

Twentieth Century Fiction
Prof. Avishek Parui
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture – 32
Mrs. Dalloway – Part 3

(Refer Slide Time: 00:12)


Regent Street, in Regent's Park, and the bar of smoke curved behind and it dropped down, and it soared up and wrote one letter after another – but what word was it writing?


Lucrezia Warren Smith, sitting by her husband's side on a seat in Regent's Park in the Broad Walk, looked up.

"Look, look, Septimus!" she cried. For Dr. Holmes had told her to make her husband (who had nothing whatever seriously the matter with him but was a little out of sorts) take an interest in things outside himself.

So, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him in their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signalling their intention to provide him, for nothing, for ever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty! Tears ran down his cheeks.

It was toffee; they were advertising toffee, a nursemaid told Rezia. Together they began to spell t . . . o . . . f . . .





So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Twentieth Century Fiction. We were looking at Virginia Woolf's novel Mrs. Dalloway. So, we just carry on where we left, from where we left last time and we looked at the whole embodiment of Septimus Smith. The war veteran who comes back from the battlefields and who is obviously, traumatized and who feels medically, biologically and existentially alienated from everything around him.



And, we were looking at the alienation and the cognitive implications and cognitive associations along with his alienation how it does not seem to connect to everything around him or anything around him. So, he essentially becomes like a sheath, an insular sheath, completely insulated from any human connect.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:57)

It was toffee; they were advertising toffee, a nursemaid told Rezia. Together they began to spell t . . . o . . . f . . .

"K . . . R . . ." said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say "Kay Arr" close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper's, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke. A marvellous discovery indeed – that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life! Happily Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed, or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the colour thinning and thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave, like plumes on horses' heads, feathers on ladies', so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly, would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more.

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down: when the branch stretched he, too, made that



Now, the passage the scene which we will do now today in this particular class is interesting because we'll look at a certain episode which takes place in the sense of certain action, certain activity taking place and we will look at Septimus's cognitive response to it, how does he respond to it or how does he not respond to it more specifically.

So, this scene in at play the scene in question over here is a skywriting aeroplane. So, this is a time where skywriting advertisements were becoming big in London. So, we have this aeroplane this advertising aeroplane which is trying to advertise for a toffee you know it could be any kind of toffee name. So, each letter will be sent up spiraled in a cloud. So, all these spiral clouds will form a letter and then together they will form a name a word on the sky which would obviously, be the brand name for that particular company. And, what that would obviously, do is that it will make it hyper visible. So, everyone in London everyone in that part of London would get to see it right. So, the visibility quotient could be quite high.

Now, this skywriting aeroplane was obviously, there was a sense of wonder a sense of excitement about it because of the velocity because of the visuality etcetera now the reason why Septimus is so unnerved - Septimus feels so completely detached from it and also any attachment is a traumatic attachment with that particular activity is because presumably this skywriting airplane reminds them of a plane about to bomb right. So,

again we have this entire continuation of the war violence into the civilian metropolis now and he seems to be unable to move on he seems to be unable to have moved on.

So, he remains to a large extent as an interrupted subject, a subject whose embodiment is interrupted by the trauma he experienced in the war fields right. So, this particular section where it is important and because it just dramatizes so spectacularly the different cognitive response embodied by Septimus in relation to the other people's responses. Everyone else around him is just consuming the entire episode in a very visual way it is like a happy entertainment for them. Whereas, for Septimus it is a very gruesome grotesque reminder of the bombing planes which he had presumably seen at the war trenches, he has just come back from the war, ok.

So, this is Lucrezia, Septimus's wife trying to draw his attention to the sky writing aeroplane and this should be on your screen. Look, look, Septimus! She cried. For Doctor Holmes had told her to make her husband who had nothing whatever seriously the matter with him, but was a little out of sorts take an interest in things outside himself.

Now, this one sentence tells a lot because Dr. Holmes and Bradshaw these are 2 doctors mentioned in this particular novel and they obviously, represent and embody heavy masculinist medicine. Medicine which is determined and largely governed by a very very male sense of logic and rationality and anything which should not come into that purview within that radar of rationality would be considered to be effeminate, would be considered to be hysterical, would be considered to be completely inappropriate.

