggravated by a culturally prescribed process that silences and marginalizes people suffering from mental illness and traumatic disorders. Woolf reflects upon the negative effects of war on human nature, as well as on social and political institutions which is not ready to embrace the truths about mental illness and recovery, whereby encouraging further interdisciplinary research to explore the possibilities of understanding trauma psychology through literature.

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