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Prof. Smt. G. D. Ingale
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THE FEMALE SENTENCE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MRS. DALLOWAY (1925)

Prof. Smt. G. D. Ingale

Abstract

This paper seeks to define the notion of 'female sentence' and its use in one of the greatest experimental novels written by Virginia Woolf. As a modernist writer, her primary concern was to unshackle and dismantle the obsolete and meaningless institutions and values handed down to her from the past. She became successful in doing so with the novel form – with its formal features, its content as well as with its language. In this way, she contributed immensely to the development of the novel form by making it an inclusive form with female vision of life as an integral part of novel. This paper is a modest attempt which seeks to throw light on Woolf's views about the gendered sentence as she uses in her novel Mrs. Dalloway (1925).

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was a pioneer modernist and a pioneer feminist who sought to challenge the traditional novel by experimenting with its formal features such as plot, characterization and technique, and also by incorporating in the hitherto male bastion, a woman's vision of life. Mrs. Dalloway (1925) is Woolf's first successful attempt to break away not only from the mainstream novelistic tradition, but also to establish a new, female-oriented literary tradition. Living in the era of competitive modernism alongside Joyce and Proust, her experimentation acquired a unique, distinctive quality informed by her feminist concerns. Bernard Blackstone (1956: 12-13) rightly observes, 'Virginia Woolf was, from first to last, intensely making a different thing out of the novel. As a woman novelist, she wanted to create her own form. So she experiments ceaselessly in new forms, new techniques, always trying to get nearer to an integral expression of life'.

In her landmark feminist treatise, A Room of One's Own (1929) (hereafter, ROO), Woolf problematizes the relationship between the hitherto comfortable relationship between reality and the novel form. Her purpose was to expose the traditional representationalism – its exclusivity and lope-sidedness in dealing with subject matter which deals with, by and large, in male values and male culture, and what she calls, in masculine structure of the novel. She observes (ROO: 72), "Novel as a whole seems to be a creation owing to a certain looking-glass – likeness to life – though, of course, with simplifications and distortions. Shape is made by the relation of human-being to human-being. And since a novel has this correspondence to real life, its values are those of real life… . It is the masculine values that prevail… . These values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction". As to the structure of the novel form, she observes (ibid: 74), "A book is not made up of sentences laid from end to end, but sentences

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built, if an image helps, into arcades or domes. And this shape too has been made by men out of their own needs for their own use." Hence, according to Woolf, women writers cannot be at ease with the novel form. The masculine values have permeated it for so long that they have become the norm. She believed it to be the gift of the woman novelist to rejuvenate it by providing a corrective to the lope-sidedness by incorporating female vision of life into it.

One of the significant ways in which Woolf challenges the traditional representationalism in novel form is by undermining the external reality and foregrounding the inner, subjective reality of the mind and also by fashioning an appropriate medium to render that reality, namely, the stream-of-consciousness technique. She defines the inner reality as 'a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope' ('Modern Fiction': 104) and further she observes (ibid: 105), 'Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall … however, disconnected and incoherent in appearance'. It is this emphasis on the unpatterned, chaotic psychic reality as the shaping factor of the novel form that she was able to make the novel flexible enough to incorporate female experiences, and concerns into the novel form.

Virginia Woolf, throughout her literary career, was concerned with dismantling the traditional discursive style of the novel – the language of the novel and its lowest common denominator, the sentence structure. For her, language is literally 'man-made' and that women cannot fit their ideas and expressions into a language which has been constructed according to their needs. She observes (quoted in Cameron, 1990a: 37), 'Woman has many difficulties to face. The very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men: it is too loose, too heavy, too, pompous for a woman's use. Yet in a novel, it covers so wide a stretch of ground, an ordinary and usual type of sentence has to be found to carry the reader on easily and naturally from one end of the book to the other. And this a woman must make for herself, altering and adapting the current sentence until she writes one that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it'. This was her clarion call to women writers to free themselves from man-made sentence in order to express themselves freely.

In ROO (p. 77), Woolf gives one example of male sentence handed down to her from 19th century:

' "The grandeur of their works was an argument with them, not to stop short, but to proceed. They could have no higher excitement or satisfaction than in the exercise of their art and endless generation of truth and beauty. Success prompts to exertion; and habit facilitates success." That is a man's sentence; behind it one can see Johnson, Gibbon, and the rest. It was a sentence unsuited for a woman's use. Charlotte Bronté and George Eliot, with all their splendid gifts of prose, stumbled and fell with that clumsy weapon in their hands. Jane Austen devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it.'

Virginia Woolf was one of the first woman writers to notice and understand the relationship between ideology and language and to locate ideological messages at the level of sentence structure. She metaphorically sees the above quoted sentence as an imposing architecture, an instrument of oppression, an institutionalized and archaic entity which should be resisted and challenged at all costs.

