

Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 13
Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway – Part 5

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“Look, look, Septimus!” she cried. For Dr. Holmes had told her to make her husband (who had nothing whatever seriously the matter with him but was a little out of sorts) take an interest in things outside himself.

So, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him in their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signalling their intention to provide him, for nothing, for ever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty! Tears ran down his cheeks.

It was toffee; they were advertising toffee, a nursemaid told Rezia. Together they began to spell t . . . o . . . f . . .



This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Virginia Woolf’s novel “Mrs. Dalloway.” We have already seen how the biomedical climate in this particular novel is cruel and how that does it with any sense of human agency and how the medical practitioners in this novel the way they are represented is quite barbaric.

It is a very empathyless gaze that they have of the human subject. The human subject happens to be a post-traumatic stress disorder suffering veteran a war veteran from the First World War who comes back to London after the war and who cannot seem to integrate back into the civilian space. This novel is also about disintegration at a very medical corporeal cognitive level among other things.

This mingling of corporeality and cognitive quality in this novel makes it fertile and rich text to look at, in terms of how the biomedical practice, how the biomedical climate appears to be extremely insufficient to treat the human subject suffering from a very deep cognitive crisis. The other thing about Septimus Smith is his crisis. It is not only medical but also emotional

in quality, at an existential score and quality as well because he seems to suffer from survivor's guilt.

He seems to suffer from a whole host of other things in the novel. But the way he is treated by the biomedical practitioners, the way he is treated by the doctors is a very materialist kind of method. It is very proportion-based, it is very physical, very corporeal as mentioned and if there is nothing detected at a corporeal physical level the doctor seems to say that there is nothing wrong with him.

In other words, what we see here is a complete lack of understanding on the part of the doctors, a complete lack of empathy on the part of the doctors who just treat the patient as some kind of an object, a medical object and this distinction with object and subject is running throughout "Mrs. Dalloway". One of the central themes in the novel is this.

It is shown how the human subject is commodified or refined into a medical object and how this process of reification is very cruel. This cruelty is something that we see happening over and over again. This is done at a very sort of fundamental cognitive level and it plays out the difference between the materiality and the spectrality that difference begins to blur away in some sense.

The boundaries began to blurry between what is material and spectral as it is not quite clear. Septimus seems to suffer from a sense of survivor's guilt, he keeps having visions about the past and there is a constant reference to a character who does appear Evans. He is a spectral character who was never quite there has a physical presence. But it is very much as a spectral presence, something like a haunting presence.

The haunting presence is a haunted quality something which you see characterizing the climate of London in general. The entire city seems to be immersed in the haunted ontological framework or the haunted existence. The war is gone, the war is finished. There is a lot of references that the war being over but the spectral residual presence of war sort of lingers in public imagination throughout.

There are materialistic spectral things happening all the time and the boundaries for the material and the spectral are never quite clear. The novel gets focalized on Septimus's eyes, Septimus's consciousness and that consciousness is very shattered, a very troubled consciousness. The boundaries are very unclear and what he sees as a material phenomenon in front of him.

And what appears to him as a spectral phenomenon are very so entangled together in a very messy way. This messiness is something that the doctors hate about Septimus and the hatred of the doctors against Septimus, the resentment that the doctors have for Septimus is exactly because the doctors look at Septimus as a clinical object which has to be quantified, which must be quantified, which must be given a number, which must be given a digit, which must have given a body.

Anything outside the physical corporeal parameter is not recognized as a problem. "Mrs. Dalloway" is also about the lack of recognition among other things. The war veteran comes back, he is no longer a war hero or not just that he is not even recognized as a suffering subject and this lack of recognition as a suffering subject is something that makes the entire novel very cruel in quality.

It is about human cruelty, institutional cruelty, patriarchal cruelty because a clear collusion between patriarchy and medicine can be seen in this novel. The doctors are all males, they are very like robust physically strong males, patriarchal in quality and there seems to be a lot of references to the Boys Scout, the strong sturdy masculinity that is a preferred the cuvette model of masculinity.

The doctors seem to prescribe Septimus to play cricket, not introspect too much, and not think so much because thinking or introspecting, over introspecting is a very unmanly thing. There is a very interesting mingling of masculinity and medicine over here as I mentioned.

The skywriting aeroplane is coming in and how different people are looking at it from different perspectives. A skywriting aeroplane in post-war London can mean many things

because the fear of the bombing aeroplane is never quite gone, it is still there, some kind of presence.

But then this is a different kind of an aeroplane, this aeroplane is not a bombing aeroplane, it is an advertising aeroplane. It is advertising for toffee of all things. It is a commodity and it is advertising another commodity that is meant to be consumed, but this is interesting in the novel that the consumer's quality in the novel where people are looking out to consume the signs. It is never quite far from the fear factor that this is a plane that reminds people of violent aeroplane from before.

