

Pain, Writing and the Problems of Thinking Time: A Study Using *Emma* and *Mrs Dalloway*

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Abstract

The article's main concern is to decipher the hidden time from *Emma* and to relate it with the one-day structure of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Further the study also tries to find the presence of eternal time more than the mechanical time in both the novels. The article leans closer to philosophical understanding of time than the mathematical one. Over all it is an attempt to understand the concept of 'time' through a re-reading of these novels.

Keywords: Time, Pain, Structure, Eternal, Consciousness

As in Life, so in Literature, Time asserts itself in one way or the other. The narrative form, be it the epic, the romance or the novel, has always concerned itself with man in action, i.e. man moving in Time. As such, in any form of narrative, Time plays a crucial role, at least, in the structuring of events.¹

Time is the sole witness to all the pain which writers beautifully portray in texts with the power of pen. It can also be a record of pleasure, but the record of pain has a greater impact; take for example revolutions, wars, and renaissance. In terms of the impact it creates Edward Bulwer-Lytton viewed Pen as being even 'mightier' than the sword.² The pen has been, since ages the power that made the record of incidents indelible, sometimes light sometimes deep. Pen has the power to limit time and incidents and yet allows a particular writing to travel beyond the limited time. Readers of every age take the liberty of their own in the interpretation of the text just as every writer takes his/her own liberty in the representation of a particular time and age. On the one hand is the eternal time, and on the other the mechanical time. Time, if viewed from the ancient Greek philosophical perspective, points at two forms, one is Parmenides' understanding of reality as timeless;³ and the second is Heraclitus's belief about world to be in ceaseless change.⁴ My reading also tries to focus on the concept of time as 'tense less' i.e. eternal. Debates on time are endless. These thoughts led me to the rereading of two novels of two different times - *Emma* and *Mrs. Dalloway*.⁵ One is the time period of struggle for women writers, and the concept of time in their writings; and then finally the bridge that gaps the writers' time-frames.

¹ Kanwar, Asha. *Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1989), 7.

² Lytton, Bulwer, Edward. *Richelieu: Or, The Conspiracy* (Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1839), 43.

³ Parmenides. "On Nature". From A. H. Coxon, *The Fragments of Parmenides: A Critical Text With Introduction and Translation, the Ancient Testimonia and a Commentary* (Las Vegas, Parmenides Publishing, 2009).

⁴ Heraclitus. *Fragments*. Translated by Brooks Haxton (New York: Penguin), 2001.

⁵ Austen, Jane. *Emma* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* (Ontario: Broadview Edition, 2013).

Jane Austen (1775-1817) is one of the important and interesting English novelists of the 18th century. The very fact that she chose not to use a pseudonym while publishing her works during a time where male writers were preferred more, itself shows what Austen was and how her works would be. For Austen, the upper middle-class world with one or two families was enough to write on. Her fictional society defines itself 'in terms of land, money, and class'.⁶ She deliberately limited her space in writing. Irrespective of the major historical events like the French Revolution happening around her, she was more concerned with the issues of family and society. Her women protagonists are found to be quite independent like Emma, and the intelligent and witty Elizabeth Bennet. Austen has allowed her heroines to have flaws, and ensures time to deepen a strong moral assurance. Self-knowledge, discipline and moral values are some measures which help determine the growth of her protagonists. Therefore, the 'education' part that we find in her novels, construct her novels in the form of a *Bildungsroman*. On the other hand the modern novelist belonging to the 'Bloomsbury' group, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) also has a unique place in English literature. Woolf is popular for her use of 'stream of consciousness' technique, and by its usage she delineates her novels from the regular-conventional style of writing. She says, in her essay *Modern Fiction*, that "[t]he mind receives a myriad of impressions- trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged, life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."⁷ Thus, she seeks a new way of constructing her novels. Like Austen, Woolf's fictional society is surrounded by upper middle-class snobberies. Woolf's women protagonists and their interior monologue help a lot in understanding them and in a larger way we get to understand the writer herself.

Austen and Woolf's women characters, both major and minor, are presented indirectly and directly respectively, struggling through a suppressive patriarchal society. Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own* speaks of the role of woman in society and notes their absence from the mainstream pages of history. She looks for privacy - a space which only a woman can be in as she is - and the domestic situation of woman. Basically it is a tribute to the early woman novelists for establishing a tradition of woman's writing as a part of literature in general. The society that both the writers create is a representation of the then real society. Austen's geographical boundary is limited, whereas, Woolf's mechanical time is limited. Austen's limited landscape is a microcosm of England in a larger canvas. And Woolf's psychological time is greater than any time and has more significance in the life of the characters. The absence or minimalistic presence of historical events in their novels shows their disinterest in politics; but when read within the context of their writings, one can come across many small yet major issues of life which may not have been dealt with in male-authored works like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Austen takes 'marriage' as the basic issue in her novels, be it in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* or *Sense and Sensibility*, while Virginia Woolf writes about woman, 'marriage' and its complexities. Unlike Defoe's *Crusoe*, Austen's heroines living within the boundary of a domestic life develop into morally mature characters and Woolf's heroines define themselves through timeless psychological monologues. And like in *Robinson Crusoe*, the binary of the self and the other can also be felt in their writings. The struggle of finding one's place in the family and society, every attempt to find a space of one's own, the voice and its echoes trying to speak

⁶ Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 369.

