

Representing the 'Self' in the Personal Writings of Virginia Woolf

Uttara Bisht¹

Abstract: The paper explores the idea of the 'self' through a reading of Virginia Woolf's select diaries and letters. In order to examine the 'self', the paper reads three important works by French philosopher, Michel Foucault to arrive at an understanding of the self. The self, as one understands, is constructed through a constant engagement with oneself as well as through one's interactions with the others. The paper argues how the self of the author, Virginia Woolf is revealed through her practice of diary and letter writing (as Foucault says writing means to *show oneself*) which displays various facets of her character be it as a writer or a wife or a master to her servants.

Keywords – Self, personal writings, 'author-function', 'know yourself', 'founder of discursivity'

Around the 1920s when the idea of New Feminism was still taking shape in Britain, one of its most celebrated woman writers, Virginia Woolf had already entered the literary scene with the publication of her first novel *The Voyage Out* in 1915. The decade's end saw the publication of her feminist treatise *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and established her as a Feminist thinker of the twentieth century. Woolf's concerns may not be similar to those of the New Feminists but her idea behind writing to represent or to voice one's own views somehow make us see similarities in their disparate intentions: to shun the notions of superiority attributed to men, highlighting the differences and advocating equality and dignity.

Virginia Woolf left behind a voluminous and equally enthralling array of personal writings comprising of memoirs, diaries and letters revealing a completely different side of her personality. Through her writings, she emerges as a vociferous reader and writer, a distinct observer of men, manners and fashion, a benevolent critic and a vehement gossipmonger. At several instances, in her diaries, she mentions the idea behind diary-writing as not just a way to preserve memories of

¹ Uttara Bisht has been awarded a PhD degree by the department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi in July 2019. Her thesis is titled *Suicide of the Author: A Study of the Personal Writings of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath*. Her research interests include Women studies, Suicide studies, Biographical Research, Feminist theory and Translation studies. She has taught at some of the best colleges of Delhi University including Miranda House, Daulat Ram College, Kalindi College and Dyal Singh College. She has presented papers at conferences and has published articles in both English and Hindi languages in some well-known journals like EPW, The Wire and Samayantar. She has also been translating stories and one of her translated stories of Premchand was published by Penguin Classics. She is currently translating a novel. She can be contacted at: uttara159@gmail.com

her life and herself but as a constant way of practicing the 'art of writing' itself. One would hardly doubt her meticulous and dedicated efforts towards maintaining these diaries which became crucial 'points of origin' for fiction-writing and through these engagements and associations between the 'self' and the others culminating in some of her best works. These diaries which she started maintaining before working on her fiction are thus, not just proofs of her popularity as a fiction writer, but present a form of narrative, a compilation of events of life that get voiced (verbalized) and transformed into different narrative forms. Referring to this form, in Volume 1 of her diary, she writes, "all writing even this unpremeditated scribbling has its form, which one learns" (304).

More than her fiction it is her personal writings which best represent the 'Self' for they are possibly the closest to truth about her life. So, without much contention, one can say that diary-writing is a personal act of writing that is in a sense more self-representational than any form of fiction for it is 'truth' as represented by the writer herself. Diary-writing, in the case of Woolf, was a personal act not intended for any audience other than the writer herself and with the purpose of keeping a record of her life and times but equally as an act of self-preservation. She took it up as an exercise to re-read and re-examine them, providing a stimulus to her fiction. Her letters which serve as 'personal' correspondences with relatives and friends are more obligatory in nature but equally important in trying to unravel the different selves that Woolf represents.

The paper through a reading of her select diaries and letters seeks to examine the notion of the 'Self' and how it gets constructed. How is the 'Self' produced in these personal writings? Can personal writings be seen as a medium of self-representation? Moreover, for a woman writer like Virginia Woolf how is the representation of the 'Self' important? Is there a fixed notion of the self or is it fragmentary? Can there be a feminist representation of the Self? The paper does not intend to arrive at any rigid definitions of the Self, on the contrary, it tries to explore some of the interesting ways through which Woolf, the woman-writer represents her 'Self' through her personal writings.