Woolf does not analyze the sentence cited above or pinpoint the linguistic components that make it a gendered sentence. However, one can draw several inferences from it which reveal its gendered nature: firstly, on the level of content, it expresses male experiences and flatters male achievements couched in bombastic or pompous vocabulary (grandeur, argument, Satisfaction, excitement, truth, beauty, success, exertion); secondly, the masculine, the undisputed voice of the narrator – the authoritarian idea of omniscience – who takes the centralized moral standpoint to assert the grandiose values of truth and beauty and male exertion as key to their success; thirdly, at the grammatical level, the clarity and precision in the choice of vocabulary, the linear and logical progression of syntactic structure – indicating the rigid code, aggressive, concise and purposive style; and lastly, but most importantly, it illustrates how language is the medium for construction of human 'self' and which shapes the way we think about the world – language as constitutive of 'self' or 'subject'. Woolf observes (ROO: 98-99), 'Man's writing so direct, so straight forward … . It indicated such freedom of mind… such confidence in himself … . But a shadow seemed to lie across the page … the letter 'I' … to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it … . One began to be tired of 'I'; honest and logical; as hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding. Turn another page … in the shadow of the letter 'I', all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree.

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No, it is a woman. But, … she has not a bone in her body.'

Therefore, Woolf launches a stylistic programme in her writings to counter the male sentence and provide an alternative to it. In this connection, she praises Dorothy Richardson whom she credits with inventing a 'female sentence'. In her 1923 review of Richardson's Revolving Lights, Woolf applauds her exploration of a unique feminine thought. She observes (quoted in Cameron, 1970a: 72),

"Miss Richardson has invented, or if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is a more elastic fiber than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes' (italics supplied).

Thus, Woolf is the first to define a female sentence in positive terms. In her modernist aesthetic, the sentence structure occupies the centre stage. It is subversive in orientation, the purpose being to dismantle the rigid, authoritarian framework of the sentence structure and to make it flexible, inclusive and supple instrument at the hands of women writers.

In Mrs. Dalloway, there appears a stylistic corollary of her resistance to the genre – the style open-ended and supple enough to communicate multifarious experiences. In the novel, she uses a number of linguistic devices such as of expansion or extenuation, fragmentation, dislocation, ellipsis, incompleteness and interruptions within the sentence. Woolf's sentence structure as used in Mrs. Dalloway, does not merely create a stylistic effect on the minds of the readers, but it impacts the narrative structure itself, by constantly resisting linear, conventional patterning of the narrative progression. For Woolf this is a sacred act, duty-bound to exert herself on behalf of womankind – to set things right – not to write not authoritarian sentences but more accretive sentences that fit the natural shape of the thoughts and feelings of women.

The following are some of the types of Woolf's sentences used in Mrs. Dalloway, which are uncharacteristic of traditional language:

1. Evasion of order and coherence and accumulation of unconnected, diverse and fragmentary details in a sentence:

a) 'In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June' (p. 6).

We can notice a number of unconventional aspects in this sentence which purports to portray a microcosm of London life in a moment of June through the eyes of a woman – Mrs. Dalloway. The ungrammatical or odd syntactic structure arising from the absence of a specified subject; use of punctuation marks instead of grammatic markers to indicate boundaries of meaning; the parallelistic structures (in ~, in ~, in ~, in ~); the heavy nominalization ('the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead'), the ambiguity in it ('high singing' or 'high aeroplane overhead'), the irony ('sandwich men shuffling and swinging'), the obvious alliteration therein and continuation of the sentence even after its apparent completion by noun-tags. This open-ended sentence, as it is expansive in nature and scope, effectively illustrates Woolf's theory – 'record the atoms as they fall upon the mind'. The sentence is feminine in the sense also of its critique of the city – London, which is the symbol of 'triumph' of man-made civilization with its subtle, evocative picture of London life – the crowd, traffic, noise and emblems of scientific modernity – motor cars, omnibuses, vans and aeroplane.

2. Coordination/Parataxis is used as the characteristic sentence structure of Mrs. Dalloway which operates on the principle of equivalence unlike the hypotactic/complex sentence structure which operates on the principle of subordination and thus inherently maintains hierarchical, authoritative structure – which are an anathema to Woolf. In addition, parataxis allows infinite extendability of the sentence structure.

Ex.: 'And already, even as she stood there, in her very well-cut clothes, … People were beginning to compare her to poplar trees, … and garden lilies; and it made her life a burden to her, for she so much preferred being left along, but they would compare her to lilies, and she had to go to parties, and London was so dreary compared with being alone in the country with her father and the dogs'. (p. 149)

3. Subjectless-verbless serntencs:

'i) Tears and sorrow; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing' (p. 12)

'ii) A tall man, middle aged, rather fine eyes, dark, wearing spectacles, with a look of John

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Burrows' (p. 188)

4. Accumulation of synonymous expressions to give the quality of iconicity to the presentation of thought:

i) Clarissa saw the car diminishing, disappearing (p.20)

ii) Life itself, every moment of it, every drop of it, here, this instant, in the sun, in Regent's Park, was enough (p. 88) (italics supplied).

