

Stream of Consciousness

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Abstract

Stream of consciousness is a great term in modern literature. Though the application of the stream of consciousness by the Western and some Russian novelists have been mentioned as a special technique, its existence in many other writers of the world is apparent in different forms.

The deep ocean of memories is the store house called Chitta. Consciousness proper is not confined to brain or memory, any others, though all these are part of it. What has been construed as stream of consciousness is only a part of the whole. Everything from tiniest matter to the Divine is consciousness. The core issue is Chit, the origin of consciousness. It is a great hope that groping in the dark, Man the mental being, is growing from ignorance to knowledge, from partial to the whole.

Keyword: Stream of Consciousness, Modern literature, Consciousness, Memory (Chitta) Evolution of man, Sri Aurobindo, Mental being, Self-knowledge, Ego Fragmented consciousness, Inner reality, Ignorance to knowledge, Spiritual evolution, Chit (origin of consciousness), Western and Russian novelists

How the Term Emerged

Alexander Bain wrote in 1855, in the first edition of his book, *The Senses and the Intellect*, that the concurrence of sensations enables different senses to be readily associated in one common stream of consciousness on the same path to the cerebral highway. William

James is more known for applying the term, stream of consciousness, in his *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890. William James considered the mind as an ever changing flow like a river or stream which cannot be divided by bits; he understood the mental life as seeing things from within. A temporal separation can only distort the flow. May Sinclair (1863–1946), the British author, first applied the term stream of consciousness while reviewing the novel *Pointed Roofs* by Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957). This is the first novel in English which is considered to have had the concept of stream of consciousness included in it. And Richardson in 1934 named the novelists who made extensive use of the concept; Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Virginia Wolf.

What the Practitioners Meant by it

Focus on the emotional and psychological processes that are taking place in the minds of one or more characters are explored to bring out the thought and sensation, may be influenced by the subconscious mind. Critics find a great example in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. They found a complex evocation of the inner states of the characters like Leopold and Molly; Bloom and Stephen Dedalus. Other notables mentioned are Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Woolf's *The Waves*, Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* and Gordimer's *July's People*. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, the Underground Man expresses his continuous train of thought through long, comma-filled sentences (even in brackets). It is not covered by any grammatical rules. Stream of Consciousness includes different forces working in the minds of the characters. It permits deeper patterns of order to emerge like the movement of information, different forms of conscious state like dream, coma, drug affected and hallucinatory sensations.

Virginia Woolf's "Modern Fiction" is mostly about the English novels written by her predecessors. She is quite concerned about the realism in use by novelists which seemed to

her to be very mechanical. By passing the all-influential romanticism she comes to the human minds and psychology as initiated by Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalysis as it became the intellectual cry of the time. In their press she and her husband, Leonard Woolf, began translating Freud. All her care and attention focused what happened in the minds of modern man. Elaine Showalter described how in her novel *Mrs Dalloway* Virginia Woolf used the concept of stream of consciousness entering the minds of her characters, portraying the cultural and individual changes in the period following the First World War.

Woolf wrote that life is a luminous halo, that it is a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. But her concept of consciousness is limited to the human mind, mostly in the surface of it; even in the subconscious region of the mind as was there but newly explored then by Freud. She found worth in the mental flow of thoughts, dreams and all such materials as used by some of her contemporaries like D.H. Lawrence, Dorothy Richardson, Marcel Proust and notably James Joyce. Marcel Proust ventures into forgotten past mainly through the path of memory lane, titled *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* or *In Search of the Lost Time*.

Woolf's way of representing the stream of consciousness reflected her need to go beyond the clumsiness of the factual realism in the novels of her Edwardian precursors like Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy while finding a more sensitive, artistic and profound way to represent character, an effort shared with her contemporaries, observed a critic, telling further that in the 1920s psychoanalysis was uncovering a multi-layered self in which dreams, memories and fantasies were as important as actions and thoughts. She highly praised James Joyce and his *Ulysses*, mentioning him as spiritual writer. She highly praised some Russian writers for their originality as their mind and heart were based on their ancient culture.

