

From 'a loose sally of the mind' to 'a graduation of the speaking voice- the discursive mode- par excellence': The Essay.

Tanya S. Gautam
Masters of English
Heidelberg University
Germany.

ABSTRACT:

"Vague as all definitions are, a good essay must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out." Essay'

- Virginia Woolf, *The Modern*

Essay, since its 'birth' in 1500s, has been incessantly evolving, or better yet, shapeshifting. For Bacon, essays were 'certain brief notes, set down significantly rather than curiously. For Samuel Johnson it was, 'an irregular and undigested piece' whereas for J. B Priestly, it is "a genuine expression of an original personality- an artful and enduring kind of talk." It has certainly achieved a significant rank in the genres of Literature, however, the sense of fragmentation or 'irregularity' suggested by Johnson, still persists in the conception of the form of Essay. Perhaps it is this 'undigested' quality or "the comforts of limit" or "freedom of irregularity", as Zadie Smith suggests, attracts writers to the essay. For David Shields, author of *Reality Hunger*, it is exactly what is tentative, unmade and unpolished in the essay form that is important. This essay tries to suggest that essay, in our times, is the appropriate or rather, much needed form of expression that is not only informing, reflecting, revolutionary and influential in nature but also therapeutic on several occasions. It is a discourse. It is as if a quiet, brief walk in a beautiful garden. A garden whose gates are opened by the essayist and the reader at the end of his walk, feels more sprightly and somehow magically acquires the ability of channelizing his energy into understanding, interpreting and taking forward the subject or issue. It is as though the essayist were, in spirit, walking with the reader in the park, engaging in an enthralling talk and helped him see the way out while leaving him with the choice or responsibility of taking their conversation forward. Now, more than ever, is the demand of essay writing at its boom. With the fortunate availability of an immediate audience and concerning issues sprouting up almost every hour, we, in order to think and act together, need a form which can successfully engage all our fellow men, women and children in as potent and succinct a way as possible; here, the Essay.

Free from the binding expectations of a linear narrative, the essay has no obligation to tell a tale or restrict itself in telling only a single tale let alone complete it. An essay is more of a dialogue between the essayist and the reader. It is not with an intention of speaking as a scholar or an expert, but rather, as someone who is interested in the topic at hand and wishes to start a talk, that the essayist writes. An essayist rather looks at his readers to carry forward the gripping conversation that both of them have indulged into. And

therefore, an essay does not become a closed argument but it is an unfinished talk that the reader then continues. James Baldwin's collections of essays may well be the perfect examples of such initiations done by an author, whose essay, tells a tale so thought provoking that the reader feels a kind of duty to continue that line of thought and to do something about it. In *'Notes of a Native Son' (1955)*, *'Nobody knows my name: More notes of a native son' (1961)* and *'The First Next Time' (1962)*, Baldwin emphasizes on the need for unification between the white and black Americans. History, Baldwin says, "is an unending story of a man's inhumanity to man of the White's refusal to see the black man simply as another human being, of the White man's delusions and the Negro's demoralization." He suggests ways in which both white and black Americans can reach a common ground and achieve their identities. The problem of identity is a moral issue for Baldwin and in his essays he speaks to not only black but also white people in an attempt to initiate and accomplish peace and identity. Baldwin proposes that the Negro must not look at his past and rather, "undergo a metamorphosis so profound as to be literally unthinkable." This is the kind of dialogue that America needed at the time and it can be hardly argued that Baldwin's attempt helped in the reconciliation of the Americans. It was in his essays that he urged his fellow Americans to think about the future of this country with all men in it. "Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny", says Baldwin while establishing the only way in which America can succeed as a nation. He stresses on the human freedom for all which can be attained only if we rid ourselves of the illusion, that surrounds us and our ideologies, come together and perpetuate the dream of freedom and that of all liberal men. The problem according to Baldwin is not that the Negro is aware of discrimination and the atrocities that come with it but that the White man is not ready to face up to this awareness. "The failure to look reality in the face diminishes a nation as it does a person", he says while being articulate in depicting the desire of his race to acquire equality. F.W Dupee rightly said, "as a writer of polemical essays on the Negro question James Baldwin has no equal." Baldwin does not only inform us as to what it means to be a Negro in white America but also force the white Americans to take a fresh look in the mirror and stare at themselves just a little longer. Baldwin makes phenomenal use of such experiential material and paints a remarkably revealing portrait of himself. These essays are narratives of his exile of around 10 years during which he could "take a long look back" so that he could "look forward in any meaningful sense." The three vital concepts in Baldwin's essays are that of acceptance, integration and love. And acceptance according to him will be achieved not by the white man's approval of the negro but of the negro's approval of the whites. White people are, "in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it." In these attempts, Baldwin, while discovering his as well as the identity of his race, presses on the unification of both sides. Essay, thus, becomes a highly powerful, dynamic and functional literary form for the framing of public opinion.

