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## GENDER IDENTITY IN *Mrs DALLOWAY*

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### Abstract

*Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf features Clarissa as the protagonist from the vantage point of female gender: their voices and their identity in the novel. It delves into the inner lives of a number of characters many of who struggle to balance their private and public lives. It also illustrates how women are victims of masculinity. By focusing on the female characters, Simone de Beauvoir's theory of social constructionism and existential crisis will be brought to light. Intimately linked to gender roles, gender identity is a social construct that takes into account all behaviors, actions and roles. It is a person's internal sensation of being a man, woman or anything else in between and the term was first used by professor Robert J. Stoller in 1964. The study demonstrates how patriarchal dominance has degraded women in various fields, causing them to question their identity and making marriage the only way for a woman to remain independent/raise her social status. They also battle between their private and public personas.

**Keywords:** Gender, identity crisis, patriarchy, stereotype, discrimination.

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Virginia Woolf, a prominent figure in the twentieth-century modernist literary movement, is known for her controversial writings on gender identity and feminism. As a female writer in a patriarchal society, she raises various gender issues and challenges of the Victorian era by presenting the ideas of woman, the importance of self, and identity, which became especially apparent in her novel *Mrs Dalloway* as she clearly juxtaposes the two images of women, namely their internal and external world. It demonstrates how the protagonist Clarissa Dalloway's inner soul and society collide, as well as how the mind works is depicted using the stream of consciousness technique by shifting through the

characters thought process of their past and present.

Woolf emphasizes the ideas that gave rise to gender indifferences which were prevalent during her time, and how, the belief about women being considered inferior as compared to their male counterparts has been followed for quiet sometime and this mentality has affected the role of women for many centuries. Woolf contradicts the popular image of her era, which depicts a woman suppressing her inner feelings by remaining devoted and submissive to her husband. She wanted to show an individual's true self, with all of their flaws and confusions through the characters because the exterior image hides the internal struggles. She was

acutely aware that men and women fit themselves into rigid roles, and in order for an individual, regardless of gender, to grow and develop should practice gender blending, which means flexible and not bound by the expectations of their sex because one should seek to blur what it means to be a true man or woman. She also had a few lesbian affairs, and in her book *Orlando*, she depicts her lover as a nobleman who later becomes a woman. In the *Three Guineas*, she argued that the only way to end war is for people to reconsider the practice of distinguishing between sexes. She wished to demolish patriarchy by granting citizens more equal rights.

In many ways, the Victorian era, which was viewed as a patriarchal society, marginalized the position of women. Women are stereotyped as weak, vulnerable, fragile, and reliant, whereas men as physically strong, ambitious, bold, and determined. The church also taught the society how to examine and control women, reminding them that they were created inferior simply to serve their men on all levels. Clarissa married Richard even though they don't share the intimacy she had with Peter Walsh; this proves to be the better choice for her because Richard gave her some independence. "She accepts him without loving him. She will accept him without even if there are buts" (Beauvoir 459). However, Peter would make her feel vulnerable by challenging her to think deeply, question, and rebel against snobbery and rigidity.

Clarissa struggles to find her place in society by sacrificing her desires for the sake of necessity; basically, marriage with an aristocratic man would conceal a woman's inferiority, demonstrating her reliance on her husband. "Even when she is more emancipated, the economic advantage held by males forces her to prefer marriage over a career: she will look for a husband whose situation is superior to her own, a husband she hopes will 'get ahead' faster and further than she could" (Beauvoir 456). Richard could look after her by financially supporting and providing her with a room where she could be alone if she needed it. She married Richard to approach life in her own reflective and internal way. The novel is seen to culminate in the planning of Mrs. Dalloway's party. She is afraid that her party

will fail due to the men's criticism and societal pressure.

