



Feminism and Patriarchy in the Works of Virginia Woolf: A Critical Study

Dr. Anju Rajan

Associate Professor of English, Vaish College, Bhiwani

Abstract

This study critically examines the interplay of feminism and patriarchy in the selected works of Virginia Woolf, particularly *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf's feminist perspective is not expressed through overt rebellion but through a subtle and psychological exploration of women's inner lives. The research highlights how patriarchy operates not only as a visible system of male dominance but also through social norms, cultural expectations, marriage, and identity construction. Through characters like Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe, Woolf presents diverse representations of feminine identity shaped by class, memory, and societal pressure. Clarissa embodies the socially accepted woman whose individuality is overshadowed by marital identity, Mrs Ramsay represents the ideal yet self-sacrificing feminine figure, and Lily symbolizes resistance and creative independence. The study also explores Woolf's use of the stream of consciousness technique, which allows access to the fragmented, fluid, and layered nature of female identity. Ultimately, the paper argues that Woolf redefines feminism as a quiet yet powerful assertion of the female inner world, emphasizing that identity is not fixed but continuously constructed and contested within patriarchal structures.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Feminine Identity, Stream of Consciousness, Psychological Realism, Gender Roles, Inner Consciousness

Introduction

Virginia Woolf does not struggle with patriarchy by writing loud slogans. She struggles against it by penetrating into the secret rooms of women minds. She demonstrates the smiling, hosting, obeying, remembering, sacrificing, and the silent suffering of women who are the structures constructed by men. Patriarchy in her novels is not a man screaming at them. It is also custom, matrimony, naming, status, respectability, religion and unspoken anticipation that a woman should be there to serve others. Through this, feminism by Woolf is subtle, psychological and very radical. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf does not start with war, Parliament, and public power, but with a woman getting ready to host a party. That in itself is not meaningless.

This is further enhanced by the memory of Peter Walsh that Clarissa has. Peter once criticized her and denied her and fantasized her as the ideal hostess. That is no accolade. It is a limitation. It is in the world of social life he perceives her talent and not her whole inner world. Clarissa would never marry Peter since she is aware that she would not have any room to herself when she is with Peter. Woolf makes this quite clear into foreground when Clarissa cogitates that in marriage there must be licence, there must be independence. This is among the feminist concepts in the novel. Clarissa does not stand against love. She denounces absolute proprietorship. Patriarchy is not absent even in intimate relations because a woman has to surrender the mental privacy. In the meantime, Clarissa is not shown as a rebellious individual. Woolf is too sensitive to that. Clarissa is in the same system which suppresses her. She appreciates status, etiquette, partying and order. That is the reason why this is so rich feminist character. She is not a derogatory of patriarchy. She not only



lives in it, but also does and contributes to its perpetuation. However, she experiences its price inside. This division between the external beauty and the internal appetite is the main detail of the discussion of women by Woolf. The other short manifestation of her origin is the soul of Clarissa:

Clarissa's inner excitement bursts out in the words, "What a lark! What a plunge!" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 1).

Child words, lighthearted words, and a certain taste of danger is present. To Clarissa life is the downward trend of performance, memory, old age, and the pressure of the society. She is riding in London as a fading and breathing woman. She loves the city, the morn, people, the flow of life, however, she feels that she is invisible and unfamiliar. Woolf has shown that the women are not the only victims of the patrilineal violence. It may also transform them to classy shadows. The other feminist aspect is the personality of Sally Seton. Sally is a symbol of freedom, emotiveness, spontaneity and some kind of female connection, never to be repressed by the antiquated patriarchy as Clarissa recalls. Sally is associated with the reality of alternative existence, the existence which was not purely subdued by the male approval or benevolent marriage. The recollection of her is sweet and emotionally factual in Clarissa. With the help of Sally, Woolf demonstrates that female relations between women may be transformed into the area of recognition and liberty.

Woolf develops one of her most famous patriarchal figures of Mr Ramsay. He is certain, domineering, presumptuous and emotionally dictatorial. It is not that he is villainous. It is a man who has been developed in a society where he has been conditioned to need respect, subordination and emotional service of the women. He wants sympathy, solace and admiration. He exploits the emotional work of women in his life the most.

At the start, it appears like Mrs Ramsay is the best Victorian woman. She takes care of children, calms the visitors, extinguishes the tension, defends the male ego and provides a cozy atmosphere in the house. She is nurturing, beautiful and sweet. Nevertheless, it is the cost of such femininity ideal that Woolf feminism is to prove. Mrs Ramsay is power which is not so much. She has an influence on everybody, yet primarily by service. The reason why she is able to bring the family together is the caring, sacrificing, relating responsibility. Such women are glorified and well used by patriarchy. Woolf does not make fun of Mrs Ramsay. She is jealous of her emotional sense and humanity. At the same time, she shows that such type of life is pre-imposed by the system according to which women are expected to feed others, but to remain deprived. Mrs Ramsay is sympathetic and never quite free to do anything that is out of her position.

