

The Notion of Lessness: Revisiting Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's room* through Dialogism

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Abstract

Fellow man! Your whole life, like a sandglass, will always be reversed and will ever run out again, – a long minute of time will elapse until all those conditions out of which you were evolved return in the wheel of the cosmic process.

- *Notes on the Eternal Recurrence* – Vol. 16 Nietzsche's Complete Works (in English)

As per the idea of conceiving a complex text and the politics of its representation goes, the Greek concept of 'Phronesis' or practical wisdom plays an intriguing part to the 'understanding' of that which is apparent. Now literature with self-interpretation of the historically given textuality with a contextual contravention involving socio-moral-psychological exegesis can be intriguing enough to problematize the set notions of truth or morality. 1922 the in-between (of the two major Wars on the planet) year marked the reality of a tiresome humanitarian world that diminished the idea of the organic being which was primarily deconstructed by the very 1859 book of Darwin. Freud with the three divisions of mind: Id, Ego, Super Ego, corollary to Unconscious, Subconscious, Conscious untogethered the notions of full-fledged human system that could exist in or outside the text.

In this context, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (October, 1922) is worth to be re-read as a commencement text of the reader's response. A multi-vocal attitude throughout the novel gives us the idea of the peripheral. The broken metanarratives of micro familial relations reveals the macro with reference to a newly emerging formlessness. In this paper we would try to point out the notion of 'lessness' in the novel as a primary signifier of the century and how it discloses world with values redeemed in a waste-land only to be juxtaposed with a Sisyphean barrenness of repetition.

Keywords: Phronesis, Exegesis, Metanarratives, Sisyphean, Barrenness



It is a long-lost cause. The idea of organic wholesomeness present through the middle ages up to the cohesive tales of divine is living in several texts. It is the same until the dawn of individuality (in the next centuries, fifteenth and sixteenth, to be precise) had a tight grasp over literature. Titles like *Everyman*, (*Somonyng of Everyman*) *Mankind* contained the notion of the famous medieval collectively: a space where the individual does not have any meaningful existence. He, is the lot. Just a coherent diversion to the construct built by the church and monarchy. The idea of power in the hand of a single individual prevailed thus. History has shown how a system of oppression could be easily built around this power centre.

The understanding of life, the truth of existence lies beyond the concept of freedom. Freedom is always a differently problematic choice. The formation of the same foregrounds itself in the heart of an individual. It is strictly person-specific. What is more important to recognise in this matter is that it involves the ambience. Ambience can be defined as influence, imposition and ultimately coercion by the system, the power structure. It is that road-roller that tries to equalise all varieties for its own smooth-going. All of this is part of the methodology of identity-building that makes the bigger section of the contemporary society think that it is all about being together. That is the key to control and tame people. If anybody thinks differently than the rest, points out the holes in an otherwise knit structure, then he will be left alone in dark, cold, unknown outer (read other) world.

In those days, the public philosophy essentially revolved round the perception of mere existence. Science was not developed as it later will be. Explorations did not start with the needful velocity. Literature centred on religious motifs: religion was the only adhering element that politicised the position of those who were in power. In the narratives of Abraham and Moses up to Solomon, the idea of a strict patriarch prevailed. The Augustinian philosophical principal concerning the religious institution and political government remained unproductive. The analogy between an empire (*the Regnum*) and a robber band by him seemed a bit too preposterous to be executed in the real world. The elasticity of the regime, the political one, depended mostly on religious designs. The system fed on the collective and mental state of despair, a sense of loss and unwitting but practical surrender to anonymity, however unwilling.