Another example, of essay as a serious and influential talk between the writer and reader, is *'Vietnam: The War That Killed Trust'* by Karl Marlantes. In this essay, Marlantes talks of the Vietnam war and the repercussions it had. He gives the readers a reason to revisit the war and its consequences in order to make them see the bigger picture of today. It was more than just a war and, "America didn't just lose the war, and the lives of 58,000 young men and women; Vietnam changed us as a country. In many ways, for the worse: It made us cynical and distrustful of our institutions, especially of government. For many people, it eroded the notion, once nearly universal, that part of being an American was serving

your country.” Further in the essay, he says that not all things about the war were negative and he saw how the war, “threw together young men from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and forced them to trust one another with their lives.” The war played an enormous, if often unappreciated, role in moving America toward real integration. Marlantes, asks the readers to revisit the war so that one does not miss the truly important question, “What did the Vietnam war do to us as americans?” This concern rises from the fact that 65 percent of the american population is under 45 and thus are unable to even remember the war and therefore, he worries that with, “our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, our involvement in Syria, our struggle with terrorism — these conflicts are pushing Vietnam further into the background.” At the end of the essay, Marlantes reiterates that, “The Vietnam War continues to define us, even if we have forgotten how. But it’s not too late to remember, and to do something about it.” He believes that something has changed the Americans in a major way and it is not liberalism, not globalisation and also not immigration but the war. “It was the war that changed us.” By giving the readers his personal insight into the happenings of the war, the essayist gets his readers to see things once again, this time a little closer so that one does not forget the events which have in some manner defined a part of his attitude or mindset.

Many writers have, over the years, preferred the form of essay over that of the novel. The ability of the essay to incorporate non-narrative fiction - or self contained fictions within a larger non fictional work or fictions that may or may not be fictions at all - allows for a new approach to fictionality itself, one that frees imaginative modern prose from the restrictions imposed by the traditional novel’s structure. A reader of the novel has his entire route map decided and there is little room for him to contribute or engage in a dialogue or continue the line of thought. The decided start and finish of a novel and its conventional structure, make the novel complete in its own right and the only thing it seeks from its readers is approval or consent. Once the reader has completed reading a certain novel, his job, there, is over and he is expected to peacefully depart and without incident. Essay, however, refuses to abide by pre-established laws and thus assumes an autonomy that is claimed by no other genre. This has enabled writers in the past as well as today to see the essay as a model and testing ground for new experiential techniques and modern ideas; to make a form of their own. In ‘*On being a writer*’, V. S. Naipaul thinks of writers like Richard Jefferies, “whose essays about farming people carry so much knowledge and experience that they often contain whole lives. Or William Hazlitt. Or Charles Lamb, concrete and tough and melancholy, not the gentle, wishy-washy essayist of legend. All of these writers would have had their gifts diluted or corrupted by the novel form as it existed in their time. All of them, novelistic as they are in the pleasures they offer, found their own forms.”

