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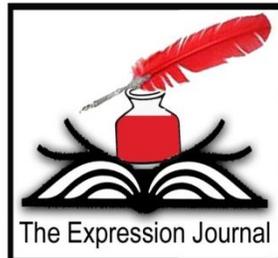
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## **VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MRS. DALLOWAY* AS "A CELEBRATION OF LIFE IN GENERAL AND OF A WOMAN'S LIFE IN PARTICULAR" – A BRIEF ANALYSIS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores neatly the emergence of Feminism as major segment of the contemporary literary writing quite rapidly developing as a significant critical ideology that has emerged as a concept that encompasses both a philosophy and movement for a socio-political change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and woman's subordination within a given society. It has a focus on Mrs. Dalloway as a celebration of life in general and of a woman's life in particular. It neatly analyses Virginia Woolf's contribution to literature from the feminist point of view proving literature to be a cultural product which can be used as an instrument in exploring new possibilities for women.

### **Key-Words**

Critical Ideology, Feminism, Major Segment, Literary Writing, Concept, Socio-Political Change, Submissiveness, Subordination, Contribution, Instrument, Women.

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Rapidly developing as a significant critical ideology, Feminism has formed a major segment of the contemporary literary writing. Having emerged as a concept that encompasses both a philosophy and movement for a socio-political change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within a given society, the first phase of feminism was launched in 1972 with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. She called it 'a revolution in female manners', the main focus of the vindication was that women as members of the human species should have the same considerations applied to them as applied to men. The ideal nineteenth century requisites of women were piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity and the changing role of women in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was accompanied by a redefinition of femininity. The writings of Ruskin and Coventry Patmore depicted the home as a sanctuary, a haven, presided over by an angle-wife! In 1869, John Stuart Mill, a liberal theorist published his essay "Subjection of Women" which was heralded as a feminist Bible by the masses. Mill said: "The only school moral sentiment is society between equals" (89) While men like Rousseau insisted on women as part of nature, Simone de Beauvir's famous aphorism, "one is not born, rather becomes a woman" (Second Sex 89) showed the relevance to feminism of the nature by culture distinction.

Virginia Woolf's contribution to literature from the feminist view point is really noteworthy. She felt literature to be a 'cultural product' which can be used as an instrument in exploring new possibilities for women. For doing so, she felt the need to break down the limits and norms of traditional literature. Being in constant search of feminine identity in literature and a feminine style, she wanted to write and be read as a woman. In her perception and thought-provoking analysis of the early obscurity and absence from the history of women and their checkered career, Woolf touched a tender chord when she bemoaned the fact that the history of

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England is the history of the male line, not of the female, for little was known about women. Women writers of the nineteenth century felt trapped, suffocated and faced with the anxiety-ridden choices offered to them. Inevitably the fall-out was that literature produced by such women was permeated with silent rage, frustration and anger and norms laid down by the society and the culture that had created them.

Virginia Woolf found 'strange spaces and silences' in the saga of women's achievements in English literature. Woolf felt that novels written by women were influenced by their resentment to the treatment meted to their sex and ended up pleading for their rights. Woolf felt that this weakened the cause of women's struggling to carve a niche for themselves in the literary canon. In her writings, Woolf made a shifting appraisal of women's problems, their peculiar dilemmas conditioning in the traditional Victorian society. By discovering 'a psychological sentence of the feminine gender' as a medium to externalize the innermost emotions and passion of women, a new realm of consciousness was explored by women writers like Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Katherine Mansfield. This was in stark contrast to the traditional style of writing by male writers who projected their female protagonists as seen by other sex and in relation to the other sex. Virginia Woolf was the most vociferous and vehement on feminist issues such as subjectivity, class, sexuality and culture. In her attempt to create a female perspective in her novels, Woolf inscribed women's experience, wholly feminine and anti-canonical. Feminine perspectives get beautifully reflected in her two major novels namely *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