This is obviously the greater picture. A general indication of the microscopic structures operated as a working virus inside the system. As time flows, the age of passive collective compatibility gradually converted into that of the individual. Thus its reflection is evident in literature. The titles, from *Everyone* and *Mankind*, became *Dr. Faustus*, *Edward the Second*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and so on. The notion of individuality is always central to any work of art or life for that matter. Now, the known conflict between age, society, monarchy and man, his love, his ideal changed its pattern in due course of time. Irony is, along with the dethroning of the dark and humid atmosphere that evoked and prevailed over the majority of medieval period, the Black Death and peasant's revolts, the communal tendencies (*letania septiformis* the famous "seven pronged procession"), the metanarrative of high tragedy, the essence of chivalry, love and honour also faded.

The discourse therefore is neither that of black nor white: it is all through grey. As time passed the empire and the colonies saw their ups and inevitable downs as the whole



world did. It is always indeed the juxtaposition of both the best and worst of times. The tumultuous society gave birth to enigmas concerning stillborn liberal humans who by then have become too much individuals. The Renaissance over-reacher lost his arch in the vignette of self-centric accomplishments. The process involved colonising the minds of the weaker (the decent and more sensitive people in this case) and thus satisfying his own libidinal hunger: the Gods may have been released somehow from the stony institutions but the idol-worshipping just got transferred into Hero-worshipping. The tradition of being in misery and under catastrophe remained the same, may be with different attire: the paradox of freedom costs life itself. From Socrates to Martin Luther, Victor Hugo to Abraham Lincoln, the notion of truth and enlightenment associated with freedom always demand martyrdom, excommunication from the mainstream and such other features common to non-conformists.

As per the idea of conceiving a complex text and the politics of its representation goes, the Greek concept of 'Phronesis' or practical wisdom plays an intriguing part to the 'understanding' of that which is apparent. Now literature with self-interpretation of the historically given textuality with a contextual contravention involving socio-moral-psychological exegesis can be intriguing enough to problematize the set notions of truth or morality. 1922 the in-between (of the two major Wars on the planet) year marked the reality of a tiresome humanitarian world that diminished the idea of the organic being or an individual which was primarily deconstructed by the very 1859 book of Darwin (*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*). Freud with the three divisions of mind: Id, Ego, Super Ego, corollary to Unconscious, Subconscious, Conscious un-togethered the notions of full-fledged human system that could exist in or outside the text. Hence we have the question of multivocality.

In this context, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (October, 1922) is worth to be re-read as one of the commencement texts that boosted the reader's response in a very different manner. The word *dialogizm* and *dialogičnost* (signifying "dialogicality") has been made a term by Mikhail Bakhtin while he was studying the classical works, the *locus classicus* of Fyodor Dostoevsky. In his essay "Discourse in the Novel" ("Slovo v romane,") he explained the different aspects of stylistics of the narrative in the novel. The suggestion of more than one voice playing inside the texts gives it a discrete consequence: the essence of dialogism thus lies in acknowledging the existence of multivocality with which the discourse gets its shape. This also brings the term heteroglossia (*raznorečie*) to consideration: one may remember Franz Brentano and his act psychology or Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* in this context.

A multi-vocal attitude throughout Woolf's novel gives us the idea of the psychedelic rambling that go outside a sensitive modern individual's text. Let's concentrate a little on the narrative to discuss the multivocality and its facets. Jacob's character is defined in reference to his relationships with the other characters in the novel. The broken metanarratives of micro familial relations reveal the macro with reference to a newly emerging formlessness. The moot point of this paper will be to point out the notion of 'lessness' in the said novel as a primary signifier of the century and how it discloses a clash between the classic ecosphere with values and the commercial world in a waste-land only to be contrasted with a Sisyphian barrenness of absurd repetition.

It is interesting to note that the word *quaranta giorni* (comes from the 15th Century Venetian law for the ships to be held in the coast for a period of forty days in the time of



plague) is the begetter of the word quarantine. This word, then on became infamously indispensable whenever a time of pandemic comes. The conception of seclusion or being held alone is a pandemic itself on the psychological plane. The novel tells us about a journey that prevails throughout the stream-of-consciousness flow. A series of an overlapping and incongruous spectrum of contradictory views is revealed in front of the readers through the narrative of *Jacob's Room*. The story begins as simply as it can, on a sea beach with a narration by Betty Flanders (as she writes a letter to Captain Barfoot), the mother of the protagonist Jacob Flanders.

