



THE FRAGMENTED SELF: A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF CLARISSA DALLOWAY

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Abstract: This paper explores the fragmented self of Clarissa Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* from a psychological perspective. Clarissa appears confident and socially successful, yet her inner thoughts reveal loneliness, doubt, and emotional conflict. The study examines how her memories, personal choices, and social responsibilities influence the way she understands herself. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness style allows readers to follow Clarissa's thoughts as they move between the present and the past, showing that identity is shaped by both experience and memory. The paper also considers how the expectations placed on women affect Clarissa's sense of self and create a gap between her public image and private feelings. Rather than presenting her as a weak or troubled character, Woolf portrays Clarissa as someone trying to find meaning in everyday life while carrying the weight of her past. The study shows that her divided sense of self reflects the emotional struggles of modern human life.

Index Terms - Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa Dalloway, Fragmented Self, Psychology, Identity, Memory, Modernism, Selfhood.

INTRODUCTION

The exploration of identity has long been a focal point in literary studies, shedding light on the intricate interplay between the individual and the social, cultural, and psychological influences that shape human experience. Particularly within modernist literature, there is a heightened awareness of the self's instability in the wake of rapid societal change, industrialization, and the psychological uncertainties prevalent in the early twentieth century. Instead of portraying identity as a stable or cohesive entity, modernist authors illustrate it as fluid, fragmented, and continuously shaped through memory, consciousness, and relationships with others. In this intellectual and historical framework, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* stands out as one of the most important literary investigations into human consciousness and the delicate nature of personal identity.

Released in 1925, *Mrs Dalloway* utilizes the stream-of-consciousness technique to explore the internal experiences of its characters, especially Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. Their thoughts, recollections, and emotional struggles highlight the conflicts between personal identity and societal pressures. Clarissa's endeavor to reconcile her past decisions with her current social position, alongside Septimus's mental breakdown after World War I, prompts significant inquiries into the development, maintenance, and fragmentation of the self. Woolf's storytelling implies that identity is neither fixed nor one-dimensional but is perpetually influenced by memory, gender, social norms, trauma, and interpersonal connections.

While Mrs Dalloway has been extensively analyzed through feminist, modernist, and psychoanalytic lenses, the issue of identity crisis has not received as much focus in psychological discussions. This research investigates how Virginia Woolf depicts identity crisis through the psychological journeys of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, highlighting the influence of memory, trauma, societal expectations, and internal conflict. By employing qualitative textual analysis guided by psychological literary criticism and close reading techniques, the paper delves into the fragmented essence of selfhood. It contends that Woolf illustrates identity as a fluid and precarious process influenced by both personal consciousness and external social dynamics.

OBJECTIVE

The main aim of this research is to investigate the depiction of identity crisis in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* from a psychological standpoint. It seeks to delve into how Woolf illustrates the disjointed sense of self felt by her characters, especially Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, as they react to memory, trauma, societal expectations, and personal struggles. The research also intends to examine the connection between individual awareness and external societal influences in the development of identity. By utilizing psychological literary analysis and detailed text examination, this paper explores the ways in which Woolf represents identity as a fluid and developing concept instead of a static condition. Ultimately, the study aims to show that *Mrs Dalloway* provides a deep psychological investigation of the modern individual, highlighting how internal conflicts and social constructs shape the sense of self.

The study explores how personal awareness and societal influences interact to form identity, using psychological literary criticism and close textual analysis to examine Woolf's portrayal of identity as fluid and changing, not static. Ultimately, the research seeks to show that *Mrs. Dalloway* deeply investigates the modern individual's psyche, illustrating how internal conflicts and societal factors lead to identity crises.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* has been widely studied for its portrayal of the human mind and the complexities of personal identity. Many scholars have noted that the novel shifts attention from external events to the inner lives of its characters, making it one of the most important works of modern English literature.

- Erich Auerbach (1953), in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, explains that Woolf's narrative style moves away from traditional storytelling by presenting reality through the continuous flow of a character's thoughts and memories. This approach helps readers understand Clarissa Dalloway's inner world rather than simply observing her actions.
- Jean Guiguet (1965) argues that Woolf's novels focus on moments of self-discovery rather than dramatic events. According to him, Clarissa's memories and reflections reveal a personality that is constantly changing, suggesting that identity is shaped by experience rather than remaining fixed throughout life.
- Hermione Lee (1996) observes that Clarissa lives between two worlds: the public role she performs as a wife and hostess and the private thoughts that she rarely shares with others. Lee points out that Woolf presents this difference with great sensitivity, allowing readers to see the emotional depth behind Clarissa's outward confidence.
- Elaine Showalter (1977) examines Woolf's work from a feminist perspective and argues that women in early twentieth-century society often struggled to balance personal identity with social expectations. Her ideas help explain why Clarissa sometimes feels limited by the role that society expects her to perform.

