



Madness vs. Culture in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

Maysaloon Khalid Ali, (PhD)

Inst., (PhD) college of languages, University of Baghdad.

zanubia_2009@yahoo.com

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explain the relationship between madness and the culture of societies, where madness is closely related to cultures. Madness is defined as a group of behaviors characterized by abnormal mental or behavioral patterns. Culture has a tremendous influence on the individual values framework of a society as it is a set of traditional beliefs, rituals, customs and values transmitted and shared in a particular society. Anyone who deviates from these rules will be considered insane.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is a novel that expresses her perceptions of the idea of madness throughout history; especially since the writer herself was diagnosed as mentally ill. In this novel, the writer chooses the character of Septimus and his relationship with the outside world. Septimus was responsible, obedient, and loved by his employer, yet his inner world was separated from the outside one. It was exacerbated by the fact that he was distanced from the daily habits of the masses and became a stranger and unfit for normal life. Trapped between the past and the present, he failed to leap over a painful memory, and he gradually fell into a state of madness.

Key Words: Mrs. Dalloway, Madness, Culture, War, Shell Shock, Inner World, Rules.

Text Used: Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: CRW press, 2003.

المستخلص

ان الغرض من هذا البحث هو تفسير العلاقة بين الجنون وثقافة المجتمعات حيث يرتبط الجنون بالثقافات ارتباطا وثيقا. يعرف الجنون على انه مجموعة من السلوكيات التي تتميز بأنماط عقلية أو سلوكية غير طبيعية . للثقافة تأثير هائل على إطار القيم الفردية حيث إنها مجموعة من المعتقدات والطقوس والعادات والقيم التقليدية المنقولة والمشاركة في مجتمع معين. أي شخص يحدد عن هذه القواعد سيعتبر مجنوناً. تعبر روايه السيدة دلواي للكاتبه فرجينيا ولف عن تصوراتها لفكره الجنون عبر التاريخ . وخاصة وان الكاتبه تم تشخيصها بانها مختلة عقليا. في هذه الرواية اختارت الكاتبه شخصيه سبنيموس وعلاقتة بالعالم الخارجي. لقد كان سبنيموس مسؤول ، مطيع ، ومحبوب من قبل صاحب العمل ، لكن عالمه الداخلي مفصول عن العالم الخارجي . وقد تفاقمت حالته بسبب حقيقة أنه أبتعد كل البعد عن العادات اليومية للناس وأصبح غريباً وغير صالح للحياة الطبيعية في المجتمع. لقد شعر سبنيموس بانه محاصرا بين الماضي والحاضر ، وفشل في القفز فوق نكرياته المؤلمة ودخل تدريجياً في حالة من الجنون.

Introduction

The meaning of madness as an abstract concept depends on personal judgments. Therefore, it is open to many interpretations. The Oxford English dictionary defines madness as “having a disordered and dysfunctional mind” (p. 345). Theories of causation of madness, since the old age till modern times, have been countless: the influence of heavenly bodies, theoretical and demonological visitations, atmospheric changes, the result of occult forces and witchcraft, the effect of sin and self-indulgence, bodily disorders and even the effect of certain political and cultural doctrines (Paul 2).

The influence of madness on one’s behavior is not different from that of culture. Culture has a massive influence on the individual value framework. It is a set of traditional beliefs, rituals, artifacts, customs, and values transmitted and shared in a given society. The meaning of culture includes three dimensions. Firstly, it is a perspective system by which there is social control in the form of sanctions, making people accept moral and behavioral norms. Secondly, there is an emotional system; art, literature, music, etc. which are cultural expressions of individuals. Thirdly, it is a method of concepts that makes members of society interpret the world meaningfully as



well as a process through which culture controls a social system called institutionalization (Venugopalan 5).

In *Cross-Cultural Studies in Mental Health* (1961), Soddy announces that: “a healthy person's response to life is without strain; his ambitions are within the scope of practical realization” (quoted in Szasz 36). Soddy locates the source of unhealthiness within the individual rather than the culture (Ibid.). However, Foucault believes that cultural power is not a phenomenon but a relation, and it is not merely a property of the state. Foucault discusses that it is “everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (1978, 93).

