

Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 9
Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway – Part 1

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Virginia Woolf’s novel “Mrs. Dalloway”. The backdrop of the text, the cultural and political background rather than the bio-political background is stated here.

There is an important narrative in this course “Trauma and Literature”. This is a First World War text. The novel is written against the backdrop of the First World War. It was published in 1925. It is about London which is trying to get back to normal life, the normal civilian space.

There is an effort, an attempt which is a superficial spectacular structure where everything looks normal and the buses move, the trains move, advertisements happen in the sky, people seem to be going out in the streets and having a good time. Everything looks normal superficially. But at a very immediate subterranean level, there is that very traumatic landscape.

There is that morning metropolis which is there, not quite invisible yet is there if one just scratches the surface. The trauma of the First World War is there as some kind of a spectral presence and is quite similar to “The Fly” by Katherine Mansfield. The First World War is very much a spectral presence in the character of the boss's son in “The Fly” by Katherine Mansfield.

The war appears as some type of a residue with a coarse appearance. The boss tries to move on, the boss tries to put in new furniture, new kinds of office gadgets in the story. But despite everything there is that residual lingering, hauntological presence of the First World War and that hauntological presence is there in “Mrs. Dalloway” too.

“Mrs. Dalloway” is a novel, with lots of characters, lots of narratives, crisscrossing each other. In that sense it has got hyperlinked. It has different narratives running across the same plane. It is about one day in London. In that sense it is a Modernist novel. It is about one calendar day in London, but with different kinds of narratives crisscrossing each other, different kinds of characters sometimes connecting, sometimes moving away.

There is a mutability about the whole story storytelling process. There is mutability about the characters. There is mutability by the way they appear on page. The whole panorama of London appears to be a post-war London. It appears to be someone’s space which wants to move on, have a normal civilian life and accelerate velocity, have all kinds of things.

But there is that First World War greyness which keeps coming up in different disguises. Now the character in “Mrs. Dalloway” who best embodies the war is a person called Septimus Smith. Septimus Smith is a war veteran who has come back from the war and he suffers from what clearly is an example of PTSD, a post-traumatic stress disorder which is a very common symptom among veterans, war veterans.

The important thing in the novel is to look at the way in which Septimus is situated in this urban landscape. The landscape is London trying very hard to look normal, healthy, happy and harmonious. Septimus becomes an incompatible irritant in that setting where no one quite likes him, and he is alienated.

The alienation of Septimus is important because he comes back from the war and instead of being a hero he is looked as someone who is a misfit in this metropolis, very incompatible irritant. It is trying very hard to look normal, happy, and harmonious and just try to move on. Now Septimus does not want to move on.

The trauma in Septimus is very much there. He is sort of fixated to it, in that sense he embodies it constantly and the constancy of trauma is important for us to understand because everything else is mutable in that metropolis. The buses move, the omnibuses move, the trains move, the advertisements move, people move in and out but the only constant thing in that metropolis is Septimus’ trauma.

He is fixated to the trauma. He becomes the PTSD character, the sufferer of PTSD and in that sense he becomes traumatized, becomes someone who is inhabiting that traumatic landscape. Now with that backdrop what is also important for us to observe is how the medical politics plays out in Mrs. Dalloway. How are the doctors represented? Two principal doctor characters in the story are people call Mr. Holmes and Mr. Bradshaw.

Holmes and Bradshaw are the two physicians who try to treat Septimus, try to kill him. But among other things this novel is also about the morality of treatment, the morality of missed skill. Thus, instead of curing him they end of miscuring him. The morality of miscure which happens in “Mrs. Dalloway” is because of the lack of empathy and that is a very important quality, very important category in the whole novel.

The lack of empathy no one seems to understand each other and it is complete annihilation of empathy, the complete causality of empathy is important to observe because that is one of the first things which happens during a war. Post-war everything looks normal. There is an attempt to go back to civilian space, civilian life, civilian movements, mutability but the one thing which is missing constantly is empathy.

Empathy becomes one missing factor throughout the story. The alienation of Septimus as mentioned gets compounded, gets exponentially compounded because no one seems to understand him. The doctors do not understand them. They miscure him, they mistreat him, he is almost abused, he is almost coerced and confined and there is a lot of coercion happening.

This whole binary between coercion and care blows away in Mrs. Dalloway’s care becomes a form of coercion. The coercion becomes the form of care. He is asked to be confined in a room, he is asked to be fed in a certain kind of meal and what happens in the process is his agency as a human being is completely compromised and his entire anhelation of agency is something important for us to observe.