This has a different cognitive register altogether because when Septimus is looking at the aeroplane and thinks about the war all the time. This particular section where Lucrezia, Septimus's wife who is Italian and an outsider for different reasons as a female. As an Italian, she is a complete outsider linguistically as well and she is trying to make Septimus feel better.

She is taking him for a walk. It can be seen how Septimus is very symbolically emasculated because he cannot take care of himself. He wants someone else has to help him all the time. He has to be cared for all the time. In this section, where Lucretia takes Septimus for a walk and she is pointing out the aeroplane to him and ask him to take notice of that because you know she has been told by the doctors of Septimus she looks outside of himself .

“Look, look, Septimus!” she cried. For Dr. Holmes had told her to make her husband (who had nothing whatever seriously the matter with him but was a little out of sorts) take an interest in things outside himself.” This section is important because the doctors have decided that her husband is absolutely fine, and there is nothing wrong with him seriously. There is nothing serious with him that has been determined and decided by the doctor.

There seems to be nothing wrong with Septimus in the very quantitative materialist medical gaze as per the doctor as they have a complete lack of empathy, and a lack of understanding like recognition for the suffering subject. The doctors have decided he is absolutely fine that is a diagnosis at any rate and his diagnosis is very commodifying.

It is very quantitative and sort of calibrating him in some sense and not recognizing him as a suffering subject. They have also advocated that he takes an interest outside of himself. The introspection seems to be a pathological condition. The thinking manner is a problem for these doctors. It does not fit. It does not conform to the model of masculinity. They are always advocating.

The male doctors in the novel are like big sturdy heavy men, successful, precise, sure, and very certain about what they want. There is an absolute certainty of medical gaze that fails to engage with the existential uncertainty that Septimus suffers from. On one hand, there is a commodifying gaze of the doctors, and, on the other hand, there is a very messy subjective situation of the human sufferer and they are completely incompatible.

It is a story about incompatibility among other things. The diagnosing gaze, the medical gaze and the suffering subject are completely incompatible with each other. Doctors are telling the wife that there is nothing wrong with her husband. They are just asking him to take an interest outside of himself, he is just over-introspecting and that is the problem. In this section, Lucretia is trying very hard to make Septimus take notice of the aeroplane in the sky.

“Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him in their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signaling the intention to provide him for nothing, for ever, for looking merely with beauty, more beauty! Tears ran down his cheeks.”

There is a weeping man, a soldier coming back from the war who is supposed to be heroic, supposed to be masculine, supposed to be unemotional, who was trained not to be emotional and now it is just the other way around. Tears ran down his cheeks and he cannot control them, it is a compulsive condition.

This weeping man; if someone is weeping in joy, someone who cannot control his emotions becomes a problem. He is a messy man and this mess of Septimus embodies is a problem for

the doctors, and not just for the doctors but also for the civilians around him. He does not fit into the genetic model of masculinity, the strong, stoic, sturdy masculinity anymore. A complete shift from one end of the spectrum to the other end of the spectrum can be seen over here.

The stoic subject, the unemotional subject, the masculine subject, the heroic subject suddenly becomes a weeping person and he is not weeping because he is grieving for anything, he is weeping because he cannot control his emotions. He is weeping out of joy, this is a weep; this is tears out of joy. He is looking at the signaling aeroplane in the sky and it looks like a spiritual thing for him.

It looks like it is something epiphanic moment where the aeroplane is writing something in the sky, cannot understand the language but he sees the beauty of the entire spectacle and that spectacular beauty is moving in. There is a degree of hypersensitivity in Septimus and that is because he is completely traumatized. He is a suffering subject, he cannot control his emotions.

This is getting aggravated because the medical science at that point in time is not recognizing him as a sufferer, is not recognizing him as someone with a problem. They just did the money, he has got no problem at all and this lack of recognition as I mentioned is something which is aggravating his condition. The symptom of PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder took years for military medicine to classify it as a disease.

It was like after the Vietnam War when this was classified as a disease, as a classified disease, as a nosological category, but at this point of time in First World War it was called all kinds of names shell shock was the most popular name given to it. The term shell shock has nothing to do with shells. There is no physical problem with Septimus, his problem is emotional.

He is emotionally traumatized suffering from shock. He is suffering from cognitive dissonance, but the medical science at this point of time it does not have the vocabulary to address or engage with it. It does not have the rhetoric, it does not have the instrument, does not have the perspective to understand it. So, it is still sticking onto a very materialist medical

gaze which is completely incompatible and insufficient in terms of engaging with the suffering subject.