A Critique of the Idea and its Use

Fact is, only few writers through big publicity of the Western Press are known, became famous; even in India there is little difference. Big media make known and unknown; famous writer or no-writer is made by special stress on some and neglect of others. True greats were and are still there but some of them aren't known. In India one is immediately known when official establishment or one from foreign sources honours someone with a big laurel. There may remain other greats too without source to approach and get a favour. Isn't it a fantasy that none of the Indian writers got a Nobel Prize in literature after Tagore in 1913! Stream of Consciousness idea was used in the works of other novelists though not equally focused.

What's the real idea behind Woolf's thought that life is a luminous halo, that it is a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end? Where consciousness begins and where ends! The whole concept of this Stream of Consciousness is a play in the mental field, whether awakened or asleep, in dream or in semi-conscious state; in *Jagrat*, *swapna* or *susupti*. The Turya state is reserved for the chosen few by the Divine.

Whether one is conscious or unconscious thought is continuously flowing through the mind; usually one's thoughts are limited to his or her world; culture, country, personal knowledge, community, ethnicity, habits and more. There may remain questions of birth and rebirth. Everything has a role to play.

The Mother, a spiritual personality, collaborator of Sri Aurobindo in the field of Yoga and spirituality, used to sit alone for some years in communion with the Divine. Such contacts, expressed through her thoughts and contemplations, were recorded in a book which was published later titled, *Prayers and Meditations* in which we get some extraordinary pieces of

her thought, idea and contemplation. In one of them she recorded her observations on Thoughts flowing through the mind.

“The greatest enemy of a silent contemplation turned towards Thee is surely this constant subconscious registering of the multitude of phenomena with which we come into contact. So long as we are mentally active, our conscious thought veils for us this overactivity of our subconscious receptivity; an entire part of our sensibility, and perhaps not the smallest, acts like a cine-camera without our knowledge and indeed to our detriment. It is only when we silence our active thought, which is relatively easy, that we see this multitude of little subconscious notations surging up from every side and often drowning us under their overwhelming flood. So it happens that, as soon as we attempt to enter the silence of deep contemplation, we are assailed by continuous thoughts- if thoughts they could be called- which do not interest us in the least, do not represent for us any active desire, any conscious attachment, but only prove to us our inability to control what may be described as the mechanical receptivity of our subconscious.” (Meditations. 35)

The stream flows through the mind; it is quite common. What is uncommon is keeping it entirely silent. How many have tried? How many have been successful!

Here comes to mind a story from Yogi Sri Aurobindo's life. At the beginning of his learning yoga he once sat with his then Guru, V. B. Lele, who asked him to silence his mind. The disciple, sitting with the guide, tried it and found that thoughts were constantly entering his mind from outside which he successfully drove out. In three days he had the Nirvanic experience.

“‘Sit down’, I was told, ‘Look and you will see that your thoughts come into you from outside. Before they enter, fling them back.’ ‘I sat down and looked and saw to my astonishment that it was so; I saw and felt concretely the thought approaching as if to enter through or above the head and was able to push it back concretely before it came inside.’

“In three days-really in one-my mind became full of an eternal silence-it is still there. But that I don’t know how many people can do. . . .

“The usual way, the easiest if one can manage it at all, is to *call down* the silence from above you into the brain, mind and body.” (Sri Aurobindo. *On Himself*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library; Sri Aurobindo Ashram. 1972. V. 26. pp.82-83)

Not that one is often bombarded by unthinkable thoughts and ideas, fantastic events. When a writer creates a character, his thoughts are what the writer thinks; entering a character’s mind by the writer is entering his own mind and ideas. Ultimately stream of consciousness became a technique, may or may not be pleasant experiences to the readers. Expressing such streams through italics, interior monologues and latest, by making constructions with wrong punctuation and wrong spellings are the other techniques. Some of the much talked about role of Stream of Consciousness may be considered from the critic’s point of view as may be verified by any common reader.

