



## A Feminist Reading of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

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### Abstract

Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) primarily focuses on Clarissa Dalloway's multifaceted identity. In this study I intend to shed more light on the problem of subjectivity from a feminist perspective. The present study draws on Woolf's own understanding regarding the formation of identity as well as Simone de Beauvoir's, Judith Butler's and Susan Bordo's to locate Clarissa's feminine qualities and resistance in the novel. All the above mentioned figures believe in the constructivity of identity formation: that Clarissa's identity, far from being given in advance for her to step into, emerge over time through discursive and other social practices; her identity is inflected and constructed by ideologies of gender and other social constructs. These interactions between language and gender on the one hand, and feminist theory on the other, are of tremendous significance in this study. The present study challenges the essentialist notion that identities in general, and gender identities in particular, are inevitable, natural and fixed. Clarissa's identity needs to be constructed socially through language, but this very language is patriarchal and, therefore, marginalises feminine identity. I conclude that Clarissa Dalloway, as a social being, is not able to achieve a stable and unified position as a subject and her struggles are frustrated and ultimately lead to defeat of constructing a unified subjectivity.

**Keywords:** androcentric assumptions, identity creation, multifaceted and labyrinthine self, psychic disposition

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to perform a thorough examination of one of the most memorable characters in twentieth century fiction: Clarissa Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). It aims at exploring Clarissa's multifaceted and labyrinthine self from a feminist perspective. It dissects Clarissa Dalloway's often contradictory temperaments, and the whole process of her psychic disposition to conclude that she is not able to achieve a stable and fixed notion of identity. But before delving into Clarissa's subjectivity, a short summary is necessary, here provided by Laurie Lanzen Harris (1990):

What plot exists revolves around Clarissa Dalloway's day preparation for an important dinner party, which will include England's Prime Minister...She remembers her girlhood and a young lover whom she rejected, and she meets an old friend who will be attending the party and who flatters her and makes her feel young again; this causes more musing about her youthful suitor, Peter Walsh. Her thoughts are fragmented as she walks; they include what she is now and what she might have been, anxiety about her young daughter and her future, and thoughts about a limousine which, obviously carrying a member of royal family, has impact on her and everyone who views it... When Dr. Bradshaw appears late [at Clarissa's party] because of Septimus's death, she is torn between pity for a young dead man and rage that his action casts a pall on her happiness. In a solitary internal monologue, we can sense her responses to both the terror and beauty of life, with death as its natural ending (450-1).

### Discussion

#### Social constructionism and the dismantling of androcentric assumptions

Because language is the most commonly recognised of all those signifying practices which try to ensure that we grow up fully socialised, there is a *prima facie* case for supposing that it encodes androcentric attitudes in an androcentric society. If so, then language itself is complicit in the oppression of women (Ruthven 59).

Woolf, as a female writer, desired that a woman should write as a woman, and ask herself, "Who am I?" Woolf always sought for "a rational, coherent, essential self, which can speak and know itself" (Waugh 10). On the other hand, many women writers believe that if they wished to represent themselves as they are, they would



encounter inevitable alienation since they have lived in a patriarchal society in which women are only others, and it would be difficult for them to assume a position different from the historically determined one for women. But then again, Woolf believed that differentiation does not necessarily lead to separateness and alienation from others; instead, it can be used as a basis for a better relationship. Some twentieth century female writers, including Woolf, have sought a different conception of subjectivity, or the self in relationship, instead of avoiding communication and relationships altogether.

Woolf's general contribution to feminism is her groundbreaking notion that "gender identity is socially constructed and can be challenged and transformed" (Selden and Widdowson 207). Her major preoccupation in her fiction was the conception of the subject constructed through relationships. Her depiction of female characters completely reveals this conception of the subject. Her major female protagonists, like Clarissa, are dependent on others for self-definition—and as such, solitude denies them self-recognition. Therefore, the *I* in Woolf's fiction is always depicted in relation to the other and the interminable, and interwoven interactions of *I/you* or *self/other* are primarily responsible for constructing the socio-cultural identity of self.

Beside Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir is also associated with the continuum of social constructionism. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir explains her vantage point on the social constructionist critique of essentialism, which emphasises female nature or essence: women are essentially (naturally) different from men:

One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine (qtd. in Waugh 9).