The medical historical perspective in Britain were similar to Freud became important where psychoanalysis became important right and the whole idea of the talk here, the whole idea of asking this word subject to speak, asking the subject to talk about the dreams and those become very important categories of diagnosis reports Sigmund Freud.

But Holmes and Bradshaw who are the doctors in this novel are pre-Freudian they belong to pre-Freud in medical vocabulary right. As a result of it they seem to have no understanding at all of this kind of trauma and because they cannot diagnose anything at an empirical corporeal level so to decide and dictate nothing was wrong with Septimus and that is something which we see this constant incompatibility. Tears ran down his cheeks.

“It was toffee; they were advertising toffee, a nursemaid told Rezia. Together they began to spell t...o... f...” It is seen how the letters are coming together and the sign system is happening in the sky and how everything seems much slowed down and decelerated to Septimus and the sort of cognitive deceleration can be seen in this novel.

He is completely defamiliarized; London to him appears a much defamiliarized space. It seems to be a very traumatic and cognitive defamiliarization as a result of which he cannot engage at all with the London that he once knew and this becomes at a very core fundamental level problem of embodiment. Embodiment means the neural cognitive as well as the extended and active engagement with the environment.

The embodiment has a much embedded quality, it is about the neurons, it is the body that process information in your brain through your body, through your nerves to the neural system but equally it is also an inactive process, an extended process in terms of how the subject extends self to its environment, apropos of this environment. It has a loop-like quality, the inside and outside embedded and extended they all come together.

Embodiment being a process; a cognitive process, an interactive process. Septimus seems to suffer from a crisis and embodiment among other things because on one hand he is medically ill, he is neurally ill, he cannot cognize reality, he cannot cognize the surroundings the way he used to and that has been aggravated by the cultural condition that does not recognize him as a suffering subject, that does not recognize him as a sufferer at all and they are very dismissive of his condition.

The medical dismissal, medical lack of empathy is something that aggravates his inactive engagement with the environment. It is a very complex cognitive process by it becomes a crisis and embodiment at some level.

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“K . . . R . . .” said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say “Kay Arr” close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper’s, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke. A marvellous discovery indeed — that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life! Happily Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed, or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the colour thinning and thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave, like plumes on horses’ heads, feathers on ladies’, so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly, would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more.

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down: when the branch stretched he too made that statement

They begin to spell together for Septimus, the whole idea that the toffee that is being advertised in the sky “K...R...” said the nursemaid, and Septimus hear her say her say “Kay Arr”. It is like decelerated. Close to his ear, deeply, softly like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper’s which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which concussing, broke.

There is slowed down cognitive neural process. It enters his brain, he rasps his spine deliciously and it just sends waves across the brain and then it is a rupture in its brain. So the normal cognitive process is decelerated and defamiliarized and interrupted in some sense and this interrupted subject becomes a very important symbolic presence.

In “Mrs. Dalloway”, Septimus is an interrupted subject because his engagement with reality, his engagement with the embodiment is interrupted to trauma, to shock, to loss, to violence and is only helped by the dismissal that he is receiving, the resentment that he is receiving from the doctors around him okay. A marvelous discovery indeed that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions; one must be scientific, above all scientific.

We can see the parody in Woolf’s novel it is taking the joy the hyper signs of scientific quality of medicine one must be scientific, one must above all be scientific. The human voice in certain atmospheric conditions can quicken trees into life. The human voice can sometimes quicken your cognitive process and sometimes decelerate it as well.

“Happily Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighed down, transfixed, all the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all the leaves alight and the color thinning and thickening from blue to the green of the hollow wave, like plumes on horses’ heads, feathers and ladies, so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad, he would shut his eyes; he would see no more.”

This shutting of eyes become very symbolic cognitive strategy called the maneuver on a part of Septimus because he cannot take it anymore. He cannot process reality anymore. He cannot cognize anymore. It is becoming too much for him. This is an example of an interrupted subject who cannot function corporally, who cannot function cognitively, who cannot take, who cannot absorb reality; who cannot cognize reality.

The shutting down of the system in some sense because the system is about to break is a spillover. He cannot take it anymore. There is an excess of information and he cannot process it sequentially like he used to. His lack of processing, the crisis of processing is what making him mad in some sense.

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into life: nappily hezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed, or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the colour thinning and thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave, like plumes on horses' heads, feathers on ladies', so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly, would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more.

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as

“But they beckoned. The trees were alive, the leaves were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibers with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down, when the branch stretched he, too made the statement.” There are some new terms to be introduced along with spectrality, materiality and that is the idea of metaplasticity.

Metaplasticity is that condition or theory that does not put the human at the center of the environment rather it looks at a human and the non-human the organic and the inorganic sort of connected categories all the time, all of them are metaplastic in equal way. They are all part of our metaplastic system.