In the year 1982, French philosopher, Michel Foucault delivered the lecture *Technologies of the Self* at the University of Vermont focusing on the history of the development of the Self. The lecture focused on the development of the hermeneutics of the self through an analysis of the relation between care and self-knowledge. His aim was to study how the technology of self, which is one of the four techniques he defines, functioned in order to produce knowledge about the self. The technologies of the self are those "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (2). The 'Self' or 'Auto' which means 'same' also attached to the notion of identity is defined by the relation between two sets of ancient practices: "to take care of yourself" (*epimeleisthai sautou*) and the Delphic principle "know yourself" (*gnothi seauton*) found in the Greco-Roman and Christian traditions. The self is not something that can be possessed but it is something that is produced through various activities

that one undertakes. Self is at one level, related to one's identity, personality and being but, it is also a 'mirror to the soul'.

The basic idea behind defining the technology of the self is to explain how in order to take care of oneself one needs to occupy oneself with the 'self'. In simple terms, it means to engage with oneself through a self-examination leading to self-knowledge. Further, taking care of the self got linked to a constant writing activity and was seen as instrumental in producing the self. In this relation, Foucault writes, "Writing was also important in the culture of taking care of oneself. One of the main features of taking care involved taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed" (10-11). The self, he proclaims, is "something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity" (11). These letters and personal notebooks scribbled with details of everyday life describing "what you thought, what you felt" (12) were a form of introspection and analysis of the self, as well as an 'examination of conscience' (13). Leaving aside the moral and the ethical issues linked to the idea of the self, what becomes of utmost interest is the way the common and the ordinary plays a role in the construction of the self. Referring to an example of a letter exchanged between Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius and his tutor, the Roman rhetorician, Marcus Cornelius Fronto, Foucault explains how these forms of personal writings constituting details of the everyday routine become a way of engaging with and exploring the self. To this he adds, "Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of oneself was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing" (11). It is in these 'nuances of life' explored through the 'act of writing' that the self is located.

Virginia Woolf started writing letters at the age of six and continued to write them till her death in 1941. The four thousand letters that survive mostly addressed to relatives and friends are casual in their content describing events and episodes that she was part of and the usual literary gossip that she wanted to share. For instance, a letter (no. 888) to her husband, Leonard appears something like, "...There is very little in the way of news. We fetched our milk, and Saxon carried it back, and then we settled down to gossip, in the usual minute way..." (193-194). In another letter (no. 905) to her sister, Vanessa, she writes, "I now begin another letter, partly that should I die tonight you may know that my last thoughts were of you. Nor that you care - but think of all the gossip you'd miss - yes, that touches the one sensitive spot" (213). It is in these sundry details that the self is experienced simply because "*they are you - what you thought, what you felt*" (12). It is through the exchanges between oneself and others about the experiences of life that the self gets defined.

In the lecture titled *Self Writing* Foucault explains how the letter as a form of personal writing produces the self in relation to others. This form of correspondence involves a dual function which has an effect on both: the one who addresses it as well as the one who receives it. He describes it as a 'face-to-face meeting' that not only "brings to us real traces, real evidence of an absent friend" but it offers "both a gaze that focuses on the addressee and (...) a way of offering oneself to his gaze by what one tells him about oneself" (216). The gaze that the letter offers is not aimed at an introspection of the self rather an opening or a revelation of oneself. For him,

“To write is thus to “*show oneself*,” to project oneself into view, to make one’s own face appear in the other’s presence” (216). These personal writings must not be considered as intimate journals meant for confessing rather their whole aim should be “to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self” (211). The narrative of the self, thus, is constructed mainly through the correspondences with others.

