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Virginia Woolf and the Construct of Sanity and Insanity in *Mrs Dalloway*

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“My Madness Saved Me”- this bold summing up of Woolf’s life and work in the form of a title of a book by Dr Thomas Szasz seems not only to ‘deconstruct’ the popular notions on sanity and insanity prevalent in the society but at the same time, serves to establish its authenticity and simultaneous existence in the ‘mad genius’ of Virginia Woolf as well as literary characters of *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf was declared mentally ill at quite an early stage in her life and this intense grappling with the whole issue of sanity and insanity through her repetitive nervous ‘breakdowns’ coupled with the involvement of Bloomsbury group in ‘the early manifestations of the Freudian psychiatry’ led to a close scrutiny and re-defining of the whole concept as well as ways of looking and interpreting it in modern literature and society. The novel, in writer’s own words, attempts to present ‘the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side’ through the characters of the ‘sane’ woman protagonist Mrs Clarissa and the ‘insane’ World War veteran Septimus Warren Smith and the ‘societal oppression’ confronted by the both in the form of brutality, meaninglessness and loneliness of the modern British society. The sanity of Mrs Clarissa Dalloway and other characters is as much open to question as the overt insanity of Septimus and they are frequently shown to exchange places as far as normalcy and mental illness is concerned.

Having herself experienced the periodic and recurrent bouts of insanity and yet being a ‘sane woman’ and a tremendously creative and prolific writer, the socially constructed categories of ‘madness’ and ‘sanity’ for Virginia Woolf, are nothing but “absurd simplifications” which need to be challenged ‘*per se*.’ She has challenged the question of madness in her personal life and actions through her writings and tremendous contribution to English literary culture. Most of her fictional and creative work was the result of that ‘lava of madness’ in which she is believed to have found her subjects as well as the subject matter. Virginia Woolf suffered her first bout of mental instability at the tender age of thirteen years when she was unable to cope up with her mother’s loss. Her father’s death nine years later led to her second severe breakdown when she had to be institutionalized. After the death of her brother a few years later, she was forced to stay in a sanatorium for several months and this was followed by many more mental collapses when she temporarily lost control over her self and grew incoherent over a period lasting from a few days to several months. Yet, it goes to her credit how these depressive collapses were utilized by her as a kind of ‘mental advantage’ to give vent to her pent up emotions and frustrations. She took this illness as almost an “act of release” since, in her own words, “what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness.” (Lyndall Gordon. 1986: 196)

To Virginia Woolf, the concept of insanity is most intimately concerned with the loss of communication with the world outside one's mind and the resultant loneliness and desperation. This is most clearly evident in the character of Septimus Warren Smith, who feels like an "outcast who gazed back at the inhabited regions, who lay like a drowned sailor, on the shore of the world." (*Mrs Dalloway*. 2005: 101) Any kind of mental breakdown, in the final sense of the term, leads to the process of thought being so rapid that language, the main route of communication, tends to become incoherent. This goes on to explain the essential linkages between Virginia Woolf's temporary loss of sanity and the process of creativity. She could feel these moments of 'intoxication' and incoherence at the time of writing the final pages of one of her novels, *The Waves*, when her 'thoughts flew ahead and her reason stumbled after'. In her own words: "I wrote the words O Death fifteen minutes ago, having reeled across the last ten pages with some moments of such intensity and intoxication that I seemed only to stumble after my own voice, or almost, after some sort of speaker (as when I was mad). I was almost afraid, remembering the voices that used to fly ahead." (1986: 197-98.) She feels that during such moments while the sub-conscious and unconscious mind gets hyperactive and begins to work at top speed, the conscious mind becomes dull and passive.

