

## Identity Construction In Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway: A Feminist Perspective

Dr. Seema Madhok

### Abstract

*Virginia Woolf is widely regarded as one of the most prominent modernist authors and a key figure in 20th-century feminist literature. Her renowned work delves into fundamental feminist themes, such as the division of societal roles, the dominance of patriarchal authority within marriage, and issues related to sexism. Virginia Woolf examines both the universal and individual struggles experienced by women in Mrs. Dalloway. She delves deep into the inner conflicts and turmoil that arise between the inner psyche of women and a society that steadfastly clings to patriarchal values. This study explores Woolf's own insights into the formation of identity, showing how discourse and diverse social behaviours help to shape Clarissa's identity over time. Gender ideology and other social constructions influence and mould her identity.*

**Keywords:** *sexism, conventions, feminism, patriarchy, identity construction, subjectivity, language,*

### Introduction

Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" stands as a seminal masterpiece within feminist literature, intricately weaving together themes of societal norms, gender roles, and the profound psychological battles endured by women during the early 20th century. This novel has garnered extensive feminist scrutiny for its profound exploration of the inner worlds and journeys of its female characters. Published in 1925, the book is hailed as a pioneering model of modernist literature, providing a multifaceted depiction of the formidable hurdles that women grappled with in the context of British society during the early 20th century (Abel, Elizabeth 1989).

### Contextualizing identity in Mrs. Dalloway

In Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf deftly explores into the shared human experience as viewed through the lens of femininity. She delves deeply into the profound inner struggles and conflicts that brew within the psyche of women, set against a backdrop of a society steadfastly rooted in patriarchal norms. Through her portrayal of the character Clarissa Dalloway and her interactions with other women, Woolf vividly illustrates the constraints and disheartening challenges that women of that era encountered, painting a vivid canvas of the limitations and frustrations they faced.

The central storyline revolves around the arrangements made by Clarissa Dalloway for a dinner party, which is set to have the Prime Minister of England as a guest. During this time, she ruminates about her adolescence and a past admirer whom she once turned down. Clarissa also bumps into an old friend who is invited to the party, and their pleasing

compliments make her feel youthful again. This activates further contemplation about her former suitor, Peter Walsh. As she walks, her thoughts are fragmented, surrounding reflections on her present self and the possible paths she might have taken, anxieties about her young daughter and her future, and reflections about a limousine, carrying a member of the royal family, which will capture the attention of the spectators (Ruthven, K.K, 1984).

### **Identify and society in Mrs. Dalloway**

On hearing about Septimus's tragic death, Clarissa finds herself in a dilemma between sympathy for the young deceased man and anger that his actions have cast a shadow on her contentment. Her internal monologue reveals her emotions, thoughts and her response to both the terror and beauty of life, with death as its inevitable conclusion (page 450-1).

During Virginia Woolf's era, there was a significant upheaval in the established beliefs and principles that had long shaped people's understanding of the world. Woolf keenly portrays an acute understanding of the profound disruption and disintegration of modern existence and human essence triggered by the traumatic impact of the First World War in her literary works. In her writing, she castigates the authoritarian control that elevated husbands and fathers to the status of autocrats. In her own family, Woolf experienced a gloomy atmosphere characterized by a pervasive patriarchal rule. Her father's dominance over his wife and daughters left a lasting impact on her.

### **Feminist critique of patriarchal structure**

A prominent feminist dimension of the novel lies in Woolf's depiction of the inner realms inhabited by her female characters. Employing her distinctive stream-of-consciousness narrative approach, she grants voice to the innermost musings and aspirations of women, revealing the intricacies of their emotional and intellectual landscapes. This narrative technique enables readers to connect with the characters on a profound level and gain insight into the oppressive limitations imposed upon them within a patriarchal societal framework.

Woolf vividly illustrates the loneliness and frustration experienced by women whose destinies are moulded by moral, ideological, and traditional forces. The narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway* unfolds within the confines of a single day in June, where Clarissa hosts an evening party. Unexpectedly, Peter Walsh pays her a visit, reuniting her with friends from her youth such as Sally Seton, Whitebread, and others. Clarissa, a woman in her middle age, has surpassed the age of fifty and is married to Richard Dalloway, a conservative member of parliament. They reside in Westminster, an affluent and fashionable district of London. Clarissa and her experiences of love are intricately woven into the very fabric of the novel.