James Joyce (James Augustine Aloysius Joyce; 1882-1941) was an Irish novelist from Dublin. His books were published by the largest world publishers. His works have been held as the best examples of Stream of consciousness writings, particularly *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. In these works he made extensive use of his ideas of stream of consciousness but it is doubtful how many have really enjoyed his writings. The writer, by way of entering into the mind of characters created by him, imposed his ideas and feelings to fit in his character’s world getting clue even from sources other than the original occurring spontaneously, welling out in the character’s mind; sometimes they seem contrived. More discussed and focused than their actual worth. One may have an idea of this contention from his editor’s views and comments. Excerpts from two paragraphs from his novels are also given for better understanding.

“The narrative of *Ulysses* is identified with internal monologue of three major characters; it also responds to such discursive influences as newspaper headlines and fugal variations; one chapter comprises of the parodies of the principal English stylists; and the whole may be studied as a comprehensive handbook of verbal techniques.” (Editor’s introduction *James Joyce* 15)

Here is an example from the novel,

“...and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.” 2 (One of Leopold Bloom’s monologues; James Joyce, *Ulysses*: Joyce James. *Ulysses*: as in the Net)

“In *Finnegans Wake* a universe of discourse, seemingly unlimited in space and time, is spanned by association of thought and play upon words In *Finnegans Wake* he drew upon his linguistic skills and learned hobbies to contrive an optophone-an instrument which for the benefit of the blind converts images into sounds.” (Editor’s introduction: *James Joyce* 515)

And, “But it would not be worth the trouble of elucidation if it did not offer the immediate satisfaction of humour and poetry. Its texture is so close, its structure so organic, that it could not yet be considered readable in the sense of an ordinary novel. Indeed, it begins with the later part of a sentence, the beginning of what is found on the last page. This circular construction, which carries Vico’s philosophy of history, invites us to plunge in almost anywhere.” (Editor’s Preface: *James Joyce* 515)

Here is an example from the work by Joyce. An excerpt from “Here Comes Everybody”, another piece of Joyce’s stream of consciousness,

“Whatif she be in flags or flitters, reekierags or sundyechosies, with a mint of mines or beggar a 8ennyweight, Arrah, sure, we all love little Anny Ruiny, or, we mean to say, lovelittle Anna Rayiny, when unda her brella, mid piddle med puddle, she ninnygoesnannygoesnancing by. Yoh! Brontolone slaps, yoh snores. Upon Benn Heather, in seeplesout too.The cranic head on him, easter of his reasons, peer yuthner in yondmist. Whooth? His clay feet, swarded in verdigrass, stick up starck where he last fellonem, by the mund of the magazine wall, where our maggy seen all, with her sisterin shawl.” (*James Joyce* 516)

Study of some other Novels under the concept

Much has been discussed about the writing of a novel within the time space of a day/night. In fact it is only a way of presentation. The story may be spanned through the entire life of the characters consisting of several events or of a period but arranged in such a way as to limit it within a day’s expanse with the help of memories, flash back and many such things. Not only in *Ulysses*, *Mrs Dalloway* and some other novels but the 24 hour cycle was used in many other remarkable works by writers on the other side of the globe, like Satinath Bhaduri in *Jagari* and Mahasweta Devi in *Hazar churasir Maa (Mother of 1084.)* If stream of consciousness is the meeting of multiple memories then Mahasweta did a very remarkable use of it in her novel mentioned. Memories play a significant role in bridging the time and events in the life of the characters in the following novels.

In Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, recording the events of a day up to night until complete retirement of prisoners for the night, tells about the prisoners’ whole prison life’s tale in a significant way. One day represents all the days;

monotonous repetition of the days, almost without exception; memory playing a great part in it.