The failure of emotional energy and feelings in the modern times and circumstances, the fact that one gets crushed and numb under the pressures of modern existence and loses communication with the outside world is a most terrifying tragedy related to the world of sanity and insanity. Septimus Warren- the shell shocked victim of First World War, describes these pressures related to disorder, degradation, futility, sordidity and corruption of the modern life in the following words: "The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?" (19). This emotional paralysis is the earliest symptom of mental illness in Septimus. When his officer Evans gets killed in the war just before the Armistice in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion at the end of such a valuable relationship, congratulates himself 'upon feeling very little and very reasonably.' (94) Four years of war had blunted his feelings and emotions and made him brutal. The war, for a while, had provided him with the false identity of being a brave survivor and a decorated hero: "The War had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive." (94) It is only later when Evans' memory begins to haunt him that the panic that 'he could not feel' dawns over him and he is overpowered by the feelings of shame and self-disgust. His sense of guilt and crime is further extended when he gets married to an Italian girl- Lucrezia without really loving her. In the words of Lyndall Gordon: "He sees no artificial distinction between the organized aggression that destroyed the man he most revered (Evans) and the random callousness of any Tom or Bertie in civilian life, their starched shirt fronts 'oozing thick drops of vice.'" (199) Seen in this light, there is really a very thin line separating the normal and the abnormal human beings and the boundaries of the two constructs, more often than not, are so closely intertwined that it is difficult to distinguish between the two and as Virginia's own experience demonstrates, the normal features associated with insanity in the form of incoherence between thought and action or any kind of maniac behaviour including

hysteria or hallucinations often prove to be the source of extraordinary creativity in the form of art, literature, music or any other sphere.

The most significant aspect related to sanity and insanity that Virginia describes in the novel relates to the “twin Goddesses of Proportion and Conversion” that the modernist British society and its various authorities believed in. Whereas the concept of Proportion, as used in the novel, signifies a person’s ability to think and act in a coherent and rational manner, the concept of Conversion signifies the power of normalization exercised by various ruling forces by trying to convert everyone within their domain to the same set of conventional norms that have been fixed by the society. This implies that anyone who dares to challenge the set norms of society and refuses to fit into the same mould, can not be tolerated as a normal human being and needs to be shifted to sanatoriums or such other isolating places for medical treatment and proper cure. Such ‘insane’ individuals who are believed to be a threat to the established notions of rationality must be ‘corrected’ even through the use of force, if necessary, until they fit into the prescribed norms of reason and coherence. Virginia Woolf criticizes this essentially imperial notion of reason and is strongly against any socially constructed binary of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ based on the brutal mechanisms of power and control.

It is this ‘coercive discourse of power’ that is represented by Dr William Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes- the two doctors who try to cure the mental illness of Septimus through the manipulative use of their medical powers. Dr William, ironically, throughout his course of treatment never says that Septimus is suffering from “madness”; he instead calls it lack of “a sense of proportion.” Dr Holmes, goes even a step ahead to discard all mental illnesses as mere ‘funk’- “nerve symptoms and nothing more.” (99) When Rezia enquires from him about his diagnosis of her husband, he very calmly replies that “there was nothing whatever the matter” (98) with Septimus “except the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death.” (99) Dr William, the specialist, however, feels just the opposite and finds this ‘abnormality’ in Septimus as serious as a ‘social danger’ that has to be wiped out at every cost through the power of scientific knowledge. Like Virginia’s own doctors, Sir William also insists that Smith is ‘dangerously’ ill and immediately needs to be quarantined in a sanatorium “where there are to be no ideas and no contacts’ until the patient is healed and ‘corrected.’ Both the doctors are not aware of the real cause of Septimus’ illness and are only interested in exercising their “disciplinary power to control’ the likes of Smith from protecting their intimacy and ‘privacy of the soul.’ Their sense of ‘proportion’ is limited to the idea of physical fitness which, they believe, would automatically guarantee one’s sense of proportion: “Health we must have; and health is proportion.” (107) And this ‘divine proportion’, Sir William’s ‘goddess’ had to be ensured through the disciplinary techniques of ‘surveillance’, ‘normalization’ and above all through another ‘Goddess’ – the twin sister of proportion- namely Conversion: “But Proportion has a sister, less smiling, more formidable...Conversion is her name and she feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on the face of the populace.” (108) It is this will of converting everyone to a ‘point of view’ where each shared similar sense of proportion as that owned and propagated by the imperialist’s dominant forces and ideologies. It is this blind worship of

