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**CRISIS OF THE SELF: MODERNIST INVESTIGATION INTO  
VIRGINIA WOOLF'S SELECT WRITINGS**

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**Abstract:**

*Virginia Woolf was considered as major woman novelist writing novels in the new and unique way. She occupies a unique position among Modernist novelists. Her writings seek a voice for the voiceless in patriarchal society. The voice for all the subjugated and repressed in the unconscious is the most important aspect of her writings. Her modernism is reflected in her attempt to subvert convention dear to patriarchy and Victorian writers. The crisis in the mind of women characters has been presented for the first time by Virginia Woolf using new narrative technique called stream-of-consciousness. The present article is an attempt to study crisis of the self as modern metaphor with special reference to select writings of Virginia Woolf.*

**Keywords:** *Modernist, Crisis of self, Unconscious, Stream of Consciousness, Feminism, Patriarchy, etc.*

**Introduction:**

Virginia Woolf is known for her bold analysis of character of women in modern ways. She attempts to portray the psychology of woman using stream-of-consciousness technique. Her portrayal of women characters and their crisis to individualize themselves has branded her as feminist writer. However, Virginia Woolf has denied calling her as feminist writer. She claims that what is seen in the society is portrayed in her writings. Being a woman, she knows the problems of woman, her crisis in male dominated society, her attempt to assert her voice and her crisis of the self. Virginia Woolf has been credited to use new technique called stream-of-consciousness to portray the issues of woman. Her novels like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, *Jacob's Room*, and *The Waves* and other non-fictional writings like *A Room of One's Own*, *The Art of Fiction*, etc. deal with feminine issues and crisis of the self in modernist way.

**Statement of the Problem:** The present research article is modest attempt to investigate Virginia Woolf's handling of theme of crisis of self in her select writings.

**Aims and Objectives:**

- To study meaning of Modernism and feminine concerns of modernism.



- To study Virginia Woolf as Modernist writer.
- To study crisis of self in Virginia Woolf's fiction.
- To study Virginia Woolf's modernist handling of theme of crisis of self.
- To study Virginia Woolf's modernist handling of narrative technique like stream-of-consciousness.

### **Methodology:**

The novels and non-fictional writings of Virginia Woolf have been taken for the study in the following article. All secondary materials available Virginia Woolf would be additional source for analyzing Virginia Woolf's attempt to delve deep into the psyche of women characters. The interpretative and analytical research methods have been employed in the research. The feminist and modern theories have been additional source for analyzing Virginia Woolf's select writings and her handling of theme of crisis of self.

### **Hypothesis:**

Virginia Woolf has portrayed women characters in her novels and non-fictional works. She excels in using stream-of-consciousness in depicting soul of woman characters. The crisis in the psyche of women characters and their attempts to individualize themselves in patriarchal society are the major concerns of Virginia Woolf's writings. The present research article is an attempt to test and validate above observations.

### **Review of Literature:**

David Daiches analyzed fictional works of Virginia Woolf in his book entitled *Virginia Woolf* and neglected her non-fictional works. He brings out the lack of politics in the novels of Virginia Woolf. Another critic Joan Nettett studied Virginia Woolf's novels and brought out Woolf's less interest in the issues of woman. The German critic Erich Auerbach has focused on experimental style of Virginia Woolf in his work entitled *Mimesis*. According to him Virginia Woolf concentrated on innermost feelings and thoughts of character in her novels. American critics like Harvena Ritcher, James Naremore and Alice van Buren Kelley have made extensive investigation in Virginia Woolf's fiction and addressed both the external and internal realities in the lives of characters in Woolf's fiction. French professor Jean Guiguet in his book entitled *Virginia Woolf and her Works* studied Virginia Woolf and pointed out her interest in human being and social consciousness. Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* criticizes Virginia Woolf for her depiction of women in literature and rejected her suggestion to be androgynous in outlook. These critics have focused less on crisis of self in the novels of Virginia Woolf. Hence, the present study has undertaken in order to fill the gap in the study of Virginia Woolf's select writings.