Slowly welling from the point of her gold nib, pale blue ink dissolved the full stop; for there her pen stuck; her eyes fixed, and tears slowly filled them. The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled; and she had the illusion that the mast of Mr. Connor's little yacht was bending like a wax candle in the sun. (Woolf)

The intrusive narrator depicts the situation with utmost aptness. "Pale blue ink", the quivering bay, the wobbling lighthouse all expressions are dedicated to draw a grey picture of some inscrutable reality. It is to be pointed that it is the realm of the father as Lacan would put: "It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law" (Lacan 67).

It is important to remember that Virginia Woolf's novel coincides with the two most important works of literature that came out in 1922: *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. Of course one might mention the founding of *The Criterion* (Eliot), Fitzgerald's novel *The Beautiful and Damned* alongside the fact of Kafka's initiation of his towering work, *The Castle* (*Das Schloss*). It is impossible to overlook the time that produces such colossal works of literature on sterility of civilization in one singular year. Among all these literary pieces, Woolf's novel stands apart not only as an experimentation in the field of novel of the modern sort but also for the fact of her innovative way of telling a story. Her narrative is definitely purposive. The enigma lies in the eyes of the reader to solve: the reader has to decide, which way to look at. Again which angle should be dominant in a reader is completely respective and relative. Woolf portrays a male protagonist through multi-vocal female presence. But the nuance of dialogues cover but does not restrict itself to the narration only. The mosaic of broken narratives (a person writing a letter, a person collecting the belongings of her dead son, the little details on insects, the description of a graver nature, a day in British Museum, A walk and talk through the ruins of antiquity etc.), the metaphoric, poetic evocation of natural circumstances ultimately get shaped only in the mind of a conscious reader. It is imperative to have a very sensitive outlook towards the narrative to understand the gravity of the situation: to put the text within the context.

Being multi-vocal, Woolf's narrative not only is that of the protagonist, but it tells a lot about the peripheral figures that float around the male centred novel as women were in a male dominated universe. The novel's most significant novelty lies in the fact that it is not only multi-vocal but also multifocal. This multiplicity gives birth to a lot of reaction in the readers. It concerns the society, individuality, character, glory, power, identity, extremist tendencies, justification, lies and so on. The identity of the protagonist is associated with metaphors and symbols that involve a sense of loss, in absentia, the notion of a father figure, the clash with the mundane world. One simple paragraph would suffice for an example:



Jacob drew rather a dirty pocket-handkerchief across his face. He went upstairs to his room.

The stag-beetle dies slowly (it was John who collected the beetles). Even on the second day its legs were supple. But the butterflies were dead. A whiff of rotten eggs had vanquished the pale clouded yellows which came pelting across the orchard and up Dods Hill and away on to the moor, now lost behind a furze bush, then off again helter-skelter in a broiling sun. A fritillary basked on a white stone in the Roman camp. From the valley came the sound of church bells. They were all eating roast beef in Scarborough; for it was Sunday when Jacob caught the pale clouded yellows in the clover field, eight miles from home. (Woolf)

Just before, Kafka's *The Castle* has been referred in this paper, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*, originally published in 1915), a classic example of a compartmentalised self in duress, already declared the violence of the inner war of the modern individual in all clarity. The notion of isolation gives way to the most famous and happily used term, the portentous of modernism –alienation. The inner universe of the protagonist is reflected through the outer world: the world surrounded by a struggling archetypal widowed mother figure, an unrequited love-interest, a semi-father figure associated with classical past etc. References to insects, Jacob's interest towards them, the vivid and infinitesimal description of the events point to a universe of self-seclusion separating it from the outside-reality. Expressions such as "rotten eggs", "broiling sun" corroborate to the idea of a brutal canine world. It is a world of mercilessness. It is a world of the carnivores. This universe is no short of the prehistoric one with clans of the Neanderthals with primordial, illogical, wild rage.