⁷ Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction". *Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press), xiv.

of the 'other's self' is what we discover in their novels. To be precise, the study on Austen's *Emma* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* shall be dealt in detail as specimens of their comparative study.

Thinking Time

Our reading of both the texts tries to analyze the concept of time. Even before the clock was invented, time had existed. Time is ever-flowing and to emphasize Bergson, it is incomplete.⁸ Though the structure of the novels remain different yet the nuances of the texts leads one to see a zone where two different times of two different authors collide rather than merge. The commonality between the two is not that both are female writers but the issues, which is dealt by one in the 18th century and which continue into the writings of the other in the early 20th century. These continuations open up two understandings - one that the issues of marriage and society for women have never changed, and the other that the consciousness of one writer has flowed beautifully into the other. And the flow continues into the eternal time. The texts explore the inner life. Apparently, *Emma* looks like a fantasy novel where the heroine fantasizes about her match-making role and *Mrs. Dalloway* like a crossword puzzle where many thoughts, the flow of consciousness, cross one another. *Emma* might appear to be a lengthy book with the regular conversations between characters regarding banal things like social visits. *Mrs. Dalloway* might appear like a mathematical calculation where one gets stuck in identifying the inner voice of multiple characters speaking out loud almost at the same time. In this structural web one might miss out, especially in *Emma*, the role of time. Be it visible or invisible, time has allowed both the major characters to understand the 'self' in their personal time, while they live in the eternal time. The very visibility of 'time' in these texts also speak about the role of pen in representing the pain. Moreover, Austen and Woolf choose to speak of pain through pen which has not only contributed to the literary world but also voiced the political aspects of both writing and reading.

Emma begins with an introduction of its eponymous character who is placed in a time frame along with the other characters. Although Austen has not mentioned any particular year or time it is clear to us that the characters have been constructed around the concept of time. The writer allows her character, Emma, to come to self-realization - to know her limitation and her prejudiced nature. Their worlds are not tightly controlled by the chronological time. There is no hurry in Emma's visit to Mrs. Goddards or to Ms. Bates. There are conversations where the people of Highbury wait to meet Frank Churchill, but it isn't bound by the construction of a limited time. Rather there is enough space and time for each character to know others and the self. Mr. Elton is, perhaps, the only character who seems to be in a hurry in order to do away the shame of rejection happens to marry Augusta Hawkins.

Mrs. Dalloway on the other hand is restricted within the mechanical time of one day. The complex structure encompasses the free flowing time into the limited sense of time complementing each other. As Clarissa prepares for the party, a series of thoughts cross her mind. In the moment of one day she travels back and forth into her past and present. In one moment the thought of Peter Walsh and in the next of Mr. Richard Dalloway travels in her mind. We find layers of thoughts of various characters crossing the boundary of the clock time,

⁸ Bergson, Henri. *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Dover Publications, 1946), 138.

though 'Big Ben' appears many times in the novel. Series of thoughts rise from each mind as series of human natures begin to form various shapes. Clarissa's mind recalls Peter Walsh and we come to know about him through her mind before he appears in the novel. Septimus Smith's hatred for war along with his mental imbalance and Rezia's painful life; Peter's life in England and in India, his opinion about the imperial power, Richard's dilemma in expressing his love for Clarissa - all are structured in such a manner that they take us beyond the time of the novel i.e. one day.