Clarissa is an excellent hostess, despite Peter insulting her when she was younger. She experiences an identity crisis that prompted her to act differently in the eyes of the society because she is unable to express her genuine self, which would be mistaken for her vulnerabilities so she pretends to be someone else this leads to question her own existence. Existential crisis is characterised by uneasiness over life's purpose, options and freedom. When her thoughts drift to her younger self in Bourton, Clarissa recalls her ambitions and ideals, indicating that she's not happy with her current life. Her family represents traditional norms, in contrast to Sally who embodies liberty and freedom, but she was able to defy the stereotype by selecting her own husband. She also inhabits a very distinct sphere because she prefers to stay alone in her own room upstairs. She is depicted as a blatantly shallow individual who lives in the wilderness and acts her superficial position in society by feigning similarity to it. Clarissa abruptly left the party after learning of Septimus suicide and began to think about her death, "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" (Woolf 198). She also considers that, "this life, to be lived to the end, and be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear" (Woolf 199). Clarissa's conflicting thoughts reveal that death is another way to terminate a hard life; as a result, she is grateful for Septimus's farewell and identifies with him.

Clarissa and Sally had grander aspirations as teenagers to transform the world through the abolition of private property, the implementation of radical reforms, the pursuit of freedom and the study of William Morris but is shaped into a model of the ideal lady in society. They're both married when they re-unite at the party which they both deemed disastrous when they were younger. Nevertheless, in the perspective of the community, a woman is a success if she marries and has a child. As Beauvoir writes, "The destiny that society

traditionally offers women is marriage" (451). These two women's mentality shifts are not a result of natural development; rather, they are a stark illustration of the social construction of gender as it clearly says, "for girls, marriage is the only way to be integrated into the group, and if they are 'rejects', they are social waste" (453). Social constructionism is a concept that was developed and adopted by the populace of a society; it is centred on relationships and upholds the individual's roles in the social construction of reality. At first glance, Sally appears to be above all conventions, but closer examination reveals that her revolutionary ideas and motifs are merely for show and that she hasn't taken any real political action. Instead, she prefers to stir up controversy by using provocative language while remaining silently bound by patriarchal conventions. "Both Mrs Dalloway and Sally Seton had to change their lives and live the conventional way, marrying a man, rather than the way they wanted to live" (Judehn; web).

Sally was introduced as Mrs Rosseter, unlike Clarissa who identifies with Mr Richard Dalloway, she was able to notice the shallowness of Clarissa. Sally manages to remain independent even though both of them financially depend on their husbands also she demonstrates that she is a proud mother. "Sally Rosseter is a woman who has everything she wants to have and is not yearning for everything else. Still, she is neither a role model nor a symbol of female independence, as the thing that makes her proudest and happiest are her five sons- her contribution to male society" (Bunse 9).

Elizabeth doesn't enjoy her life and ridicules the girls of her age who act feminine since she doesn't care about clothes or men. She lacks her mother's womanly charms and possess her father's steady attributes. "Every profession is open to the woman of your generation, said Miss Kilman. So, she might be a doctor. She might be a farmer... in short she would like to have a profession" (Woolf 99). Elizabeth longs for independence and is committed to pursuing her own goals and aspirations yet she is innocent and exhibits some vulnerability due to her youth. "The fact that Elizabeth is not happy with her life, but too weak to change it, underlines that, like her mother and Sally Seton, she cannot be

considered a role model, although she has some modern feminist ideas" (Bunse 11). Even though Elizabeth is influenced by Miss Kilman who is resentful, self-righteous, unforgiving and continually criticises Clarissa, it proved that like her mother, she is constrained by patriarchal conventions and fantasises about a better future. Despite her extroverted nature and passion in her career Richard has a lot more possessive and controlling perspective and doesn't hold her accountable for anything.

Miss Doris Kilman is an enraged, frustrated spinster whose religious zeal led her to despise all the things she could not have or be; her only pleasures are eating, attending church services, criticising typical Victorian society and influencing Elizabeth. "Sometimes lately it had seemed to her that, except for Elizabeth, her food was all that she lived for" (Woolf 98). She is the only properly educated woman but does not make use of it by educating the other female characters. Instead, she criticises Clarissa and all Victorian women for adhering to the social mores of the least organised government and for serving as puppets for their husbands and the wider community. Her academic accomplishments are insufficient to make her feel satisfied.