The diaries of Woolf bring before us two predominant selves of Woolf: one, as a woman and the other as a writer. The two selves often merge, but also collide and confront. Her diaries are interspersed with events mundane as well as uncommon, filled with conversations with friends discussing literature, visits to London, gossips about the servants, hunting for houses and describing days when she was confined to the bed because of her mental illness. Writing which she says, “gives me my proportions” (343) is a constant activity for her which she would take up almost daily until unless she was seriously ill or had visitors. Her fascination with a new pen and a bottle of ink that she mentions about often in her diaries provides her with the temptation to write meticulously each day. Each diary entry mentioning date and place are indications of the consistency in maintaining her entries. Importantly, these diaries mark the development of a writer who shares her anxieties, fears and jealousies. The Woolf that the readers already know about is a brilliant novelist, owner of the Hogarth Press, member of the Bloomsbury group and the Memoir club and the lover of Vita Sackville West. But the Woolf who was over conscious of her dress, constantly in confrontational mood with her servants, Lottie and Nelly, obsessed with buying new houses in search of a peaceful place to write, critical of both her relatives as well as her contemporaries be it Katherine Mansfield or James Joyce and someone who described her physical discomforts like menstrual cycle or copulation without inhibitions is unknown to most. Her self is, thus, not limited to the moments when she portrays her regular roles but in between these when she exhibits a completely different side of her personality.

While most of the moments described in these personal notebooks could be passed as uneventful, some stand out leaving an indelible effect on the readers’ minds revealing fascinating aspects of her life. For instance, Woolf found it most difficult to shop for clothes as equally to spend time on dressing up for parties. She was a frequent party-goer but she could not visualize herself wasting time on dressing up. She found shopping tedious and boring and would buy her clothes from empty shops though paying more but saving her valuable time. In one of her diaries, she writes, “I dislike the sight of women shopping. They take it so seriously” (Vol. I, 8). She was critical of other women who dressed up badly but equally feared criticism because of her choice of clothes. In May 1928, when she received the Femina prize for her novel *To the Lighthouse* she recalls how she feared looking ugly in a cheap black dress. In her diary, she records, “Afterwards there was the horror of having looked ugly in cheap black clothes. I cannot control this complex” (Vol. III, 183). Dealing with this appearance-complex, in a letter (no. 923) to her sister, Vanessa, she writes, “...You know the horror of buying clothes, especially for one forced as I am to keep my underclothes pinned together by brooches...So it went on: I tried shop after shop...What a world we live in!” (232). She was even harsher on her own sex when she caricatured them for

their appearance and facial features while drawing their character sketches in her diaries. For instance, she describes Bowen Hawkesford, a neighbour from Rodmell as “...a cheap piece of crockery, for her nose reminds one of a tea pot spout; her mouth is like a slot in coarse china” (192). While describing Margaret Davies, General Secretary of the Women’s Cooperative Guild, she observes, “...straggling wisps of hair; hats floppy & homemade; thick woolen stockings; black shoes, many wraps, shabby handbags, & shapelessness, & shabbiness, & dreariness & drabness unspeakable. A tragedy in its way” (Vol. III, 296-297). What clearly emerges out of the above descriptions is the fact that while she was dismissive of the idea of wasting time over outward physical appearance, she could not help but feel insecure about her own dressing style. Woolf was equally conscious of her rather abnormal height and skeleton-like appearance which made her quite unattractive among men. Even more intriguing is the fact that while she portrays herself more as a victim of women’s fashion of the early modern period, she chooses the same lense to censure other women.

