

# FEMININE INSIGHTS: A STUDY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MRS. DALLOWAY

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Virginia Woolf finds 'strange spaces and silences' in the saga of women's achievements in English literature. Woolf felt that novels written by women were influenced by their resentment to the treatment meted to their sex and ended up pleading for their rights. Woolf felt that this weakened the cause of women struggling to carve a niche for themselves in the literary canon. In her writings, Woolf makes a sifting appraisal of women's problems, their peculiar dilemmas and conditioning in the traditional Victorian society.

It was the first phase of the fulfillment of a new feminist impulse, which had its first tremulous awakening during the war. Regarding her novel Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf says, "I think it is the most satisfactory of my novels.....it seems to leave me plunged deep in the richest strata of my mind."<sup>1</sup>

Virginia Woolf started writing this novel in June 1922 and completed it by October 1924. In her diary note of 19 June, 1923, she says, "I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticize the social system and to show it at work, at its most intense."<sup>2</sup> Thus it is clear that "the social system" is also the focus of attention in her fourth novel, **Mrs. Dalloway**. In this novel, Woolf envisions the city of London through a female perspective, wherein women's voices rise above the din of urban space, an arena traditionally reserved for and defined as masculine.

Clarissa Dalloway permeates the text as a romantic, carefree, buccaneer, provocative yet asexual. Though she is over fifty as the novel opens, over white after a recent attack of influenza, she has not yet lost the capacity to enjoy life. She enjoys the beauty of the morning which to her seems 'fresh as if issued to children on the beach.' (1) She is still charming having a touch of the bird about her. She has been living with her husband Richard Dalloway, a conservative Member of Parliament, in Westminster for over twenty years, but still she enjoys the scenes and sounds around her with zest, as if she were seeing them for the first time. She is young hearted having mirth for life. Even in the dull and monotonous routine of Westminster,

she finds beauty and charm of life:

How many years now? Over twenty, one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or walking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense ( but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza ) before Big Ben strikes...(2)

She vacillates between her public identity as a socialite in London and her private self that seeks to blend into a complete being – ‘pointed’, ‘dart-like’, ‘definite’. In the novel, the innate strength of womanhood is brought into sharp focus, pitted against male inadequacies and intelligence.

It is the first novel in which Woolf expresses her feminist insights through structure rather than through plot and character. In this novel, she explores the contradictions within individuals and the manner in which communication and genuine identity is established. Woolf aspired to be ‘only a sensibility’, in writing this novel, and presenting her transcendental theory.

Woolf fashioned the character of Mrs. Dalloway on an intimate friend of hers and socialite, Kitty Maxe, whom she admired, yet deposited for being very class conscious. Kitty Maxe’s suicide in real life, finds an echo in **Mrs. Dalloway** in the portrait of Septimus Smith, Clarissa’s twin face – one of the sanity, the other insanity.

On this peaceful day in the month of June, Woolf's female protagonist Clarissa, voices the writer's feelings as she ambles down the street, peering into Hatachard’s shop window. London, a city of male supremacy threatens to swamp her feminist impulse to spread the message of peace and harmony. Bond Street, early in the morning acts like a balm on Clarissa's troubled spirit as she passes by the familiar shops.

Woolf brings in a class hierarchy and aristocracy with the character of Lady Bruton who is the backbone of English aristocracy, burning with patriotic fervor and pride. The authorial voice glides through the text as it illumines the tragedy of such a noble lady on being born a female like Lady Bruton. Had she been born a male, she would have commanded armies over seven seas, quelled mutinous forces with an iron hand, as a true patriot of the British Empire. Now as a woman, she can only aspire for power through a man, the Prime Minister without actually

occupying the seat of authority.

As a woman, Woolf emphasizes that only Lady Bruton is a woman. At her luncheon party with Richard Dalloway, Hugh Whitbread and her secretary, Miss Brush, Lady Bruton enquires about the whereabouts of Clarissa Dalloway although she dislikes Clarissa. She feels a strange bond with Clarissa of "Feminine Comradeship" which reveals her feelings of royalty towards her own sex. Woolf signifies the language of silence; of the muted voices of women through so many generations. Ambitious and interested in colonizing Canada with young men and women, Lady Bruton desires to be at the Fore Front of Politics yet has to take a back seat.

