
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ANDROGYNOUS IDENTITY IN MRS DALLOWAY

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Abstract: The concept of 'Identity' in literature can be dealt from various aspects. Literature has witnessed the multi-faceted nature of how identity evolves; be it under religion, political or socio-cultural circumstances. However, its deep impact is faced under the radar of existentialism, diaspora and the heat of 'sex and gender'. My paper focuses on a different type of identity which is a result of the androgynous psyche and the identity formed could be termed so. Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is deeply knitted with various themes such as feminism, modernism and the socio-political setup. Woolf's portrayal of an insane ex-soldier, Septimus Warren Smith in the novel, strikes a perfect contrast to the sane disciplined English lady, Mrs Dalloway. However, as the novel progress, the contradictory characters appear to resemble each other. The novel throughout hints that they are two entities who act as each other's 'double'. This paper on the other hand argues that they are not two but one on theory of 'androgyny'. The protagonist's psychological identity is an androgynous one where the 'animus' is not inside but outside roaming in flesh and blood.

Keywords: Androgynous, Clarissa, Mrs Dalloway, Septimus, double, identity

Introduction: In *Mrs. Dalloway*, published in 1925, Woolf discovered a new literary form capable of expressing the new realities of the postwar England. The novel depicts the subjective experiences and memories of its central characters over a single day in the post-World War I London. Divided into parts, rather than chapters, the novel's structure highlights the finely interwoven texture of the characters' thoughts. Critics tend to agree that Woolf found her writer's voice with this novel. She knew her experimental style was unlikely to be a popular success but no longer felt compelled to seek critical praise. The novel did, however, gain a measure of commercial and critical success. This book, which focuses on commonplace tasks, such as shopping, throwing a party, and eating dinner, showed that no act was too small or too ordinary for a writer's attention. Ultimately, *Mrs. Dalloway* transformed the novel as an art form. Woolf develops the book's protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, and myriad other characters by chronicling their interior thoughts with little pause or explanation, a style referred to as stream of consciousness. Several central characters and more than one hundred minor characters appear in the text, and their thoughts spin out like spider webs. Sometimes the threads of thought cross—and people succeed in communicating. More often, however, the threads do not cross, leaving the characters isolated and alone. Woolf believed that behind the "cotton wool" of life, as she terms it in her autobiographical collection of essays *Moments of Being* (1941), and under the downpour of impressions saturating a mind during each moment, a pattern exists. Characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* occasionally perceive life's pattern through a sudden shock, or what Woolf called a "moment of being." Suddenly the cotton wool parts, and a person sees reality, and his or her place in it, clearly. "In the vast catastrophe of the European war," wrote Woolf, "our

emotions had to be broken up for us, and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them in poetry or fiction." These words appear in her essay collection, *The Common Reader*, which was published just one month before *Mrs. Dalloway*. Her novel attempts to uncover the fragmented emotions, such as desperation or love, in order to find, through "moments of being," a way to endure. While writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf reread the Greek classics along with two new modernist writers, Marcel Proust and James Joyce. Woolf shared these writers' interest in time and psychology, and she incorporated these issues into her novel. She wanted to show characters in flux, rather than static, characters who think and emote as they move through space, who react to their surroundings in ways that mirrored actual human experience. Rapid political and social change marked the period between the two world wars: the British Empire, for which so many people sacrificed their lives, to protect and preserve, what was in decline. Countries like India were beginning to question Britain's colonial rule. At home, the Labour Party, with its plans for economic reform, was beginning to challenge the Conservative Party, with its emphasis on imperial business interests. Women, who had flooded the workforce to replace the men who had gone to war, were demanding equal rights. Men, who had seen unspeakable atrocities in the first modern war, were questioning the usefulness of class-based sociopolitical institutions. Woolf lent her support to the feminist movement in her nonfiction book *A Room of One's Own* (1929), as well as in numerous essays, and she was briefly involved in the women's suffrage movement. Although *Mrs. Dalloway* portrays the shifting political atmosphere through the characters Peter Walsh, Richard Dalloway, and Hugh Whitbread, it focuses more deeply on the charged social mood through the characters Septimus Warren Smith and Clarissa Dalloway. Woolf delves into the

