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A Different Perspective on Woolf`s Mrs. Dalloway

Abstract

A twentieth century novel, Mrs. Dalloway, written by Virginia Woolf is a unique masterpiece that depicts a single day of Clarissa Dalloway together with interrelated major and minor characters using interwoven texture style and multi-personal stream of consciousness technique in which we, as readers, get into a flux of ordinary people`s ordinary lives through lens of different themes and symbols mainly; a desired death led by suicidal thoughts which stems from the idea of inevitable, circular time rather than linear, natural elements (trees-flowers, waves-water), and a sense of pessimism overweighing optimism reflected throughout the novel. As the novel influenced many people by its provocative inner voice of imposing committing suicide as a relief from all burdens and a possible way of becoming immortal, in other words, if facing the fear of death is inevitable why do we keep living? Woolf`s contemporaneous Said Nursi, an eastern scholar, religious writer and famous for his collection of Risale-i Nur (a collection of 14 main books and many booklets interpreting around 300 verses of Quran) also inquires and presents solutions to the above mentioned themes and symbols in Mrs. Dalloway that come to be either obstacles leading us into deep pits of eternal pessimism or torches enlightening the pathways that lead us to salvation, elevated hopes of optimism and eternal happiness by achieving immortality. This article is aimed to be a first step for further studies of presenting the two contemporary writers with their approaches and point of views in terms of character analysis, psychological and social background, and analysis of Said Nursi`s approaches and answers to the questions raised by Woolf`s Mrs. Dalloway.

Keywords: *Stream of Consciousness; Interwoven Texture; Inner Voice; Suicidal Thoughts; Contemporaneous*

1-Introduction

A first impression on Woolf`s contemplation through characters in Mrs. Dalloway and Said Nursi`s getaways from plunged inner profound struggles may cause a surmise of contradiction, two defying ideas or viewpoints, nonetheless they both share quite many common grounds that resonate one another. The fear of death and search of immortality, depressive thoughts caused by social unrest, ways of approaching natural elements, and sense of a circular time are among many others. The significant difference is that Nursi`s approaches are solution centered with optimist outcomes rather than pessimistic delusional endings as seen in Mrs. Dalloway; "Yet fear of imminent calamities, unspeakable catastrophes, is rarely absent; the horrors of individual and collective destruction are never remote." (Brombert, 2010) One of the important details that entails Woolf`s Mrs. Dalloway among interpreters is that she has many secrets awaiting to be revealed through her real life experiences, (Gay, 2002) thus indicating parallel interpretations on Nursi`s real time experiences which makes them both free from time boundaries as they always have elements of the present ideologies enabling them to mutations of modern and postmodern changes. (Hardy, 2011)

2- Socio-Economic Background

They are both from a time of post-world war I in which the socio-economic structure of societies was deeply wounded. Furthermore; moral values, spiritual and psychological well-being of individuals were in great depression as piled crowds were in search of a light to a benign world among whom the hope for universal peace was rotting under the threat of a new world war. The Great War for civilizations was turning into bleakness and heartbreak: "Disenchantment". (Panichas, 2004) In England, women were starting to take the place of men in working places as men were reduced in number because of the war, and they were starting to ask for equal rights. Woolf, herself as a feminist writer, showed sympathy for suffragettes. The war veteran Septimus Warren Smith who commits suicide and symbolizes the pessimist side of Woolf as depicted in Mrs. Dalloway is reflected as the duplicate of Clarissa Dalloway and represents the lower class of English society of that time; "More British soldiers died in World War I than in any other British conflict. Under the best of circumstances, this burden would have been difficult to bear, but other factors increased the psychological and emotional damage." (Bethea, 2010) Said Nursi, on the other hand, had a mobile life in rural Anatolia and Istanbul as he was exiled for his writings of Risale-i Nur collection through which he was struggling against ignorance, communism, and atheism as he saw them obstacles in front of socio-economic and religious welfare. Because, in his opinion, sciences like philosophy and psychology were misled by atheist authors and they were not serving individuals for their well-beings any more. There was an attack towards spiritual values in Turkey of that time (Yavuz, 1999). He devoted his life to answer the questions - through interpretations of revelations; "to be either theological or mystical interpretations of the Qur'an" (Ibrahim, 2011) - arisen by these authors in terms of fighting against non-believers by exploring and interpreting verses from Quran in his collection. Mrs. Dalloway is also written under the shadows of such

ideologies of non-belief and pessimism that raises many question marks in readers' mind, thus Nursi's answers seem to be identical in a way to those questions, as if she is asking, and he is answering.