There is no agency at all left in Septimus and that compounds his traumas. The real trauma of the war is also there but what becomes more insufferable for Septimus is a lack of understanding that he experiences. It becomes the immediate crisis. No one seems to understand him; no one seems to be able to understand what he is going through.

The reason why “Mrs. Dalloway” is such an important novel is because from a newer scientific perspective what happens to Mrs. Dalloway is the suffering in “Mrs. Dalloway” of Septimus, the trauma in “Mrs. Dalloway” is about the lack of feeling. Septimus is unable to feel anymore, he is unable to connect to things, at adapt to the sense of feeling level anymore. There is no feeling left.

This lack of feeling becomes important. He is not able to feel, he is not able to emote, he is not able to express his emotions. It is a very complicated and complex process because there is also part of the masculinity package in “Mrs. Dalloway” where he was trained not to feel when he was grafted in the war when he was trained to be a soldier among the many drills which he had to go through was also a lack of feeling.

He is trained not to feel, strained not to emote because that is supposed to be the part of the military masculinity thing and that becomes internalized in the mind in the system to the point that when he comes back from the war, he thinks of his friends who died in the war. There is a person called Evans in the novel, Septimus’s very close friend and there is a very tenuous hint that Evans and Septimus may have been more than friends.

There was some relationship between them which may or may not have been erotic. It is not known and never spelled out but it is interesting to see how Septimus he keeps thinking about Evans. Evans comes back as some of the ghostly figure in the novel, it is like Banquo scares in Macbeth, but unfortunately, Septimus was not able to emote, he is not able to think of Evans in emotional terms because the ability to emote has been taken away from him.

He is not able to have feelings anymore, he is not able to emote anymore and that component is alienation, that component is loneliness. The entire trauma narrative in “Mrs. Dalloway” is a combination of medical conditions, political conditions and also existential conditions. The

fact was that he was trained not to emote, he was trained not to feel, he was trained not to express his emotions.

All these become important, all these now compound, all these become multiplied suffering to a large extent and this multiplication of suffering becomes important from Septimus perspective. "Mrs. Dalloway" as a literary text about trauma becomes very complex because trauma manifests itself in different forms, so most immediately in the form of feelinglessness.

The fact that he cannot feel anymore and in that sense it is quite interestingly comparable to "The Fly" by Katherine Mansfield because even Mansfield's, the real trauma comes out of nothingness. The father is feeling so numbed, he is not able to cry anymore the boss, he is not able to weep anymore for his dead son and that becomes a real cause of trauma that becomes a real cause of crisis.

It is like a post-war trauma, or a post-mourning trauma. He is unable to mourn anymore. The mourning in "The Fly" is a performative category, but Septimus' case in "Mrs. Dalloway", mourning becomes an aspirational category, an emotive category. He is not able to mourn or feel anymore, and feel the crisis of his loss.

There are other things in the novel which has a central character Mrs. Dalloway or Clarissa Dalloway. In the novel, she is throwing a big party where all the big people in London are coming, politicians, actors, with tickets in the parliament, the distinguished social presence all there in the party, and among other people there is a person called Peter Walsh.

Peter Walsh shows an interesting character in "Mrs. Dalloway" because Peter Walsh has just come back from India, a post-imperial India. He has come back to Britain, he has come back to London and he feels alienated too, and his alienation like Septimus' alienation is more existential because he cannot connect to the London anymore and he is coming back.

At some level they are quite comparable characters although they never meet Septimus and Peter Walsh. They just surpass each other sometimes. They never converse, they never talk, they never connect but they sometimes inhabit the same space-time as there is a hyperlinked

quality in “Mrs. Dalloway”. All the narratives sometimes connect to each other, sometimes disconnect, crisscross each other.

There is an interplay of narratives at a very interesting level. Peter Walsh does not suffer from trauma but there is definitely alienation that he has and the alienation comes because of the post-colonial condition. He comes back from India to London and he cannot connect to London anymore because there is a way change in London and he has come back from India.

He has an Anglo-Indian wife who connects him or secures him permanently or positions him permanently as a colonial officer as a colonial presence. The colonial presence is not completely alienated because the London that he comes back to wants to abandon him, wants to reject him like Septimus.

He is very much an abandoned character. He is very much leftover in this post-imperial, post First World War London. India is not free yet and it is not 1947 but then there is that post-imperial quality coming in. The fact that he is married to an Anglo-Indian person is interesting because that further alienates him that further takes them away from the white middle class, upper middle class, white privileged circle of London.