consciousness of Clarissa, a woman who exists largely in the domestic sphere, to ensure that readers take her character seriously, rather than simply dismiss her as a vain and uneducated upper-class wife. In spite of her heroic and imperfect effort in life, Clarissa, like every human being and even the old social order itself, must face death. Woolf's struggles with mental illness gave her an opportunity to witness firsthand how insensitive medical professionals could be, and she critiques their tactlessness in *Mrs. Dalloway*. One of Woolf's doctors suggested that plenty of rest and rich food would lead to a full recovery, a cure prescribed in the novel, and another removed several of her teeth. In the early twentieth century, mental health problems were too often considered imaginary, an embarrassment, or the product of moral weakness. During one bout of illness, Woolf heard birds sing like Greek choruses and King Edward use foul language among some azaleas. In 1941, as England entered a second world war, and at the onset of another breakdown she feared would be permanent, Woolf placed a large stone in her pocket to weigh herself down and drowned herself in the River Ouse. (Sparknotes)

Fear no more the heat o' the sun

Nor the furious winter's rages

These words are from one of Shakespeare's later plays, *Cymbeline* which is experimental and hard to classify, since it has comic, romantic and tragic elements much like Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. The lines are from a funeral song that suggests- death is a comfort after life's hard struggles. Both Clarissa and Septimus repeat these lines throughout the single day of June that the novel records.

Woolf believed a complex web existed behind the "cotton wool" of daily life, and this web allows her to make natural transitions between the characters' point of view. Although the entire novel speaks of only one summer day in June of 1923, Woolf covers a lifetime in her enlightening novel *Mrs Dalloway*; the mystery of the human personality. The delicate Clarissa Dalloway, a disciplined English lady provides a perfect contrast to Septimus Warren Smith, an insane ex-soldier living in chaos. Even though they never meet, they correspond each other in that they strive to maintain possession of themselves and of their souls.

Septimus Warren Smith, driven insane by witnessing the death of his friend Evans in the war, acts as Clarissa's societal antithesis. However, the reader learns that they are more similar than being different. Virginia Woolf examines the human personality in two distinct methods: she observes that the different aspects of one's personality emerge in front of different people and she also analyses how the appearance of a person and the reality of that person diverge. By offering the personality in all its varying

forms, Woolf demonstrates the compound natural of humans in her unconventional novel, *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf through her novel tries to construct a unique identity which can be termed as 'androgynous'. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), an original, passionate, vivid and modern novelist tried to deconstruct masculine definitions of transcendence and tried to think beyond gender polarity; either by embracing a mysticism of a maternal/virginal, liberated from concepts of chastity or eroticization, or by developing concepts of androgyny which parody both orthodox cults of sexual maturation and haughty male intellectualism. In her famous feminist essay *A Room of One's Own* we find a positive reception of Coleridge's androgyny of the mind when she talks about the artist. She uses the concept to re-evaluate the female position as one of equality; a condition where the masculine and feminine are united in a appositive equilibrium. The foundation of Woolf's androgyny and Bloomsbury's sexual liberalism can be found in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century science. Figures such as Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, Otto Weininger, Sigmund Freud all put forward to some degree or the theory of a third sex in which masculine and feminine characteristics came together in a single body. Havelock Ellis wrote that 'each sex...is latently hermaphrodite', while Dr. Anduin, as quoted by Freud, asserts that "there are masculine and feminine elements in every human being; but one set of these- according to the sex of the person in question- is incomparable more strongly developed than the other, so far as heterosexual individuals are concerned..." this theory was further developed by Carl Jung whose concept of 'anima' (the female within the male) and 'animus' (the male within the female), was interpreted as the healthy balance for human psyche. The scientific recognition of the ability for men and women to contain the characteristics of each other, not only bodily hermaphrodites, but mentally (whether homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual), was a step forward even though this concept reinforced patriarchal binaries. (Wright, 2006) The word 'androgyny' not only opened itself to a variety of interpretations but critics and commentators have often approached it from particularly ideological positions. Her introduction of this theory and the concept has caused contention among critics ever since. Critics such as Carolyn Heilburn and Nancy Topping Buzin supporting her concept read androgyny as a balance and union between opposites; 'the evanescent masculine and the eternal feminine' which gives a satisfying pattern to life. However, others have read Woolf's vision of androgyny as an escape from the body (Elaine Showalter and Lisa Rado), an avoidance of key feminist issues (Elaine Showalter), a 'sexist myth in

disguise' perpetuating the phallogocentricism it seeks to deconstruct (Daniel Harris, Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi), a vision of self-destructive narcissism (Julia Kristeva, Francette Pacteau) or merely as an insipid form of homogeneity that 'lacks zest and energy'. (Wright, 2006)