these twin goddesses that had not only made the likes of William and Holmes to prosper but made whole England prosper through punishing the lunatics and penalizing despair: Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion- his, if they were men, Lady Bradshaw's if they were women..." Virginia believed that sanity or normality, what Bradshaw terms as sense of proportion, is an 'arbitrary notion' reached through the collective consent of 'generations of practical men' and that the symptoms of insanity in the form of 'diseased emotions' and physical and psychological brutality are commonly found in everyday existence since up to a very great extent, they are a part of the 'common rage' imparted by the society 'with its arbitrary norms.' The insensitivity of the doctors and the psychiatrists- as expressed through Dr Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, who consider abnormality primarily as a form of 'radicalism' that needs to be wiped out at the earliest- goes on to add more agony to the existing thin line between the sane and the insane. Virginia Woolf argues that the doctor's misuse of their medical authority is not to be seen as a 'peculiar phenomenon independent of the social order.' Expressing Virginia's opinion, Stephen Trombley writes that Bradshaw and his colleagues are "more correctly, an integral part of a system bent on repressing all forms of deviance, a system which seeks to maintain order by promoting uniformity of behaviour, at least among the classes which can not afford the luxury of eccentricity." (Trombley: 105)

Virginia believes that the social construct of normal and the abnormal is intimately related to one's capacity to be able to protect and preserve the privacy of one's soul. Septimus could clearly feel this assault on his individuality in the form of Dr Holmes and Bradshaw. He confesses this onslaught in the following words: "Human nature, in short, was on him- the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on him...Once you stumble, Septimus wrote on the back of a postcard, human nature is on you. Holmes is on you." (100) For all those individuals who dare defy the codes and disciplinary gaze of dominant class, and especially to the weak and the sick like Septimus, Dr Holmes seemed to stand for the most terrible and evil side of human nature, "something horrible" which is ever ready to 'tear each other to pieces' and the only option was "to escape" 'anywhere' quietly from such forces without letting them know about it. The fact that even Rezia, Septimus wife, could not understand the evil designs of people like Dr Holmes causes terrible pains to him and he felt completely 'deserted': "So he was deserted. The whole world was clamouring: kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes. But why should he kill himself for their sakes? Food was pleasant; the sun hot; and this killing oneself, how does one set about it, with a table knife, uglily, with floods of blood,- by sucking a gas- pipe? He was too weak..." (101) Yet he can not let people like Dr Holmes take over his individuality and a unique kind of freedom 'which the attached can never know.' The final pronouncement made by Smith before he decides to end his life is most revealing in the sense in which it exposes the hypocrisy and control mechanisms of the forces of proportion and conversion and their ultimate failure to turn people over to their sense of sanity and proportion: "Holmes had won of course; the brute with the red nostrils had won. But even Holmes himself could not touch this last relic straying on the edge of the world...(101)

A man like Septimus, 'who had fought, who was brave' is forced to live like an 'outcast', even the eminent psychiatrists like Bradshaw prefer to maintain safe distance from him and refuse to hear and understand his real pain and problem. He is isolated to a position where listening to the voices of his dead friends, he despairingly concludes that only "the dead were with him." (101) Septimus Smith's wife- Rezia is the only person who cares, understands and respects his insanity. She is even able to see through the 'obscurely evil' side of Bradshaw and ironically enough, she is even able to reawaken momentarily his sense of lost humour just before his act of suicide. The 'sanity' of 'insane' Septimus clearly comes to the fore in the form of his lamentations for not being able to provide his wife the genuine love and companionship that she so rightly deserved. This kind of realization eludes the likes of Bradshaw and other sane characters who take marriage as 'arrangement' to promote their own interests and rising status and in the process 'cramp' and 'squeeze' their wives. Septimus, in spite of his mental illness appreciates the beauty underlying the world, is able to hear the singing of the birds, and most significantly, craves for some purpose in life: "We welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create Beauty, the world seemed to say. And as if to prove it (scientifically) wherever he looked...beauty sprang instantly. To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging them selves in and out, round and round...beauty was everywhere. (76)

As some of the critics have expressed, Virginia has chosen in Septimus a perfect 'objective co relative' for her own unexpressed desires and dreams and also for the periods of her own mental illness when she was unable to feel anything and her subsequent treatments by the doctors and the psychologists. To quote Roger Poole: "In this way, and in giving Septimus Smith just precisely *this* problem, Virginia has created a symbol which exactly corresponds to the unspoken and incommunicable elements of her own problem in 1912-13. Then shocked and isolated, she could not feel, and she could not express her feelings. She was treated in an entirely external and 'behavioural' way, which took no account of her inner dilemma." (217)