Madness is located in the realm of mental illness as behaviors characterized by specific abnormal mental or behavioral systems. However, madness can be considered a representative form of mental illness and has nature and essence that can be beyond the state of being just as an illness. Foucault says, “what differentiates madness from other types of mental illness is, what links human beings with what is deepest in himself, and with what is most solitary” (1988, 280).

In the past, society had a direct effect on madness through various mechanisms of power. The historical perspective proves that after the obliteration of leprosy, another group of people was excluded from their cities, madmen, at the end of the Middle Ages (Abou Ghalandari and Jamili, 537). Foucault sees madness as a child of social construction more than one of the precise psychiatric truths and sees it as a product of society. He thinks that madness is not a natural being, yet it depends on the community in which it was created. He adds that:

[m]adness has become man's possibility of abolishing both man and the world—and even those images that challenge the world and deform man. It is, far beyond dreams, beyond the nightmare of bestiality, the last recourse: the end and the beginning of everything.
(Foucault, 1988, 281).

Madness vs. Culture in Virginia Woolf's *Mr. Dalloway*



The relationship between culture and madness is the essential element that can be traced in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Culture includes a body of individuals in a common geographical region and under the same political and social authority. Moreover, people have to conform to the norms explained by society. Anyone, who frequently violates these unwritten rules, is seen as abnormal. Through different mechanisms of power, culture can define and even control everything. Still, then, it tries to marginalize this group of abnormal people through various and invisible devices. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf tries to show the influence of culture (represented by power and society) over madness and how society rejects madness as an unpleasant feature (Abou Ghalandari and Jamili, 535-536).

There were darker shadows of the male-dominated rule in Woolf's life. She was sexually abused by her half-brother when she was a child both before her mother's death and afterward. One of the weakest points of British patriarchal society was the lack of understanding of the mental illness. The term at that time was called "nerve weakness" (Caramango, 11). It referred to different kinds of mental disorders. It was the same diagnosis that George Savage, a type of Victorian psychologist, recognized about Woolf's illness. His explanation of some types of mental disorders was in the status of a "defect in moral character" because he realized sanity in the state of "social conformity" (Caramango, 14). Thus, culture defines madness, determines its treatment, and shapes its expression all by prevailing ideological suppositions. This could be shown through one of the most valuable forms of cultural criticism, i. e. literature (Roberts 14).

Woolf in *A Writer's Diary* argues, "In this book [Mrs. Dalloway], I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life and death, sanity, and insanity; I want to criticize the social system and show it at work, in its most intense" (56). "My Madness Saved Me," this bold summing up Woolf's life and work in the form of a title of a book by Dr. Thomas Szasz appears not only to 'deconstruct' the prevalent notions on madness widespread in the society but at the same time, to assist in manifesting its authenticity and simultaneous existence in the 'mad genius' of Woolf, and literary characters of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Woolf was announced mentally ill at quite an early stage in her life, and this intense grappling with the whole issue madness through her repetitive nervous 'breakdowns' led to scrutiny and re-defining of the whole idea as well as ways of looking and interpreting it in modern literature and society (Rathee 2). Her own experiences gave Woolf's descriptions of Septimus Smith's inner world authenticity and depth. Septimus's perceptual sensitivity, his mercurial oscillations between heaven and hell, and his conceptual intensity are residues from his creator's madness. There are in *Mrs. Dalloway's* autobiographical accounts of psychosis. Fidelity to experience reflects a particular interest in understanding what the mad see and how their perception is related to their culture. Coupled with this authentic description is an innovative style of narration perfectly suited to presenting madness's voice, both the inner monologue and the stream of consciousness techniques that Woolf explored to carry the reader along through association. This associative narration complements the fragmented, explosive perceptions and thoughts that Septimus has, allowing the reader to experience a degree of insight not generally possible in fiction or non-fiction (Roberts 18).