Metaplasticity is where the human and the leaves, the fibers and, the nerves and the leaves they become one, connected without any presupposition of privilege without any presupposition of a central privilege, right. The human is not centralized, the human is not the located subject who is looking at the environment rather the human is one among the many components of this plastic environment and this metaplasticity is what makes the entire environment in a very connected ecosystem.

It completely undercuts the humanistic notion of man being the center of the entire ecosystem, it undercuts, and it sort of deconstructs and deflates the idea of the human subject as the supreme subject as a centralized subject rather the human becomes one of the many

components in this ecosystem. The nerves, the fibers, the leaves, the trees, the human brain become connected at an entangled network of different kinds of cognitive categories.

This metaplasticity is exactly what is happening over here. This complex theoretical term that is used in embodiment studies today is because it completely undercuts the medical notion away because the medical notion as represented by Holmes and Bradshaw they still plays a human being, the man, the white man of course is heavily racialized, the white man being the sturdy center of the entire cognitive system.

The man has to be the center, the man will receive information and the man will process information whereas the metaplastic we can also extend the post-humanist understanding of the ecosystem. It does not place a man in the center of the universe at all. It just becomes a man, the human mind just becomes one of the many systems interacting with each other in a distributive network in a fluid network.

Instead of a centralized network, it is a fluid network and Septimus is sort of moving in this fluid form of cognition where we can see that everything is connected to everything else. The leaves being connected by millions of fibers with its own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down, when the branch stretched he; too made that statement. The branch is stretching, he is stretching, the leaves are connected to its fibers.

Everything is part of one metaplastic system. It just becomes an active model of cognition rather than an embedded model of cognition. It all becomes part of a process of cognition where the leaves and the fibers connect to each other or dialoguing with each other. Despite the sparrows fluttering, rising and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches.

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significant as the sounds. A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion —

“Septimus!” said Rezia. He started violently. People must notice.

“I am going to walk to the fountain and back,” she said.

For she could stand it no longer. Dr. Holmes might say there was nothing the matter. Far rather would she that he were dead! She could not sit beside him when he stared so and did not see her and made everything terrible; sky and tree, children playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down; all were terrible. And he would not kill himself; and she could tell no one.

“Septimus has been working too hard”— that was all she could say to her own mother. To love makes one solitary, she thought. She could tell nobody, not even Septimus now, and looking back, she saw him sitting in his shabby overcoat alone, on the seat hunched up, staring. And it was

“Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sound.” This is a very important section. He is hearing all kinds of sounds. The space between the sounds that becomes as important as it sounds now a child cried, rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion. This is interesting because if we use modern neuroscience which talks about synaptic plasticity.

The medical terms are brought to have a renewed understanding of this particular novel which is a phenomenal novel written from a position of suffering and also the medical gaze on a suffering subject. The modern cognition studies tells us cognition takes place between neurons one neuron another neuron they sort of have this gap between them and that is called a synapse.

Our entire understanding of cognition is a synaptic process, is a sort of a process through the gaps between the gaps. When Woolf is writing and the narrator is informing over here that in Septimus’s mind the sound between the two sounds or the blank space between the two sounds become as significant as the sounds. It seems to be a much interiorized look into the human cognitive system as it really is.

Septimus is an interrupted subject. When he is actually become an interrupted subject, what I am saying is and if we take a look at Septimus’s mind it is a slowed down version of the

normal normative process of cognition that gives us a better glimpse, with a more graphic glimpse of how the human cognition really takes place where we process information, where we part a system that we are processing.

We are also part of it in a very cognitive way where the distinction between the cognized subject and a cognized object is completely blurred where the subject object becomes together as one ecosystem of metaplasticity and this becomes a very different kind of cognitive system for the normal way because in a normal parlance a normal cognitive system which is uninterrupted there is this illusion of seamlessness or the human being is just processing information.

The receptiveness because of suffering from a crisis or embodiment that seamlessness is interrupted in some sense as a result of which he becomes and his mind becomes an excellent case study through which we can understand how cognition really works. And so a child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion.

The cognizance of these terms, metaplasticity and synaptic plasticity and when it is said Septimus is an interruptive subject; it means he is the deceleration of his mind, the interruption in his mind that gives us a more graphic glimpse as a sort of a renewed understanding.

A privileged perspective into how the human mind really works because when we are processing information seamlessly or incorruptibly we do not recognize how cognition works. But this becomes almost a metacognitive system where we understand how we understand in some sense. This is a very interesting novel from the perspective of trauma studies.

But also from cognition studies where we understand how cognition works and a metacognitive quality in Septimus's mind is what makes it such a rich text that we will continue to study in the subsequent lectures. Thank you for your attention.