Virginia Woolf was often very blatant in her criticism of people especially from the lower classes. This discrimination often appears in her letters in form of her friction with her maid servants, Nelly and Lottie. She uses the harshest words possible to criticize them for lacking education and sophistication. In volume I of her diaries, she remarks, “Considering their unimportance they must be compared to flies in the eye for the discomfort they can produce in spite of being so small” (197). For Nelly, she says, “How can an uneducated woman let herself in, alone, into our lives? – what happens is that she becomes a mongrel; & and has no roots anywhere” (Vol. III, 220). Not only are the words like ‘flies’ or ‘mongrel’ used in relation to her servants quite demeaning, they even suggest at a form of class oppression which existed in the then modern English society. Throughout her life, Woolf was dependent on her servants and nurses for providing her with their valuable services not just at the time of her illness but also to facilitate her hours of reading and writing. While such unabashed comments on the servants stand out in demystifying the godly image of the author, it also reveals the writer’s proclamation of truth about certain issues.

Woolf was unsparing in her censure of her contemporaries and her jealousy towards them also forms a part of her writings. Regarding James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*, Woolf wrote “...have been amused, stimulated, charmed, interested by the first 2 or 3 chapters – to the end of Cemetery scene; & then puzzled, bored, irritated, & disillusioned as by a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples (Vol. II, 189). To dismiss the writings of another acclaimed writer in such a flippant manner shocks the readers but also re-establishes the earlier observation about how Woolf nonchalantly passed judgements.

One cannot possibly imagine how else Woolf could have filled the pages of her voluminous diaries and letters if it was not for the description of landscapes while moving in and out of London, portraits of her friends that often turned into caricatures, literary gossips that began as parties and ended as criticism-sessions, the visits made by friends despite her calling them ‘disruptions’ at work or through her frequent introduction to her fictional characters like Mrs. Dalloway or Septimus Smith to the readers. She could barely resist the temptation of showing

her creativity through presenting men and manners and in the course of it, revealing her own self. Thus, these personal notebooks become interesting precisely because they throw open to us the world that was inhabited by Woolf and in the process revealed her Self.

The paper began by suggesting that various forms of personal writings especially those meant for the self and not intended for others, seem to become a repository of truth made available by the writer himself/herself. But how much of the truth the writer has chosen to reveal can never be arrived at. A writer may well choose to hide those episodes of life that she associates with pain or a sense of guilt. In such a case, how does one reach the ultimate truth or is the need for truth secondary to the need for representing the self that may not be the true self. Woolf was criticized for her exaggerations about people's characters and at times, incidents. In her diary she admits, "the sad thing is that we daren't trust each other to read our books; they lie, like vast consciences, in our secret drawers" (95). Through our reading of her diaries, letters and memoir *Moments of Being*, it becomes clear that Woolf intentionally kept certain aspects of her personal life hidden from her readers. Woolf has consciously avoided giving detailed descriptions of her illnesses, her periods of rest cure, her problems with frigidity, and her loveless relationship with her husband, Leonard Woolf. It is debatable how these personal notebooks, especially her diaries and her memoir, make a distinction between the personal versus the public. Nevertheless, one understands that it is difficult to arrive at one true self of Woolf, rather the more one reads about her through her writings one comes to realise that the diverse selves are created and exhibited through observations, reactions, comments, appearances and criticism.

In his essay *what is an Author?* Foucault discusses the author-function wherein he talks about it as possessing the plurality of self, implying that the author has several selves. The author is the "founder of discursivity" or the "initiator of discursive practices" (310) as he establishes an endless possibility of discourse. Further, the author facilitates "the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within society" (305). Foucault calls Marx and Freud as the "initiators of discursive practices" to reveal how they have not only made possible certain analogies that may help future texts but also exposed certain differences (310). Their texts have an "inaugurative value" (311) that leads to exploration of endless possible applications, statements or propositions. In this relation, Virginia Woolf as an author with the vast oeuvre displays what Foucault calls a "series of subjective positions" which open up the possibility of numerous discourses. She as an author gives the readers the opportunity to read her works as a political treatise or as contributing to Feminist or Psychoanalytical theory, a form of Biographical research or a case in Suicide Studies. Finally, one cannot neglect the fact that even after 80 years of Woolf's death, her works are not only integral in understanding some of the major Feminist debates but also have constantly engaged with the discourses of the postmodern literary world.

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