Woolf illustrates the eternal antagonism between culture and madness and touches upon the reasons for this antagonism. If not solely responsible for creating Septimus' madness, his culture is at least the trigger for it. Septimus Smith enlists to fight in the war because it is the right thing to do. After all, he believes that he is defending his fatally circumscribed notions of what culture stands for. To Septimus, culture "consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 73). His reading of Shakespeare, like his image of Miss Pole, is antiseptically pleasant. His understanding of culture is similar, lacking in-depth and critical insight. He enters the trenches to fight for a society that will destroy him in the end. Sensitive, hopeful, and sadly unacquainted with social and political realities, he succumbs to a display of mass lunacy for reasons which his society has dressed up to appear sane and noble. He makes the common mistake of identifying intellectual and creative masterpieces with the march of civilization (Roberts 25).

The war that Woolf illustrates in this novel is a different manifestation of reason, just as George Bataille observes:

If the prohibition were a reasonable one it would mean that wars would be forbidden and we should be confronted with a choice: to ban war and to do everything possible to abolish military assassination; or else to fight and to accept the law as hypocritical.(63).

Therefore, reason, to Woolf, as Foucault states, is merely an “order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the requirements of conformity” (Foucault, 1988, 34). Woolf points out one of the major themes in this novel: deferred war shock. In the novel, the main character who suffers from this illness is Septimus, a survivor from the war. Septimus's seething cauldron of emotions engendered by war is contrary to the governing class's qualities of “solidity, rigidity, stasis, the inability to communicate feeling” (Zwerdling 147). Their response to war is remote, which is crucially different from the men who have real experiences in the bloody trenches. These governing-class figures worship "proportion" because they believe that "proportion" is the way to establish a stable society. Consequently, they manipulate the power of "conversion" to ask people to force their souls, little express emotion, and not mention war because war is over. Thus, Septimus, who cannot hold a sense of proportion, is viewed as a threatening force to society. Therefore, the conflict arises:

The fundamental conflict in *Mrs. Dalloway* is between those who identify with Establishment 'dominion' and 'leadership' and those who resist or are repelled by it. The characters in the novel can be viewed as ranged on a sort of continuum with Bradshaw at one end and Septimus at the other. (Zwerdling 154)

At the front, Septimus develops "manliness" and wins the friendship of his officer, Evans. When Evans is killed, Septimus does not react. Despite his delicate nervous system, or rather because of it, he feels neither anger, nor loss. His culture succeed in numbing him, making him a pliable machine able



to do its violence without the interference of human emotions. In Italy after the Armistice, he is attacked by bouts of panic, an inability to feel, and a bottomless emptiness. In an attempt to escape the sense of emptiness, Septimus seeks out the temporary restorative of human warmth and becomes “engaged one evening when the panic was on him that he could not feel” (*Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 74). The war cripples Septimus, places his sensibility in a constant state of deadened shock and divests him of faith capacity. Even his marriage is an act of desperation (Roberts 25).

Returning to England with his new bride, Rezia, Septimus makes a superficially smooth transition from the insanity of war to the mundane complacency of routine. He is responsible, dutiful, and well-liked by his employer, but his inner world is disjointed from surface appearance. The estrangement between inner alienation and outer acquiescence that is characteristic of modern culture is felt by Septimus. It is intensified by the fact that he has been wrenched away from the daily habits of the masses and has been made foreign and unfit for a normal life. His grip on conventional reality begins to slip (Robert 33).

Septimus's sensual awareness includes an aversion to human touch. Here, the senses are an entrapment rather than a release. His wife's attempted tenderness solicits the revulsion from physicality frequently cited in accounts of madness. Septimus' distaste for his wife's physical needs reflects the objection in which hyper-sensitive awareness holds corporeality. Still, it also signals Woolf's disgust for sex, a feature of her character that may have owed more to her stepbrother's alleged molestations (Roberts 27). Trapped between the past and present consciousness and failing to leap over the traumatic memory, Septimus gradually goes into a state of madness: “There will be a form of madness consisting of the loss of these relations; such is the madness of character, conduct, and passions” (Foucault, 1988, 105). Septimus's symptom is because of hearing the sparrows that chirp and “sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 19). When his wife implores him to look at a troop of boys with cricket stumps, he thinks, “what was there to look at? A few sheep. That was all” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 20-21). These perceptions show his symptoms of hallucination. Hallucination means that a