Mrs. Woolf's characters, especially the female ones are portrayed as vulnerable, early beings, pulsating with life. As Walter Allen puts it, "When one thinks in the abstract of a typical Virginia Woolf character, one seems to see a tiny figure on a tip-toe, eagerly grasping a butterfly net, alert to snare the significant, the transcending moment as it flies" (P347). Woolf's characters create their own moments without impinging on the basic rhythms and speech patterns of the original subjective process and her text abounds with her philosophy of life and the characters of women. Women writers, as Woolf rightly pointed out, had no maternal stream of inspiration to draw upon. For the first time women writers were conscious of the void of the 'mother' in the literary canon. Influenced by men in the beginning of her writing career, Virginia Woolf evolved with irresistible force, the women within her. She explored femininity in her writings and freed herself from the same of her sex, never hiding behind male pseudonyms to express her emotions and sensibilities. Her philosophy of life permeates into the fabric of her writings thereby opening up a new realm in literature wherein the world of women is distinctly different from that of men. She firmly believed that women achieved an adequacy of response beyond the physicality of an object and visualised herself as a link in a long line of women writers thereby working towards the dawn of a female 'canon' of great works by women as an alternative to male critical authority and her narratives intertwined in a 'triple play, the roles of an artist, a feminist and a socialist. Her feminism was deep-rooted desire surging inside from adolescence to create a new world for women writers to write fearlessly and to challenge cultural codes reinforcing the myth of an obscure, invisible woman writer. Her own style of writing was a gossamer web of fragility of intelligence, combined with the healing powers of a women's strength pitted against evil and

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oppressive patriarchal forces of the world. Lyndall Godon observes:

“She was in a manner of speaking new ground in her brave attempt to re-arrange human relations to plumb the depth of one’s mind and to analyse human nature” (P 105).

The novel namely *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 reveals how women preserve a civilization which is nearly destroyed by men. In this novel, Virginia Woolf envisions the city of London through a female perspective, there in women’s voices rise above the din of the urban space an arena traditionally reserved for and defined as masculine: Mrs. Dalloway’s first and foremost persistent memories are of her former suitor Peter Walsh and their failed relationship. Peter tries to supply Clarissa Dalloway with her critical vocabulary. These words Clarissa felt, curtailed her freedom to do whatever she wanted to do without the jailor of words (Peter Walsh) spoon feeding her. Just as Clarissa Dalloway’s personal voice completes with the loud presence of the patriarchal city, so the women writer accepts and denies the urge to impose a unifying vision. The basis of Woolf’s feminist revisioning of human experience is through the use of water imagery. This recurrent imagery provides palimpsest for an amalgamation of consciousness and images of the city, which finally become indistinguishable. In this narrative of continuous process, masculine vision undergoes a sea-change. Water imagery is used to the optimum level to reveal differences within apparent unity, to undermine patriarchal institutions such as marriage and to create a female vision of the *Women in Time and Space*: “physical or mental man’s space is a space domination, hierarchy and conquest, a sprawling, showy space, a full space” (P 169).

In the very first chapter of the novel, Clarissa is magnetically drawn towards water. In the opening paragraphs of the novel, Clarissa ponders on the ebb and flow of life’s tides and the process of ageing “how year by year her share was sliced”. Clarissa Dalloway permeates the text as a romantic, carefree buccaneer, provocative yet sexual. She vacillates between her public identity as a socialite in London and her private self that seeks to blend into a novel, the innate strength of womanhood is brought into sharp focus, pitted against male inadequacies and intelligence. The Shakespearean refrain ‘Fear no more the heat of the sun,’ forms an invisible halo around Clarissa and the other protagonists in the novel, suggesting surrender of will to the realm of death. Clarissa Dalloway is imbued with the gift of creativity, a hallmark of everyday feminine life. Simone de Beavoir in her revolutionary book *The Second Sex* says that the moments women regard as revelations are those in which they discover their accord with a static and self-sufficient reality of their own views and aspirations for fiction. *Mrs. Dalloway* is the first novel in which she expresses her feminist insights through structure rather than through plot and character. In this novel, she explores the contradictions within individuals and the manner in which communication and genuine identity, gets established. Woolf aspired to be ‘only a sensibility’ in writing this novel and presenting her transcendental theory. The internalization of Clarissa Dalloway as she walks

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through the streets of London, or sits quietly in her attic room or socializes in the evening at her party, is beautifully depicted in the novel.