### **Protagonist's Quest for Identity**

The novel investigates female identity within the framework of a patriarchal society. Clarissa Dalloway wrestles with the societal norms dictating the essence of womanhood. She represents a product of her era and social class, bound by the prescribed roles that society demands of her as a wife and hostess. Her internal battles and introspections as portrayed in the novel illuminate the constraints placed upon women during that time. The novel illustrates the isolation and estrangement that women like Clarissa frequently encountered while confined within the realm of domesticity. Clarissa's meticulous preparations for her party, though they may appear routine, symbolize the performative aspect of femininity. Her role as a hostess serves as a metaphor for the societal expectation that women put on a facade of happiness and contentment, irrespective of their genuine emotions.

Woolf's meticulous examination of everyday life details, such as the act of purchasing flowers or arranging for a gathering, serves to elevate the ordinary experiences of women to a level of profound literary significance. In doing so, she confronts the devaluation of women's lives and their experiences within a patriarchal society.

Mrs. Dalloway also addresses the theme of female sexuality and its suppression, drawing a stark contrast between Clarissa's life and that of Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran grappling with post-traumatic stress disorder. This juxtaposition serves to underscore the divergent paths and experiences of men and women within a society that marginalizes and stifles women. Septimus Warren Smith, a traumatized war veteran, stands as a foil to Clarissa, illuminating the devastating repercussions of the inflexible gender roles and societal norms that constrain individuals, particularly women, from freely expressing their genuine desires and emotions.

The novel investigates the intricate web of Clarissa's relationships, including her romantic involvement with Peter Walsh and her marriage to Richard Dalloway, as well as her deep connection with Sally Seton. Within these relationships, the book emphasizes the profound value of female friendships and bonds. Clarissa's contemplations and recollections of her dear friend Sally Seton underscore the depth of emotion and connection that can thrive between women. This portrayal effectively challenges the stereotype that women's relationships are exclusively characterized by competition or jealousy. Furthermore, the novel subtly explores the theme of lesbianism through the character of Sally Seton, who is Clarissa's intimate friend. While not explicitly articulated, their relationship hints at a more profound emotional connection that questions conventional perceptions of female friendship. This underlying subtext suggests that, in a society that restricted their freedom and independence, women sought alternative forms of intimacy and connection. The depth of Clarissa's affection for Sally Seton represents the pinnacle of emotional intensity she will ever encounter. In retrospect, she reveals that what appeared unusual was the sheer purity and genuineness of her emotions towards Sally. It differed from one's feelings for a man. It was entirely altruistic and possessed a unique quality that could only flourish in the relationship between women, particularly women who had lately come of age. Her emotion was productive, stemming from her deep sense of being connected with Sally (32).

Undoubtedly, it is in Sally Seton's company that Clarissa experiences the genuine essence of freedom and joy. In contrast, Richard symbolizes the societal constraints, her dearth of affection, apathy, and the conventional norms governing her existence. In fact, as introduced in the essay "A Feminist Reading of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway", Butler argues that her heterosexuality could be perceived as an unexamined and obligatory social contract, or as Butler terms it, a "melancholic heterosexuality" (cited in Montashery 26).

Sally advocates gender equality and is considered an anti-patriarchal force. She boldly asserts her identity as a woman and champions the cause of equal rights for women. Sally serves as Clarissa's muse, inspiring her to transcend the confines of Bourton, encouraging her to read, and engaging in philosophical discussions. They spend countless hours together, deliberating on life's intricacies and even harbouring ambitions to establish a society aimed at eradicating private property. By breaking free from isolation and forging connections with other women, Clarissa was able to challenge the prevailing patriarchal narrative and foster relationships built on equality. Such bonds can be seen as a response to the constraints of patriarchy and as a step towards creating a society that empowers women. Despite Clarissa's deep attraction to Sally, societal norms and conventions stifled her. Sally Seton symbolized the forbidden within the patriarchal society, and her vision was met with resistance and rejection. Women like Sally often face societal resistance and are compelled to conform and suppress their true selves. Clarissa's acceptance of societal roles and the constraints of respectability prevented her from fully pursuing her connection with Sally.