3-Psychological background

Psychology serves as a science, not only for corporal healing, but also to help people reach happiness, an inner-state of tranquility. However, Psychology, as a positive subjective experience of science has been restricted and described as a devotee of prevention from pathological illnesses, especially when the inquiries for life were arisen together with senses of despair and pessimism, as well as barrenness and meaningless of life. The authors like Mongarin, Csikszentmihalyi and Hershbeneger eagerly clung on the idea of reorientation of psychology, as a science, to its two main missions of evaluating normal people and actualizing the high human potential (Mongrain, 2012) (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) and (Hershbeneger,2005) as they suggest the same findings of Seligman. The dominance of pathology resulted in a model of human being that is lack of positive concepts like hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness, courage, spirituality, responsibility, and perseverance which are also essential for one's well-being. Such values were ignored or defined as mere transformations of authentic negative impulses. (Seligman et. al, 2000) Therefore, psychology was functioning in a limping way. Septimus who suffers from a very serious mental problem caused by the shock of war, in which he lost his closest friend and many others, lost his belief in the doctor that diagnoses him with "lack of proportion", and committed suicide at the end of the novel. Woolf, through Clarissa, also has negative feelings for doctors, thus shows sympathy for Septimus Warren Smith; "She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble." (Woolf, 1925)

4- Themes, Symbols, and Motifs

4.1- Optimism vs. Pessimism

Clarissa starts the day with fresh thoughts of livelihood as she heads to the florists; "For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life." (Woolf, 1925) These lines reflect how joyful her thoughts are depicted by Woolf in Dalloway's stream of consciousness. However, the same person gets very depressed as she finds it difficult to bear the life one more day; "She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day." (Woolf, 1925) Nursi, also uses natural elements to infer implications of depression and pessimism if one was to see the landscape we live in with limited visions as he narrates the story of prophet Yunus who was believed to be swallowed by a big fish and had to endure darkness and loneliness as redemption of his departure from his astray people for not believing in one God; "Our night is the

future. When we look upon our future with the eye of neglect, it is a hundred times darker and more fearful than his night. Our sea is this spinning globe. Each wave of this sea bears on it thousands of corpses, and is thus a thousand times more frightening than his sea. Our fish is the caprice of our soul which strives to shake and destroy the foundation of our eternal life. This fish is a thousand times more maleficent than his fish. For his fish can destroy a hundred-year lifespan, whereas ours seeks to destroy a life lasting hundreds of millions of years.” (Nursi, 2005)

As inferred through lines mentioned above, Mrs. Dalloway brings up calamities in the society through ordinary characters by delving into their consciousness as to justify reasons for committing suicide, thus uses myriads of minor characters together with major characters in order to reflect a social corruption, decline of survival instincts as to let go of all these burdens due to inevitable end. “She often questions life’s true meaning, wondering whether happiness is truly possible. She feels both a great joy and a great dread about her life, both of which manifest in her struggles to strike a balance between her desire for privacy and her need to communicate with others.” (SparkNotes Editors, 2004) Nursi, like Woolf, gives a detailed depiction of calamities in our lives, but unlike her, he forces the reader to see behind the curtain which veils eternal blessings, with a little effort, one may overcome the life-spanned limitations and achieve hundreds of millions of years by submitting to the true Sustainer; “...and by showing that he acts as he wishes, and that all aspects of all things are tied to his will, and that universal laws too are always subject to his will and choice, and that a compassionate sustainer heeds the individuals who cry out at the constraint of the laws and responds to their cries for help with his favors...” (Nursi, 2004)

4.2- Time

Time in both perspectives is handled as a key element that indicates circular recurring of events and ceasing of life. “Clarissa, Septimus, Peter, and other characters are in the grip of time, and as they age they evaluate how they have spent their lives. Clarissa, in particular, senses the passage of time, and the appearance of Sally and Peter, friends from the past, emphasizes how much time has gone by since Clarissa was young.” (SparkNotes Editors, 2004) In Mrs. Dalloway, time is always present as Big Ben always reminds the characters and readers of the time by chiming; “leaden circles dissolved in the air.” (Woolf, 1925) This expression is seen in many parts of the novel as it is always time to do something like not waiting anymore for another day to live the same things. ‘Time is so important to the themes, structure, and characters of this novel that Woolf almost named her book *The Hours*.’” (SparkNotes Editors, 2004) Said Nursi’s approach to time as a concept has quite an eminent value as it is handled as past, present, and future of each individual. “Since the reality is thus; and since past calamitous hours together with their pains are no longer existent, and future distressing days are at the present time non-existent, and there is no pain from nothing, to continually eat bread and drink water today, for example, because of the possibility of being hungry and thirsty in several days’ time, is most foolish. In just the same way, to think now of the past and future unhappy hours, which simply do not exist, and to display impatience, and ignoring one’s faulty self, to moan as though complaining about God is also most foolish.” (Nursi, 2004)

