Deconstructive Nature of Pedagogy in Virginia Woolf with Special Reference to A Room of One's Own

Shruti Sharma

Research Scholar Singhania University, Pacheri Bari (Rajasthan)

----------♦----------

OVER VIEW

Among many aspects of feminism, one that has generally been overlooked is the nature of pedagogic dimension inherent in each feminist text. The paper aims at finding this dimension in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, particularly the deconstructive nature of pedagogy.

The presence of pedagogy in a feminist text is natural also, because if we accept a broader definition of feminism as a movement aimed at women's empowerment, we are supposed to take cognizance of one of the most potent means of their empowerment, i.e. kind of education they should be imparted. All those concerned with pedagogy will readily allow that the current theory of education, being heavily rationalist, materialist and conventional is not conducive, especially to women's over-all growth – for their freedom, enabling them to be creative. The contemporary theory of education is equally damaging to men, as for the creativity is concerned, but for women it is doubly damaging, as it preserves and even strengthens patriarchy, hand in hand with the hold of conventions, traditions, religious form of the worship of the past idols. Together these forms do not give room enough to women to feel free, to set down what they choose. Virginia Woolf in her feminist treatise *A Room of One's Own* and her novels, especially *To the Lighthouse* suggests a psychologically-oriented pedagogy, as she put it in her essay "Modern Fiction" for the genuinely moderns, not this but 'that' is the point of interest; "it lies very likely in the dark places of psychology." (20th CLC 90)

In referring to 'the dark places of psychology' she foreshadows Jacques Derrida's concern with the psychology which though akin to that of Freud, is not Freudian. Derrida of course welcomes Freud's deconstruction of human consciousness, by presenting "a critique of self-presence, that is, the critique of consciousness, of the subject, of self-identity, and of self-proximity," (WD 354) as he welcomes Heidegger and Nietzsche for their destruction of the metaphysics of presence in his debut paper "Structure, Sign and Play in The Discourse of the Human Sciences" presented at Johns Hopking university in 1966. What Woolf wished to draw our attention to is that all our structures – self-evident and self-present, as for example, the structures of patriarchy or of tradition involving difference, nay opposition between men and women, as between sensibility and intelligibility, speech and writing, nature and culture, are not based either on some material or spiritual substratum, that the real is unknown and unknowable. According to Woolf, we make do with impressions only.

The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday the accent falls differently from the old, the moment of importance came not here but there… (20th CLC 88)

The impressions as Woolf elaborates, shape themselves not as one would have us arrange them, but as they interest and move us, i.e. tracing their resemblance wherein conventionally we see difference.

Woolf finds that impressions are primary, as all our knowledge arises from them. She is in the tradition of British empiricism propounded by John Locke in the seventeenth century, and strengthened later by Bishop Berkeley and David Hume. Empiricism is based on the view that we come to the world not fully possessed of ideas. Rather, the child can be molded by parents and teachers, for the child writes his own ideas through his experience on the blank slate of his mind, what Locke called *tabula rasa*. Locke attacked, as was likely, formalised rules of educating a child. For example, in his *Some Thoughts concerning Education*, he denounced the kind of teaching done in schools in his days with emphasis of Latin, which encourage memorization. He also hated

logic, for he thought it creates immeasurable conceits and artificial education. Truth, Locke felt, cannot be found through a priori rules. Let the child learn through what it finds pleasant and interesting.

Together with Hume, who said that impressions give birth to ideas, and though faint in comparison with impressions, these ideas become a child's building blocks – for creating knowledge. Since experience is the bedrock of all our structures we know that there is nothing immutable and fixed about these structures. For example, Woolf deconstructs poetic structures, such as tragedy, comedy, epic and so on, on the basis, as she says in her essay "Modern Fiction", that there are conventions, supported by no vision of reality.

What is real is, of course, the pattern our impressions form in our mind on the basis of our faculty of association and of which children possess it natively and in abundance. This faculty of association is especially strong in females in the natural state, i.e. who remain free from the web of conventionality. Woolf likes their "unconventionality" (ROO 105); this shows their "completeness" (ROO 105), and also their "anonymity" (ROO 105). Woolf does not want women to be 'learned' at the cost of the naturalness, abnegating their feelings, but at the same time, there is no reason for them to be not in the way of book-learning, particularly with the opening of colleges for them. With means of educating themselves at hand, Woolf enjoins upon women to write, to say what they feel. Woolf believes, as she shows in *To the Lighthouse* that women are humiliated precisely because they cannot write, they cannot paint. This is what Mr. Ramsay accuses Mrs. Ramsay of. Writing is the only salvation for women to come out of their low estimation of their male counterparts, thinks Woolf.