" Though power was hers, position, in come "( 100)

Milly Brush, Lady Bruton's secretary, resents her own dandy appearance and lack of other feminine guiles as Hugh Whitbread enquires about Milly Brush's brother in South Africa. She hides her feelings from Hugh Whitbread in contempt of his greed and his lack of breeding. However, towards her own ilk, she has undying feelings of devotion and loyalty- a bonding of sisterhood, working for a common cause. Milly Brush is devoted to Lady Bruton and is in service of her as a secretary. She is sometimes made aware of time passing by and leaving her as a middle aged woman. There was time when Milly might have fallen in love with a man- someone like Richard Dalloway, but had always silenced her emotions, as she complimented herself as an 'uncorrupted soul' whom life had been cruel :

Because life had not offered her a trinket of the slightest value; not a curl, smile, lip, cheek, nose; nothing whatever(119).

These two female protagonists are projections of Woolf's mind which is conversant with the powerlessness, the silence and obscurity of women from times immemorial. Both lady Bruton and Milly Brush yearn for power to rule the patriarchal world and its representatives like Hugh Whitbread and Richard Dalloway. Trapped in female bodies, contending with male voices, their dilemma is echoed in the following narrative piece about Lady Bruton:

Murmuring London flowed up to her, and her hand lying on the sofa back, curled upon some imaginary baton such as her grandfathers might have held, holding which she seemed, drowsy and heavy, to be commanding battalions marching to Canada, and those good fellows walking across London, that territory of theirs, that little bit of carpet, Mayfair(124 ).

Meanwhile Clarissa Dalloway while crossing Broke Street is confronted with emblems of power, institutionised by masculinity; awesome, disciplined in the form of a figure of royalty passing by in anonymous majesty through London and the zooming aircraft furrowing the clear blue London sky with an advertising slogan.... TOFFEE. In this passage again, Woolf raises an accusing finger at the male figures of authority ruling nations and trampling out civilizations.

The appearance of the aircraft signifies the disruption of peace that is so desperately desired by woman in the England of the 1920s. The queen is revered as a protector of the women- poor, middle class, their children, orphans, widows, who wait patiently for a glimpse of their sovereign near the palace. For Mr. Bowley, an elderly gentleman, a prisoner, the presence of the sovereign fans the flames of patriotism and war:

Clarissa Dalloway hurries home to her room and feels blessed by life's bounties as she surveys her domain. Mrs. Dalloway's Parasol is handled like a sacred weapon by Lucy, the maid, as if Clarissa was an object of veneration, who ruled-over her subjects, her devotees with calm benediction. It is only in the privacy of her room that Clarissa 'disrobe'; reveals her real self without the other layers of superficial femininity. A true, deglamorised image of woman is unveiled. Clarissa suddenly feels 'breast less' like a nun and treasures this sensation of having merged with time. She feels like virgin as she sits, sewing her dress on the bed. Aware of his cold spirit Clarissa feels: "I am along forever"( 53 )

Clarissa's husband, Richard Dalloway, is excluded from Clarissa's room as 'the sheets of the attic bed are clean, tight stretched in a broad white band' (40) . Clarissa's husband insists on her resting undisturbed because of a heart affliction and Clarissa mocks her spouse's feeble attempt at taking a hot water bottle, as a substitute for her warmth. It interprets Richard's withdrawal from his wife, Clarissa, as an attempt to impose strictures on female desire under the garb of medical impositions by disinterested men of authority in the medical professions.

She feels an indescribable sense of loneliness, lonely and neglected like an attic room. She is more responsive to the charms of women, women confessing, as they often did, to

her some act of folly. At such moments, she feels for women what men feel for them. She epitomizes herself as an ideal woman who feels, thinks and comes forward to share the natural instincts of all woman kind. Thoughts of love, of falling in love with women, put in her mind of girlhood friend, Sally Seton. Their friendship was almost like love. Sally Seton was a queer girl. But she was intelligent, knew about the world, and very soon they were close friends. 'There they sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom at the top of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world ... '(43). She felt for Sally a strange sort of protective feeling. Her charm was overpowering and even though she smoked and bicycled around the parapet, Mrs. Dalloway could not help liking her.