So, it was decided by doctor Holmes that Septimus had nothing wrong with him seriously right. So, he had nothing whatever seriously the matter with him, because he was out of sorts. He was just a little out of sorts according to Dr. Holmes right and this being out of sorts is important over here because you know that obviously, underlines the fact that he was a misfit - medical misfit in the eyes of this very very masculinist medicine right. So, and he had been instructed by Dr. Holmes, he had been instructed and advised by Dr. Holmes to take an interest in things outside himself.

So, again this whole idea of looking at the shell-shocked soldier as the traumatized war veteran as someone who is over-introspective, someone who is constantly absorbed and obsessed with his own self is something which was seen as unmanly. So, the unmanliness of Septimus is something which is becomes, it is equated according to these

medical practitioners with his insanity or irrationality right. So, the fact he is irrational is equated with his unmanliness, and his rationality is equated with manliness in a very very mathematical way right.

So, these crude equations is something which informs the contemporary medicine you know a medicine that Septimus is subjected to, the medical science that he is subjected to. So, in that sense this novel Mrs Dalloway becomes a very interesting reflection a very complex and dark reflection of the tyranny of medicine, the tyranny of biomedicine and how that was meted out to the shell-shocked soldiers, how they became the very very unwilling subjects of that tyranny of medicine.

So, Septimus obviously, becomes someone who, becomes the victim not just through his disease, but also and more importantly through the treatment given to his disease right and the treatment is something which victimizes them, which shames him publicly, socially, existentially and of course, medically right.

So, that sense of being shamed, that sense of being told over and over again that you are unmanly, you are over introspective, you have this narcissistic introspection which is what the problem is there is nothing else which is bothering you; you do not really have any real disease. So, the unreality of shellshock is something which is a big deal in London and England that part of time.

It was not really classified as a proper malady. It was just some kind of a mental aberration something which came from over-introspection, something which came from, according to this medical science practitioners something which came because of the emotional nature the morbidly narcissistic emotional nature of these people.

All that was very very unmanly, all that was very very problematically proximate to hysteria which is obviously, the female malady something which came from the womb. So, Lucrezia Warren Smith you know he, she had been told by the doctors of Septimus nothing really is wrong with him and he should take some interest in things outside of himself right. So, this whole idea of over introspection is something which is condemned by contemporary medicine ok.

So, thought Septimus, looking up, they had they are signaling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty,

this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him in an inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signaling their intention to provide him, for nothing, forever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty! Tears ran down his cheeks.

So, again this is obviously, the not the right kind of response notionally the right response to an advertisement for toffee. He feels the whole scene to be very very sublime and the sublimity you know almost grips him with its beauty and that; obviously, makes him teary, he begins to almost cry tears run down his cheeks. So, again the whole idea of crying this man crying in a very public place in London that will be equated by people like Holmes and Bradshaw as very very unmanly. So, the unmanliness of Septimus's response is important over here because that is exactly what is condemned by the doctors by the medical practitioners that is Holmes and Bradshaw.

It was toffee; they were advertising toffee, a nursemaid told Rezia. Together they began to spell t o f right. So, in other words the letters are coming one after the other and together they form one word - tof toffee and maybe that will have a name as well and that is something that is the whole point of the advertisement to make it hyper-visible and very very public. K R said the nursemaid and Septimus heard this heard her say Kay Arr close to his ear, deeply, softly like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper's which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which come concussing, broke.

So, again look at the deceleration of cognitive response over here everything seems to be slowing down for Septimus. So, K R you know he hears this as Kay Arr. Kay Arr so, it is decelerated, it is slowed down, it becomes more loud perhaps and that is obviously, because of his very disturbed cognitive and spinal system, nervous system which has been almost permanently destroyed by the war. And, We will soon be offered a very very graphic description of cognitive absorption on cognitive reception over here and we are told that you know she he hears the voice of the of the nursemaid as that of a grasshopper which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which concussing broke.

So, the waves of sound came running up to his brain through his spine and you know and then he when the concussions began to be formed and then they broke and the whole idea the whole activity over here is listening to a particular word which is being advertised in the sky and how that is responded and received by the you know traumatized war veteran is what this whole episode is all about right. So, he is beginning to get concussions and the spine is deliciously sending out sound waves to his brain and the brain is receiving the sound waves as concussions and the sound waves are then breaking in his brain and that becomes a very graphic image, a very decelerated graphic image. Excuse me.

