

Mental Illness and Biopower Approach in Mrs. Dalloway

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Abstract

Physical and mental differences have been presented as a medical issue rather than a social in the novels of modernist authors. It has been represented as “a master metaphor for social ills” (Mitchell 24). Disability has been constructed by various cultures in the early twentieth century. Modernist approach focuses on the rehabilitation and cure of the differences. Modernist fiction portrays their characters with the sign of hallucination, illusion, confusion and other psychosomatic symptoms. Authors have also addressed the personal knowledge of disability rather than traditional perspective. They criticize both, the medical system and contemporary perception of mental illness. In this context, National Alliances for the Mentally Ill put it, “Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are brain disorders” (1). This paper will study the modernists’ view of mental illness and for this purpose Virginia Woolf’s novel, Mrs Dalloway has been selected. Woolf depicts that World War I left many people emotionally unstable and with psychosomatic symptoms. She gives us a chance to study the social responses of the World War I and its effects on the mental state of her characters.

Keywords: Mental Illness, Biopower Approach, World War I, Psychosomatic Symptoms

Introduction

Mental illness has always been a taboo but people actually got to know these kinds of situations only through literature, films and social media. People with mental deficiencies have always been as neurosis discriminated against because a common man does not understand and even does not know what the mental deficiencies are. According to Freud, the underlying cause of human psychological suffering is the childhood experiences that if poorly resolved could manifest in adulthood (43). Mrs Dalloway gives an opportunity to understand the mental condition of a person with cognitive deficiency and how the social structure affects the mental state of human beings. Woolf focuses on the medical and social aspects of mental illness and how mental illness was looked at

and treated.

Foucault, after the liberal revolution in Europe and America introduces the disciplinary model of training and surveillance, which addresses “man-as-body” and focuses on the individual subject. He, then, suggests the regulatory model of supervision and control with a focus on caring for the life of a national population and addressed “man-as-species” (242). Foucault is of the opinion that “the norm can be applied to both a body one wishes to discipline and a population one wishes to regularize” which emerges as “a norm of discipline and a norm of regulation that intersect” (252-253). A society becomes an instance of biopower, according to Foucault, when the norms are instituted and power is exercised by a decisive authority over the individual body to make

it disciplined and determine its status as “normal” or “abnormal” (243). Such biopolitical norms are imposed to bring potential change in an individual. Foucault’s concept of biopower provides a “unified and organic normalizing society” (243). Society plays a vital role in bringing this part of society into the mainstream as it is our perception, to an extent, which decides their inclusion. Prominent modernist authors portrayed their characters with certain cognitive disabilities and mental illness such as neurological disorders, insanity, hysteria, traumatic derangement. It is an author’s effort to bring forth awareness about the condition of mental illness in society. It gives an opportunity to understand the mental state of the person and can also judge the social response towards mental illness. In the modernist era, according to Thompson, mental deficiency was viewed as a “major social problem” and “an image presaging the end of the race” (13). This paper will study the mental state of Virginia Woolf’s character Septimus in her novel *Mrs Dalloway*. Septimus who has been presented with certain cognitive deficiency, is a second protagonist but has not been presented inferior to the other characters and as a live and most talked-about character.

Mental deficiencies of a person, to an extent, are the consequences of his/her past experiences. In “The Unknown Virginia Woolf” Woolf accepts that she was sexually molested in her childhood days which was the cause of her bipolar disorder (qtd. in Poole 111). Her character Septimus is influenced by her own sufferings. It could also be taken as dissociative amnesia, which is, according to McNally when a person experience and encode a psychologically traumatic event he tries to forget it. In its response the mind protects itself by banishing horrific memories and uses defensive mechanism by giving expression to it in some way or the other (137-142). In this context De Salvo points that Woolf started writing to “heal her childhood wounds” (14). Woolf has also tried to vent her traumatic experience through her character Septimus. According to Caramagno, mental illness was often vaguely defined and

misunderstood throughout the twentieth century and was named as neurasthenia. It was a Victorian euphemism that covered a variety of vaguely recognizable symptoms (10-23). Shell-shock was later named as “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” or “PTSD”. Woolf uses the symptoms of Septimus to make her comment about society and its treatment of mentally ill patients. She emphasizes the effect of the First World War and the lack of effective treatment through Septimus’ thoughts and experiences as well as those of his wife.

Psychological behavioural patterns can best be studied only in the experiences of the person who himself has suffered. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the unstable mental state of Virginia Woolf reflects in her character Septimus Smith’s troubling and eventual suicide. According to King, Virginia creates the character of Septimus who has “shell-shock” for several reasons. First, World War I was the responsible factor for the mental instability of so many people including Virginia herself. Second, in the modernist society depression was misdiagnosed and people were unable to understand the problems like mental illness. Third, the severely traumatized war veterans like Septimus represent the modernist man (652). Through Septimus’ character and his mental state, Woolf makes several significant claims. It reflects Virginia’s biopower approach. She represents the social effects of WWI and the treatment of mental illness in early twentieth century Britain. She has also tried to illustrate the gravity of the situation and brings awareness about the state of mental illness. Woolf has portrayed all the possible psychological underpinnings of the mind of a person who has mental illness. It makes the reader know the behavioural patterns of a person with mental illness and can help to socialize them and heal their mental injuries.