Woolf exposed the depths of the upper-class prejudice by using the figure of Doris to represent the layers of hurt and betrayal. She disapproves the customs and traditions of the aristocratic way of life, which puts others before oneself. She is a symbol of the few options available to women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to pursue careers like teaching and remain unmarried in patriarchal societies. Kilman detests Clarissa because she stands for women who conform to social expectations. Ironically, Kilman depicts a free-spirited woman who wants to concentrate on her job and avoid having man rule her life by remaining single.

Women during this time were culturally influenced with the idea of marriage and being a good wife but this even fails for some women who struggles to find a life partner, as Woolf portrays Lucrezia Warren Smith, or "Rezia," as the only traditional woman who is unhappy with her life and

desperate for her husband. The archetypal woman, represented by Clarissa Dalloway, is the one who marries for stability, independence and freedom rather than for love. Because society has designed marriage to be this way, Clarissa appears invisible in her marriage to Richard. As a result, she pretends to be a perfect hostess but she is actually struggling internally to fit in with the affluent society. She could've married Peter or either Sally, but neither of them could afford to make her a hostess.

Characters like Sally, Lucrezia and Kilman just serve as symbols for the limited options that women, in particular, had. They were never given the chance to pursue their aspirations; instead, were forced to conform social conventions such as marriage, suppression of femineity, oppression, confinement to specific roles, societal ignorance, which led to alienation, particularly in the case of Lucrezia and carry on with an unhappy existence. Elizabeth is a symbol of the future woman who must decide whether to be independent as Miss Kilman has advised or to be like her traditional mother, who repressed everything to appease society by acting inauthentically. A new identity for women is created when the ambitions and tenacity of Kilman are combined with Clarissa's emotional and vulnerable side.

Women in the Victorian era only had one role in life, which was to marry and participate in their husband's career and jobs. Institutions like marriage threaten women's identities, so the novel explores the life of a married woman Clarissa Dalloway, whose "Home" serves as the focal point of her existence. Woolf deftly exposed the realities of marriage as a system that dominates an individual's life by using "Mrs" to denote Clarissa's new permanent identity. "She takes his name; she joins his religion, integrates into his class, his world; she belongs to his family, she becomes his other 'half'.... she is annexed to her husband's universe" (Beauvoir 454).

Clarissa's past in Bourton directly associates with Peter is revealed in the stream of consciousness technique. But she decides against getting married to him because he was possessive and controlling and would've interfered her desire for spiritual

privacy. "In her relationship with Peter, her soul underwent a constant tension between love and individual freedom. Clarissa wants to preserve her virginity" (Shihada 127). Clarissa's philosophy on marriage is stated right from the very beginning of the novel when she says, "For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; when Richard gave her, and she had him" (Woolf 6). Clarissa is convinced that a marriage to Peter will erode her limited sense of privacy and independence because she feels insecure to trust herself to someone.

In the novel, characters are shown to have a common fate that can change for the better or worse depending on who they are married to. Marriage gives women a foothold in the patriarchal culture, allowing them to be independent in terms of their talents, privacy, abilities and even physical attractiveness. Unlike other authors, who frequently called their works after the protagonists, Woolf did not opt to name the book Clarissa, Mrs Dalloway's first name. Given that women are dependent on their husbands after marriage, Woolf uses the moniker "Mrs Dalloway" as a form of mask that represents Clarissa's new identity.

In the sophisticated, upper-class world in which she lives, Clarissa like all married women, is recognised exclusively as Richard's wife rather than the plain, vulnerable Clarissa and has no independent identity. She chooses to be Mrs Dalloway, preferring to be Richard's wife rather than Peter's wife so that she would be able to play a role in the society that is predominately male. When they were younger, Sally and Clarissa both shared the same view that marriage is a "catastrophe," but after 30 years, Sally Seton as Lady Rosseter and Clarissa as Mrs Dalloway reconnected with each other under a new identity. Through the creation of a new identity, it allows the idea of applied existentialism crisis very clear.