### **Modernism and Virginia Woolf:**

As a reaction to Victorian and Edwardian materialism and focus on external observable details, modern writers like Virginia Woolf conceives mind as important object and subject of literature. Virginia Woolf's primary concern is the mind of the female as the very subject of modernist literature: "The privileging of internal, private, and evanescent impressions over the external, public and regulated markers is her cardinal principle for writing lives, or for writing 'self' (Saunders, 441). Virginia Woolf has challenged the narrativity, character and plot of traditional fiction and appealed for new modes of writing and language for narrativity and both these are the primary concerns of modernism and feminism. Her writings are concerned with feminine. She





attempts to construct female experience and perspective in her writings. In her *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf believes in fiction rather than truth and to lies rather than truth in order to construct female experience. Virginia Woolf also departs from her earlier novelists in her interrogation of narrativity, plot and character in realist novel. She discards reality willfully. Elaine Showalter criticizes Woolf's narrative politics: "Virginia Woolf withdraws from the facts and crisis of day-today experience" (Showalter, 167). There are some critics like Nancy Topping Bazin who argues that Woolf departs from traditional reality only because of her manic-depressive psychology. Her childhood life was not happy as her mother was in manic whereas her father was in depression. Female discourse and language is at the centre of Woolf's writing which makes her both feminist and modern. She delves deep into the psyche of woman in order to articulate female problems. It is apt to quote here:

For a modern writing, with its dislocation of syntax, its displacement of positions, its disruption of any one identity into mobility, the question of feminine discourse emerges as a challenge to the fixity of identity, as a challenge to the 'male' and 'female' which are the very terms – the places of that identity, as a challenge to the very principle of sexual identity, the whole fix of 'sexuality' (Heath, 135).

Virginia Woolf also questions the stereotypical roles assigned to female in patriarchal society. The crisis of identity and representation are the most important in psychoanalysis. Her writings enhance understanding of femininity. The phalocentric tradition of the west has been questioned in her novels and non-fictional works. She advocates feminine writing as it offers her opportunity to reflect on repressed woman's desire and muted other. It is in the light of above study, the present research article attempts to demonstrate in detail the reflection on crisis of the self in Virginia Woolf's select writings.

The year 1920 was the most important in the history of modernism as on this year Woolf writes in her diary "Some idea of a new form for a new novel. Suppose one thing should open out of another – as in *An Unwritten Novel* – only not for pages but 200 or so ...*Mark on the Wall*, *K. G.* and *Unwritten Novel* taking hands and dancing in unity" (Woolf, 23). Virginia Woolf was very ambitious to write a novel kind of fiction which should depart from earlier fiction writing in its style, form and theme. This ambition is best reflected in her very first novel *Jacob's Room*.

Virginia Woolf's most acclaimed novel *Jacob's Room*, published in 1922, explores the new subject – crisis of the self from both modernist and feminist perspectives. Woolf's critique of traditional realism is sign of feminist protest. The novel is modern in its style and form as advocated in her *Modern Fiction*. She writes in this connection: "There is no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own way" (Woolf, 47). The well ordered life of traditional novel is reacted and opposed in favour of psychic dimension evoked in Woolf's novels. Woolf's *Jacob's Room* takes birth from the various short stories written earlier. The novel is new and experimental as new form and style has been employed in this novel. No doubt, bright fire of *Jacob's room* forms the subject of the novel. The novel is centred around the character of Jacob Flanders. However, Jacob's character has been blossomed through the narration given by other characters. A Very young man from England, Jacob Flanders' love for classical world and his efforts to find his place in an empty world is the major concern of this novel. Jacob faces many problems during his interaction with his friends and relatives like his