One day, then came the most exquisite moment of her life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on her lips. The whole world might have turned upside down' (45).

Peter Walsh is the man who loved her and wanted to marry her, but she did not marry him rather rejected him and turned to Richard, her present husband. He called her 'a perfect hostess', and foretold that she would marry a Prime Minister. She had cried over his remark that she had the qualities of a perfect hostess, for it meant that she was insincere and hypocritical. She did not like that her this trait of serving people should be mistaken.

The image of Clarissa is presented as an assertive, independent woman having her own individual identity. She is the woman who prefers spiritual solace which she is having in her attic room. A raging storms of emotions engulfs Clarissa's heart, but seeing Peter Walsh's tear soaked face, moves her to a maternal bout of sympathy:

Clarissa had leant forward, taken his hand drawn him to her before she could down the brandishing of silver flashing plumes like pampas grass in a tropic gale in her breast(52).

For a flicker of a moment, Clarissa is tempted to leave her little world and step out in a different world with Peter Walsh, but realizes with a start, her duties as a good Christian house wife and mother, whose allegiance is foremost to her family and husband. She has a mesmerizing influence on Peter Walsh and he is tempted to recreate their past romantic moments together. The strident chiming of the Big Ben intrudes on their wayward thoughts, warning Clarissa, the woman, not to transgress the limits of Victorian domesticity. Clarissa cannot stay away from the beaten path trodden by generations of women before her, housewives

and mothers like her, performing the role of the Angel in the House, to perfection.

In the novel, Woolf is inadvertently exhorting women to be more visible, to be heard and to be taken notice of by the patriarchal society in which they live. The unknown woman on the street is a figment of the writer's imagination. Woolf gives the example of an old lady crossing the street on the arm of a middle aged woman, both elegantly attired. Here Woolf laments the obscurity of women's lives in the rubble of English literature.

Tearfully watching him is a young lady, an Italian, Lucrezia Warren Smith, who is herself lost in her own morbid thoughts. Rezia is projected as a nervous, thoroughly confused young lady: "Like a bird sheltering under the thin hollow of a leaf, who blinks at the sun when the leaf moves; starts at the crack of a dry twig" (73). Like Peter, she too is unhappy. Her husband, Septimus, is no longer Septimus. She suffers intensely, and thinks the world wicked which causes her such suffering. She has done nothing wrong, and still she suffers terribly. Her thoughts turn to the past, to the past, five years ago when she lived happily with her sisters in their home in Milan, Italy, making hats. But she left Italy and now her life is a torture. Her husband talks to himself; he talks to the dead and she is exposed to suffering and cruelty.

Although surrounded by flowers and burgeoning symbols of hope and promise, Rezia is unmoved by the beauty surrounding her, as she is haunted by the fear of her husband's insanity. References to the flowers abound in the novel, as they are symbolic of feminine art. They are also emblematic figures of feminine imagination. Rezia Smith submerges her life into the mainstream of her husband's and identifies with him. Woolf has sketched a soft, fragile woman in the character of Lucrezia Smith, who epitomizes the ideal Victorian doctrine of the female species being overcast by the dominant shadow of the male. Rezia has forsaken her family, her country, language and even the possibility of motherhood in deference to her husband's wishes. Her feeble voice for help is drowned in the clamor and din of overpowering, swooping devouring male voices of authority like those of Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw. Watching her trimming hats Septimus thinks that 'she looked pale, mysterious like a lily drowned under water.' (134)

The novelist gives vent to her own feelings about a marriage being subservient to her husband. Alone in her misery in a distant land, Rezia cries in solitude in the park. Deep in her anguish and pain, Rezia dreads Sir William Bradshaw's frightening intentions of putting away her husband in some sanitarium, for cure. Darkness settles in Rezia's

heart following her husband's death, as her mind is filled with the vision of "whispering ... The caress of the murmurings to her lay on the shore shone, she felt like flying flowers over some tomb." (228)