Existing studies have explored Woolf's narrative style, memory, gender, and identity from different perspectives. However, there is still room to examine how these elements come together to present Clarissa's fragmented sense of self through a psychological reading. This study builds on earlier

scholarship by focusing on the relationship between memory, emotions, and social expectations in shaping Clarissa Dalloway's identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative research method to examine the fragmented self of Clarissa Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. The research is based on close reading of the novel and focuses on Clarissa's thoughts, memories, emotions, relationships, and everyday experiences. The aim is to understand how these aspects shape her identity and reveal the gap between her public life and private self.

- **Primary Source:** The primary source for this study is Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). The novel serves as the main text for analysing Clarissa Dalloway's character, her inner thoughts, memories, and emotional conflicts. Important passages from the novel are closely examined to understand how Woolf presents the idea of a fragmented self.
- **Secondary Sources:** The secondary sources include books, peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and published research on Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, psychology in literature, identity, memory, and women's experiences in modern society. These sources help place the study within existing scholarship and support the interpretation of the primary text.
- **Comparative Study:** The research also uses a comparative approach where necessary. Clarissa Dalloway's experiences are compared with those of Septimus Warren Smith to understand how Woolf presents different forms of inner conflict. While Clarissa's struggles remain hidden behind her social life, Septimus's psychological suffering is more visible. This comparison helps explain the different ways individuals respond to personal and social pressures. The study also compares Clarissa's public identity with her private thoughts to highlight the contrast between appearance and reality.
- **Relevance to Contemporary Issues:** Although *Mrs Dalloway* was published in 1925, many of its concerns remain relevant today. Questions of identity, emotional well-being, loneliness, social expectations, and the pressure to maintain a public image continue to affect people's lives. Clarissa's search for meaning and her struggle to balance personal feelings with social responsibilities reflect experiences that many individuals still face. The novel encourages readers to think about the importance of emotional health, self-understanding, and the hidden struggles that often remain unnoticed.

By combining textual analysis with insights from previous studies and a comparative reading of the novel, this methodology provides a clear framework for examining Clarissa Dalloway's fragmented self from a psychological perspective. It also shows why Woolf's portrayal of human experience continues to be meaningful in the present day.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF CLARISSA'S FRAGMENTED SELF (BODY)

1. Public identity vs. inner self

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf presents Clarissa Dalloway as the ideal hostess whose public identity is shaped by social expectations. The evening party becomes a symbol of her ability to bring people together and maintain social harmony. To society, Clarissa appears graceful, confident, and fulfilled in her role as Richard Dalloway's wife and a respected member of the upper class. Her outward composure reflects the image expected of women of her social position.

Despite her confident public image, Clarissa's inner consciousness reveals a different reality. Through the stream-of-consciousness technique, Woolf exposes her feelings of loneliness, uncertainty, and emotional dissatisfaction. While she performs her social duties with ease, her mind frequently returns to memories, personal regrets, and reflections on ageing and death. This contrast between external appearance and inner experience highlights the fragmentation of her identity. Clarissa's public self fulfils society's expectations, whereas her inner self continues to question the meaning of her choices and the authenticity of her life.

Woolf thus suggests that an individual's true identity lies not in outward performance but in the private world of consciousness.

2. Memory and the Formation of Self

Clarissa's fragmented self is largely shaped by her memories of Bourton, where she experienced emotional freedom and a stronger sense of individuality. These memories interrupt her present life, revealing that her identity is divided between the self she once imagined and the self she has become. Woolf portrays memory as a psychological force that prevents Clarissa's identity from remaining fixed, allowing different versions of herself to coexist within her consciousness.

Clarissa's memories of Peter Walsh and Sally Seton expose the emotional dimensions of her fragmented identity. Peter represents the possibility of a life driven by passion and emotional spontaneity, while Sally symbolizes freedom, intimacy, and self-expression. Although Clarissa chooses a socially secure life with Richard Dalloway, these memories continue to influence her inner consciousness. Their persistent presence suggests that the identities associated with Peter and Sally remain psychologically alive, contributing to the division between her public self and her inner desires.

Throughout *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf presents memory as a dynamic process that continually reconstructs Clarissa's sense of self. The past repeatedly enters her present consciousness, blurring the boundaries between past and present identities. As a result, Clarissa's self is not unified but fragmented, shaped by conflicting memories, unrealised possibilities, and present responsibilities. Woolf thus suggests that personal identity is a fluid psychological construct, constantly redefined through the interaction of memory and lived experience.

3. Gender, Marriage, and Psychological Conflict

Clarissa's marriage to Richard Dalloway reflects the psychological conflict between personal fulfilment and social security. Although Richard offers stability, respectability, and affection, their relationship lacks emotional openness. Clarissa values the independence that her marriage provides, yet she remains conscious of the emotional distance between them. This conflict contributes to her fragmented self, as her outward role as a contented wife contrasts with her unspoken emotional needs.