The novel has also been appreciated as a 'pioneer work in the genre of the female asylum trauma narrative' in the sense that it depicts male society's 'fantastic' power "to silence women" in a most inhuman manner through the surrender of her autonomy and privacy in the hands of the psychiatrists. (Giovanna Pompele.2004:233) Septimus, being Clarissa's 'double' and 'alter ego' reaffirms Virginia's 'vehement indictment' of the horrors of women's psychiatric incarceration, which she herself had experienced on more than one occasions. Woolf herself, in one of her introductions to *Mrs Dalloway*, states that originally it was Clarissa Dalloway who was to 'kill herself.' The close bonding between the two is also reflected in their manifestations the "post-traumatic symptoms, and in their antagonistic attitude to the demands of the status quo. In the words of Nancy Toppin Bazin, each of them represent "one of the psychic moods of bipolar disorder" which is 'genderized' in the sense that "each shares to some extent the vision of the other, Clarissa is predominantly feminine and maniac whereas Septimus is predominantly masculine and depressive." (1973: 103) Septimus and Clarissa are both fiercely against any kind of authority or domination and are 'obsessed' in their own ways "with a

compulsive need for personal autonomy.” In the words of Suzette Henke: “through his suicide, Septimus communicates with Clarissa, who understands his gesture of defiance against an authoritarian society that would force his soul.” (1981: 139)

So any construct of sanity and insanity has to take into consideration this larger social context of suffering and loneliness, prevailing horrors (Horror! Horror! she (Clarissa) wanted to cry), lack of communication and sensitivity, the mercilessness of man to man and the near total collapse of human values of love, generosity and compassion. The brutal exercise of power permeates every level of existence and relationships. Then there is the imperial power of knowledge and reason which does not take into account the needs and desires of the weak, the sick and the rebels. The characters in the novel who are supposed to be normal to the level of being successful politicians, academicians and intellectuals have their own ‘eccentricities’, strange habits and behaviour coupled with underlying feeling of despair and incoherence: “Everything seemed very queer...all seemed, after Edinburgh, so queer.”(30-31) Peter Walsh, had the strange habit of always carrying a large pocket knife with him and taking it out every time he met anyone: “What an extraordinary habit that was, Clarissa thought; always playing with a knife. Always making one feel, too, frivolous; empty-minded...” (49) There is Clarissa, who, in order to escape the tyranny of unexpressed desires, is forever, ‘mending her dress; playing about; going to parties; running to the House and back and all that...’(46) There is Doris Kilman, for whom “her food was all that she lived for; her comforts; her dinner, her tea...The pleasure of eating was almost the only pure pleasure left her...” (139-40) People like Hugh Whitbread and Lady Bruton “who had been afloat on the cream of English society” for many years, cut a sorry figure while trying to maintain their hierarchies and class distinctions by observing ‘little courtesies’ and ‘old-fashioned ceremonies’ even when not necessary.

So ‘normality’ as Virginia concludes, is an ‘arbitrary notion’, “arrived at by the consent of generations of practical men.” She also believed that “the symptoms of madness are to be found in responses too common to strike one as they ought: emotional inertia, loathing of one’s kind, psychological as well as physical brutality.” (202) In the opinion of her sister- Varnessa, Virginia was successful in providing “the most extraordinary sense of bigness of point of view” as far as understanding the concept of sane and insane is concerned. In her words: “I think she (Virginia) has in reality amazing courage and sanity in life.” (203) When such educated and knowledgeable characters as Dr Bradshaw, Dr Holmes and the others like them could be so insensitive to the real needs of human life and little educated and mentally ill characters like Rezia and Septimus can recognize and strive for a more humane, sensitive and interactive world, there seem to be an urgent need to erase the socially and intellectually constructed boundaries around these two constructs and rather attempt to understand the inter relationship and inter linkages that flow between the two so that this world could be a better place to live in for both the categories and all others who are weak and relegated to the periphery in various ways. Through this novel and through Septimus Smith, Virginia Woolf is not only able to explore the nature of insanity but also succeeds in liberating the construct of insanity from its marginal positions. And seen from the gender, as well as human point of view, this is no small

contribution at a time when things, ideologies and individuals seemed to be ‘falling apart’ and ‘anarchy’, horror and fragmented self were the order of the day.

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