mother Betty, a woman who takes interest in Jacob called Clara Durrant, his friend called Richard Bonamy, a woman in London called Florinda etc. He attempts to find meaning of his life. He remains mystery to his both friends and beloved. He travels to Europe where he meets Jinny Carslake, Cruttendon and Millionson in Paris. However, he does not find any solace in the company of these people and is not happy with them. As a result he leaves Paris and starts his journey to Greece. During his journey to Greece, he meets Sandra Williams and falls in love with her though she is married. Jacob dies in World War I. His relation with his mother and Sandra are happy one but he could not make meaning in his life. His room was cleaned by his mother at the end of the novel. This suggests that even mother also wipes out Jacob's memories. Jacob's empty room suggests emptiness of modernism. It becomes impossible for Virginia Woolf to depict complete man through the character of Jacob. The social world surrounding Jacob discomforts him. The traditional world depicted in the novel is gross material and brick scaffolding: "The cities which the elderly of the race have built upon the skyline showed like brick suburbs, barracks, and places of discipline against red and yellow flames" (Woolf, 34).

In short, the novel proves Virginia Woolf's polemic in *Modern Fiction*. Jacob is not happy with traditional literature. He hates modern novels except Henry Fielding and loves William Shakespeare and other Elizabethan, the Greeks: "... black outline upon what we are; upon the reality; the mirror and the Byrons; the sea and the lighthouse; the sheep's jaw with the yellow teeth on it ... 'I am what I am, and intend to be it', for which there will be no form in the world until Jacob makes one for himself. The plumers will try to prevent him from making it. Wells and Shaw and the serious sixpenny weeklies will sit on its head (Ibid., 33-34).

Like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf has portrayed the flickering of innermost flame through the character of Jacob. The inner spiritual journey of Jacob corresponds and reminds the character of Stephen Dedalus of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Virginia Woolf has abandoned the coherence, probability and signposts in order to sound inner flame of Jacob as real David Lodge calls this novel as 'a technique of radical and stylish deletion' (Lodge, 183). Though the novel is centred around the character of Jacob, the various characters' speculations and impressions on Jacob, the centre remains curiously vacant. Virginia Woolf wrote about Jacob's character as 'the silent young man' (Woolf, 58), 'how little he said' (Ibid. 116), 'if he is going to get on in the world, he will have to find his tongue' (Ibid., 70). The author has not explained and exposed the mind of the character Jacob, 'he lacked self consciousness' (Ibid. 69). The recurrent theme of modernism is unconsciousness and Jacob's unconsciousness is the major concern of the novel.

Virginia Woolf has portrayed the scattering objects in the room of Jacob which hints at fragmentary nature of Jacob. For example, a skull was kept into a rose in Jacob's empty room at Cambridge. It is the symbol of luminous halo. The novelist attempts to infuse life into the skull. The fragmentary nature of modern age has been presented through the room of Jacob. There is no story element, neither the development of characters. Though Jacob is protagonist of the novel, he is no centre of the novel because other characters help to understand the nature and character of Jacob. The narrator describes London city where Jacob resides for his education. The description of London streets reminds modern life full of alienation, despair, unhappiness, frustration and disappointment: "The proximity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an opportunity to stare into each other's faces. Yet few took advantage of it. Each had his own business to think of ... The omnibuses jerked on, and every single person felt relief at being a little nearer to his journey's end, though some cajoled themselves past the immediate engagement by promise of indulgence beyond-steak and kidney pudding, drink or a game of dominoes in the smoky corner of





a city restaurant ... Jacob, getting off his omnibus, loitered up the steps, consulted his watch, and finally made up his mind to go in ..." (Woolf, 62).