Marriage as a weapon or protector to safeguard oneself from society is not always successful for all women; in one case, Lucrezia married the soldier Septimus by forsaking her friends, family and society but met a tragic end.

Given her acceptable social position and successful marriage Lady Bradshaw's life is fairly lucky and fruitful. She now has access to a world of masculine opportunities.

Woolf's goal is to portray a struggling woman where she seems to be merely existing rather than living. "In a patriarchal society, women from upper class are supposed to be a housewife and depend on their husband economically and emotionally. Men expect their wife to be loving, caring and gentle, like an angel, and play the role of a good mother wife. That places Clarissa in a dilemma" (Wu 566). The author expertly illustrates women's dual identities, both the one that they already have and the one that they also share with others. The opposite of what is anticipated is true for Clarissa, whose sense of security permits her to spend all of her time alone in the attic chamber, demonstrating her singleness in a marriage.

Although marriage is a union of two individuals, Woolf's portrayal of it lacks mutual understanding and communication through the broken bond that exists between Clarissa and Richard that is lack of love and intimacy. After marriage, women lose their independence and act in ways that benefit their husbands and families as a result, Clarissa is merely playing the role of Mrs Richard Dalloway, she serves as a lens through which society controls the roles that women play after marriage. Her life decisions, husband choice, and identity bias were all completely influenced by the society. Woolf's belief that women are silenced by gender norms and afflicts them for the rest of their lives is reflected in Clarissa. Everyone has different motifs and different stories, so the marriage moral of "*Mrs Dalloway*" is that a woman is limited in her marriage but simultaneously has many opportunities. This is the beginning of opening more social space and freedom for women to choose less traditional paths. Clarissa's parties represent life whereas Miss Kilman became a history teacher to gain her freedom.

The writing technique known as "stream of consciousness" is more than just an internal monologue; it accurately reflects the character's cognitive processes. In the novel the actual events

took place in the thought process of the characters shifting through their past and present lives. Through this technique, Woolf produces a lot of challenging topics that surround the paradoxical society, and this is displayed according to how the characters behave in their public and private lives. The title itself illustrates the theme of identity between the self and public life of Clarissa because the book suggests that she is a married woman. The name Clarissa doesn't appear frequently in the novel, which represents the loss of a sense of identity and what really matters is for Clarissa to be accepted as a member of the elite society because, "She did things not simply, not for themselves; but to make people think this or that" (Woolf 8).

Additionally, Clarissa feels that the persona she adopted as the ideal hostess requires "too much an effort" (Woolf 17). She is excellent at concealing her opposition to social conventions, which keeps her personal identity as voices in the back of her head and reduces it to a shadow veiled by deception. Septimus, who serves as her mirror image, dies near the end of the book, she returns to the party after grieving her misfortune fate and being deeply demoralised. By merely hosting parties, Clarissa cannot intellectually connect with Richard. Despite the fact that both Clarissa and Septimus face internal conflicts, only Septimus is able to express his inner fear by taking his own life; everyone else struggles in silence.

The main reason Clarissa hosts parties is to bring light into the dark times, and she feels responsible for creating an environment where her guests, who have been through so much, can once again have fun. As evidenced by the fact that she greets everyone by saying it is "delightful" to see them. "In fact, she is more likely to seek relief in social life; she goes out, makes visits, and- like Mrs Dalloway- attaches enormous importance to her parties; she goes to every wedding, every funeral; no longer having any existence of her own, she feeds on the company of others" (Beauvoir 648). When Clarissa contemplates her own identity, she thinks of "no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress" (Woolf 11). At this point in her life, she is "Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this



[body] being Mrs Richard Dalloway" (Woolf 11). As a result, a form of existential crisis and identity loss only serve to exacerbate these emotions of Clarissa.

