



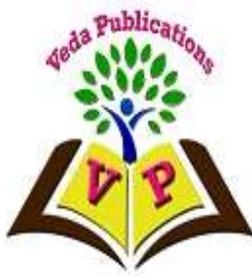
FEMALE SENSIBILITY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *Mrs. DALLOWAY*

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ABSTRACT



At the dawn of British literature, especially from the time of Chaucer, male writers fabricate and seize the canon of literature. As they write their works from the perspectives of male viewpoints, the image of women is found in a very derogatory condition. In their works, all main incidents take place around the male protagonist; contrary to that, voices and feelings of the women are suppressed and marginalized. They are also provided a very minor role only to fulfill the criteria of a story. Women are not allowed to choose writings as their profession and to take participant in the public places like market, pub or park. But these marooned images of women get revamped in the beginning of the twentieth century, and are solidified at the middle of that age by the hands of some female figures, especially by Virginia Woolf, Simone De Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Helene Cixous etc. At that time female sensibility gets upper hand position, and they start to find their own voice and definite cultural identity in the society. The main focus of this paper is to show how female characters are able to find their definite self, voice and cultural identity in the social arena, and how female sensibility gets due importance in Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs Dalloway".

Keywords: *Male Viewpoints, Derogatory Female Image, Female Sensibility, Cultural Identity, Definite Voice etc.*

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From political movement to the social and representative movement, women in the modern world are able to wield the definite position and self in society. "Contrary to the Victorian Age when women were considered as the caretaker, in the modern age women raised their voices against the gender discrimination and got right of franchise in 1918. Emergence of feminist movement and its advancement from liberal feminism to radical feminism revamps the outlook of women from social equality to sexual equality that ultimately results in separatist or lesbianism" (Sattar 226). As they were marginalized and suppressed in the Victorian and previous ages, they "fail to find the proper picture and voice in the canon of literature as that time men tended to serve as the writers. At that time it was considered as the negation of moral codes and degradation of their respite if women had chosen writings as their profession" (Sattar 226). So they wrote and read privately at home, and published their works taking names of male writers. If a woman writer wanted to publish her works by her real name, it was refuted considering as inferior and unworthy to publish. But in the modern age, women start to attend schools, and continue their education at the universities. They find ground in public spheres; attend in the public places like market and party. With the emergence of feminist movement in the first half of the twentieth century that solidifies at the middle half of that century, cultural identity and position of women are completely changed as they themselves start to seize the rudder of the canonical texts. Virginia Woolf, the mouthpiece of feminist movement and woman empowerment uplifts the voice of the voiceless characters in her famous novel "Mrs Dalloway".

At the dawn of British literature, especially from the time of Chaucer, male writers fabricate and seize the canon of literature. In their writings, male characters are presented with superior position and mentality, contrary images are found with the case of women who are presented with marginalized position in terms of social rank and economic condition. At that time, the titles of the books are designed by the names of the male protagonists, not by the female protagonists or heroines. This trend is changed at the hand of Virginia Woolf, a radical

female writer. Contrary to the norms of western society, in her novel "Mrs Dalloway", women are presented with the superior position, so its title is designed by the name of the female protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, not by any male character. The marginalized voices and feelings of most marginalized characters are given due importance throughout the novel. Here Woolf presents Clarissa by giving the role of the main protagonist as all the incidents take place around her. In the beginning of the novel, Virginia Woolf presents Mrs Dalloway as the reminiscent character brooding over her past incidents. The thought of Peter Walsh, her fiery suitor takes a continuous flow in her conscious mind that she has rejected for Richard Dalloway. To her, Richard is the suitable person for her personality as he allows her to lead her own life independently. The thought of her other friends like Sally Seton, and Hugh Whitebread is a fresh image in her mind.

All the women characters like "Lady Bradshaw, Sally Seton, Miss Parry, Lady Bruton and Clarissa all inhabit a world of privilege, nurtured by a highly organized patriarchal social system" (Ronchetti 49). They frequently attend in the party for social interaction, participate in group discussion, go to the public places like park and market, smoke cigarette, and drink alcohol.

The representation of same sex love or lesbianism represents Woolf's female sensibility and the extreme form of feminism or women empowerment. Contrary to the social norms in which generally the heterosexual love is accepted, and is considered standard code of behaviour, here Woolf exhibits the homosexual relationship. The true self of Clarissa Dalloway is exposed in the lesbian act with her childhood friend, Sally Seton, a brave and scandalous woman. "The relationship between Sally Seton and Clarissa Dalloway exemplifies the romantic friendships between women that were thriving at the turn of the century" (Barrett 147). It is their romantic relationship that provides full expression of female sensibility that firmly ascertains their cultural identity in the society. "From their first meeting, Clarissa is charmed by the beauty of Sally Seton. After sometime they kiss each other, the moment which Clarissa considers the best time of her life. They take into consideration the concurrent problems



regarding women and women rights in their discussion. They also discuss heterosexual marriage is a 'catastrophe' for women as it jeopardized the individual identity and liberty of women. It sometimes leads to the submersion in deep sea of woe and suffering for both men and women that ultimately results in breakdown of marital relationship or even death" (Sattar 229). Other character like Doris Kilman finds the extreme form of happiness with the company of Elizabeth, daughter of Mrs. Dalloway.