Jacob's room is presented as empty at the end of the novel when Jacob was died in war in London. Ordinarity is the most important characteristic feature of modernism and Woolf's *Jacob's Room* is full of ordinarity. The experiences of Jacob and other characters are ordinary and not significant. Inconclusive and insignificant moments in the lives of Jacob and other characters are so intense that the plot loses its importance in the novel. The ordinary life of Mrs. Pascoe is full of ordinarity and contradictions: "Although it would be possible to knock at the cottage door and ask for a glass of milk, it is only thirst that would compel the intrusion. Yet perhaps Mrs. Pascoe would welcome it. The summer's day may be wearing heavy. Washing in her little scullery, she may hear the cheap clock on the mantelpiece tick, tick, tick ...tick, tick, tick. She is alone in the house. Her husband is out helping Farmer Hosken; her daughter married and gone to America. Her elder son is married, too, but she does not agree with his wife ...for the millionth time she looked at the sea ...Mrs. Pascoe went indoors, fetched a cream pan, came out, and stood scouring it" (Woolf, 62). Mrs. Pascoe plays very insignificant role in the development of narrative or the story. However, Woolf has succeeded in portraying everyday life full of emptiness and ordinarity. Complete and ordered plot and narrative are absent in the novel.

In short, Woolf's *Jacob's room* is the beginning of modernism in literature. Though, the crisis in the self is less projected in the character of Jacob, the protagonist attempts to fathom his self through his journey to various countries and his death in the World War I. The empty room of Jacob represents psychic interiority, one which is unavailable. Virginia Woolf described the novel as 'a disconnected rhapsody' (Woolf, 46). The character and the mind of the protagonist, Jacob is unfathomable and irresolvable. Jacob is the absent centre – a ram's centre rather than rose. His absent centre exposes the hollow illusions – central in modernism.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is a distinguished novel in its depiction of crisis of the self in modernist way. The novelist started to write novel in 1922 and completed in 1924. It was first published in 1925. The novel is both modern and feminist. It unfolds one day from morning to night in the life of protagonist Clarissa Dalloway, an upper class housewife who lives in London. Like *Jacob's Room*, the novel exposes once again the 'luminous halo' in the life of Mrs. Dalloway. The modernist narrative technique 'stream-of-consciousness' has been used in the novel to fathom the unfathomable psyche of Clarissa Dalloway in vain. The novelist moves successfully from interior world of Clarissa Dalloway to the exterior world using the new narrative technique. Regarding her narrative technique and style, she writes in her diary: "I think writing must be formal. The art must be respected ...for if one lets the mind loose it becomes egoistic; personal which I detest. At the same time the irregular fire must be there; and perhaps to lose it one must begin by being chaotic, but not appear in public like that" (Woolf, 69). She further writes that her diary "writing has greatly helped my style; loosened and ligatures" (Ibid., 69). Thus, Virginia Woolf has rejected traditional narrative style in preference to new style of writing called transcendence of narrative linearity.

The novel *Mrs. Dalloway* narrates a day in the life of female protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, a married woman of 52 years old. It is divided into ten parts. The novel begins with detailed information about Clarissa's remembrance of many relatives and friends during her visit to Flower's shop. It also depicts reminiscences of Clarissa who was in love of Sally Seton and attempted to change the world. She read number of books and rejected the marriage proposal of her friend, Peter Walsh. Clarissa senses and experiences invisible; her mind and self is torn



between her love for Richard and Sally and her attraction to Peter. She is also tormented by the social situations where her role has been questioned. She fails to reconcile her innermost self with her surface self. Her relationship with Richard in married life could not bring solace to her. Her love for Sally is really deep. But she hates Sally's critical remarks about tradition of England. She wonders if life with Peter would have been more enjoyable and excited than the life with Richard. She sees English tradition as noble. She has invited all her friends and relatives for a party. She wanted to make her party successful and dissatisfied by her own role. Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway is portrayed as character overwhelmed by sense of despair and disappointment. Virginia Woolf has depicted vacuum world through the character of Clarissa.

The fixed and static narrative technique has been replaced by the new narrative strategy where nothing is static and everything is bound to change and momentary. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Clarissa sees both the present and past at a time. It was the month of June and Clarissa visualizes an October morning of childhood: "How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning ... chill and sharp and yet solemn" (Virginia Woolf 2015, 3). As per the expectations of modernism, there is no story, no plot and no conclusion in the novel. Instead, the narrative hints at the endless progression of story" "The story is ambitious in its efforts to do away with narrative – to eliminate 'story' - and attempts to reject a sequential, narrative reading of any kind. Time appears irrelevant and the story floats freely, following no pattern, but that of free association and there is a very real sense of time stopping which is conveyed in repetition that is rhythmically very strong" (Skrbic, 52).