A feeling of weightlessness settles on Clarissa wherein she feels as if her body was as light as air and floating, free from the fetters of everyday life. This euphoric feeling of mind transcending body, gives her the freedom in the novel to remain on the surface of life as a glitzy, tinselly, socialite and also to plumb the depths of the novel in her inscrutable manner, fish-like, secretive. As the ego fades away, and Clarissa, enters an invisible state, her body steps into a 'state of being' whereby it fuses with light, sound, colour and rhythm. Woolf fashioned the character of Mrs. Dalloway on an intimate friend of hers and socialite, Kitty Maxse, whom she admitted yet despised for being very class-conscious. Kitty Maxse's suicide in real life, finds an echo in *Mrs. Dalloway* in the portrait of Septimus Smith, Clarissa's twin face- one of sanity, the other of insanity. London, a city of male supremacy threatens to swamp her feminist impulse to spread the message of peace and harmony. Bond Street, early in the morning acts like a balm of Clarissa's troubled spirit as she passes by the familiar shops. In her diary, Woolf commented on the privacy of the soul yet believed in contact with others. This paradoxical characteristic is present in Clarissa Dalloway as well as in Septimus Smith. Both feel the need to expose themselves to life, withdraw and to be in isolation. Clarissa, on leaving the privacy of her own house for the vastness of the street, suggests a projection of the private consciousness into the public self:

"When the door shuts on us, all that vanishes.

The shell-like covering which our souls have  
excreted to house themselves, to make for  
themselves a distinct shape from others, is  
broken and there is left of all these wrinkles

and toughness's a central oyster of perceptiveness" (P 156).

To achieve human communion in society was Woolf's genuine desire which gets manifested in Clarissa Dalloway. Clarissa is 'the perfect hostess' whose great moral strength comes from the well-being of feminine intuition, the cohesive life force which draws out people from their intuition into the mainstream of life. Lady Bruton, the aristocratic lady who asks Richard Dalloway out to lunch is a hard, selfish woman with an impassive face. 'Clarissa dislikes her with such intensity of feeling that she 'shivers' and 'rocks' like a plant on the river bed'. Lady Bruton dabbled in politics and preferred the company of politicians to feathery, evanescent conversations with her own kind. Woolf brings in a class hierarchy and aristocracy with the character of Lady Bruton who is the backbone of English aristocracy, burning with patriotic fervour and pride. The authorial voice glides through the text as it illumines the tragedy of such a noble lady on being born a female like Lady Bruton. Had she been born a male, she would have commanded armies over seven seas, quelled mutinous forces with an iron hand, as a true patriot of the British Empire. Now as a woman, she can only aspire for power through a man, the Prime Minister without actually occupying the seat of authority. As a woman, Woolf emphasizes that only Lady Bruton's spirit can hope to flit across far flung lands as a patriotic English woman. Woolf portrays the impact of the patriarchal society of England on women's lives. She portrays the loneliness and

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frustration of women's lives that have been shaped by the moral, ideological and conventional factors. In the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf is inadvertently exhorting women to be more visible, to be heard and to be taken notice of by the patriarchal society in which they live. Woolf laments the obscurity of woman's lives in the rubble of English literature as she says:

"For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it at all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels inevitably" (PP 89-90).

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the dark picture of patriarchal society is portrayed through Septimus-Rezia relationship. Septimus has gone to war with a sense of total dedication to the ideal of freedom which was seriously threatened by the German hordes. The grim experience of war has given him a new vision of the truth. He is able to see the painful reality of English society and wouldn't accept the world as different from what he actually sees it. This vision of Septimus makes him an insane person through his doctors and people's eyes. He married Rezia without loving her because she couldn't stay alone at night. Rezia suffers silently and alone. Her husband rejects to have a child because he rejects to join patriarchy by becoming a father himself. Rezia finds her alone in a foreign country without a husband or a child:

"Far away he heard her sobbing; he heard it accurately, he noticed it distinctively; he compared it to a piston thumping, But he felt nothing. His life was crying, and he felt nothing; only each time, she sobbed in this profound, this silent, this hopeless way, he descended another step into the pit".

(Mrs. Dalloway 100)

Woolf compares Rezia to a flower attempting to protect her battered husband with her maternal petals. Woolf depicts Clarissa's final apprehension of the truth of life:

"Death was defiance, Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture, faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death". (Mrs. Dalloway 202)

Thus, the novel is a celebration of life in general and a woman's life in particular. Virginia Woolf was not a feminist in the sense that she wanted woman to have more rights and opportunities but she was a feminist in the sense that she wanted. Psychological acceptance, with due reverence of women and their world by men.

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