Septimus Smith is another projection of Clarissa Dalloway's subconscious mind. He cannot escape the fears, the anxiety that lead him ultimately to commit suicide, by flinging himself out of the window. Septimus is another victim of patriarchy. He had left home as a boy, severing ties with his mother, with whom he never had a rapport. By refusing to procreate, Septimus refuses to take the final step into patriarchy by becoming a father himself. Septimus admires Nature's plenitudes but fears the sinister forces represented by Holmes and Bradshaw, who he is convinced, are going to 'force his soul'. He slips into madness, the twilight zone wherein he resurrects the dead, converses with the birds in Greek and affirms life by denying the reminders of death. But he finally struggle to embrace the Mother, a fusion with the maternal body and succeeds in his death defying leap, throwing away his life:" There was an embrace in death" (202).

Images of an absent son and grieving mother are liberally sprinkled in the novel. When Clarissa hears about Septimus's suicide from the Bradshaws, she grieves for him like a mother mourning the death of a son. Septimus is a victim of patriarchal pressures, as his unmanly behavior is unacceptable to society and the guardians of Victorian morality.

In comprehending Septimus' death he has 'plunged holding his treasure- Clarissa discovers her own identity and becomes whole. She is once more, in imagination, the diver who plunges into the darkening, brightening sea to find the reality beneath the surface. The self sees itself in the mirror of another self; and out of 'communication', shared feeling, 'the embrace of death'; the ego is paradoxically located and revealed. Clarissa has triumphantly evaded, in the moment of communion, 'the agonized individuality of the lost and separated souls in Hell', at the same time, she has seen the value and meaning of the 'treasure', individuality, winning out over all its fears and failures.

While love of Peter is the central fact of her life, Mrs. Dalloway is also a loving wife and an affectionate mother. She loves her husband and she is faithful to him both in her actions and thoughts. She loves him and admires him because he is practical and successful and because he allows her spiritual privacy that, "attic room", which she regards as priceless.

Clarissa acclaims her love for Sally Seton as a very fulfilling relationship. The authorial voice breaks through at this point, wherein it states that bonding

with women ensures the emergence of a republic of women; whereas bonding with men results in the oppression of women, never a relationship on equal footing. Clarissa declares marriage as a "menace to women": the relinquishing of all freedom. Woolf's problem as a woman writer was to assert a female specificity in terms of 'woman space' within the framework of the masculine structure of society.

Sally Seton is comfortable with her female qualities and her body. She is a rebel of sorts who does not conform to the shy, reticent image of a young Victorian girl. Sally speaks freely about sex and confidently asserts herself as a woman as she fearlessly demands equal rights for women and the right to vote. For this she is punished by a representative of the patriarchal society, Hugh Whitbread, who kisses her, in order to punish her in the ladies cloakroom: "For she was a woman who 'could say anything, do anything' (37 )

But this high spirited rebel is quelled by patriarchal forces and soon Sally enters matrimony and becomes a mother of five boys. Sally is now Lady Rossiter, a sober conformist. The only female identity which was accepted by patriarchy was maternity during the Victorian era, for a woman was handed from the father to the husband as a commodity and onwards to the son, subdued by the laws of the father. Clarissa's memories of her own mother are overshadowed by memories of an autocratic father. Clarissa's duty as a hostess at her party is a form of service to patriarchy, as she suppresses the maternal instincts in her and acknowledges herself as cold and unfeeling. Repudiating the mother and pledging loyalty to her father, than her mother, accepts the role prescribed by paternal law without any questioning.

Reclining against the window of her room, Clarissa looks out at an old woman in the house next door. To Clarissa, this old lady signifies the decadent forces in life where as her daughter, Elizabeth, embodies the zest and zeal of the new generation of women emerging on the domestic scene. On a fine June day in 1923 , Elizabeth Dalloway steps out of her cloistered existence and board a bus, like a pirate voyaging the oceans, of the city, Elizabeth Dalloway gives free rein to her imagination that dissolves gender differences. According to Ruth Salvaggio, "Julia Kristeva does not shape rhetorical space into a feminine configuration but instead regards women and feminism as crucial in the creation of a new discourse and ethics."<sup>4</sup>