The First World War and the colonial backdrop become important cultural-political conditions in that plane. India is neither shown nor its trenches on the First World War but they keep coming in, they keep affecting, they keep infecting the narrative as it were with a presence with a recursive presence. It is to focus on Septimus and his trauma bit in “Mrs. Dalloway” as mentioned about the real trauma is a lack of feelings.

Real trauma further is not really essential subject anymore. It is just a liquidated person; he is just left over from the war. He has not died, he is a survivor of the war but he is not really a glorious survivor, he is someone who is unmanly. Someone who has been essentially emasculated by the war, so it is not really a presence where he can be glorified and becoming represented as a heroic character.

His is really an unheroic character. There is a degree of deglamorization that takes place above the war. "Mrs. Dalloway" is a very realist novel, a gritty realist novel because it does not glamorize the war, it does not glorify the war at any level and it looks at war from a very unglamorous perspective. This is about a person who has been infected by the lack of feeling, who has been infected by trauma.

It is just a problem now, it is an irritant, a very incompatible irritant in the post-war metropolis. Doctors do not like him, the civilians do not like him, no one likes him, his own wife does not understand him and the wife character becomes important. Rezia becomes important. Rezia is an Italian woman who is also an outsider. It is a novel about outsiders, it is a number of people who come from the outside, do not quite fit in.

It is a novel about misfits and the central character, Mrs. Dalloway is also an outsider despite being a white privileged woman. There is a degree of alienation that she experiences as well. Rezia's character is important. She is an Italian woman from Italy, whom Septimus met during the war and she is now in London. It is a different culture for her, a different language for her and also the different husband friends.

The husband is completely alienated from war entirely, does not quite attach to her, it does not quite connect to her at any level. There is a trauma of disconnect going on in "Mrs. Dalloway" and this trauma of disconnect, this trauma of incompatibility, the trauma of alienation is the real problem in "Mrs. Dalloway". The medical condition is there, the war spectral condition is there.

The traumatic condition is there but all that is compounded constantly by the existential emotional conditions. As mentioned the medical condition is emotional, the medical condition is existential. The fact that he cannot emote anymore, he cannot empathize anymore, he cannot connect anymore to other people that becomes the medical problem which is grossly mistreated by the medical practitioners Holmes and Bradshaw.

There is a heavy-handed way to force Septimus to eat, to force Septimus to be confined to a room, to force Septimus to be resting etc. And the introspective quality of Septimus is seen as

a problem. The further he is thinking about himself all the time that is seen as a melody by the doctors. He is encouraged to think outside of himself, he is encouraged to think of things like cricket.

He is encouraged to play cricket, play outdoor games, do this Boy Scout thing and again the masculinity thing keeps coming up it is never really away. The whole masculinity package of Septimus is sort of that is the main problem in "Mrs. Dalloway" in that sense because that becomes and informs this crisis and infects this crisis more exponentially. The whole idea of trauma as in "The Fly" is a very complex category in "Mrs. Dalloway".

It is not really about just suffering, it is not really about just medical problem but the medical problem is never a new way from the existential problem, from the emotional problem, from the social problem. All these become connected categories in the novel and they all connect and they coalesce into each other and it sort of snowballed into each other and it becomes really complicated categories of trauma.

"Mrs. Dalloway" is an entanglement of medical, social, emotional and existential conditions. All that factors come in and they contribute to the traumatic quality in "Mrs. Dalloway" with traumatic presence in "Mrs. Dalloway". It is a novel about trauma, it is a novel about a PTSD war veteran, and it is a novel about someone's suffering a shellshock.

We will unpack the term shellshock, but suffice it to say at this moment that it is a novel about all these things trauma, shellshock, PTSD but it is also a novel about existential alienation. It is manifested not just in Septimus in the novel but also the other characters by Rezia, Septimus' wife, Peter Walsh the colonial officer and by the central character Mrs. Dalloway, everyone is alienated from the immediate surroundings.

Since alienation becomes a part of the trauma experience, part of the trauma narrative in this particular novel. It is a Modernist novel, it is a novel about one day in London. So, the other thing which we need to be careful about is the use of time, the use of space time. This Modernist space time, but in terms of calendar time, in terms of clock time it is one day and it is London throughout.

But it is shown how despite being one day in one place the characters keep traveling in the minds all the time. So the different kinds of temporalities which come in there is traumatic time which is there, there is a clock time which is there, the psychological time which is there and all crisscross into each other, they all undercut each other in a very complex ways.