But writing comes to the whole mind, she adds, the mind which is androgynous (ROO 93), as was that of Shakespeare, of Coleridge, and a host of other writers. Woolf's view of the whole mind is based on the empirical view, that impressions, like atoms, fall on our mind, not haphazardly, but in a order of resemblance, as Hume would say. This is what is generally called in her case, in reading her fiction, *Mrs. Dalloway*, in particular, the stream of consciousness technique. In the flow of consciousness experience, Hume tells us that this exactly is the creative power of mind, aided by memory and imagination. However, this power of mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting or diminishing the material afforded by the senses and experience. Therefore, no idea whatsoever be derived from our impressions that is not decomposable. It is in this sense that Derrida is relevant for the empirical pedagogy.

Derrida is also empirical in this thinking. In his debut paper already referred to he deconstructs ethnology, which during 1960's was considered to be a privileged science among human sciences. A curious fact of human desire to create structures is that we create them when we are engaged in denouncing them. It is a necessity, says Derrida, which "nobody can escape" (WD 356). It is so because the human mind is not destructive. So when it comes to know that all ideas and the structures based on them are like the houses of cards, based on impressions, brought together by its operation, it lets those structures stay put, because it knows them to be disposable.

Deconstruction, Derrida rightly says, is not destruction. He, like Woolf, does not destroy the existing structures; he only shows them ruptured. As Woolf also shows, feminism does not mean to destroy the male; it is simply a question of being alert to the implications, the historical sedimentation of the language which we use to celebrate male virtues, enforce male values and describe the world of men." (ROO 96). Women find books of male chauvinists incomprehensible, books by Goldsworthy and Kipling, books about masculine orgy. They are written by partial minds. That is why their appeal is limited. "Poetry" according to Woolf, "ought to have a mother as well as a father." (ROO 97)

The point Woolf makes is that the males who pride themselves on their ability to write (Woolf takes only one faculty into consideration) should see that they write for half the population of their readers and that shows the failure of their writing. Therefore, she advises women to write with the whole mind, or alternatively, they should have the whole mind, a mind that does not recognise difference, as Derrida would also slur over difference in search for a common ground through his concept of *differance* in which the 'a' is seen but not heard. An androgynous mind of a woman may likewise appear to be of a woman, but it includes that of a man also. In Derrida, as in Woolf, the presence of the empirical pedagogy is clearly felt that both want to show the existing structures ruptured because no structure can claim to be total, because new experience, new impressions, always supplement it by way of adding, saying much more than has earlier been said. This pedagogy has thus no closure.

What we call the deconstructive pedagogy would change the entire perspective, not only for women, but also for men who would see that they cannot afford to be partial, that what they claim is ruptured, that there is a hole in the heart of what they said. They for example, have not seen all aspects of writing. Woolf has been charged with escaping her troublesome feminity by proposing androgyny, as for example, Elaine Showalter alleges. It is,

in fact, the radical feminism which seeks to escape the troubled spot in difference and thereby becomes destructive. On the other hand, Woolf's proposition of the unity of mind is genuinely deconstructive as Derrida intends it to be. It is not in severances and opposition that the mind is creative. What causes strain in the body, i.e. differences and opposition, also cause unease in the mind?

At the back of this thinking is the empirical epistemology, that, since we relate impressions and thus construct ideas with similar ideas, or contiguous ideas that happen nearby or at the same time, or consider their relationship in terms of cause and effect, our mind runs towards finding similarities. Why does recurrence of similar impressions give rise to the similar ideas? Woolf following Hume feels that life is not "a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged, but a luminous halo," (ROO 88) i.e. it is not merely the external, but also how the mind rearranges what it receives from outside. That is why she asks the novelist to "look within," (ROO 88) for life, it seems is far from being like this, i.e. customarily seen, merely imitative, mimetic in the Platonic sense of the word. Rather, when looked subjectively, it is varying, unknown and uncircumcised. Customarily life appears in differentially, not integrally. But the human mind, being lazy, as Hume would say, seeks similarities. This is psychological necessity, that is, the natural bent of mind takes us to seek association, not dissociation. It is a different matter when it makes efforts to see differences, then what we write is laboured. Samuel Johnson in his "Preface to Shakespeare," says that Shakespeare tragedies are laboured while his comedies show the ease and naturalness of the dramatist.