Consciousness had a great part to play in many great Russian novels like Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Mikhail Sholokhov's *Quiet Flows the Don* though not arranged in the technique of stream of consciousness form. They are classic novels where flow of memory and thoughts play great parts.

Coming to the other writers of the 'Stream' mention may be made of the following.

Tonny Morrison, one of the American Black woman Nobel laureate writers, is considered one of the stream of consciousness practitioners. Sitting over her male partner Ajax and in action, Sula's thoughts stream out as below which may be said her internal monologues. Her partner too is a black American; her racial feelings and sentiments too are spontaneously active in her thoughts and wishes.

"If I take a chamois and rub real hard on the bone, right on the ledge your cheek bone, some of the black will disappear. It will flake away into the chamois and underneath there will be gold leaf. I can see it shining through the back. I know it is there . . .

"And if I take a nail file or even Eva's old paring knife-that will do-and scrape away at the gold, it will fall away and there will be the alabaster. The alabaster is what gives your face its planes, its curves. . . .

"Then I can take a chisel and small tap hammer and tap away at the alabaster. It will crack then like ice under the pick, and through the breaks I will see the loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs. For it is the loam that is giving you that smell." (Tony 130)

Here is an example of how thoughts separated and distanced the two otherwise known persons living in the same area but rarely meeting each other who chance met suddenly and while trying to recognise each other, parted.

“Shadrack and Nel moved in opposite directions, each thinking separate thoughts about the past. The distance between them increased as they both remembered gone things.” (Tony 174)

It seems quite germane to quote from the blurb of the book, *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to note how love blew the conscious minds of the hero and heroine of the novel affecting their thoughts, “Ifemelu and Obinze are young and in love when they depart military-ruled Nigeria. In America Ifemelu has to grapple with what it means to be black, despite her academic success. Obinze plunges into a dangerous, undocumented life in London. Fifteen years later, when they reunite in a newly democratic Nigeria and reignite their passion-for each other and for their homeland-they face the hardest decision of their lives.” (Americanah- last cover page)

“‘*We are just one step away from this life in a slum, all of us who live air-conditioned middle class lives*’, she wrote and wondered if Obinze would agree. The pain of his absence did not decrease with time; it seemed instead to sink in deeper each day, to rouse in her even clearer memories. Still, she was at peace to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being.” (Adichie 475)

“On a lugubrious Sunday evening, seven months since she had last seen him, there Obinze was, at the door of her flat. She stared at him. . . .

“‘Kosi is a good woman and my marriage was a kind of floating-along contentment but I should never have married her. I always knew that something was missing. I want to raise Buchi. I want to see her every day. But I have been pretending all these months and one day she’ll be old enough to know that I’m pretending. I moved out of the house today. I’ll stay in my flat in Parkview for now and I want to see Buchi every day if I can. I know it’s taken me too long and I know you’re moving on and I completely understand if you are ambivalent and need time.’

“He paused, shifted. ‘Ifem, I’m chasing you. I’m going to chase until you give this a chance.’

“For a long time she stared at him. He was saying what she wanted to hear and yet she stared at him.

“‘Ceiling,’ she said, finally. ‘Come in.’” (Adichie477)

In *Jagari*, a novel in Bangla by Satinath Bhaduri, the narrative begins in one evening when birds coming back to their nests create last frenzied movements of the day before the fall of the night carrying the burden of the night over the hearts and brains of the prisoners of the death cells who were to be hanged the next morning. The night passed through memories of life and struggle for freedom; innumerable tales and anecdotes covered their dreamless, wide awakened night. One night’s nightmarish experiences through memories around the incident of possible hanging ends on the next dawn when the frozen hearts of the victim and his near relatives and friends get a tremendous shock in learning that all the orders for hanging as a result of judgment on the charge of sabotage, are indefinitely suspended. There would be no hanging. The morning was soothing with fresh calls of the birds ushering in the beginning the day on the treetops.