The spatial-temporal quality of trauma is something that you need to be very careful about. The trauma as a spatial-temporal quality, trauma as a spatial temporal event. The event trauma is very spatial-temporal in quality, so it sort of belongs to another space time and it cannot really be compatible with calendar time, with clock time and with standardized space.

The whole ontology of trauma and after this we will look at some theory on trauma, Catherine Malabou's book, "The Ontology of the Accident" and "The New Wounded" we will look at those things. But at this moment it is important to understand Mrs. Dalloway that a very ontology of trauma that very event of trauma it means. There is a different space time which is there for the traumatic person which is completely incompatible with standardized space time.

The space time is shared by everyone and space time inhabited by the traumatic person are completely different or completely incompatible and that is a problem in Septimus in "Mrs. Dalloway" that he constantly inhabits a different order of space and time. It is constantly transported to a different order of space and time and it cannot come in and cannot weave in seamlessly with the standardized space and time.

The lack of seamlessness is exactly what causes the trauma. The trauma could be seen as a fault line, the fact that it cannot weave in, it cannot mix, and it cannot seamlessly be woven into the social cultural fabric. He remains as an outsider, he remains as a leftover, and he remains as a spectral presence as an outsider in the whole narrative that compounds this trauma.

We look at these categories very carefully. We look at the philosophy of trauma very carefully and also the experiential quality of trauma very carefully when we read the novel. The spatial

temporal quality, the experiential quality, the cognitive quality again is very important because you know there is a lack of cognition going on. There is a crisis of cognition going on throughout the novel.

Septimus cannot cognize certain things, Septimus cannot recognize certain things and the lack of recognition is the lack of reconnection. He cannot reconnect to certain very normal things so because he cannot recognize those things. This recognition, reconnection dialectic is important in "Mrs. Dalloway". So, when he hear something for example, when he is a piston, when he is an advertising aeroplane in the sky, he is transported those act as triggers to him.

He is transported back in some other space time which is completely cut off from the space time in which he is physically inhabiting. There is a physical corporeal space time that is inhabiting with other people but it is also the mental space time where he is there and it is completely different, it is completely incompatible with the physical space time which is shared.

There is a shared space time and there is a psychological space time and those are completely disconnected categories on "Mrs. Dalloway" and that disconnect is exactly what causes the trauma in this particular novel. The whole idea of trauma we need to look at trauma in these categories and these lenses with its perspectives and also the perspective of memory, trauma as a crisis of memory because only memory he has.

The only memories that he can recover and represent in his mind are the memories of loss. It is a very metonymic thing. It is a selected fragmented process through which he informs himself. There is a degree of the crisis of the self. There is no stable self in "Mrs. Dalloway". The lack of stability of the self is important and self becomes disintegrated.

Disintegration is important because you know he does not integrate himself in a civilian space so that again the lack of integration becomes important and that is spatial-temporal the lack of integration. He cannot integrate with the space and time, he cannot integrate with the surroundings; he cannot integrate with the selves around them. It becomes the crisis of the self that is important for us to understand as well.

So just to wind up when you look at “Mrs. Dalloway”, we look at it obviously with the medical lens but also with a philosophical lens, with a social lens, with a cultural studies lens, with a fictional lens, with literary studies lens. These different perspectives; will come in which will make it very fascinatingly interdisciplinary. So, the interdisciplinary quality in the novel is exactly because it offers so much to the readers even after almost 100 years of write time.

There is a medical traumatic lens, there is a cognitive philosophical lens, there is a social sociological cultural lens and also there is a gendered lens, the post-colonial lens. So, all these lenses are valuable and they all have very valid readings in terms of reading the novel and if all bring it together and read it as a very interdisciplinary complex narrative about trauma, about self, about loss, about alienation, about nostalgia.

About all those things and how; these become connected categories. Trauma is not something which happens in the brain, there is also an extended quality about trauma. It is not just embedded, it is also extended. It also affects your social movements, it also affects your extended movements, extended embodiment. It is going to do something which is embedded in the brain.

There is an embedded quality of course, but there is also the extended quality which is very important for us to recognize when you read the novel. This is a backdrop and this is the philosophy which we will use appropriately when reading the novel, so I hope you find it interesting. So, for the next class onwards, we will start looking at novel the text, we will do certain selections on our text.

We cannot read it entirely, it is not practically feasible, but it is important for us to understand how this narrative that we talked about goes in the novel, how it is dramatizing the novel. So, we look at certain selected portions and do close readings of inspirations in terms of understanding how trauma and fiction can become important categories or representations of the self in alienation. So, we will start with the novel in the next lectures. Thank you for your attention.