man “alter[s] representation ('error of the mind in which imaginary objects are taken for realities, or else real objects are falsely represented)’” (Foucault, 1988, 105). The world, to Septimus, is wavering and quivering; however, it is he who is shivering and frightened while facing a traffic jam. The street seems to burst into flames; it is an intangible horror that exists within him. Septimus's “mind is almost totally absorbed by the vivacity of certain ideas” (Ibid. p.92); he has succumbed to his ideas of fear and guilt and his memory of Evans. Reiza is worried that her husband has become stranger because he takes illusions as reality:

He [Septimus] said people were talking behind the bedroom walls. Mrs. Filmer thought it odd. He saw things too—he had seen an old woman's head in the middle of a fern” or “he cried, into flames! And saw faces laughing at him, calling him horrible, disgusting names, from the walls, and hands pointing round the screen. (Mrs. Dalloway 56)

Septimus's hallucinations occur repeatedly. What Septimus sees are all nonexistent entities—he sees Evans singing behind the screen, but Reiza sees and hears nothing; he cries that “he was falling, down, down, into the flames! She [Reiza] would look for flames; it was so vivid. But there was nothing. They were alone in the room” (Mrs. Dalloway 121). His hallucinations about Evans increase more intensively and more frequently:

He [Septimus] sang. Evans answered from behind the tree. The dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids. There they waited till the war was over, and the dead, soon Evans himself “For God's sake, don't come!” Septimus cried out, for he could not look upon the dead. But the branches parted. A man in grey was walking towards them [the Smiths]. It was from Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed. (Mrs. Dalloway 59)

This passage shows how traumatically the war damages one's mental faculty into a state of madness. Mrs. Dalloway shows Woolf's scrutiny of the governing class and its control over English society (Zwerdling, p. 145). In other words, Woolf aims to examine the insidiousness of a society's classism. In her article, "Class, the Great War, and Mrs. Dalloway," Christine Darrohn, discusses the class system in England. She indicates that the social rank evaporates during wartime; war thus "prompt[s] distress in the middle and upper classes who have lost their sense of security in class privilege" (p. 100). The governing class is represented by characters such as Richard Dalloway, Lady Bruton, Hugh Whitbread, Dr. Holmes, and Dr. Bradshaw. Holmes and Bradshaw set a norm of health, that is, the "sense of proportion." Septimus, outside the norm, is considered an abnormal person who needs to be "corrected."

The disciplinary mechanisms bear a "penalty of the norm" (Foucault, 1977, p.183); the violator of the norm needs to be "corrected or effaced most effectively" (McNay, p. 94). Thus, Septimus must be sent into Bradshaw's retreat and taught how to rest according to the doctor's rules.

Bradshaw said he must be prepared to sleep.
Bradshaw said they must be separated. "Must, must, why must"? What power had Bradshaw over him? "What right has Bradshaw to say must' to me?" he demanded. So he was in their power! Holmes and Bradshaw were on him!

(*Mrs. Dalloway*, pp.126-127)

When Septimus refuses to see Dr. Holmes, Rezia, now gaining a glimmer of the threat Holmes represents for her husband, tries to block the doorway and keep the doctor out. Smilingly oblivious to his patient's rights, Holmes pushes Rezia away and confronts the patient-become-victim. It is then that Septimus realizes he is lost, that once madness has been scented, the culture's medical representatives would not rest until he is converted or crushed:



Once you fall, Septimus repeated to himself;
human nature is on you. Holmes and Bradshaw
are on you. They scour the desert. They fly,
screaming into the wilderness. The rack and the
thumbscrew are applied. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 83)