## **Exploring Feminine Identity**

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, characters like Clarissa, Septimus, Peter, and others grapple with the challenge of finding avenues for communication while preserving a sense of privacy. Striking the right balance between these two aspects proves to be a daunting task for all of them. Clarissa, in particular, faces difficulties in fostering meaningful communication and resorts to hosting parties in an attempt to bring people together. Simultaneously, she senses a certain solitude within her own introspective world. She ponders the profound enigma of human existence, where she can occupy one room while an elderly woman in the house across the street inhabits another. While Clarissa admires the old woman's independence, she recognizes the inherent loneliness that accompanies it.

Peter draws an analogy between the soul and a fish that navigates through murky waters before emerging swiftly to frolic in the waves. This analogy serves to elucidate the contradictory human inclination for both solitude and interaction. The war's aftermath has brought about a significant shift in how people perceive English society, instilling optimism for ongoing transformation. Nonetheless, in this fragmented post-war world, establishing meaningful connections remains a formidable task, despite the characters' determined endeavours. Ultimately, Clarissa interprets Septimus's tragic demise as a desperate yet valid attempt at communication in a realm where authentic connections prove elusive.

Mrs. Dalloway boldly defies the customary narrative structure by immersing readers in a single day in the lives of its characters, delving deep into their innermost thoughts and experiences rather than focusing on external events. This innovative approach disrupts the prevailing male-dominated literary conventions of the time, and underscores the profound significance of women's inner worlds and perspectives. Woolf's inventive utilization of the stream of consciousness narrative technique serves as a conduit for readers to explore the inner lives and contemplations of her characters, including the female ones. This literary device lends a voice to the unexpressed and frequently suppressed emotions and desires of women, shedding even more light on the intricacies of their lived experiences.

Given that language stands as the most prevalent of all signifying practices employed to ensure our full socialization, it raises a compelling initial argument that it may carry androcentric biases in a society steeped in androcentrism. If this holds true, then language itself could be considered complicit in the subjugation of women (Ruthven 59). As a female writer, Woolf held a fervent desire for women to write authentically as women, urging them to pose the question, "Who am I?" She consistently sought "a rational, coherent, essential self, which can speak and know itself" (Waugh 10). On the contrary, many female writers grappled with the notion that if they attempted to represent themselves as they truly were, they would inevitably confront a sense of alienation. This stems from their experiences in a patriarchal society that has historically treated women as the "other," making it challenging for them to adopt a different position from the one traditionally attributed to women. However, Woolf contended that difference need not lead to isolation and estrangement from others. It could instead serve as a foundation for healthier relationships (Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk, 1995).

Some female writers of the twentieth century, including Woolf, sought an alternative conception of subjectivity or self that emphasized relationships and connections rather than evading communication and relationships altogether. In addition to Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir is closely associated with the continuum of social constructionism. In her work *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir articulates her perspective on the social constructionist evaluation of essentialism, which places significance on the concept of female nature or essence. This notion suggests that women are inherently (naturally) distinct from men, with the belief that one is not born a woman but rather becomes one. Beauvoir argues that no predetermined biological, psychological, or economic destiny

dictates the role that women assume in society. Instead, it is the collective influence of civilization itself that shapes this intermediate figure, positioned between eunuch and male, and characterized as feminine (quoted in Waugh 9).

Clarissa, as a quintessential feminine protagonist, embodies the concept of feminine resistance within the realm of feminism. However, what strategies does she employ to challenge, dismantle, and ideally transcend the prevailing androcentric and patriarchal ideologies? One of Clarissa's initial acts of resistance is evident in her refusal of Peter Walsh, who ardently loved her. In doing so, Clarissa effectively suppresses her own passionate self to avoid being ensnared by Peter's affections. Peter's portrayal of Clarissa aligns with what feminists would classify as a adverse depiction or the propagation of damaging stereotypes about women. He characterizes her as "cold, heartless, a prude" in Mrs. Dalloway. He goes on to remark, "There was always something cold in Clarissa, he thought. She had always, even as a girl, a sort of timidity, which in middle age becomes conventionality..." (36). In a phallogocentric or patriarchal society like the one Clarissa inhabits, there is often a conscious or unconscious tendency to assume and promote the idea that masculinity naturally embodies power and authority, while femininity represents its inherent opposite—namely, absence. Characteristics like reason and activity have traditionally been linked with masculine, while emotion and passivity have been associated with feminine. Furthermore, within a male-controlled culture, assets allied with masculinity tend to be valued more highly than those linked to femininity. Consequently, empowered men often wield their position of authority to subjugate women. This is precisely what Peter attempts, while Clarissa fights against his advances. She distances herself from these stereotypically feminine attributes and endeavours to adopt more traditionally masculine qualities. Her objective is to dismantle the prevailing phallogocentric hierarchy, moving away from dependence and towards independence, even if it means turning away from Peter, whom she deeply loves.