Beauvoir adds that throughout history, women have been reduced to objects for men. Because men have imagined women as the 'other', women have been deprived of subjectivity. In this remark, she echoes Woolf's statement in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that women serve "as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (qtd. in Leitch et al. 1404). In this way, Woolf advances the notion that women "collude in their own domestic and professional victimisation by acting as a 'looking glass' for the reflecting back to men of their desired image" (Selden and Widdowson 207).

Clarissa, being a feminine protagonist, epitomises feminism's feminine resistance. But what are the resources available to her to oppose, to undo, to dismantle and, if possible, to transcend androcentric and patriarchal assumptions? Clarissa's first act of resistance can be seen in her rejection of Peter Walsh, who was passionately in love with her. Here, Clarissa kills her passionate self in order not to be enslaved by Peter. Peter's portrait of Clarissa is what feminists would call negative representation or negative stereotyping of women. He calls her "cold, heartless, a prude" (*Mrs Dalloway* 6): "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). She is also described as "timid", "hard," "arrogant", "prudish" and "the death of the soul" (44); "devilish" and being characterised by a "coldness" and "woodenness," (45); "iron," "flint," "rigid up to the backbone" (48); and "cold as an icicle" (60). Phallogocentric or patriarchal society, such as the society in which Clarissa lives, consciously or unconsciously tends to assume and advance a view of the masculine as natural source of power and authority, and of the feminine as the natural opposite. Thus man is presence, and the woman absence.

Qualities such as reason and activity are associated with masculinity, whereas emotion and passivity are aligned with femininity. Furthermore, patriarchal culture values those qualities associated with masculinity over those with femininity; therefore, empowered men use their positions of power to subordinate women. And that is what Peter does; and Clarissa resists. She moves away from those mentioned feminine attributes towards masculine qualities. She dresses herself in borrowed attire, a robe to appear in disguise to find a subject position in a hostile androcentric society. Consequently, Clarissa kills her passionate self; Peter finds her impenetrable and unyielding, and takes this as a sign of her "indomitable egoism" and feminine resistance. She aims at dismantling phallogocentric hierarchisation. She moves from dependence towards independence by rejecting Peter whom she loves greatly.

For in marriage a little license, a little dependence 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 gone into. And it was intolerable (6).



These words are Clarissa's overt and explicit declaration of independence, which is gained at a cost. Although Clarissa obtains "a little independence," she never experiences full subjectivity; because those marginalised by the dominant culture—for reasons of gender, social class, race, belief, physicality, etc.—may never experience a sense of full subjectivity as constructed through impersonal and social relations of power. Clarissa struggles to disrupt traditional boundaries between masculine and feminine, and the dominant and the marginal, in order to construct an identity out of the recognition that women need to discover, and must fight for: a sense of unified selfhood, or a coherent and unified feminine subject, which has hitherto been denied them by the dominant culture.

Peter, along with Dr. Holmes, Sir William Bradshaw and Richard Dalloway, are all embodiments of patriarchy. Throughout the novel, Peter is seen with his pocket-knife—a masculine image—and Clarissa with needle and scissors which are feminine images. "Peter Walsh, in fact, is thus perceived as a 'liberal' version of those forces of patriarchy which are revealed so monstrously and paradigmatically in the characters of Holmes and Bradshaw...he [Peter] is identified with the image of a knife" (Waugh 118). Throwing incessant parties in spite of Peter's and Richard's harsh critique of them, is very solid evidence of Clarissa's second act of resistance in encountering the alienating forces of patriarchal society. Peter and Richard, and by extension patriarchal society, plot to drive Clarissa to the attic like a madwoman to alienate her.

But Woolf's social constructionist stance argues that things in the world—selves, texts, bodies, behaviours—are the products of ongoing social progress of interactions, and thus do not have fixed or inherent meanings. Entities are always dynamic, always in process; their identities change over time as they establish new relations with various other elements in the social scene. So in lieu of succumbing to a set of fixed negative representation or stereotyping, such as her being an "angel in the house," Clarissa trespasses and goes far beyond those prescribed positions for women. Her frequent allusions back to literary figures like Shakespeare, Huxley, Tyndall, Plato, Morris, Shelley, and rumination and contemplations over love, religion, etc., ranks her with educated men. She always tries to eliminate the yawning and unbridgeable gap between herself and patriarchal society.