5. Postponement or deferment of completion of sentence:

i) He would give her, who was so simple, so impulsive, only twenty four, without friends in England, who had left Italy for his sake, a piece of bone (p. 19) (italics supplied)

ii) And up came that wandering will-o'-the-wisp, that vaguous phosphorescence, old Mrs. Hillbery, stretching her hands to the blaze of his laughter (…), which, as she heard it across the room, seemed to reassure her on a point which sometimes bothered her if she woke early in the morning and did not like to call her maid for a cup of tea: how it is certain we must die. (p. 194)

6. Incomplete sentences and abrupt endings are particularly considered by Woolf as a feature of female sentence:

i) Septimus looked. (p. 18)

ii) And already, even as she stood there, in the very well-cut clothes, it was beginning…. (p. 149)

7. Interrupted sentences which indicate author-interference in the middle of the sentence which are suggestive of the style of Lawrence Sterne in Tristram Shandy:

i) Choosing a poor of gloves – should they be to the elbow or above, lemon or pale grey? Ladies stopped; when the sentence was finished something happened. (p. 21)

ii) That'll do for the moment. Later … her sentence bubbled away drip, drip, drip, like a contented tap left running. (p. 159)

These are a few instances of Woolf's tampering with the traditional sentence structure which she manipulates in provocatively versatile ways. These demonstrate her control over the linguistic medium and also the discourse from which she is trying to escape. Her point is that we must look through the sentence, within the sentence, to the gaps and interruptions and what they mean, thereby intensely engaging the reader in the linguistic exploration of the novel Mrs. Dalloway.

It is this 'psychological sentence of the feminine gender' – the free, amorphous, open-ended sentence structure – which constitutes her aesthetic of language. This is her anti-dote, her modernist, ideological counterblast to the well-entrenched man-made systems and values. Modernism glorifies and celebrates such odd, disconnected, fragmented structures which represent a digression from societal stricture and propriety. Because 'these generate moments of greater humanity, than the straight and narrow conventional 'unified' narrative path' (Randy Malamud: 37). What is markedly modernist about these sentences in Mrs Dalloway is the way they internally define their own systems and values in the text.

The sentence is one of the linguistic structures that modernism challenges and reworks. James Joyce perhaps is the most flagrant modernist sentence-tamperer, with his final forty five page episode of Ulysses (1919) broken down into eight sentences. Finnegans Wake (1939), of course, begins and ends in mid-sentence. Joyce shows one way in which a linguistic revolution takes place: he destroys the most integral and accepted units of discourse, simply to show that it can be done, and that he can continue writing without depending on the structures that have been imposed on the literary tradition. The destruction has been cathartic for the modern age.

Woolf experiments with the sentence structure and she also demonstrates that one must interrupt and destroy the sentence as it stands. Susan J. Leonardi (1986: 151) argues that Woolf feels the need to reject specifically 'the man's sentence, the hierarchical sentence of the literary tradition she inherited – that is, the sentence which privileges facts, subordination, and objective judgment, instead of the interior of things. Woolf makes this rejection of the hierarchical sentence specifically feminine. The lack of clear distinction, and fragmentation, characteristic of the modern world, has always been characteristic of women's world'.

Woolf's rebellion against male sentence and preference for female sentence influenced the French feminists. Irigary and Helen Cixous developed the theory of 'ecriture feminine' and Julia Kristeva developed the semiotic theory which refers to the pre-linguistic stage of the child, an area of rhythm, colour and play in language as against the symbolic form (the Law of Father) of language.

However, a number of feminist critics have rejected Woolf's formulation of 'female sentence'. Sara Mills (1995) argues that there is confusion between gender difference and writing. Defining a female sentence is not defining a sentence at all,

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but defining females as lacking something in relation to the male or masculine and also to consider the female sentence as deviant form of male counterparts. This leads to a consideration of male sentence as the implicit norm, which could be termed phallocentric.

Deborah Cameron (1985) and Jennifer Coates (1986) criticized the 'difference theory' by stating that it is based on pre-conceptions and ignored contrary evidence. Sara Mills (1995: 52) observes, 'We might be able to find examples of female sentence full of subordination, where the subordination could be interpreted as refusing closure, endlessly deferring an authoritative statement, and therefore, it is clearly not sentence structure which is really at issue here, but interpretative schemata'. Montique Wittig (1983: 2) remarks there is no 'feminine writing'. It stands for women, thus merging a practice with a myth of woman. 'Feminine writing' is the naturalizing metaphor of the brutal fact of the domination of women by men, and it is something to do with the assertions of power. The 'third wave' feminists have challenged the binary opposition between male values and female values and are interested in the multiplicity of gendered identities and associated linguistic behaviours.

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