



# Feminism in the Novel “Mrs. Dalloway” by Virginia Woolf

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**Abstract:** Feminism is a social theory or movement to advance the status of females and protect their legal rights due to the sexual discrimination and inequalities in the man-dominated society. The word "feminism" was first used by Charles Fourier in 1837 and since then it has been gradually known by people in the world. "Feminism represents one of the most important social, economic, and aesthetic revolutions of modern times. "Virginia Woolf wanted men and women to make willing acknowledgement to each other as individuals. She valued individual life irrespective of gender. In her novels, Virginia Woolf shows the essential quality of female experience and where it differs from men. In her novels, she gives us a glimpse of the womanliness in a woman. Mrs. Dalloway can never remember whether her husband's concern is for Armenians or Albanians. Women as they are more profound than men, have this honesty which comes through 'self-knowledge and power to distinguish between the essential from accidental.' Clarissa Dalloway has got depths unimagined by her friends. This is the reason why in Virginia Woolf's novels women appear more profound, grand, deep and heroic than men. Men are occupied with trivial things. They struggle for money and power, for states, countries and scholarships, but women struggle to create order, love and life. The work of women, although, appears trivial, at heart, it is loving. They aim to connect people, to establish relationships, love and friendship, rather than waste time making monuments. Men are always fighting and struggling with each other, but women struggle against the greater forces of nature, against chaos and death. This is the thing which dignifies them. There is Clarissa in love with Sally Seton, which certainly is passionate in the fullest sense of the word. This paper aims at highlighting an important fact about Woolf's creative instinct which was against this dichotomy of male and female and projected the unity of mind, which took both the male and female perceptions to create a new artistic experience in all its spirit.

**Index Terms** - Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, Feminism, Creative instinct.

Of all the novels of Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway (1925) is one of the most personal books, expressing the feelings, which lie deep in Virginia Woolf's heart. Creativity and madness are the two central themes of the novel, representing the two impulses within Virginia Woolf.

Clarissa Dalloway, the wife of Richard Dalloway, conservative, Member of Parliament, and mother of seventeen-year-old daughter Elizabeth, is the heroine of the novel. She is in her fifties and giving parties is her hobby. The novel celebrates the single day of her party for which in the morning she goes to buy flowers, speaks to her servants about the final arrangements, and entertains for a few moments her former suitor, now elderly, back from India, Peter Walsh, stitches her dress and ruminates on her past, present as well as the meaning of existence. In the novel, there is another set of characters who seems to have no connection with Clarissa's world: Septimus Warren Smith, a victim of the First World War and his wife Lucrezia, a hat maker by trade. Septimus who is shell-shocked is being treated somewhat brutally by Dr. Holmes. On the day of Clarissa's party, he visits Sir William Bradshaw, an eminent psychiatrist, who

recommends that Septimus be taken to his sanatorium. In the late afternoon, as Dr. Holmes comes to take him, Septimus jumps from the window of his room and kills himself. At the end of the novel, Sir William Bradshaw comes to their party Clarissa and apologizes for being late due to Septimus's suicide. This is the only superficial link between Clarissa and Septimus, although at heart they are just like the two sides of the same coin.

The novel is a celebration of life, in general, and of a woman's life, in particular. Virginia Woolf was not a feminist in the sense that she wanted women to have more rights and opportunities, but she was feminist in the sense that she wanted a psychological acceptance, with due reverence, of women and their world, by men. Women because they are women see the world differently from men, but their outlook is equally important and considerable as that of men. The most important thing about Mrs. Dalloway is not her income, her social status or her ideas, but the fact that she is a woman. It is from this that her creativity and her rapport with life precedes. Almost all the novels of Virginia Woolf celebrate the virtues of women and their world and point out the absurdities of men's world, but among them, *Mrs. Dalloway* is the most feminine.

Clarissa loves life. She takes an active perception of the things surrounding her. To enjoy life, one should also be able to create it, just as Clarissa Dalloway does, in creating a world in her drawing-room, in assembling and knowing all sorts of individuals, in giving parties, which were for her 'life'.

Even Peter Walsh accepts 'she enjoyed life immensely' and did well for the sake of goodness. Her enjoyment of life was the touchstone of the goodness in her. "It was her nature to enjoy", he thinks, "there was no bitterness in her; none of that sense of moral virtue which is so repulsive in good women. She enjoyed practically everything. . . . She had a sense of comedy that was exquisite, but she needed people, always people to bring it out" (70-71). And the result of all this was that she spends most of her time giving and receiving parties and talking 'oceans of nonsense'.