To this end, she appears as a 'perfect hostess' in her parties. She masks her real self with being a 'real hostess'; because her selfhood is defined only through relations to others. Parties are Clarissa's unending quest to form a community. In a given community, the self is a social self, which is rooted in relationships. Worded differently, feminine models of subjectivity and selfhood, which emphasise the crucial significance of relations and communication between different subjects, differ tremendously from masculine models. Without her social mask, Clarissa is nobody, a woman with no distinct identity. Whatever she does, even her feminine resistance, is aimed at preserving that illusory social identity—which is illusory insofar as it is dependent on other people's attitudes and responses.

She occupies the position of a 'real hostess' who "did things not simply, not for themselves; but to make people think this or that" (*Mrs Dalloway* 8). She is doing everything for the sake of people, for social success. Woolf argues that identification happens in the realm of communication and relationship; if so, Clarissa is right in her struggle to keep this relationship tight, because it would "make her feel quite sick to know that it was all going wrong, all falling flat. Anything, any explosion, any horror was better than people wandering aimlessly..." (122).

Because of the fact that she extracts her subjectivity out of these parties and relationships, "she did think it mattered, her party" (122). For this very reason, if it goes otherwise, it is natural to make her feel 'sick'. Her whole identity and social success entirely depends on her parties. Although Clarissa confesses that "she needed people, always people," (58), her relationships are frustrated and blocked; they do not lead to identification. The excruciating confession on the day of the party for Clarissa was that "now, at the age of fifty-three, one scarcely needed people anymore" (59). So Clarissa's community and communality fails. The acceptance of the sublimity of death through identification with Septimus can be the evidence of Clarissa's ultimate resistance in relation to phallogocentric and androcentric assumptions. 'Death as embrace' moves Clarissa away from patriarchal values. At the end of the party, Clarissa is oscillating between the social world of her party, and her own alienating solitude. She is now extremely divided and fragmentary. Elaine Showalter notes that "Woolf's female aesthetic is an extension of her view of women's social role: receptivity to the point of self-destruction, creative synthesis to the point of exhaustion and sterility. The ultimate room of one's own is the grave" (qtd. in Waugh 121).

### **The body as a text of culture**

What is feminine in Clarissa Dalloway? It is hard to say for sure. As Judith Butler states, she is a masculine female. Butler refuses to accept the commonly held assumption that sex, gender and sexuality exist in relation to



each other; for example, if one is biologically female, she is expected to show feminine traits. In lieu of this, Butler claims that gender is ‘unnatural’, so that there is no necessary relationship between one’s body and one’s gender. Or as Stoller (1968) puts it:

Gender identity starts with the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not the other, though as one develops, gender identity becomes much more complicated, so that, for example, one may sense himself as not only a male but a masculine man or an effeminate man or even as a man who fantasies being a woman (qtd. in Glover and Kaplan XXI).

If so, it is possible for one to have a female body, and not to display feminine traits. Put simply, one can be a masculine female or conversely, a feminine male. Clarissa’s female body has nothing to do with her masculine gender; gender is a socially constructed identity which is distinguished from sex, the biological designation of male or female. This can be seen as following from the same line of thought found in Woolf and De Beauvoir’s social constructionism from the viewpoint of gendered identity and the body.

How then is Clarissa’s body represented? As noted above, Peter Walsh describes Clarissa as having masculine traits such as being “cold” and “heartless,” and he repeatedly refers to Clarissa’s ‘coldness’ and ‘woodenness’ throughout the novel. Although these descriptions are heavily influenced and shaded by Peter’s patriarchal views, it seems that these masculine representations to some extent holds true. To quote Susan Bordo, the body is a text of culture. Clarissa is aware of the oppression of women, and as a result, attains those available resources for resistance. Since her femaleness does not necessarily prescribe femininity, she resists being a feminine female; therefore, she chooses her gender and becomes masculine female; her body now is a constructed text, in that the textuality of her body and the physical shaping of her body are both culturally and socially determined.