In marriage, some degree of freedom and reliance is expected when two people share their lives day in and day out under the same roof, as was the case with Richard. Yet with Peter, Clarissa felt compelled to share and divulge everything, a situation she found intolerable (6). These words uttered by Clarissa constitute a clear and explicit declaration of her independence, although it comes at a price. While she manages to secure "a little independence," she never attains a full sense of subjectivity. This limitation stems from the fact that those marginalized by the prevailing culture, be it due to gender, social class, race, beliefs, physical attributes, or other factors, often struggle to achieve a complete sense of subjectivity as defined by impersonal and socially constructed power dynamics.

### **Symbolism and identity formation.**

Clarissa's journey involves a persistent effort to challenge the established boundaries between masculinity and femininity, as well as between dominance and marginalization. Her aim is to build an identity grounded in the acknowledgement that women must unearth and fiercely advocate for a unified sense of self—a cohesive feminine subject that the dominant culture has historically denied them.

Woolf asserts that social constructs are the products of continuous social interactions, devoid of fixed or inherent meanings. These constructs remain in a perpetual state of change, evolving over a period as they form novel association with several elements within the social sphere. As a result, rather than conforming to rigid negative representations or stereotypes, such as the "angel in the house," Clarissa challenges these prescribed roles for women. Through her recurrent references to literary figures like Shakespeare, Huxley, Tyndall, Plato, Morris, and Shelley, and her observations on subjects such as love and religion, she positions herself on an equal footing with educated men. She tenaciously strives to bridge the vast and seemingly insurmountable gap between herself and the patriarchal culture.

To achieve this objective, she presents herself as an impeccable host during her gatherings. She conceals her genuine self behind the facade of a gracious hostess, primarily because her sense of self is solely defined through her interactions with others. Clarissa's parties represent an unceasing quest to establish a sense of community. Within such a community, one's self takes on a distinctly social form, firmly rooted in interpersonal relationships. Without her social mask, Clarissa becomes a nonentity—a woman devoid of a discernible identity. She assumes the role of a genuine hostess, someone who "didn't do things simply for their own sake but to influence people's perceptions" (8). Her actions are primarily motivated by the desire to please others and attain social success. Woolf's argument underscores the idea that identification takes place within the realm of communication and relationships. If this is indeed the case, Clarissa's efforts to maintain these connections are entirely justified.

As the party nears its conclusion, Clarissa experiences a state of flux, torn between the social environment of the gathering and her own isolating solitude. Her sense of self becomes increasingly fragmented and divided. Elaine Showalter perceptively notes that "Woolf's feminine aesthetic extends from her interpretation of women's societal role: receptiveness to the point of destruction of self, creative amalgamation verging on exhaustion and infertility. The ultimate manifestation of personal space is the grave" (as cited in Waugh 121). Her acknowledgment of the profound nature of death, as she identifies with Septimus, can be regarded as proof of her steadfast resistance to phallogocentric and androcentric norms. This notion of 'death as an embrace' leads Clarissa away from patriarchal standards.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" stands as a feminist masterpiece that delves deeply into the inner turmoil, desires, and constraints faced by women in early 20th-century England. Through its innovative narrative techniques and intricate character portrayals, the novel challenges societal conventions and provides a compelling commentary on the status of women in a patriarchal society. It sheds light on the struggles, suppressions, and intricacies of female existence while also celebrating the resilience, inner worlds, and connections shared among women. The novel remains a potent work that continues to resonate with contemporary feminist readers, fostering ongoing dialogues about gender, identity, and autonomy. Clarissa Dalloway's sense of self is not an inherent, fixed aspect of her being but is rather shaped through ongoing social interactions that are contingent on various factors, including gender and other social constructs. Therefore, it can be argued that the process of forming one's identity is not a singular event; rather, it is an ongoing, continuous, and creative practice. Identity formation is not solely influenced by language but is also moulded by a complex interplay of factors such as gender, ideology, and the physical body.

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