But, Clarissa's habit of giving parties, of 'kindling and illuminating', of drawing people together, is something more than a social gift. She is like a creative artist, creating a world of her own wherever she happened to be. Feminine creativity and feminine modes of perception are the basic themes of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Clarissa has "that extraordinary gift, that woman's gift of making a world of her own wherever she happened to be".

Clarissa is creative, fighting a battle against man's world, the world of self-importance and destructive activities, of wars and politics. Her creativity is the creativity of everyday feminine life. Its goal is to establish relationships rather than make monuments. The image of sewing in the novel reflects the invisible ties between people woven by Clarissa.

Clarissa Dalloway has also a strong sense of independence. Peter Walsh had been her companion from childhood and she feels attracted more towards Peter than towards Richard Dalloway, but still, she rejected Peter and married Richard Dalloway, because she feels that, "in marriage little license, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her and she him" (9). This was not possible with Peter. With Peter "everything had to share and everything went into. And it was intolerable . . ." (9). As Clarissa was of assertive temperament, she did not mind sacrificing her love for the sake of independence. Although sometimes she does regret her choice, it is for the first time in the field of the English novel, that we see a woman who has not surrendered before any man and who without any clash, has tactfully maintained her independence. Clarissa loves the privacy of her soul. The mysterious old lady whom Clarissa sees twice through the window performing her lonely domestic works symbolizes the theme of the privacy of the soul which could be destroyed by love (i.e., Peter Walsh) or by religion (i.e.) Miss Kilman). To experience life as a whole one must be left alone. Clarissa's obsessive concern for the privacy of the soul is at once her vice as well as virtue.

She respects her emotions. Her cool nature is a boon for her, as it helps her to preserve her sense of autonomy and self-hood, which is one of the chief concerns of the novel.

Continuously playing with the pocketknife Peter embodies a masculine threat to Clarissa's psychic autonomy, which she cannot endure. On the other hand, Richard's passivity his willingness to honour the gulf between people is endearing to Clarissa. Sleeping in separate rooms and asking almost nothing from one another Clarissa and Richard live a peaceful life undisturbed by passion. In the novel, Clarissa is again and again compared like 'a num withdrawing and her bed sheets 'clean tight stretched'.

If Clarissa can ever be said to be in love passionately, it was with Sally Seton, when they were growing up. This was something new in English fiction, a woman falling in love with another woman, and one of the finest achievements of the novel is the presentation of depth and delicacy of Clarissa's feelings towards her friend Sally Seton. Smoking cigar, running naked down the hall, bicycling around the terrace, Sally exerted an irresistible fascination over Clarissa. Clarissa remembers:

The strange thing, on looking back was the purity, the integrity of her feelings for Sally. It was not like one's feeling for a man. It was completely disinterested, and besides, it had a quality, which could exist only between women, between women, just grown-up (32).

Clarissa still cherishes the memory of a kiss bestowed by Sally on her lips.

Although a social creature, Clarissa also has a perpetual sense of being lonely, alone, amidst crowds and parties. This sense of loneliness is one of the main characteristics of the novels of Virginia Woolf. It conveys a sense of human isolation. The sense of being in an experience is inseparable from being outside of it:

She (Clarissa) sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking. She had a perpetual sense of being out, far out to sea alone, she always had the feeling that it was very dangerous to live even one day (9)."

In the novel, Clarissa appears to be cool snobbish and superficial in social relationships.

The most striking example of this kind of isolated soul is the example of Septimus Warren Smith, a young war victim who commits suicide before Clarissa's party. Although Septimus remains all alone, still he feels some identity with the nature around him, that trees are alive and "leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat fanned it up and down . . ." (22). It is the thing with Clarissa. She also has got the same sense of identification with the universe as that Septimus:

Somehow in the streets of London on the ebb and flow of things here, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home, of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was, part of people she had never met, being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life: herself (10)."