Woolf portrays Clarissa as a woman shaped by the rigid expectations of early twentieth-century English society. As the wife of a politician, she is expected to embody grace, dignity, and social refinement while placing the needs of others before her own. These expectations encourage Clarissa to define herself through her social role rather than her individual identity. Consequently, her public self is largely constructed by societal ideals, while her inner self struggles to preserve its emotional and personal autonomy.

Clarissa's inability to express her deepest emotions intensifies her psychological fragmentation. Feelings associated with love, desire, regret, and dissatisfaction remain confined to her private consciousness instead of being openly communicated. This emotional repression creates a widening gap between her external behaviour and inner experience. Woolf suggests that when individuality is constrained by social conventions and emotional restraint, the self becomes divided. Clarissa's fragmented identity, therefore, emerges not from external conflict alone but from the continuous suppression of her authentic emotional self.

4. Mortality and Self-Realization

Clarissa's Fear of Ageing and Death Clarissa's awareness of ageing and mortality deepens her fragmented sense of self. As she reflects on the passing of youth and the inevitability of death, she becomes increasingly conscious of the gap between her outward social identity and her inner existence. These reflections reveal an identity marked by uncertainty rather than completeness, exposing the psychological fragmentation beneath her composed exterior.

Septimus's Suicide as a Psychological Mirror Although Clarissa never meets Septimus Warren Smith, his suicide functions as a psychological mirror to her inner conflicts. His death forces her to confront questions of individuality, isolation, and the value of life. Clarissa recognises in Septimus a resistance to the pressures of society that she herself has silently experienced, making his death a catalyst for her own psychological reflection.

Clarissa's Final Moment of Self-Awareness By the end of the novel, Clarissa achieves a deeper understanding of her fragmented identity. Instead of denying the contradictions within herself, she acknowledges the coexistence of her public role and private consciousness. This moment of self-awareness does not resolve her inner conflicts; rather, it reflects Woolf's view that identity is complex, fluid, and continually shaped by memory, emotion, and the awareness of mortality.

FINDINGS

The study finds that Clarissa Dalloway's identity is psychologically fragmented due to the continuous conflict between her public role and private consciousness. Although she appears socially accomplished as a wife and hostess, her inner reflections reveal emotional isolation, self-doubt, and an unresolved search for personal authenticity.

The analysis further demonstrates that memory functions as a significant psychological force in the construction of Clarissa's identity. Her recollections of Bourton, Peter Walsh, and Sally Seton preserve alternative versions of the self, allowing past experiences to remain active within her present consciousness. Consequently, her identity is shown to be fluid rather than fixed.

The study also reveals that marriage and gendered social expectations contribute to Clarissa's psychological fragmentation. While marriage provides social stability and respectability, it also demands emotional restraint and conformity, limiting the expression of her individual desires. The tension between social responsibility and personal identity deepens her inner conflict.

Finally, the research finds that Clarissa's confrontation with mortality, particularly through her response to Septimus Warren Smith's suicide, leads to a heightened awareness of her own fragmented existence. Rather than resolving her internal contradictions, this moment enables her to recognise the coexistence of multiple dimensions of the self. Thus, Mrs Dalloway presents identity as a dynamic psychological process shaped by memory, social expectations, emotional experience, and the consciousness of mortality.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the psychological dimensions of Clarissa Dalloway's fragmented self through an analysis of her public identity, memory, gendered experiences, marriage, and confrontation with mortality in Mrs Dalloway. The analysis demonstrates that Clarissa's identity is not presented as a unified or stable entity but as a complex psychological construct shaped by conflicting emotions, personal memories, and social expectations. Virginia Woolf's use of interior consciousness reveals the tension between Clarissa's outward role as an accomplished hostess and her private emotional world, highlighting the coexistence of multiple and often contradictory aspects of the self.

The study further establishes that memory is central to the formation of Clarissa's identity. Her recollections of Bourton, Peter Walsh, and Sally Seton continually reshape her understanding of herself, suggesting that identity evolves through the interaction of past experiences and present realities. Likewise, the analysis of her marriage and the social expectations imposed upon women demonstrates that external roles often require emotional restraint, contributing to the fragmentation of individuality. Clarissa's response to Septimus Warren Smith's suicide further deepens this psychological exploration by prompting a profound awareness of life, death, and the fragile nature of human existence.

Overall, the study concludes that Mrs Dalloway presents the fragmented self not as a sign of psychological weakness but as an inherent condition of modern human consciousness. Through Clarissa Dalloway, Woolf portrays identity as fluid, multilayered, and continuously negotiated between private consciousness and social reality. The research therefore affirms that Clarissa's fragmented self serves as a powerful

representation of the psychological complexities of modern existence, demonstrating Woolf's enduring contribution to the literary exploration of identity and the human mind.

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