Jacob's world is depicted through the women around him, most of whom stand in constant opposition to his sensitive self: the brilliance of the Cambridge scholar, the intellectual, romantic humane self that tried to cling onto some metanarrative that would last forever. The tragedy lies in the fact that the word "forever" lost its value since the dawn of utilizing and in course of time 'pragmatizing' individuality. The identity of the individual shrunk not into nothingness but into a different species altogether. It is a tale of alienation on a different plane. The dark and clouded night holds its shadow over what is consistent and true and sincere. It is fascinating to note that all this time the individuals are either involved or mentioned in association with smaller insects (in Kafka and here also, as explained in the quoted sections). It is obligatory to see the portrayal as a whole to understand the infernal innuendos within.

The organic collectivity of the middle ages dissolved into the overreaching triumphant eccentricity of the Elizabethan man. It therefore dissipated into the quest for validation through a revisit to the classical in a bizarre, worst-possible way (in most cases with the exception of a few gems like Pope or Dryden) through the Neo-Classical age. The authentication almost got a foothold during the 1780s-around world where love and chivalry meant only one word: revolution. The bloods of the reign of terror washed the poets' dream away to some unreal elusive Byzantium. Once again the Hero fell from his usual stature and got diminished into a mere protagonist. The loss of the medieval sense of collectively that a modern scholar would easily dismiss as something brute and uncultured also took away the essence of dignity and romance with it. The world of unconditional faith had its day. It is now the turn to remember the *ubi sunt*. Now the wholesome anarchist oneness of the ancient voice has become many: the metanarrative is crushed into numberless mini-narratives. It resulted in multiple realities, none of which has any validation or permanence for that



matter. The question of power invested in Jacob resulted in destruction: as a male Bloomsbury, Jacob must have been bestowed with all that can be craved for the race of the Apollonians.

The following passage concerning a moth metaphorically reveals the meaninglessness of a grave and unreal world in which man has become mere material, a commodity, a nameless soldier in an unwanted war craving power. In this world he does have no heroism to show, only a flicker of life here and there to prove that he is not non-existent. The classical touch, the idea of grandness is replaced by the idea of the 'lessness'. The epithet is transferred successfully, to one's dismay:

The upper wings of the moth which Jacob held were undoubtedly marked with kidney-shaped spots of a fulvous hue. But there was no crescent upon the underwing. The tree had fallen the night he caught it. There had been a volley of pistol-shots suddenly in the depths of the wood. And his mother had taken him for a burglar when he came home late. The only one of her sons who never obeyed her, she said.

Morris called it "an extremely local insect found in damp or marshy places." But Morris is sometimes wrong. Sometimes Jacob, choosing a very fine pen, made a correction in the margin.

The tree had fallen, though it was a windless night, and the lantern, stood upon the ground, had lit up the still green leaves and the dead beech leaves. It was a dry place. A toad was there. And the red underwing had circled round the light and flashed and gone. The red underwing had never come back, though Jacob had waited. It was after twelve when he crossed the lawn and saw his mother in the bright room, playing patience, sitting up. (Woolf)