4.3- Death vs. Immortality

Death in Mrs. Dalloway stalks characters throughout the novel; the mundane moments of their lives; Thoughts of death lurk constantly beneath the surface of everyday life in Mrs. Dalloway, especially for Clarissa, Septimus, and Peter, and this awareness makes even mundane events and interactions meaningful, sometimes even threatening. (SparkNotes Editors, 2004) Woolf delved into flux of consciousness through fear of death as it is a door to mortality. The lines she reads on a book from a bookshop`s window from Shakespeare, are epiphany in her facing with mortality; "Fear no more the heat o` the sun / Nor the furious winter`s rages." (Shakespeare, 2006) Her desire for immortality shows itself through a movie star, as she will be remembered even after her death, Richard as he would be given an award for his writings and be remembered as well, and art in general as a way of not being forgotten. Thus, Dalloway`s desire for immortality is quite obvious. Nursi, just like Woolf shows implications of desire for immortality as a basic need for human beings, a sense that should be fulfilled by eternal blessings of the hereafter. In his belief, just like sense of hunger that finds its need through eating; sense of thirst through drinking and other senses that find their needs fulfilled, the desire for living longer and immortality is a humane need that can find its needed answer through a power beyond human strength, a divine power that is free from limits of mortality; when he perceives the death of nature he shows great remorse and sadness; " the tableaux of death and transience amid that constant, awesome activity seemed to me excessively sad; i felt such pity it made me weep.

The more i observed the deaths of those lovely small creatures, the more my heart ached. I cried at the pity of it and within me felt a deep spiritual turmoil. Life which met with such an end seemed to me to be torment worse than death .the living beings of the plant and animal kingdoms, too, which were most beautiful and lovable and full of valuable art, opened their eyes for a moment onto the exhibition of the universe, then disappeared and were gone. I felt grievous pain the more i watched this. My heart wanted to weep and complain and cry out at fate. It asked the awesome questions: "why do they come and then depart without stopping?" (Nursi, 2004) These lines indicate parallelism with Woolf`s pessimism in Mrs. Dalloway as one may naturally find committing suicide quite inevitable with the mood depicted in these writings of despair and depression. He finds peace from his pessimist thoughts for living creatures constant death through verses of Quran and puts meaning to above mentioned seemingly meaningless deaths; "As I started to utter fearful objections about Divine Determining and the grievous circumstances of the outer face of life and its events, the light of the Qur`an, the mystery of belief, the favor of the Most Merciful, and belief in Divine unity all came to my assistance." (Nursi, 2004) "All living beings, for instance this adorned flower or that sweet-producing bee, are Divine odes full of meaning which innumerable conscious beings study in delight. They are precious miracles of power and proclamations of wisdom exhibiting their Maker`s art in captivating fashion to innumerable appreciative observers. While to appear before the gaze of the Glorious Creator, Who wishes to observe His art Himself, and look on the beauties of His creation and the loveliness of the manifestations of His Names, is another exceedingly elevated result of their creation." (Nursi, 2004) Unlike Nursi, Dalloway`s inner struggle against insanity

that is caused by the same sorrows felt for her surroundings doesn't give her a chance of a fruitful outcome, as she finds it an impossible fight to win. She has grown to believe that living even one day is dangerous. Death is very naturally in her thoughts, and the line from *Cymbeline*, along with Septimus's suicidal embrace of death, ultimately helps her to be at peace with her own mortality. (SparkNotes Editors, 2004)

5- Conclusion

In this article the two contemporary writers are compared and contrasted through their writings and comprehensions of life. It is quite obvious that there is much more to write to convey their viewpoints. Nevertheless, this article could be a first step for further studies on both scholars. One may think that they have quite different approaches, but when delved into their philosophical, and psychological inner worlds, it would be seen that many superficial differences are in fact similarities hidden behind misconceptions. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that they have significant differences about their outcomes that can be revealed from their works as they have different sources of inspirations. Further research is obviously required on their approaches to natural elements; psychological perspectives could be given in a more detailed study; other philosophers and psychologists could be referred in comprehending their perceptions; other works written by the two writers could be dredged up. The function of science is also an important element in understanding *Risale-i Nur* collection (Mermer, 1999) and (Alam 2009). More importantly, Said Nursi as an eastern scholar should be given his deserved place among western world of literature.

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