Being natural, the empirical pedagogy in Woolf and later Derrida, recalls to us Wordsworth's theory of education, particularly reflected in his Lucy poems. This pedagogy is thus essentially Romantic. It is experimental and therefore does not claim to imitate or stakes any claim to reality, for Hume himself found nothing in the name of substances, anything beneath human experience. It, therefore, relies creatively on the operation of the mind. It does not mean, however, that it is merely emotive, subjective. Even in Wordsworth, poetry is not only a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, but also emotions recollected in tranquility, i.e. the overflow in the moment of passion, recurs in the mind's eye and thus becomes invested with regularity and coherence. Our habit is to interpolate a succession of images between the past and the present. Wordsworth imagines the continued existence of "Tintern Abbey" in the unperceived interval of the two perceived moments.

Woolf, like Derrida later, relies on the creative power of the mind for constant conjunctions between the past and the present, between one sense impression and the other, between cause and effect. It is what we find happening, but do not experience the process in which one event is produced by another, nor do we perceive in any one impression any power to bring about another into being or conjoin them as if they were the same. This unknown and uncircumcised "something" tells the persona of Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" let there be no wall between two neighbouring farm houses. This 'something' which wants harmony with other is unknown – a secret connection, call it attraction, that draws two persons together, and renders them inseparable. Children thus should be allowed to imbibe this deconstructive, empirical and psychological education, be left free to respond to this mysterious binding. Derrida calls it a secret, as does Hume. Woolf also invokes this mysterious bond between men and women in her novels especially in her theoretical work on feminism *A Room of One's Own*. In the last chapter of the treatise, she finally offers a liberal version of women's liberation from the bondages of the conventional man-woman relation. She regards it customary only in the sense that there is a bond of union between our impressions and ideas, one calling up another, as if they were the same. Similarly, man-woman relationship is based on resemblance. It is a psychological, not a logical necessity. This psychological necessity does away with the stable ego, the 'I', for when one enters upon what one calls 'myself', one always stumble on some particular perception, or other. I never catch myself, at any time. The self is a bundle of impressions with gaps at places, but which our imagination fills up with feigned continuity. The self, therefore has no identity.

Thus, identity is fictitious whether of male or of female. My subjective impressions are just as broken and disrupted, by sleep and forgetting. Were it not for memory we should have no more basis for feigning personal identity than for feigning identity in places and objects. We feign it because we feel comfortable in being identical. And this 'make-belief' eventually becomes belief. Memory acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this successive perceptions constituting the self, which is casually connected and believed to be the same, inspite of changes of character and disposition. Derrida's main concern in his works is to question the self-identity of objects and persons, as also all conceptualizations, as for example, the difference between nature and culture, in the main, because this opposition is the source of all other oppositions, such as nature/ education, nature/law, nature/society and so on. Derrida finds that these oppositions are futile, because the latter terms are extensions of the former. He objects to the difference

between nature and culture, primarily that it has been "assumed to be self evident" (WD 358) because it is 'something' (my quotation marks) which "escapes these concepts, and certainly precedes them." (WD 358)

That which precedes nature/ culture opposite also binds them i.e. to "integrate culture into nature, and finally to reintegrate life into the totality of its physio-chemical conditions." In natural societies, small as they are, marriages within the narrow circle is naturally and spontaneously prohibited. In bigger social constituents, incest prohibition has to be observed through rules. In fact, all social groups big or small are arbitrary, as everything in them, education, legal system, morals, are artificially evolved, beginning with the family itself. There is no scandal Levi-Strauss faces in Nature/ cultural impasse. He had finally to concede that the difference between nature and culture, in response of incest prohibition, is obliterated or disputed, because despite methodological assumption of difference in them, we straight miss what binds them. The best course then is to adopt the deconstructive attitude, consisting of conserving in the empirical discovery all these old concepts, while at the same time exposing here and there their limits, treating them as tools which can still be of use.

Like the traditional concepts which in the wake of empirical discovery stand shaken and yet allowed to continue unless they have lived out their utility or until some other concepts appear more useful. "In the meantime", as Derrida would say, "their relative efficacy is exploited, and they are employed to destroy the old machinery to which they belong, and of which they themselves are pieces." (WD 358)