The contrasting views of Lukács and Adorno on essay are essential for anyone asking about the importance and uniqueness of the form of essay, especially today. Lukács asserts that the essay should be recognised as a legitimate art form and Adorno argues that it should resist a general categorization of this sort and staunchly maintain its independence: “The essay does not permit its domain to be prescribed. Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done... Luck and play are essential to the essay. It does not begin with Adam and Eve, but with what it wants to discuss; it says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete, not where nothing is left to say... Its concepts are neither deduced from

any first principle not do they come full circle and arrive at a final principle.” Therefore, Adorno suggests that the freedom of form assumed by the essay is from experience rather than an insistence upon arbitrariness. Where the novel lies under the burden of mimetic representation, the essay is as free to ramble as its creator.

Virginia Woolf, one of the torch-bearers of modernism, recognized this disjunction between the mimetic nature of the novel and the essayist’s invitation to dialogue. Essayistic techniques such as stream of consciousness, fragmentation and free indirect discourse opened the novel to a number of new possibilities about which Woolf was as excited as many of her contemporaries.

Woolf took to essays in order to experiment new narrative techniques and form. One of her essays in this sense of experimentation is of paramount importance; *Street Hunting*. Her engagement, with the essay’s possibilities, casts light on Woolf’s lifelong commitment to formal and generic innovation, as well as on her developing understanding of literary modernism itself. However, *‘The Modern Essay’*, has become a pivotal piece in the history of English Literature. Her conception of the essay has provided us with a more clear idea on the significance and role of essay in our times. It helps us in not only critiquing an essay but also helps writers of today in revising and constructing their essay in a way that, “It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation; we may soar to the heights of fantasy with Lamb or plunge to the depths of wisdom with Bacon, but we must never be roused.” In *‘On rise of the essay’*, Zadie Smith, an enthralling essayist of our times, agrees with and reminds us of Woolf’s view of the Essay. “In *‘The Modern Essay’* Virginia Woolf is more astute on the subject, and far more frank. ‘There is no room for the impurities of literature in an essay,’ she writes. ‘The essay must be pure – pure like water or pure like wine, but pure from dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous matter.’”

At last, I would like to, with Andrew O’Hagan’s help, conclude that today, more than ever, do we need writers of our generation take to the form of essay and provide the ‘immediate audience’ the kind of food for thought that we need in our times and engage us in captivating texts. Andrew O’Hagan’s short essay *‘Why the Essay still matters’*, asserts that since the death of Orwell, we are used to hearing that life has become too busy and the media too congested for the quietly mind-altering essay to work its magic on the readers but also observes that this genre of literature has returned ‘with a well-polished vengeance in today’s argumentative time.’ He congratulates the British essayists to have invented a form of writing in which the, ‘pulse of personality and the beat of the society can be felt in the rhythm of good English prose.’ Essays of literary criticism have strengthened the effect of the works and texts they talk about. It is hard to think of Dicken’s novels without the dark essays of Thomas Carlyle. Andrew asks if one can envision Oscar Wilde without Pater and Ruskin. What would the works Wordsworth and Coleridge have been without the ambient, emancipating zeal of William Hazlitt? According to him, the beginning of Bacon’s essay *‘On Ambition’*, can be the epigraph to everything Shakespeare ever wrote:

“Ambition is like cholera; which an humour that maketh man active, earnest, full of alacrity, and stirring, if not be stopped. But if be stopped, and cannot have his way, it becometh adust and thereby malign and venomous.”

The modern essay, Andrew says, can be a piece of work as personal as a letter, as world-altering as a policy, capturing the spirit of the age in words that can seem to clear the air for new days of living. Yet some of the best essays act as whispers to your ears alone. And in the end, that is what an essay gives you - 'a word in your ear and a thought before bedtime, all the better to speed your dreams and awaken your appetite for life.' Andrew gives his own definition, which I will never forget, of Essay, "as a graduation of the speaking voice- the discursive mode - par excellence." He also remembers what his Professor, Mr Cassidy, said of essay: "the form with the greatest pedigree in English Literature; the jewel in the crown."