Social understanding of cognitive differences decides, to an extent, not only inclusivity but also the social growth and development of a person with cognitive differences. McNally supports that “a syndrome is socially constructed . . . if certain social conditions were not present, the syndrome would vanish” (134). In the beginning of the

twentieth century owing to insufficient knowledge on the subject, people with mental illness suffered vague claims and improper treatment. It is also observed in Woolf's representation of the malpractice and misdiagnosis of the modernist medical system. Dr Holmes said "there was nothing the matter with him" (98). Dr Holmes suggests listening to the music, experience nature and playing cricket to cure Septimus' mental illness. It could be assumed that the then doctors would ignore the problems of mental illness. At the same time Woolf introduces Sir William Bradshaw who is well educated in this field. He defines the diagnosis and says, "... almost infallible accuracy in diagnosis..." (103). He is of the opinion that it is hard to diagnose and treat the problems of mental disorders. Dr Bradshaw reveals about Septimus that "it was a case of extreme gravity. It was a case of complete breakdown – complete physical and nervous breakdown, with every symptom in an advanced stage, he ascertained in two or three minutes" (104). It is assumed through the readings of the character of Septimus that even the medical system of the then society was not very well acquainted with the treatment of mental illness. Even it can be concluded that medical system was not able to diagnose the problem and that is the reason family members and responsible social members were also fail to help the person with mental illness. De Meester suggests that such conventional activities are more representative of reality and truth than what Septimus experienced and learned in the war" (661). Megan Wood also supports that "psychiatric treatment was very in its infancy at that time, medical staff had limited methods of treating the symptoms of 'shell-shock'. . . they blamed pre-existing mental illness, a weak constitution or lack of character" (2-3). According to these Modernist psychiatrists, weakness and cowardice people lead to shell shock state and they do not attribute war as the cause of any mental illness. De Meester states that "Septimus Smith illustrates not only the psychological injuries suffered by victims of severe trauma such as war and also the need for them to give mean-

ing to their suffering in order to recover from trauma. Septimus' death is the result of his inability to communicate his experiences to others and thereby gives those experiences meaning and purpose" (649). If a person with psychological trauma commits suicide, it is the total failure of society and the system as well either medical system or the political system. As it is the consequence of the ignorant attitude of society and their care takers.

People, including family members, were not aware of the symptoms of mental illness. This is the reason people with mental illness were misdiagnosed and misunderstood and did not get proper treatment and care. According to David Clark's influential theory, when people misinterpret certain bodily sensations, panic occurs. This kind of misinterpretation heightens fear and exacerbates the bodily sensations and confirms the deficiency in the mind of the individual (qtd. in McNally 131-132). Septimus' wife considers Septimus as a weak person who wants to kill himself. She admits, "it cowardly for a man he would kill himself..." (Woolf 23). In the novel it is observed that Rezia, Septimus' wife is unable to find the cause of Septimus' mental instability to cure his illness. This is how family members were also not able to understand the behavioural changes of a person who had mental imbalance or deficiency. It is observed, through the stream of thoughts Woolf has displayed, that Septimus' illness affects his married life and Rezia's life and happiness. Septimus' suicide was not the outcome of the fear of war but due to lack of understanding about various mental illnesses on the part of society where nobody is able to understand the mind and behavioural changes in Septimus. Owing to this social failure Septimus could not come out of the situation.

Septimus jumps out of his window and ends his life. Woolf's presentation of his act of committing suicide may enhance the understanding of behavioural pattern and one of the consequences of mental illness. It could be taken as an effort on the part of the author who herself has undergone through such a mental state, to give us an oppor-

tunity to understand the mental state of an individual. Woolf admits, "every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his soul, every quality of his mind, is written in his works" (qtd. in Spater & Parson 83). Woolf uses stream of consciousness narrative technique which is used for expressing thoughts and feelings of the character. Through this technique Woolf gives us an opportunity to read the emotional state of a person with mental illness. She narrates the thoughts and emotions of Septimus and narrates the psychological effects of the past experiences. 'Septimus has been working too hard' - that was all she could say to her own mother . . ." (23). Here efforts of family members in the guise of Rezia and some responsible social members in the guise of Dr Holmes can be observed in the novel.

Foucault's umbrella term "biopolitics" also suggests that the population needs to be understood in order to govern (*Security, Territory, Population* 77-79). In this sense the sufficient scientific knowledge is the basic requirement for implementing techniques and procedures of the biology of the human body for its modification. Woolf has also tried to impart knowledge about the symptoms of mental illness when she characterizes Septimus, "Septimus Warren Smith, aged about thirty pale-faced . . . with hazel eyes which had that look of apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too. The world has raised its whip; where will it descend" (19). Septimus' aggrieved mood during the whole novel is characterized of depressed life. He also had sceptical views about the entire world. He thinks people are not good and do not help him. He unfolds his views:

... human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment. They hunt in packs. Their packs scour the desert and vanish screaming into the wilderness. They desert the fallen. They are plastered over with grimaces. (97)

It is observed that Septimus has a tendency to judge people negatively which is one of the traits of a person with depression, anxiety or any other mental illness. To diagnose and understand

it could be a herculean task for the then social system but the authors who lived through it and understood it have tried to impart the social status of the person with cognitive difference.

Conclusion

Mental illness has been a difficult issue to be discussed over and as a result of this it also did not find its due place in literary representation and even till date it has not been represented adequately. This paper has studied how the attitude towards mental illness in the modernist era has been presented through characters and their point of view. The study of shifting perspectives of society gives insights to the mental states of the person with mental illness. Cognitive or mental disturbances often have a stigma attached to it. Study of the portrayal of mentally ill characters in *Mrs Dalloway* shows the time is changing but social attitude towards mental health finds relevance, to an extent, in the contemporary society. Literary analysis can be a rich source of imparting knowledge and awareness in society. Society needs to talk about it and connect people which may lead to the development of inclusive approach towards cognitive differences. The reading and analysis of fiction and non fiction with characters with mental illness will develop a better understanding of the mind of such people and it will also develop an inclusive approach towards people with mental illness.

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