The success of Lily as an artist in the end of *To the Lighthouse* is a triumph of women. It is non-assertive, non-victorious or triumphant in its conventional sense. It is attained, particular and it is internal. She fills her image and demonstrates that the vision of a woman is not absolute, useless and temporary. Lily is making a comparison to the life of self-sacrificing Mrs Ramsay and is building her own. The combination of the two novels substantiates the saturation of the criticism of feminism and patriarchy as elaborated by Woolf in remarkable details. Clarissa Dalloway reveals the society lady, graceful and internally degraded through naming, marriage and acting. Mrs Ramsay demonstrates the motherly feminine lady who loses to the emotional burden. Lily Briscoe reveals the rebellious female, who struggles to achieve the artistic self status. With their help, Woolf manages to establish that patriarchy is actually a system that can be sustained without



the women. It enters into the memory, language, identity and desire. It is what feminism starts with Woolf, a woman defending her interior world, with the exam that has been given to her, with the necessity of thinking, feeling and creating the way she does.

Clarissa Dalloway is strolling through London, but she is not just walking down the streets. She is passing through identities. The woman going out to purchase flowers is not merely Clarissa. She is Mrs Dalloway, a name that has been made by marriage, society and expectation. Her original self is in some part of that name, but it wavers and doubtful and weak: The day begins with a social identity rather than a personal one:

“Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 3).

This is whereby the identity of femininity starts with patriarchy. Clarissa is not shown as an individual, but as a wife. She is an existentially relative being. She belongs to a system when she is called by the name of her husband. However, her inner voice starts to fight against this limitation as she walks. She is reminiscing of Bourton, back to childhood, when she was simply Clarissa. She is liberated, impulsive, full of potential, in memory:

Her inner self awakens in memory: “What a lark!

What a plunge!” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 3).

These are the words of younger Clarissa who is not influenced by the social pressures. It is evident in the contrast. The present Clarissa is composed, controlled, and socially defined. Clarissa of the past was impulsive, alive and self directed. Woolf is employing this contrast to demonstrate how feminine identity is transformed due to the pressure of society. When Clarissa passes by the city, she realizes her twofold nature. On the outside, she is elegant, adored, and revered. On the inside, she is disconnected with herself, nearly non-existent:

She reflects with quiet pain: “She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 10).

This is among the strongest feminine identity statements in the novel. Clarissa exists physically, socially but is internally wiped out. Women are not always silenced by force through patriarchy. In some cases it enables them to live but in the roles that are prescribed to them and their inner personalities are not known. Marriage is the most important in forming this identity. By marrying Richard Dalloway who was a safe and stable man, Clarissa turned down Peter Walsh who required emotional intensity and total commitment. Her choice is an indication of wanting to be independent in marriage, but it leads to a silent defeat. She understands the necessity of space:

“In marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*,7).

This quote indicates that Clarissa is aware of the fact that she is a person. She wants to have something left of herself that another human being does not consume. However, despite this information, she is still Mrs Dalloway. She is independent, though not unconditionally. Her hostess status also contributes to who she is. She throws parties, unites people, forms social harmony. This role gives her a sense of purpose but it is also restricting. Her known is what she does to the other people and not what she is. Peter’s judgment lingers in her mind as he calls her “the perfect hostess” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*,7).

This is a phrase that sums up the feminine identity paradox. It is admiration and incarceration. Being a perfect hostess is to be social success, but personally constrained. It is her quality of being



pleasing, rather than her complexity that is appreciated by Clarissa. At times, Clarissa questions her life choices. She makes fantasy of how it should have been to lead a different life, to be more resilient, independent and less focused on looks and acceptance. She regrets silently:

“Oh if she could have had her life over again!” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 9).

This scene shows the conflict between acceptance and desire. Clarissa is not an outright defiant person, yet she is not feeling something missing. Her identity is full to the society, but not full to herself. Her identity struggle also incorporates the physical body. She reflects on her appearance: “a narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 10).