Woolf has been criticised for such long passages that apparently do not have any direct relation to the narrative. But one must understand that Woolf's method in the novel is to explore a different form of dialogism that involves not only multiple voices but also layers of suggestive picturesque passages. Passages that would surely lead to an understanding of the callous cruelty of the universe infested with mind-numbing violence. The microcosmic falling tree in a windless night, the reference to a moth, its clipped wings create a visual sense of a greater societal vacuum. The readers grow deep inside the narrative, between the lines. The severity of the pre-war, post-industrialised mechanical England's constructs -its created nationalism, its manifested construct of heroism, and its silence to war-casualties- is exposed with utmost subtlety. One might recall Hardy's notion of Immanent Will (in *The Dynasts*) or even the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). The existential absurdity in an unkind earth has also been stated in Eduard von Hartmann's (1842-1906) works. Predecessors of Freud and Jung, these are the philosophers who paved the way for a more aesthetic discussion of the inevitable hopelessness. This particular discourse got shape in Eliot and Joyce in one way and in Woolf, another. What seemed to be mere ramblings inside the text now have come with a more intensified form involving the politicised context. The world of Jacob is filled with nameless, insignificant events trudging through which he tries to have a quest. In other words, the narrative rather attempts to achieve some meaning that would point to the passing away of the fruitful. It is a world where the choice of goodness is mere absence of the courage to become evil: a dark and polluted domain of blood-thirst that conquered everything like the middle-age Transylvania.



Woolf's brother's death cast a long shadow in the novel's protagonist, but Jacob's death is more elaborate because of the context of war. One cannot consider *Jacob's Room* to be a War-novel, but it can be safely said that it is a reflection of the ruins of the war alongside the workings of mindless malicious patriarchy as a constitution. The ammunitions of the fathers, the masters of impending doom were engraved in the heart of the individual, out in the cold cruel world: once again it is a puppetry of being collective, being on the side of the authoritative for the sake of sheer existence. The life lost its meaning once again.

Mistress, I dug upon your grave
To bury a bone, in case
I should be hungry near this spot
When passing on my daily trot.
I am sorry, but I quite forgot
It was your resting-place. (Hardy)

The above dialogue from Hardy's famous poem "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave" was published in *Saturday Review* first. Later it appeared in volume form in *Satires of Circumstance: Lyrics and Reveries* in 1914. The year is important as it was in the case of Kafka's. It is obviously not a war poem, nothing like Wilfred Owen, John McCrae or Siegfried Sassoon. But the significance of the lines follows a certain course that says enough about the hopelessness, mindlessness and inhumanity that ran across the years of the first Great War. The dogs that epitomise the idea of trust and fidelity for a long time is compared and placed side by side a husband who thinks it to be completely perfect to marry right after one wife has died. The analogy continues: an infidel dog with an infidel husband! There is apparently nothing wrong in choosing another wife but the timing and the logic that is stated in the poem problematize the whole concept as the husband thinks that the lady would not mind as she has ceased to exist: as a result, so has her image to the husband. There is no lingering of feeling or grief, only practical voluptuous gluttony that would propel that life which still has not ended. In a review of a book on Rupert Brooke, Woolf herself posed a question about the tragic demise of a promising educated intellectual generation like Jacob's. What would they have been, what would have the generation become? Certainly they would not have converted into Jimmy Porters (*Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne). A baggage of the white elephant's past suppressed the aspiration of humanity. It was a matter of more than one generation. The shadow of depression lingered longer. Jacob is a representative of a fallen race of pseudo-heroes. He does not have the stature to become a real one. Even if he tried, his age would not support him to be one. Flanked by two Great Wars on both sides, the modern *Annus Mirabilis* 1922 itself stood for a regime called the wasteland. Here people would gather fuel in vacant marshlands as an Eliot would write.

This mischievously elegiac piece of Woolf points out the unwanted disillusionment in the educated romantic who thought of dreams, who might have clung to the idea of the unattainable as evident in the affair that he had. It was simultaneously impulsive and foolish in the eye of a worldly-wise person. He understands his inability to do the needed alterations in the society: he fails as a literary critic. The city with madding crowd, London does not really suit him. Sandra Williams, as a woman attracted him most probably as she was unattainable. The idea of the court-poet, the pain of unreciprocated love and the theoretical romanticism associated with it superficially fascinated Jacob to jump into the relationship. Their visitation in the ruins of Greek antiquity, their literary discussions glimmer with a fake idealism that has lost its value a long time before. Life and meaning became oxymoronic



with the death of God as a Nietzsche would proclaim. The birth of Godot is still a far cry; it was all about a grey waiting, a process which a lot will not survive to see through to the end. In between, life will remain as calm to the prophet as to the bastard. It will remain equally cruel to the solemn and the nonchalant. The outlook of sincerity and warmth are as absent as the touch of fire in a storm-struck London where everything got covered in a unifying, deathly white snow:

The strange thing about life is that though the nature of it must have been apparent to every one for hundreds of years, no one has left any adequate account of it. The streets of London have their map; but our passions are uncharted. What are you going to meet if you turn this corner? (Woolf)

The four-letter word life has got the nuance of nothing proven in course of the novel. It is elementary: the most important thing comes towards the end as we have a glimpse of Jacob's room: a sight in which the readers would be able to conceive the idea of the man who stood for a generation and an age. This statement of purpose in Woolf is never straight and hardly simple. In one sweep we have the glimpse of a life: achievements, intellect, sensitivity, prowess and fall.

Jacob's room had a round table and two low chairs. There were yellow flags in a jar on the mantelpiece; a photograph of his mother; cards from societies with little raised crescents, coats of arms, and initials; notes and pipes; on the table lay paper ruled with a red margin—an essay, no doubt—"Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?" There were books enough; very few French books; but then anyone who's worth anything reads just what he likes, as the mood takes him, with extravagant enthusiasm. Lives of the Duke of Wellington, for example; Spinoza; the works of Dickens; the Faery Queen; a Greek dictionary with the petals of poppies pressed to silk between the pages; all the Elizabethans. His slippers were incredibly shabby, like boats burnt to the water's rim. Then there were photographs from the Greeks, and a mezzotint from Sir Joshua—all very English. The works of Jane Austen, too, in deference, perhaps, to someone else's standard. Carlyle was a prize. There were books upon the Italian painters of the Renaissance, a Manual of the Diseases of the Horse, and all the usual text-books. Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there. (Woolf)

The references to the canonical literary, philosophical, psychological, scientific works ultimately constituted the world of a number, a mere casualty who would be remembered with the lot, as a whole, thus individuality is lost in multiplicity. The murderous coldness associated with the historical oblivion shake the reader's calm casual reading. That is the effect of this text, especially a few passages, one of which is given above. The novel explores an individual's juxtaposition of two different states of identity, being and becoming, to lend from Stuart Hall's concept. The first one is unifying and satisfactory to one's self while the second is more significant in an individual's life that is caught in the whirlwind of an ironic circus, called civilization.

It is a pure and simple proclamation on the conflict between the classic and the commodified: obviously the question involved the idea of patriarchal machinery and the construct of the colonizing realm that changed only its shape and size not the motif. On the one hand Woolf's novel involves gender issues beyond question; on the other it involves the



gradual disintegration of humanity itself. These issues are raised through multiple vocal and focal nuances as discussed above. The notion of individuality and the question of freedom are always intertwined. They get problematized according to the evolving situation. At the same time it is also curious to note that the discourse is not much different from that of the Gender-bias. The socio-political discrimination alongside a cruel indifference towards the profundity of human lives led to a psychological moratorium that cripples spontaneity which is the primary condition of life and art.

The palpability of existence once thought to be blooming in the larger-than-life heroes fails gloriously as one can see. It is a pity that Woolf needed help of metaphors to illustrate the protagonist in front of the readers instead of referring to the man himself. Because of the fragmented existence it is obvious that the full-fledged human is not available. What come handy are the titbits that are around him through which one has to draw an apparently inconclusive conclusion. The age is like that: the sub-conscious goes forward through the blood and struggle of the sensible to accomplish if there is anything left.

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
 Robed in the long friends,
 The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
 Secret by the unmourning water
 Of the riding Thames.
 After the first death, there is no other. (Thomas)

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