It is in this sphere that Clarissa and Septimus are like two sides of the same coin. They share a oneness of vision, and Clarissa's deep intuitive understanding of Septimus's death shows the extent to which two souls are one. The line "Fear no more the heat of the sun" which passes through the minds of both Clarissa and Septimus shows the wish for suicide in both of them, Clarissa, finding life too shallow, is also tempted toward suicide and which she finds as compelling as Septimus. But her relationship with Richard, however sterile, provides her with a kind of protection and security, which Septimus cannot get from his bewildered wife Lucrezia:

Septimus acts out the instincts suppressed in Clarissa. He represents "the irrational with a drawn tormented side of the serene outgoing heroine".

Septimus's madness is the madness of innocence, brutally violated by a civilization, which cannot understand it, a civilization that sends its young men off to war to be destroyed. During his madness, Dr. Holmes and Dr. Bradshaw wanted to crush the independence of his soul, and to preserve his independence he committed suicide and attended Septimus. Septimus's psyche is nevertheless finer than that possessed by Dr. Holmes and Dr. Bradshaw, who hound him to death. He was the victim of their inadequacies.

The novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is a strong protest against the violence practised by the masculine civilization. It is a strong protest against the use of power in human affairs, i.e., the power of Bradshaw and Holmes on Septimus or the power that resulted in the First World War. In presenting Clarissa as a creative artist, Virginia Woolf gives a critical view of the various kinds of masculine creativity – law-making, soul curing and empire building. The feminine power stands in sharp contrast to the masculine power. The novel shows how women preserve a civilization, which is nearly destroyed by men. There is Lady Bexborough "who opened a bazar . . . with telegram in her hand, John, her favourite killed (in the war)" (6). She shows the heroism of the society, and a willed determination to preserve civilization in face of death. The same thing is done by Clarissa, through her parties and also when hearing about Septimus's death she goes on with it, showing a reaffirmation of life and creativity against chaos and death.

In the novel, Virginia Woolf has sharply contrasted the Prime Minister, the symbol of male authority, with Clarissa Dalloway, who represents feminine power. The Prime Minister is known only by the clothes and car and is capable of exerting his power only up to the externals of life, whereas Clarissa is capable of influencing the inner flux of the people. Virginia Woolf makes an open mockery of the masculine authority when she brings Clarissa and the Prime Minister together in Clarissa's party. On one hand, Clarissa is escorting her Prime Minister, "prancing, sparkling, with the stateliness of her grey hair. She wore earrings and a silver-green mermaid's dress. Lolloping on the waves and braiding her tresses, she seemed, having that gift still, to be, to exist, to sum it all up at the moment as she passed, turned, caught her scarf in some other woman's dress unhitched it, laughed, all with most perfect ease and air of creature floating in its elements"



(154). On the other hand, there is the Prime Minister described as a very ordinary person: "One couldn't laugh at him. He looked so ordinary. You might have stood him behind a counter and bought biscuits - poor chap, all rugged up in gold lace. He tried to look, somebody. It was amusing to watch. Nobody looked at him."(152).

Dr. Holmes, Dr. Bradshaw, Miss Kilman, Lady Bruton and to some extent Peter Walsh, are the followers of the Prime Minister. What they all lack is respect for the privacy of the soul. They can't simply accept the soul without trying to possess it, convert it or impose upon its general rules of love and religion. They always try to change people according to their wishes and will.

As a lover, Peter Walsh had given Clarissa no independence and so as a husband he would have been intolerable. Even his temporary visit to Clarissa, destroys her marriage and domesticity for some time, as reflected through her gesture of hiding her dress "like a virgin protecting chastity." Before Peter's arrival, she was completely absorbed in her life and its surroundings. Peter's sudden appearance has disturbed her independence and so she reasserts herself by calling after him as he leaves, "Remember my party tonight."

Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw are adequate representatives of the mentality which lies behind the wars, quest for empires etc. Bradshaw, instead of curing his patients, makes them his victims and forces them to accept his singular version of health and proportion. There is a close relationship, says Virginia Woolf, between preaching proportion and being a converter. Virginia Woolf identifies this urge to dictate as a spirit of Conversion, "That Goddess whose lust is to override opposition, to stamp indelibly in the sanctuaries of others the image of herself," and that, "the naked defenceless the exhausted the friendless received the impress of Sir Williams's will' (91). He is conversion's right arm "He swooped, he devoured, he shut people up" (91). Even the clocks of Harley Street are seen as a part of the conspiracy of dictators: "Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing (they) nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority" (91).