Such self-evaluation is to demonstrate how social expectations define what a feminine is. Clarissa views herself in terms of other people. Her body is an object of judgment instead of a natural manifestation of self. Another aspect of feminine identity is her daughter Elizabeth. Elizabeth does not admire gloves, appearance, and social norms. This is mentored by Miss Kilman who disapproves of traditional femininity as she makes another turn. Clarissa is bothered and captivated with this difference. She feels that the identity of Elizabeth can get out of the confines that defined her own. And she is afraid of the unfamiliar too. Even Miss Kilman is the embodiment of disjointed female identity. She is alienated, tyrannical and intolerable in the society. She is not as graced and privileged as Clarissa to protect her. Her identity is formed by the misery and anger. Woolf demonstrates that feminine identity is not predisposed with such oppositions. It will depend on the class, experience and choice. The different versions of the response to identical patriarchal system are Clarissa, Elizabeth and Miss Kilman. We are eventually thrown back to indeterminate identity of Clarissa. She is not so free, and still she does not pass. She is neither on the social role nor on the inner being, performance and reflection but in the middle. Her identity cannot be just a definition. It is a process, a travelling consciousness, silent struggle in the process of acceptance.

The day does not start with some assurance, but with a silent action of mind. A woman ventures out of the world, yet she is not a full part of herself. She is a part of a name, a role, a structure which has gradually formed her identity. “Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.” (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 3)

Clarissa strolls down London, yet her identity is predetermined. She is not presented as Clarissa. She is introduced as “Mrs Dalloway.” In such a slight twist, Woolf demonstrates the construction of feminine identity through patriarchy. A woman is made a relation, not an individual. However, there is something stirring in her that is different: “What a lark! What a plunge!” (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 3)

It is not the voice of Mrs Dalloway. This is Clarissa. The younger self. The free self. The self which existed prior to the society meticulously turned her into an acceptable person. In the world of Woolf, feminine identity does not exist as an individual entity. It is layered. A social component is one of the components. The other part is protesting in silence. Clarissa comes out, but her thoughts are retrogressive. The future merges into the past. Bourton returns. Peter Walsh returns. One of herself comes back, living and inexplicable. However the present press admonishes: “She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown.” (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 10)



This is the inmost fact of feminine identity. Clarissa is there, but she is invisible. She talks but she is not heard. She acts, but not more than that. She hosts. She smiles. She arranges life to other people:

“The perfect hostess.” (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 7)

This expression sounds like applause and incarceration. Connection, harmony, beauty, is made by a hostess. But she is there to other people. Her self would be created in terms of gratifying, organizing, maintaining. Clarissa knows this. She feels it. However, she does not come out of it. In some other room somewhere the other woman is sitting near a window quietly. She is older. She is calm. She is the centre of a family, or not of herself:

Mrs Ramsay is extremely talkative to her daughter. It is an extremely timid way of how her identity is manifested. Through giving. Through emotional labor. She comforts, organizes, protects. She also goes to the level of making a sacrifice as she is too tired. She has an invisible thread, on which she uses to create the family. But Woolf puts an unanswered question: What remains of her beyond this giving?

Mrs Ramsay, is a beautiful, though weak identity. It is so much admired, yet enclosed. She is in complete service to other man. Her daughters are observing her. It is via her that they are taught. But, on them, as well, they doubt her. They imagine “a life different from hers... not always taking care of some man or other.” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 8)

This is a very important aspect. The feminine identity is starting to change with generations. Mrs Ramsay is an epitome of outdated femininity. Care, sacrifice, devotion. Her daughters start dreaming of something different. Freedom. Autonomy. A service-free life. Even they are enticed with beauty, and admiration, with male approval. Woolf does not believe that feminine identity is easy to get out of. It is inherited, distrusted, re-molded. Another character that is unlike is there. Lily Briscoe. She does not marry.

However, they are swept away by history. The two females, Clarissa and Mrs Ramsay do not stand. They also do not fail to possess the relationship with one another. Through silence. Through sacrifice. There are some abstraction system of anticipation utilized. And brings with him Lily there. Lily who sees. Lily who remembers. Lily who paints. The last line of *To the Lighthouse* is the one which Lily completes her picture. It does not have image of itself. It is an assertion. A declaration. A resistance. She can even make the world of her own, as well as fulfill her dream.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Virginia Woolf’s novels present a profound and nuanced critique of patriarchy through the exploration of women’s inner consciousness and lived experiences. Rather than depicting direct confrontation, Woolf reveals how deeply embedded patriarchal structures shape identity, relationships, and self-perception. Characters such as Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay illustrate the subtle confinement of women within socially constructed roles, where identity is often defined through marriage, service, and societal expectations. At the same time, Lily Briscoe represents a transformative possibility, embodying resistance through artistic creation and intellectual independence. Woolf’s innovative use of the stream of consciousness technique plays a crucial role in expressing the fragmented and evolving nature of feminine identity. It allows readers to experience the tension between external roles and internal desires, highlighting the silent



struggles faced by women. The study demonstrates that patriarchy is not merely an external force but an internalized system that influences thoughts, emotions, and self-worth.

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