The character of Clarissa is used as a linking device by Virginia Woolf in the novel. All loosened elements and events are linked together through the character of Clarissa. As a result, there is no centre in the character of Clarissa. Clarissa attempts to give meaning to her life sitting in front of mirror in vain. Her personality simply represents fraction of what she is and not herself as a whole. However, Virginia Woolf is most concerned with innermost feelings and thoughts of the character in this novel. E. M. Forster wrote: "...once the hidden life is manifested in external signs, it is no longer hidden - and, it was, of course, this inner or hidden life which most concerned Virginia Woolf at the time (Forster, 48). Virginia Woolf has used tunnelling process to render the innermost feelings and thoughts of Clarissa. The past events connected with Clarissa are used here as 'tunnelling process' to expose the psyche of Clarissa. The fragile and momentary nature of Clarissa's personality has been highlighted by Virginia Woolf when she describes Clarissa wondering on the streets of London without thinking herself or of Peter: "... she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that" (Woolf, 11) and "on the ebb and flow of things (Ibid., 11). Clarissa's self is in crisis and abeyance. Clarissa does not like masculine, aggressive, possessive, domineering ego of Peter. She takes a decision not to marry Peter: "For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house" (Woolf, 10), but "with Peter everything had to be shared" (Ibid., 10). Peter's domineering nature and his male ego's possessive nature forced Clarissa not to share anything with Peter. Clarissa expected a room of her won. Clarissa wanted to resist colonization on the part of male dominated society and this is suggested in her reaction to the mirror in which she sees herself while travelling in train. She sees "the bed and Baron Marbot and the candle halfburnt" (Ibid., 36-37). This enables Clarissa to resist male ego and male domination. Clarissa wanted to see her own reflection in the mirror: "the delicate pink face of the woman... of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself" (Ibid., 42). Clarissa is aware of her lack of something central in her character and this awareness has made her to repress her feelings and thoughts in order to become





subject. Clarissa's relationship with Sally is to some extent happy one. She becomes mother of five sons. But she is conscious of her subjugation in the name of love and marriage. She feels that Sally respects her for her becoming motherhood and not more than this. Thus Clarissa becomes Mrs. Dalloway in different way. She does not like to be treated as commodity by the patriarchal society. Her becoming mere Mrs. Dalloway does not allow her to accept the laws of patriarchy.

### Conclusion:

In short, Crisis of the self is the unique feature of Virginia Woolf's novels. The author has presented fractured psyche of Jacob and Clarissa and their crisis to find meaning to their life. The characters in Woolf's novels never blossom as in the case of Jacob and Clarissa. The unconscious minds of Jacob and Clarissa are laid bare using other characters. The climax of modernism is seen in Virginia Woolf's handling of form of novel. Virginia Woolf's attempts to seek meaning to life and crisis for identity is best reflected in her diary: "Yet I have some restless searcher in me. Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on and say 'This is it'? I'm looking: but that's not it – that's not it. What is it? And shall I die before I find it? Then (as I was walking through Russell Square last night) I see the mountains in the sky: the great clouds; and the moon which is risen over Persia; I have a great and astonishing sense of something there, which is title. It is not exactly beauty that I mean. It is that the thing is in itself enough: satisfactory; achieved. A sense of my own strangeness, walking on the earth is there too: of the infinite oddity of the human position; trotting along Russell Square with the moon up there and those mountain clouds. Who am I, what am I, and so on: these questions are always floating about in me: and then I bump against some exact fact - a letter, a person, and come to them again with a great sense of freshness. And so it goes on. But on this showing, which is true, I think, I do fairly frequently come upon this 'it'; and then feel quite at rest (Woolf, 86).

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