Even Septimus, in the end, realizes that life is good; it is only people who ruin it. He kills himself forcibly, unwilling to leave life, yet finds no other way to avoid the "human nature . . . the repulsive brute with blood-red nostrils (i.e., Dr. Holmes)". In the end, when Dr. Holmes comes to see him, he feels, that "he did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings" (132). After hearing about Septimus's death Clarissa immediately realizes, that by killing himself Septimus has defied men who make life intolerable and though he had "thrown it away" he has not lost the independence of his soul, which she respected most. She can very well imagine how a man like Sir William Bradshaw - "a great doctor, yet to her obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage -forcing your soul - that was it" (163) - could drive a young man to death.

Miss Kilman also is a worshipper of the Goddess Conversion. Outwardly grateful to Dalloway for the employment they have given her, as a tutor to their daughter Elizabeth, at heart, she feels jealous of Clarissa's richness, beauty, grace and leisure. She envies her femininity and wants to subjugate her in God's name, i.e., Clarissa's beauty is a sign of her triviality whereas her simplicity is clear evidence of her moral ascendancy. But Clarissa is not at all vulnerable. So, Miss Kilman's effort to overcome her is directed into an effort to possess the soul of her daughter. Elizabeth becomes the battleground on which the two women fight - Clarissa to keep her affections and Miss Kilman to lure her into the ways of communion, prayer books and God.

Although Elizabeth goes to Clarissa's Clarissa knows that Miss Kilman's spiritual assaults on her daughter will continue, and this is the thing she can never tolerate she knows that love and religion (as embodied in Peter Walsh and Miss Kilman) always destroy the solemnity of "the privacy of the soul"(113).

In contrast to Miss Kilman, there is Lucrezia, who, although sometimes feels lonely, has some of Mrs. Dalloway's gift of active participation in life. Through her, Septimus is able to revive his power of feeling and can enter into the real-life around him. Septimus watches Lucrezia sewing a hat and becomes absorbed in her activity "she builds it up first one thing then another. She builds it up sewing". This building is an echo of life and sewing is symbolic like Clarissa's sewing i.e., of uniting people.

All the relationships with Clarissa converge at the party, which she gives at the end of the day and the end of the novel. She meets Bradshaw and hears of Septimus's death. She meets Sally and feels that the magic and potential of her youth have deserted her and that now she is Lady Rosseter married to a Manchester mill owner and a mother of five sons. Peter Walsh is struggling with his sense of failure and his overwhelming adoration for Clarissa. We see Clarissa herself playing the role of a perfect hostess: at once a part of the superficial world of Whitbreads and Lady Bruton and others and at the same time removed from them, living in the depths of her soul-unimagined by those on the surface - with the old lady (symbol of privacy) and with the young man who committed suicide to maintain his independence of soul.

Clarissa's parties are something more than a merely social affair. They are, as she says, offerings; attempts made to bring people together from far-off places and establish order and communication in place of chaos and indifference. Virginia Woolf writes:

She felt quite continuously a sense of their existence (people) and felt what a waste, and she felt what a pity and she felt if only they could be brought together; so, she did it (i.e., gave parties). And it was an offering to combine, to create, but to whom? An offering for the sake of offering perhaps. Anyhow it was her gift (109).

She does all this for the sake of life, and whatever may be her defects - snobberies, coldness, prudery, timidity - they appear insignificant in front of her extraordinary gift of responding to everything around her.

The last lines of the novel, 'For there she was,' suggest the full metaphoric weight of Clarissa's presence throughout the novel. Clarissa is the centre of the novel not because of any intensity in her love for others, but as the focus of their warmth, even her servants are anxious to get a kind word from her. Richard, her husband considers his good fortune in being married to her. Even Peter Walsh, whom she had rejected years before, returns with the same intensity of feelings for her. Almost everyone in the novel loves Clarissa. Thus, we see that the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is a celebration of life and creativity and also of Virginia Woolf's feminism. "Women sew, weave, kindle, create, create possibilities of emergence, possibilities of love, possibilities of seeing 'life' as it is, moments of vision which they as women can offer to a world in which everything seems in a state of disintegration," hence they are far more admirable and respectable than men. Instead of being antagonistic towards each other, women and men should live in peace to achieve integrity, which is indeed the real perception of Woolf's feminism.

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