Contrary to the patriarchal norms, when man is provided the right to choose his suitor, here Clarissa has chosen her best suitor i.e. Richard Dalloway to get carefree life, respite, dignity and self. To Clarissa, in married life, there must be the right of freedom or independence. A woman may share everything to her husband or may not share. It must be depended on the individual. But Peter Walsh demands to share everything from Clarissa. For this behaviour of Peter, Clarissa has left Peter and married to Richard who will allow her the full independence. "For in marriage a little licence, 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 ...But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything had to be gone into. And it was intolerable ..." (11-12).

Party, a social network of interaction of different kind of people including man and woman, people of different professions and children is a main tool for Clarissa Dalloway to expose her inner feelings and to establish her cultural identity as a woman, not confined within a four walls where women are generally considered as an object and as caretaker. "Her party will, for a few hours, erase the borders between rooms, between public and private, between the subclasses of the London elite" (Fernald 102). It is the party which enables Clarissa to find her own self and voice. "That she continues to give parties to bolster her own sense of self, however, bespeaks a profound dissatisfaction with herself; a feeling so deeply rooted that she wishes to be someone other than Clarissa Dalloway" (Leasker 88).

"She would have been, like Lady Bexborough, slow and stately; rather large; interested in politics like a man; with a

country house; very dignified, very sincere" (14)

Like Clarissa, Doris Kilman finds her own room with the company of women, so she spends most of the time with Elizabeth. She is so attached to Elizabeth that she develops a kind of lesbian feelings towards Elizabeth. At the luncheon, Doris Kilman wishes to have an eternal companion with her, and at this moment she desires to die to make the moment permanent.

She was about to split asunder, she felt. The agony was so terrific. If she could grasp her, if she could clasp her, if she could make her hers absolutely and forever and then die; that was all she wanted. But to sit here, unable to think of anything to say; to see Elizabeth turning against her; to be felt repulsive even by her--it was too much; she could not stand it. The thick fingers curled inwards. (142)

The company of Elizabeth gives an eternal happiness to Doris Kilman, so she never wishes to separate from Elizabeth. At her companion, she finds everything in an equilibrium condition and in a delight mood, on the contrary, separation from her makes her life gloomy and remorseful. She develops a sense of failure when Elizabeth leaves her. She thinks it will be triumph for Clarissa, but to her, it is utter failure. So at the time of Elizabeth's departure, she wants to grasp her completely and to play with her beauty permanently. At Elizabeth's departure she says: "She had gone. Mrs. Dalloway had triumphed. Elizabeth had gone. Beauty had gone, youth had gone" (143).

At first, the cultural identity and sensibility of Elizabeth was in vague, though she was at that time seventeen years old. But during the course of the novel, she succeeds to develop her own self and voice. Though she was a young girl of seventeen years old "In many ways, her mother felt, she was extremely immature, like a child still, attached to dolls, to old slippers; a perfect baby; and that was charming" (148). On account of that she was not allowed to go any public place alone. Before the evening of party, Elizabeth takes the company of Doris Kilman for Army and Navy stores. On her return, she alone "boarded the omnibus, in front of



everybody. She took a seat on top. The impetuous creature--a pirate--started forward, sprang away; she had to hold the rail to steady herself, for a pirate it was, reckless, unscrupulous, bearing down ruthlessly, circumventing dangerously, boldly snatching a passenger, or ignoring a passenger, squeezing eel-like and arrogant in between, and then rushing insolently all sails spread up Whitehall" (145-46). At that moment, she feels the eternal bliss of carefree life in the crowded places. She enjoys all the small things including fresh and open air. It is the first time of her time she is enjoying her individuality and full liberty. At that time she is in intoxication of happiness, so she forgets the world and all the things beside her except the thought of her mother that turns her back down the strand. She was a child to her mother, but to her father she was someone alien, as in the party he fails to recognize his own daughter.

For her father had been looking at her, as he stood talking to the Bradshaws, and he had thought to himself, Who is that lovely girl? And suddenly he realised that it was his Elizabeth. (206-7)

So at the beginning of the novel, the identity of Elizabeth was invisible and was in vague. Her true identity was unknown to her mother who merely considered her a baby, and her physical existence was invisible to her father. But at the end of the novel, she succeeds to establish her true cultural identity, individual existence and voice.

Thus, through this novel, first, the identity of Virginia Woolf is established as a well-known novelist of the first half of the twentieth century, and is also an important figure in the feminist movement. Frank treatment of sex is new thing in the modern age, and the writers deal with this theme quite openly. In this novel, Virginia Woolf treats not only the theme of sex, but very explicitly exposes the lesbian relationship that was forbidden and considered unethical in the Victorian age. Here female characters like Clarissa Dalloway, Sally Seton, Doris Kilman, Elizabeth, Lucrezia and Lady Bruton are presented with upper hand position and all the main events take place around them. On the other hand, male figures like Richard Dalloway, Peter Walsh, Septimus, and Hugh Whitbread are presented with minor and pliable role. Throughout the novel, female

figures dominate the scene and intrude in all events taking place around male figures. Here sensibility of women is given due importance, and by that they succeed to establish their own cultural identity and find voices in all public places. They participate in various public places like party, market, park, and also smoke cigarette, and drink alcohol. The heterosexual relationship, the sign of patriarchy is proved as failure, but the women find their self and voice in homo-community and in homosexuality.

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