A marvelous discovery indeed – that the human voice in a certain atmospheric condition for one must have one must be scientific, above all scientific. So, again the word scientific comes twice one must be scientific above all scientific is obviously, a critique, it is a jibe against the hyper rationality of science. So, the discovery has been made apparently that a human voice in certain atmospheric conditions can quicken trees into life. So, you know trees can be brought to life, trees can be quickened into life. They can grow quicker if it is spoken to in a human voice in certain atmospheric conditions.

Happily, Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighed down, transfixed, or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the color thinning and thickening from blue to the green to the hollow wave, like plumes on horses' heads, feathers on ladies', so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly, would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more.

So, there seems to be an excess of senses over here, an excess of sensation and excitement all because of something very very banal you know this whole idea of the skywriting aeroplane advertising for toffee something which is a very urban thing, something which people see every day. But to Septimus this becomes such an excitement such an exciting event that you know he cannot take it anymore. It is almost like there is a complete explosion of senses inside his body, his brain is receiving concussions because of the sound waves and he would shut his eyes now, he could see he would see no more.

He is completely shutting himself down because of the explosion of the sense explosion around him and that is something which obviously, can be attributed to his damaged nervous system, to his damaged cognitive systems. So, everything appears to him in a different register in a different cognitive register compared to the quote unquote “normal” people around him, the normal civilians around him.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:03)


the green of a hollow wave, like plumes on horses' heads, feathers on ladies', so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly, would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more.


But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion –

“Septimus!” said Rezia. He started violently. People must notice.

“I am going to walk to the fountain and back,” she said.

For she could stand it no longer. Dr. Holmes might say there was nothing the matter. Far rather would she that he were dead! She could not sit beside him when he stared so and did not see her and made everything terrible; sky and tree, children playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down; all were terrible. And he would not kill himself; and she





But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected to by millions of fibers with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches sorry, black branches. Sound made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion.

Now, obviously, this is classic stream of consciousness technique that Woolf is using over here and all the sounds seem to be blend in together in Septimus’s cognitive system, in Septimus’s nervous system. And, the blend of the sounds is interesting because that is beginning to form something like a new religion to him; now, what does religion signify? Religion is obviously, a faith system religion is something that you can cognitively attach to. So, the only religion that Septimus is sort of attaching himself to is this blend this bricolage of sound.

So, everything is coming together in this very urban setting and that is producing not just an explosion of senses, but also an epiphany in his brain an epiphany again as I may have mentioned already several times when we were looking at Eliot's early poetry and also the short story by Joyce, epiphany over here is a neural mechanism is something which happens to you neutrally, it is like a spatially chemical reaction in the brain where you get this light bulb moment, but also epiphany can extend into something more existential, something more elevating. So, and in some cases for instance in Joseph Conrad's writing epiphany can also be a dark knowledge, a dark negative enlightenment, a negative narrative of knowledge right.

So, obviously, if we take a look at how the word religion appears something which is presumably and notionally mystic appears over here through a different combination of different machinic sounds. So, the car horns shrieking somewhere, a child crying somewhere and obviously, this skywriting aeroplane whirring around in the sky and producing different kinds of images and waves in the sky all come together and then we have this leaves and the trees and the branches were swirling in this London air. They all come together to produce an alchemy of sensations and that alchemy is what religion is all about. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion.



Septimus! Said Rezia. He started violently. People must notice. So, again the very violent response to his own name you know something which obviously, shows he is a nervous wreck something someone who cannot control the nervous system anymore something or someone who is actually neurally very very challenged, very compromised, very very different from the normative order ok.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:48)

"I am going to walk to the fountain and back," she said.

For she could stand it no longer. Dr. Holmes might say there was nothing the matter. Far rather would she that he were dead! She could not sit beside him when he stared so and did not see her and made everything terrible; sky and tree, children playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down; all were terrible. And he would not kill himself; and she could tell no one. "Septimus has been working too hard"—that was all she could say to her own mother. To love makes one solitary, she thought. She could tell nobody, not even Septimus now, and looking back, she saw him sitting in his shabby overcoat alone, on the seat, hunched up, staring. And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now. She put on her lace collar. She put on her new hat and he never noticed; and he was happy without her. Nothing could make her happy without him! Nothing! He was selfish. So men are. For he was not ill. Dr. Holmes said there was nothing the matter with him. She spread her hand before her. Look! Her wedding ring slipped — she had grown so thin. It was she who suffered — but she had nobody to tell.