In both the novels, time is portrayed in the chronological as well as psychological sense. Therefore, the two different times of the writers converge with the time of their readers. The issues they write about transcend the scientific time. Both *Emma* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, act as the voice of a particular time, representing the struggles of a woman-writer. Two different times, two different writers, both look for a space in their respective society be it in marriage or in family. This unites them and blends their different times into one. In this respect it would not be wrong to quote Todd, "Austen is to Woolf's text the context that limits and proves limits."⁹ Both the novels look for self realization, integrity, security and space, moral and spiritual quest. The best part is the gradual process in which their characters come to achieve their quest. This struggle is not only fictional in the characters but also true for the authors manifesting itself in space-time. The pain of barrenness, dependence, voicelessness is quite visible in both *Emma* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Emma isn't Jane Fairfax, and thus the element of jealousy and prejudiced comment on Ms. Fairfax to be 'reserved' has a different angle from which the readers can look at Emma and her so called 'space'. Clarissa on the other hand with an 'attic' of her own, is quite clear for us to view. Although the two of them live in chronologically different times and spaces yet the psychological time they traverse as 'women' coincide. This very measureless time is what makes both the novels and writers free of the 'Big Ben'. Both the writers in expressing themselves succeed to communicate evocatively their life long struggles. Woolf's symbols and Austen's irony are explicit in their expressions. For a woman writer, doubly marginalized, selection and compression of technique, style, and language is always a problem. In addition, to find one's own space and to move in multiple times is a great achievement. As Emma confronts her limitations and her independence, as Clarissa finds the beauty of life in the very word death, so does Austen and Woolf find the beauty of writing irrespective of many difficulties. It is quite apt to repeat Woolf's own words, "[i]ndeed, it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against."¹⁰

Austen and Woolf's protagonists are both caught in a social net of marriage, trying their best to fit in their respective society, and are at the same time creating their own understanding of the 'other' and the 'self'. The study voices the unheard and unsung heroines and their self discovery. Both the writers reflect their time - the time when women writings were not paid well, where educating women were like a taboo, where marriage was the only way up in society, where the world of woman was interpreted by the 'other' as the 'other'. Austen and Woolf presented the society in which they lived in, and witnessed both the social, economic and psychological issues and changes. One from the 18th century and the other from the 20th century have written the stories which become contemporary in every age.

⁹ Todd, Jason. *Jane Austen: New Perspectives* (New Jersey: Holmes & Meier, 1983), 125.

¹⁰ Woolf, Virginia. 'Professions for Women'. *Selected Essays*, 144.

Taunton wrote in his article 'Modernism, time and consciousness: the influence of Henri Bergson and Marcel Proust' that Proust like Bergson speaks of time as 'the accumulation of qualitative impressions' rather than quantitative ones in his novel 'In Search of Lost Time' (1912-1922).¹¹ It is therefore more important to trace the qualitative impressions in both the novels rather than search for any linear progress of the character's development. To take help of Bergson from his essay *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, it is to be understood that time varies from person to person.¹² And it is through one's power of imagination that one can grasp the 'personal' time just as in case of Mrs. Dalloway and Emma. The time in which Emma and Clarissa are placed vary on a mechanical structure but both engage more in their personal time. However, they are now and then disturbed by the mechanical time, and live in their imagination. Emma's imagination leads her to misunderstand 'love' and Clarissa's flow of consciousness crosses the border of both Big Ben and life. Bergson's concept of 'duree' (duration) can help us in the major role played by time in both the texts¹³. However, the 'duree' in both the texts differ. In one the author has intentionally concentrated the action of the novel in and around time, while in the other it remains invisible.

Austen's Emma and Woolf's Clarissa are different in many ways - their age, life style, and situations; one growing full in youth, liable to make mistakes and the other in her grey years who has seen and experienced life; one caught in a situation of over-confidence and pride, and the other caught in a zone full of social responsibilities; yet both search their space in domestic and social world. Some similarities between them can be found in the web of marriage and complexities, and the upper middle-class society in which they are caught up, and are expected not to cross the boundaries of; both are life-loving protagonists; and both develop their understanding of love, marriage and life. Their search takes time, their understanding phase takes time and everything, necessary for their life, takes time to appear as well as to disappear. The author here is seen almost like a God-like figure that controls them within the immeasurable time, yet restricting every situation, every action within the limits of words and pages. The authors must have gone through meticulous revisions in striking a balance between the limitless time of characters and the limited technicalities that were necessary to follow.

Thus in both the form of narrative - one conventional, the other unconventional and psychological - time has played an important role in the construction of events in particular, and life and literature in general. Nevertheless the study of both the novels in engaging with time needs more than mathematical calculations philosophical and psychological depth. The argument then shall provide a particular shape. Till then let me quote Woolf, "So, if we may prophecy, women in time to come will write fewer novels, but better novels; ...when women will have what has so long been denied them - leisure, and money, and a room to themselves."¹⁴

¹¹ Matthew Taunton, "Modernism, time and consciousness: the influence of Henri Bergson and Marcel Proust", 25 May 2016, British Library, www.bl.uk

¹² Bergson, Henri. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. Translated by F.L. Pogson (London: Dover Editions, 1913).

¹³ Bergson, Henri. *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*.

¹⁴ Woolf, Virginia. "Women and Fiction". In *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Edited by Stuart N. Clarke (London: Hogarth Press, 2009), 35.