Clarissa chooses to marry a man like Richard in order to live comfortably and have a self-fulfilling life? No, she desires some autonomy and privacy from her husband so that she can handle some matters that must remain private, demonstrating her respect for independence even after marriage. "Woman weighs so heavily on man because she is forbidden to rely on herself" (Beauvoir 535). Males are positioned as the self, whereas women as the other, and as a result, women have only been thought of as existing in relation to men. Although Clarissa keeps to herself and is distant from others, her inner life is filled with emotion. "In the final scene, she goes about her party not realizing about how people feel about her, and it is possible that she will continue to live without deep connections" (Williams 62).

When Clarissa's mind is tormented, she isolates herself in her own room because she seems locked inside the boundaries of her own consciousness and is distant from her spouse and have few current acquaintances, this is the point at which the concept of existential crisis is revealed. The choices made by these women demonstrate how social constructionism works in practice and how societal forces can transform them into an ideal woman despite their desire. Several underprivileged female characters are created by Woolf, and the novel analyses and exposes the trauma, predicament, and gender discrimination that women experiences. Thus, the atmosphere of bewilderment and wilderness that pervaded this time period is vividly captured by Woolf.

"Men succeed in the world by transcendence, but immanence is the lot of women" (Beauvoir 303). She clearly discusses transcendence and immanence. In contrast to women who are supposed to act with immanence, to be submissive and reliant, men are urged to act artistically and transcendently in order to assert their authority and power over the 'second sex'. Being a woman involves various external constraints and expectations that have been in place for many

millennia. This has resulted in the social construction of gender, which assigns people to predetermined roles based on inherent and uncontrolled causes. Acting in ways that are inconsistent with the person which the society has created will befall into many drawbacks including, existential crisis and mental health issues for women as clearly depicted by Virginia Woolf in the novel through the character portrayal of Mrs Clarissa Dalloway and her other acquaintances.

Virginia Woolf has successfully brought to light the fact that, even in the contemporary setting, a patriarchal society still exists and that women's upbringing, preconceptions, and expectations are unjust and unjustified. Through this, it demonstrates the significant influence gender roles have on contemporary society and how they are the main driver of gender disparity. The principal conflicts that limit women to gain recognition and independence is ignorance, economic inequality, stereotype, balance between their internal lives vs. external forces, discrimination, conforming to societal norms and most importantly marriage as their new identity. We have seen how this paper applies the social constructionism and existential crisis theories. This is best illustrated by the conventional woman represented by Clarissa, who marries for security and independence rather than out of love. Since society has constructed marriage to be this way, it has taken Clarissa's identity therefore she appears invisible in her marriage with Richard Dalloway. She frequently questions the choices she has made, prompting her to drift back in her days of Bourton when she was young and determined because presently, she only has access to her little, prison-like chamber which is why she undergoes existential crisis. Even the book's title implies that Clarissa has lost her own identity and is defined by her marriage.

Although, one or the other were fighting to find their purpose in life, Clarissa and other female characters had to accept the conventions and live with their newly constructed identities because they are dependent and constantly in danger from men. They were bound to an isolated existence, memories of the past, the repression of real emotions and psychological instability by patriarchy, stereotypes

and other external factors. We can draw the conclusion that one must strike a balance between one's inner and outer worlds, choosing company over solitude, freedom over restraint, happiness over melancholy, warmth over antagonism, and change for the better from bad and so forth. Most importantly when gender stereotypes prevent both men and women from growing personally or from making their own decisions, they are destructive. We may however, still improve and develop if we avoid making generalisations and snap judgements but instead take the time to get to know others. Giving females access to education, permitting equitable chances, encouraging women to participate in numerous forums, and finally eradicating patriarchy altogether are all necessary to solve these injustices. How wonderful would that be if we all made an effort to proceed towards a life of greater acceptance by eliminating biasness and creating oneness across all humanity?

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