In another Bangla novel by Mahasweta Devi, *Hazar churasir Maa*, translated as *Mother of 1084*, we find the whole structure of the novel is projected to focus Brati’s birth-death day when one of the most important functions in the family, his sister’s proposed marriage, is arranged to reach a dramatic climax at the death of the housewife; Brati’s mother at the height of her emotion dies almost accidentally though it too was expected (her appendix was over ripe but neglected by the family).

Brati was a revolutionary Naxalite communist; killed tortured by the Police. His mother, Sujata, was almost drowned in grief throughout the day and night in delirious memories of her son who was loved by none except her in the family. Family’s debauched

lifestyle and utter neglect of the mother-son duo whose idealism opposed the lifestyle of others in the family, brought the most tragic event of the day and night climaxing in her death.

The whole drama of the novel has been drawn on a day when the engagement party was thrown exposing every one of the family in the society; the tales of Sujata and her son Brati are shown in the background through Sujata's memories and streams of mental, conscious thoughts. The story constantly moves backward and forward covering the Naxalite movement and the then Calcutta life. It is a drama beginning and ending on the same day and night which engulfed many more days and nights; depicting times within the time.

In Manik Bandyopadhyay's *The Tale of the Puppet Show*, another novel originally in Bangla; the story begins with a scene glimpsed by Dr. Sashi who was returning from the city via Bajitpur by a boat rowed by Gobardhan, the boat man. The novel ends almost at the same place where it began. Doctor Sashi, after attending a legal case at Bajitpur was returning to his village, Gaodiya, rowed by the same boat man, Gobardhan.

After most of his life spent in the village witnessing and participating in innumerable functions, after crossing many a sweet memory lane and suffering many a singed relationship, the Doctor was still looking at people with searching eyes, perhaps searching for something though nothing apparently changed the new generations of men and women; somewhere the old ones still remained. Age old Doctor, entering his ever known village path didn't feel like walking fast but stepped slowly towards his home; stepping through the same way as it was from his childhood.

The novelist seems to hint that everything happens witnessed by the time similarly as before, spreading through it in slow steps; nothing is new, nothing unnatural. It may seem that the time stays put at the same place from the beginning to the end but actually it moves in slow but steady steps. Incidents linked by memories drag the time.

Truth-Consciousness

Throughout the discussion about the stream of consciousness we find that it revolves round the mental horizon; thought, memory, cerebral connection mixed with sensations, emotions and other feelings which are associated with brain or mixed with the mind. True that scientists are making all efforts to find a clue to it and some of them have sensed mysteries about it like Virginia Woolf's "Uncircumscribed Spirit" and "Essence of Things" which points to some independent identity of consciousness but they could not catch the right thing as they did not proceed through the wide way to God; the mystery beyond the matter exceeding the material consciousness. It has not been possible to find out the truth of it by scientific efforts; laboratory test or experimental verification or otherwise as it is not entirely a subject of material science. Though the application of the stream of consciousness by the Western and some Russian novelists have been mentioned as a special technique, its existence in many other writers of the world was apparent in different forms. The deep ocean of memories is the store house called Chitta. Consciousness proper is not confined to any of these though all these are part of it.

The highest area of human existence is his mind; he is a mental being. Among all beings human being possesses mind which is the highest attribute of life. But there are many other parts of his being like vital, physical with many subdivisions of each as of the mind. The consciousness that flows through the mind is mental consciousness. Mind has so many other aspects of it. Memory is part of the mind but there are others like feelings, sense-mind, subconscious mind, physical mind and vital mind as there is the subliminal mind with many other nuances. The consciousness that touches the mind and its different areas isn't the whole of it. Consciousness isn't always wild, doesn't always blow through the mind, even the surface mind, it is also in the deep within. Those who know to dwell in it mine the riches out of it.

Consciousness is all comprehensive. It is consciousness force. It is there in everything from the beginning to the end; it had never begun. It is inherent in everything. It runs to eternity and infinity. It is the reflection of an idea, “Our momentary personality is only a bubble in the ocean of our existence”, as in Sri Aurobindo. (Divine. V.18. 555) Chit in Sanskrit is the word which suggests its origin.