Far was Italy and the white houses and the room where her sisters sat



I am going to walk to the fountain and back, she said. For she could stand it no longer. Now, this is a passage which is interesting because we also get a glimpse of Rezia's own alienation over here because first of all we are told she is an Italian. So, she obviously, she is a cultural, political and linguistic outsider in this London metropolis. So, you know she is someone who he met in the war and you know they got married.

But, now in London she feels completely alienated not least because her husband who is in London, who is who is an Englishman he is completely broken the level of you know reception, the level of cognitive response and cognitive you know unity. So, Septimus is in cognitive anarchy, he becomes completely a traumatized subject and almost traumatophilic, he loves absorbing the trauma that you know, is to live in them in him in his body through his experiences from the war.

So, that obviously, accentuates the alienation faced by Rezia and she needs a break now. She thinks of going away for a while to spend some time with herself. For she could not she could not stand it no longer doctor Holmes might say there was nothing the matter. So, again there is a jibe at this medical you know masculinist medicine where doctor Holmes is completely convinced there is nothing the matter with Septimus, it is no serious matter that Septimus is experiencing or suffering.

For rather would she that he were dead! She could not sit beside him when he stared so and so stared so and did not see her and made everything terrible; sky and tree, children

playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down; all were terrible. So, contrast the very terrible you know experience of Rezia with the supposed sublimity this that Septimus is facing, Septimus is experiencing over here, right. So, and it is very clearly told to us that Rezia does not, is not quite convinced with doctor Holmes's diagnosis of the situation.

She is thinking that doctor Holmes might say there was nothing the matter, but for her everything was terrible all the sounds around her, all the sights around her, all the images around they all become one terrible combination of different things, all were terrible. And he would not kill himself; and she could tell no one, Septimus has been working too hard – that was all she could say to her own mother.

So, you know there is no rationale according to her for Septimus behavior and in some sense he she sometimes wishes that he killed himself he committed suicide because he could never put down Septimus's behavior to any particular rationale, to any particular reason and the only thing that she can say only thing that she could say to her mother that Septimus is working too hard that was all that she could say to her own mother.

To love one makes solitary, she thought. She could tell nobody, not even Septimus now, and looking back, she saw him sitting in his shabby overcoat alone, on the seat, hunched up, staring. So, that image of Septimus in an overcoat cut off from everyone else, cut off from this very busy London, sitting there hunched up, staring at nothingness, staring at blankness and that becomes an embodiment of modernist alienation especially you know in the case of Septimus alienation is quite medical in quality because he is a war veteran who has just come back from the war. So, he just becomes this immobile subject, interrupted subject sitting on the bench and staring hunched up and staring.

And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now. So, again the whole idea of masculinity is interesting because we are also told Septimus had been brave at one point of time, he had killed at one point of time ah you know, he had fought a war at some point of time, but now ah you know he is saying cowardly things such as he would kill himself and that is that is an act of cowardice according to the medical practitioners, according to religious people and that cowardice of Septimus is something which is contrasted with his masculinity which he exhibited during the war right.

So, according to Lucrezia, Rezia sorry all this becomes a very complicated transition from a position of cowardice to a position of privileged to a position of cowardice that is a transition Septimus makes. So, he was not Septimus now. So, again the whole idea of he is not himself anymore it is a very neural thing, it is a very cognitive thing, he seems to be more blank, he seems to be suffering an injury. And, there are many instances where people you know who had experience let us say blunt trauma, any traumatic disorder or any you know sense of shock, an emotional anxiety to be changed permanently in the level of behavior, level of reception to such an extent that people who are very very close to them would say they are not themselves anymore.

So, what happens when you say that someone is not themselves anymore, that obviously, means that there has been some neural cerebral existential and emotional change which has had a complete makeover from the persons formal, neural and cognitive frame that has changed forever ok. So, he was not himself now. She put on her lace collar. She put on her new hat and he even he never noticed; and he was happy without her. Nothing could make her happy without him! Nothing! He was selfish. So men are. For he was not ill. Doctor Holmes said there was nothing the matter with him.