Thus, Clarissa’s body does not belong to herself. According to Bordo, “prevailing and enforced cultural notions of gender differences are inscribed on the body, as it shapes itself to fit conventions of proper appearance, deportment and physical activity” (2360). According to the social constructionist position, Bordo argues that “the body does not have a fixed and enduring nature” (*ibid.*); she notes that bodies change in response to the social demands placed on them. And this is what aligns Bordo with Butler’s claim that gender is essentially a choice. By choice, Butler does not mean that a person stands outside their gender and simply selects it. On the contrary, Butler notes that “[t]o choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that organises them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one’s cultural history in one’s own terms” (qtd. in Salih 46-7).

Butler therefore argues that the subject is subject-in-process, that is constructed in discourse by the acts it performs, rather than a pre-existing metaphysical one. Also crucial to the understanding of how identity, and in particular, gender identity is constructed is Butler’s theory that the subject is a performative construct. To explicate and clarify the concept of performativity as a crucial stage in construction of subjectivity, Butler notes that

All bodies are generated from the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no ‘natural body’ that pre-exists its cultural inscription. This seems to point towards the conclusion that gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’ (qtd. in Salih 62).

The emphasis on ‘sequence of acts’ and ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ inflects and highlights Butler’s subject-in-process. Consequently, gender identity is performative. It is constructed by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language. In this continuum, Bordo, like Michel Foucault, focuses on the discourses through which society produces, understands, defines and interprets the female body. And this is Clarissa’s point of departure in her quest for gender identity. She does not display feminine traits, but rather masculine traits, as her form of feminine resistance against patriarchal oppression. If this can be taken as her first act of ‘doing’ in her performative quest for gendered identity, her seeming lesbian attraction towards Sally could be well judged as her second performance. She never describes her heterosexual relations with Peter, whom she



loves dearly, and Richard, in terms of the ‘moment’ that corresponds with Jacques Lacan’s notion of *jouissance*. Clarissa’s kiss with Sally is the most deeply felt expression of the ‘moment’ in *Mrs Dalloway*, and it has very clearly an almost orgasmic intensity. It describes the physicality of emotional feminine experience.

Blurring and troubling sexual and gender identity, Clarissa resists the phallogocentric assumption that desire runs from one sex to another (opposite sex). She develops a lesbian relationship with Sally to adopt a new gendered identity, apart from the culturally and socially enforced one. But this is evanescent, and is soon shattered and subjugated by the heterosexuality of patriarchal society as an acceptable substitute for homosexuality. To Clarissa, the so-called heterosexuality is an unquestioned and forced social contract, or in Butler’s term, melancholic heterosexuality. Therefore, Clarissa as a term-in-process or subject-in-process defines and redefines her own gendered identity. As Butler states:

If there is something right in Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing destructive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. (Salih 45).

Seen from Butler’s lens, Clarissa’s identity in general, and her gendered identity in particular, is in flux and can be characterised as fluid; hence, it does not conform to any essentialist and fixed notions of identity. By troubling and blurring gender identity through unfixing and changing representations of herself, Clarissa is also able to trouble and accordingly deconstruct deep-rooted binary oppositions of gender, like masculine/feminine, men/women, etc, or other binary oppositions like reason/emotion, active/passive which are superimposed on a biologically fixed sex division between male and female. She destabilises these established oppositions; and consequently, dehierarchises hierarchically structured phallogocentric or masculine-centered society by representing herself both with masculine traits like reason and activity, and queer feminine traits like a lesbian relationship.

As Bordo states, “The body—what we eat, how we dress, and the daily rituals through which we attend to the body—is a medium of culture...The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture” (2362). For Bordo, therefore, the body is a powerful symbolic form. Attending Clarissa’s body once more, we see that she is excruciatingly aware of the fact that the limits of her body are the limits of her world. She is overanxious about her body, since it constitutes the very medium through which all subsequent symbolic performances must be undertaken. Clarissa, on the day of the party, is 52 years old, and has “grown very white since her illness,” and “her heart, [is] affected, they said, by influenza” (*Mrs Dalloway* 3).

We are repeatedly told that Clarissa has a “small pink face”; and that she and Peter both agree that she has grown older. She envies both Lady Bexborough and Sally for having bodies she always desired:

She would have been, in the first place, dark like Lady Bexborough, with a skin of crumpled leather and beautiful eyes. She would have been, like Lady Bexborough, slow and stately; rather large; instead of which she had a narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird’s...But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, which all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown (8).

Remembering her romance with Sally in their childhood, Clarissa remembers a very exquisite moment: “But all that evening she could not take her eyes off Sally. It was an extraordinary beauty of the kind she most admired, dark, large-eyed, with that quality which, since she hadn’t got it herself, she always envied” (24).