When Swami Vivekananda said, “Consciousness is only the surface of the mental ocean and within its depths are stored up all our experiences,” while delivering his speech at the World’s Parliament of Religions at Chicago on 19 September 1893, he actually referred to the sea of mental consciousness, its different layers and depth of memories. He referred to what floats in mind as the surface consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo says that all experiences or substance of becoming in time like all substance of being in the space is a flowing stream or sea. It is not divided. But when observing consciousness try to catch it in ignorance hopping from moment to moment like a dragon fly on the surface of the stream, it gets divided. It is because of the limit of human sense faculty to observe the whole it finds part, as if separate in itself. A surface existence is the reign of ignorance.

By delving deeper into oneself, quietening the mental and vital activities, one may have the true knowledge. The truth has to be experienced in mind’s utter silence. The surface memory which has been used by the “Stream of Consciousness” writers has been further analysed by the yogic insight; “The surface memory itself is a fragmentary and ineffective action pulling out details from an inner subliminal memory which receives and records all our world-experience, receives and records even what the mind has not observed, understood and noticed. Our surface imagination is a selection from a vaster more creative and effective subliminal image-building power of consciousness.” Sri Aurobindo wrote. (Divine. V.18.

523). This inner subliminal memory seems to be what Swami Vivekananda referred to as the mental ocean.

Most of the actions in the mind and brain zone constitutes mental consciousness, mostly connected to the subconscious, of which Freud and others have spoken. It's tiny part of the totality called consciousness.

“It is no longer synonymous with mentality but indicates a self-aware force of existence of which mentality is a middle term; below mentality it sinks into vital and material movements which are for us subconscious; above it rises into the supramental which is for us the superconscient. But in all it is one and the same thing organising itself differently. This is, once more, the Indian conception of Chit which, as energy, creates the worlds. Essentially, we arrive at the unity which materialistic Science perceives from the other end when it asserts that Mind cannot be another force than Matter, but must be merely development and outcome of material energy. Indian thought at its deepest affirms on the other hand that Mind and Matter are rather different grades of the same energy, different organisation of one conscious Force of Existence.”

(Divine V.19. 1886-90)

The integral consciousness of the one Being is divided in us, one of the many, a becoming; the total becomes fragmented in its dwelling in us, the individual. Space is the extension of that one Being. One Spiritual Existence displays the field of movement of its Consciousness-Force in its own self as space. That one self with one consciousness becomes many by self-extension in space by Will. And it concentrates in many bodies, minds, lives and souls. This one becomes many and divided as ego. One with a different soul and body thinks itself as complete in itself. In fact one cannot know or realise the mind, vital being, body or matter really without knowing that original Self. One consciousness force is flowing through all. Sri Aurobindo explains it philosophically, “The world lives in us, forms itself in

us; but we imagine that it is we who live, think, become separately by ourselves and for ourselves. As we are ignorant of our timeless, of our superconscient, of our subliminal and subconscient selves, so are we ignorant of our universal self.” (Divine. V.18. 564)

A wider mind with subtler perception, a life-energy with greater dynamism and a psychic entity are behind this evolutionary activity of man which is the true support of man’s individuality of which ego is an outward false substitute. When man realises both the surface and the inner reality he will have true knowledge.

Conclusion

Telling that the mental being, man, though living in the highest stage of existence is ignorant of the true Self from which he has emanated, lives in fragmented consciousness, Sri Aurobindo assures a great future for this mental being as he is “Full of the impulse and strives irresistibly, eternally, by the very law of its being towards the realisation of self-possession and self-knowledge. A many-sided Ignorance striving to become an all-embracing Knowledge is the definition of the consciousness of man the mental being.” (Divine. V.18. 565) Man is growing from ignorance to knowledge, from partial to the whole.

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