So, this is the third time we have been told that she thinks you know she is just repeating in her mind what doctor Holmes had said to her, nothing is the matter with your husband and obviously, that is part of the jibe against masculinist medicine because we clearly see that Septimus is suffering from a nervous disorder, from an existential alienation, but the medical science at that time cannot comprehend it, cannot gauge it, cannot calibrate it and because they could not calibrate and quantify it.

So, we see this complete dichotomy, this complete incompatibility, this complete non-understanding between the medical science, the medical people, and the sufferers over here all right and I think I gave you a background to this as well this is the time where British psychiatry was found completely wanting in terms of understanding in terms of engaging with trauma victims and this is also a time where Freudian psychoanalysis became very important because the whole idea of making sufferers tell their stories, making sufferers tell their dreams became very important at that time.

So, Freudian psychoanalysis although is not really considered universally scientific today. It was very helpful at that time because the whole activity of converting a trauma

into a story into a narrative which could be told you know the whole idea of converting a dream into a story which could be told is something which Freud you know propagated and practiced at that point of time ok. So, the entire incompatibility between the sufferers and the practitioners is something which has been dramatized over here and obviously, Rezia's alienation is even more because of her political and cultural and national you know identity as an Italian in London post first world war.

So, I will just stop at this point and at the last bit is interesting because again it is mentioned doctor Holmes said it is nothing the matter with him. So, doctor Holmes decides it is nothing the matter then obviously, nothing is the matter. She spread her hand before her. Look! Her wedding ring slipped – she had grown so thin. It is she who suffered – but she had nobody to tell. So, again, the alienation of Rezia is completely is absolute over here and it is sort of very tempting to look at Septimus Smith as the only sufferer the only male sufferer in London at that point of a time.

But, Rezia's suffering is obviously, medical as well as essential because she sees her husband suffer in front of her at the same time she is suffering because of existential and political alienation. And, the slipping off of the wedding ring becomes; obviously, very symbolic her fingers had grown so thin, she had grown so thin that her wedding ring is slipping off which is very symbolic of the fact that her marriage is now very very fragile, her marital relationship is very very fragile. So, this becomes very symbolic reflection of her fragility and we are told that it is she who suffered, it was she who suffered the most, but she had nobody to tell right. So, the whole idea being cut off from from everyone around is something which is suffered by Rezia.



(Refer Slide Time: 22:30)

could tell no one. "Septimus has been working too hard" – that was all she could say to her own mother. To love makes one solitary, she thought. She could tell nobody, not even Septimus now, and looking back, she saw him sitting in his shabby overcoat alone, on the seat, hunched up, staring. And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now. She put on her lace collar. She put on her new hat and he never noticed; and he was happy without her. Nothing could make her happy without him! Nothing! He was selfish. So men are. For he was not ill. Dr. Holmes said there was nothing the matter with him. She spread her hand before her. Look! Her wedding ring slipped – she had grown so thin. It was she who suffered – but she had nobody to tell.

Far was Italy and the white houses and the room where her sisters sat making hats, and the streets crowded every evening with people walking, laughing out loud, not half alive like people here, huddled up in Bath chairs, looking at a few ugly flowers stuck in pots!

"For you should see the Milan gardens," she said aloud. But to whom?

There was nobody. Her words faded. So a rocket fades. Its sparks, having crossed their way into the night, surrender to its dark descender.



And, we are also told, Far was Italy and the white houses and the room where her sisters sat making hats, and the streets crowded every evening when people walking, laughing out loud, not half alive like people here, huddled up in Bath chairs, looking at a few ugly flowers stuck in pots. So, it is image of the story abundant, fertile, vibrant Italy compared to this very pale and almost anemic London is something which Rezia conjures in her mind and that obviously, accentuates the alienation as an Italian woman in a post war London you know with a very very medically ill husband who does not have any connection to the world around him.

So, you know that that entire experience completely alienates her existentially as well as politically and she feels someone who is completely cut off and she is the one who suffers, but she has no body to tell and she can only conjure this abundant image - the image of abundance in Italy and contrast that with the paleness of London that is the present time that she is experiencing, inhabiting. So, I stop at this point today and I will continue with this novel in next lecture.

Thank you for your attention.