It is thus discourse comes into being - the writing, in which all reference to the center, whether of a concept or of a person is abandoned, i.e. reference to the subject, to a priviled reference to an origin, or to an absolute order. Text books for schools and colleges, particularly those open for female students should be written in the nature of discourse, without reference to any of the above priviled centres. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf has also abandoned any reference to the metaphysical privilege of writing. There is nothing mysterious about great poets, for they write with the whole mind. Women, too, given some book reading and some leisure, which of course follows some material support – five hundred pounds in the 1930's and a little space, a room of their own, can be creative. For this, they should have an undivided, undifferentiated mind, for which they have not to make any effort. Woolf had a glimpse of the unity of mind in London which also was on a seat to Cambridge in October, 1928. On the morning of 26th October, it was a common October morning of London, busy as ever – people doing their business, hurrying forth, seemed separate, self-absorbed. But for a moment there was a hussle in the traffic. She saw a single leaf falling, as Newton saw an apple fall from the tree and deduced the law of gravitation, that everything falls by the force, he knew not. Woolf also saw a similar manifestation of "a force in things which she had overlooked." (ROO 91) Like the fall of the leaf, Woolf could suppose the river Thames taking people and eddying them along as she critically observed the force bringing a well-dressed girl to meet a well-dressed boy. The same force also brought a taxi-cab, and it brought the three together at a point directly beneath her window:

When the taxi stopped; and they got into the taxi; and then the cab glided off as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere. (ROO, 91)

Reading materials of the kind Woolf wrote alluding to force or bend of human mind flowing towards unity of objects and people would create a better world to live in, overcoming the force of repulsion, that creates differences. The latter force referred to is something that our minds add difference between sexes to numerous other differences. Woolf recounts strife, divisions, difference of opinion, prejudices twisted into the fiber of being, as Mrs. Ramsay deplores. She suffers when her assorted guests criticise her children, "They were so critical, her children. They talked such nonsense, "it seemed to her such non-sense – inventing differences, when people, heaven knows, were different enough without that. The real differences, she thought, standing by the drawing-room window, are enough quite enough. She had in mind at this moment, rich and poor, high and low…" (TTL 8). The lovers go against their grain; they act against psychological necessity. It is equally unfortunate that Mrs. Ramsay could not say that she loved Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* and Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway* failed to marry Peter Walsh, ruining both lives, by going against her natural bent for Peter Walsh just because she thought she would have to share everything with the latter, while Richard whom she married would give her room enough for privacy.

What hinders the natural flow of one for the other is the 'I' of which Woolf gets tired of talking, bored, particularly of its "aridity, which like a giant beach tree (it) casts within its shade." (ROO 95) We have noted that in the deconstructive empirical psychology, there is no room for personal identity, for in sleep or swoon our subjective impression are disrupted, and yet we continue to feign that we are the same all over. There is nothing wrong in believing in self-identity if we keep reminding ourselves that this is a make-belief. Our feigning should not be

allowed to become faith in self-identity. This will enable people to see others like themselves.

In the deconstructive pedagogy, moral teaching is to be seen as a matter of sentiment, as it rests primarily upon a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction in being one with others. However, our flow toward others is limited to a narrow circle. Our natural bend of mind loves to benefit our family and friends, but as we have seen, it can be extended infinitely to include the whole of mankind through education, based on empirical psychology, if possible, its radical form, as in William James. Like Eliot who believed in extending his concept of tradition back to Homer and beyond, to Eastern religions especially Hinduism, of course 'with labour,' Woolf also feels that women should also extend the limits of the perception of truth or reality, which should be common to all, to the extent possible. On the last page of the treatise, she asks women not to live their little separate lives which we live as individuals, but lives in the widest commonality spread. Such life can be lived only when women have the habit of freedom and courage to write, exactly what they feel, i.e., to be authentic, and not be led by conventions. The morals of deconstructive pedagogy are equally significant, because they too are not based on a *priori* basis, but on the basis of sympathy, that others suffer as we do. Sympathy, as Eliot also invokes in the last section of *The Waste Land* is an indispensable factor in creating the idea of public interest and in transforming our pre-moral, instinctive virtue into an artifice of morality. We may once again arrive at some conventional view of morality, but it is not fixed, but functional now, as Derrida would have it.

Woolf's feminism is thus not destructive, but deconstructive, for inherent in it is the empirical/psychological theory of education, that if children are prepared keeping in view the empirical methodology, girl pupils can surely overcome their inhibitions to grow intellectually as also emotionally, suffering from no dissociation of sensibility. They can see that all man-made structures are created to keep them survive, but they are founded on nothing substantial. They, therefore, are ruptured from within. Women must not feel so much exercised over their age-old deprivation, but must work towards their liberation, in material as well as spiritual terms. The latter can be achieved when they follow their natural rhythm and write with the whole mind, as of Shakespeare, of Coleridge.

WORKS CITED

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" *Writing and Difference*, trans, and ed. Alan Bass. London: Rutledge Classics, 2003, rpt.

Woolf, Virginia, "Modern Fiction" *20th Century Criticism*. Ed. David Lodge. London: Longman, 1972 _____, *A Room of One's Own*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd., 1999 rpt… _____, *To the Lighthouse*, New Delhi: Peacock Books, 2010 rpt.