Put simply, Clarissa is not sexually attractive, and in a critical moment she ties and aligns both her body and self together:

How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self—pointed; dartlike; definite” (27).





Here Clarissa relates identity to the body; therefore the body mirrors identity; and since Clarissa's body is to some extent abnormal and "ridiculous," and she seems to suffer from a lack of beauty, it is reminiscent of Lacan's notion of the primordial fragmented body. Her abnormal body suggests that one's coherent identity is actually a dream-like construction that conceals the fundamentally fragmentary nature of identity. As Lennard J. Davis puts it, "Wholeness is in fact a hallucination" (qtd. in Leitch, et al. 2399). Consequently Clarissa's body is constructed socially; she is forced to kill her passionate self, abandon her lesbian feelings, enter compulsory heterosexuality, and strive after power: "Power was hers, position, income. She had lived in the forefront of her time. She had had good friends; known the ablest men of her day" (*Mrs Dalloway* 82). It is society that produces and interprets Clarissa's body; she cannot gain control of her own body. She is oscillating between the physicality of her own feminine body and the repressive demands of society. To sum up, Clarissa, with her fragmented body and identity, must appear as a masculine female to survive in an androcentric and patriarchal society, or otherwise choose to be a feminine female and keep silent, and be marginalised.

Facing this dilemma, she chooses to act, to perform as a masculine female so as to be able to speak, to represent herself as other than that negative stereotype of women which patriarchal society has determined and enforced on them.

### Conclusion

Clarissa Dalloway's identity is not essential to her nature, but is produced through contingent social interactions. Her identity is inflected by ideologies of gender and other social constructs. For this reason, throughout this study, I have emphasised the fact that the process of identity creation is not a one-time event. New social arrangements provide the means to shape new identities. Identity is a continuous creative practice, and is shaped not through language alone, but through a set of other factors like gender, ideology and body. For instance, the interactions between language and gender on the one hand, and feminist theory on the other, are of tremendous significance in this study.

Earlier varieties of feminism reduced the question of identity to an ontological first principle by taking an essential difference between women and men as axiomatic. But more recent scholarship, like that of Judith Butler, views identity as a construct. And when it comes to the social construction of identity, language is of first significance. All women are oppressed by the overriding force of language; therefore, language is responsible for male dominance in society. Clarissa's identity needs to be constructed socially through language, but this very language is patriarchal. Although Clarissa attempts to resist it, she is unable to fit into its predetermined structures.

Butler highlights the fact that language mediates between the individual and wider cultural hegemonies. She suggests that selfhood is manufactured through language. Identity is a semiotic activity whereby individuals are made to make cultural sense. Those who resist the dictates of the culture by troubling its categories highlight the constructed nature of these divisions. Therefore, in her view, identity is a practice rather than a category, an actively constructed performance rather than a pre-existing role. Clarissa Dalloway's lesbian attraction towards Sally proves this anti-categorical nature of identity. She is resisting against patriarchal society, but at the same time, her feminine resistance, which is the kind of act she is performing to define a clear-cut feminine identity for herself, gets nowhere; because patriarchal society imposes compulsory heterosexuality, and Clarissa succumbs to this melancholic heterosexuality, she also consequently gives in to patriarchal language and discourse.

The specificity of women's bodies is increasingly becoming important in feminist theory. Butler views the body as the stage on which gender is performed (Salih 2002). Such debates over the body have historically been remote from the concerns of language and gender researchers. But today, feminist linguists are becoming aware of the importance of the body; that it is the centrality of language in body studies. In this study, the direct interaction and relationship between Clarissa's body and patriarchal language is manifested, in the way that her body is constructed socially through attending social performances.

The present study challenges the essentialist notion that identities in general, and gender identities in particular, are inevitable, natural and fixed. This study also elaborates upon the idea that identities, far from being given in advance for individuals to step into, emerge over time through discursive and other social practices. Furthermore, identity construction is also an exclusively individual act; whereas, social selves are produced interaction, through processes of contestation and collaboration. On the other hand, however, poststructuralism imposes unstable and fragmentary identity; therefore, subjects within poststructuralism are constructed socially, but their identities are fluid, dynamic and fragmentary.



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