Elizabeth's adventurous wandering is a denouncement of her prescribed role of an Angel in the House, as she is harbinger of fresh hope for younger generation of women. Unlike Clarissa, her daughter grabs opportunities to spread her wings to fly out of the family nest to seek a challenging career like her father. Instead of becoming a 'perfect hostess' like her



mother, Elizabeth is free to choose a career in medical profession, or to become a politician like Richard Dalloway. She bristles with ambition and identifies with the possibilities of parental profession. Women thirty years before Elizabeth's time could never dare to ever think of a career, apart from mothering and housekeeping. Bernard Blackstone rightly comments :

Elizabeth is a breath of young life in middle aged world of Mrs. Dalloway -- an effective point of contrast "( 122)

Elizabeth Dalloway heralds a new dawn for women in making their fantasies into reality. For the 19th century some, even day dreaming of an escape from the drudgeries of domesticity resulted in psychological problems, sometimes crippling the woman, mentally and physically. Elizabeth Dalloway, the 20th century woman defies her mother by wandering off all by herself and is determined to follow her professional plans for the future, at the risk of being anti- maternal. " She is quite determined whatever her mother might say, to become a farmer or a doctor." ( 122 )

However, when Elizabeth returns to her family fold she confirms to an image of an obedient daughter. At the party, her father, Richard Dalloway, fails to recognize his beautiful daughter. But when he does, he accepts her as a decorative object, a part of the world inhabited by the trivial chattering of women. Elizabeth Dalloway has to make a choice between the masculine and feminine worlds ----- whether to participate in the centers of masculine power 'unscrupulous' and 'arrogant', or succumb to a trivial femininity as an object of male admiration.

Indeed in the character of Elizabeth Dalloway, Woolf has delineated the image of a free spirited woman who is not ready to accept any restriction upon her, and wants to shape her life by herself. Elizabeth Dalloway's governess Miss Doris Kilman, who has been victimized by the male social order, is extremely hostile towards Clarissa whom she views as a representative of the patriarchal society. Kilman represses her femininity by dressing up like a man and behaving with ruthlessness. She hates Clarissa's delicacy which makes her conscious of her own inferior status in the society. To be able to survive in a male dominated society, Miss Kilman adopts aggressive masculine values and is repulsed by the female body as she mutters : " It is the flesh, it is the flesh." (142)

Kilman is starkly opposed to Clarissa; the former an emancipated, career woman, the latter is a successful socialite, utterly feminine and a creator of human interaction through her parties. Miss Kilman vividly portrays a 19th century specimen of spinsterhood with

religious leanings whose passage from one era to another is nebulous. She is still within the boundaries of family obligations and influences which at times restrict her progress towards her goal of subjugating the Dalloways, body and soul.

Woolf highlights another feminine presence in **Mrs. Dalloway** in the figure of an old, battered woman singing of love opposite the tube station. This pervades the text with a sinister sound :

A voice bubbling up without direction, vigor, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning ... the voice of an ancient spring, spouting from the earth; which issued from a tall quivering shape, like a funnel, like a rusty pump, like a wind-beaten tree, a voice of no age or sex. (122 -24)

The singer is identified as a primeval woman whom Beverly Ann Schlack associates with Ceres and immortality. An unmistakable image of female creativity, of fecundity and power emanates from the old woman's song. Rezia Smith perceives an enormous power embodied in the female voice. The omnipresent narrator imagines a London city space decadent with its population dissolving into lumps of mould. The old woman's song obliterates the voice of the masculine and floods the hierarchal space of London, the patriarchal city with the voices of women.

Indeed Mrs. Dalloway is typical, but she is also highly individual. She is among the immortals of literature. She is highly rounded figure. She is a rounded character, first in the sense that she is a many sided personality, and secondly in the sense that under the stress of circumstances she changes and grows psychologically. This 'roundness' has been achieved by the use of the 'stream of consciousness' technique. We see her through her own stream of consciousness as well as through that of a number of other characters, more especially Peter Walsh and Sally Seton. **Mrs. Dalloway** is indeed a feminist vision of Virginia Woolf, manifested most of all in the female vagrant looking as :

If she had flung herself on the earth, rid of all ties, to observe curiously, to speculate boldly, to consider the whys and wherefores. (104)

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