Holmes, “the repulsive brute with the blood-red” (ibid., p. 127), is one of the minions of social control. Sir William Bradshaw is similar to the high priests (Roberts, p. 29). Cultural norms insist that the routine and the incomprehensible be viewed as antagonistic polarities. As specialist in deviant behavior, Dr. Bradshaw is specially chartered to enforce this insistence. Being highly successful in dealing firmly with those unfortunate enough to be incomprehensible, and being a member of the ruling class, he commands respect and authority that endows him with extra-legal powers in his interactions with Septimus. Bradshaw's homes down in Surrey keep the social machinery functioning by keeping the madman out of sight. If a patient proves unwilling to accept his invitation to one of his "rest" homes, Sir William has more than the force of ideology behind him: “[S]ociety, which, he remarked very quietly, would take care, down in Surrey, that these unsocial impulses, bred more than anything by lack of proper blood, were held in control” (*Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 87).

Modern culture uses ideas as social levers, shapes its citizens into forms that mirror those ideas, and attempts to sequester or destroy people who deviate (Roberts, p. 30). The power relation between the doctors and Septimus is not a unilateral imposition upon the latter. He has his resistance to act upon the doctors' power. He is a tragic protagonist, who employs death to announce his strength against the prey of the sense of the proportion and to leave the unbearable and immoral world. He sees the cruelty in human nature: “Men must not cut down trees. There is a God...Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down)” (*Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 19). He knows the truth of the insidious part of human nature. He wants to reveal this truth to the whole world. To preach his dogma, for the sake of saving people from the flaming and clamoring world, he becomes the prophet and feels powerful as a messiah. For the mission of salvation of the world, he

sees himself as a messiah and a scapegoat: “Septimus, lately taken from life to death, the Lord who had come to renew society, who lay like a coverlet...forever unwasted, suffering forever, the scapegoat, the eternal sufferer” (*Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 20). Thus, Septimus's death carries a profound sense in which his suicide is not merely an act of martyrdom, which sheds light on the realization of the ugly side of humanity, but rather a transgression to contest the rational domineering society (Wu, pp. 46-47). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, does Woolf have an insightful observation about the marginal position of madness? Throughout history, as Foucault indicates, madness has been reduced to silence of non-being. In this novel, however, Woolf breaks this notion. Woolf portrays Septimus as the voice for madness against "Proportion" and "Conversion." Holmes and Bradshaw try to convert him into sameness. However, Septimus's sensitivity, imagination, and emotional associations with the external world reveal Woolf's deprecation to the homogeneous values of rationality. Septimus shows his extraordinary vision of the outside world: “The trees waved, brandished...To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky, swallows, swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, and round and round...” (*Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 59). He sees the sky-writing letters as the beauty; he senses the world with grace: "Beauty was everywhere" (*Ibid.*). "Look, look, Septimus!" she cried. 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 signaling 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... Tears ran down his cheeks. It was toffee; they were advertising toffee, a nursemaid told Rezia.” (*Mrs. Dalloway*, p.17) Though his perception of the outer objects is not based on scientific explanation, Septimus is not senseless. Through Septimus, Woolf harshly criticizes the imperative power of culture, reason, as well as the conversional power of normalization and medicalization (Wu, p. 48).



Conclusion

The early 20th century was a troubling time for many. The First World War, which lasted four years from 1914 to 1918, left behind many wounded people. But it was not just physical scars that the battles have caused. Many British civilians and soldiers had to deal with different types of madness like shell shock, today known as posttraumatic stress disorder that brought along many other problems such as isolation, repression and social degradation. The purpose of this paper is that madness plays a substantial role in the novel which represents Woolf's private life in a lot of ways but also the influence the First World War had on Britain's society and their mental health.

To investigate the representation and the role of madness in Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*, this paper opened by a brief definition of madness and its different types that were relevant for Britain during the early 20th century. Then, the following subsection is concerned with Septimus Warren Smith and his experience with madness and the effect the war had on him. The final subsections will determine how society, especially Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, view madness and the way they contemplate and handle mental illnesses in others. The paper concentrates on how modern culture rejects madmen and uses certain rules and conditions to shape its citizens into forms that mirror their society, and attempts to sequester or destroy people who deviate them.



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العدد الحادي والأربعون
الجزء الثاني/تشرين الثاني/٢٠٢٠

جامعة واسط
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