Clarissa's double persona, however is a man whom she never meets, Septimus Warren Smith. Their experiences and lives, though radically different, are mirror images of each other. Whereas Clarissa is rational, constantly seeking meaningful answers about life and identity; Septimus represents the irrationality of madness and death. Septimus being the double is one of the major themes in Mrs Dalloway. However, the androgynous identity that has been projected in the novel is an external personality. Clarissa before being married to Richard Dalloway was in love with Peter Walsh. She, as we explore was a free-spirited soul. In her own way, she was a rebel, seeking for adventure and freedom. Her intimate moment with her best friend Sally Seton clearly establishes her degree of an adventurous young girl which she still recalls and cherish at her later age. Her this free nature as portrayed before the advent of feminism was not looked upon as a woman's nature which demands domesticity. However, when she met the well settled Richard Dalloway, her another suitor she went for a tranquil settled life instead of an adventurous life with Peter Walsh, just as patriarchy expects from a woman. The male within the female thus gets suppressed and what was left with her was only the sophisticated, ideal femininity and not the adventurous psyche. This was the typical Victorian principle to marry a well-established person rather than someone who is yet to seek his fortune. At the beginning years, her this decision made her happy as she got whatever she wished for and in this process, unknowingly this free-spirited maiden confined herself as the perfect hostess. In fact, later in the novel she thinks of some implied criticism of her act of party giving by both Peter and Richard, "Her parties! That was it! Her parties!" Thus her pondering over it rather than it happening clearly indicates her lost identity. She feels claustrophobic and understands that an important part of her psychological identity is lost.

Mrs Dalloway began life as a short story, 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street' and was drafted under the working title, 'The Hours'. Woolf said her ambition for this work was 'to give life and death, sanity and insanity.' She further says: "I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense." During its writing, Woolf conceived her method as a 'tunnelling process' whereby she digs out beautiful caves behind her characters, with the idea that they shall connect and will come to daylight. In the very first version in which Septimus did not exist,

Mrs Dalloway was to kill herself, has been acknowledged by Woolf. (Woolf, 1953) However she creates a man in her published version of the novel who could die for her. It's the man identity of her which as if has been personified.

Considering the title of the novel, one may wonder why Virginia Woolf chooses "Mrs Dalloway" as a title. She could have chosen to title it "Clarissa Dalloway" or simply "Clarissa". Woolf, also, opens her novel in a typical fashion by choosing the main character's name, symbolically and methodically "*Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.*" (Woolf, Here, a sense of irony is used, Mrs. Dalloway chooses to handle the burden of the work herself, though the work is only buying flowers. As she is a married woman, Clarissa ought to be responsible towards her duties, simple or hard they are. Thus, Virginia Woolf uses "Mrs." a status title which readily and inevitably signifies marriage, the signature and the permanent identity of every woman, and to show that once a woman gets married she loses her family name; her father's name, and she belongs to a new world whether better or worse it is. Woolf like the other Georgians used to strike a contrast between the Victorian principles and the modern era. Modern era which witnessed the two world wars was shattered. People were unaware of such a thing and thus the first war itself was enough to change the Victorian psyche where people were concerned only with parties and dresses and class. Modernism wanted to explore something which is beyond such trivialities; that is the human psyche. How people feel-what they actually want out of life was the ultimate question.

The fact that Septimus is Mrs Dalloway's double proves the point that they are both united at some point. There are innumerable cites in the novel which makes us realise their unity. For the first time when their attention is united by the motor car and aeroplane and then through colour imagery. Woolf throughout the novel has used different colours to attribute her character. On one hand where the colour 'green' has been used for Clarissa, 'red' and 'blue' is used for Septimus and Peter respectively. The colour 'yellow', lying between 'red' and 'green' in the spectrum is applied to both Clarissa and Septimus equally. Mrs Dalloway's 'yellow hat', 'curtains', 'gloves' and even the 'bus' in which her daughter rides is parallel to 'yellow flower', 'bananas' and 'sun' in Septimus' world. (Wright, 1944)

Both reveal in a great part of their thought a Hamlet like, death brooding bent and are in sympathy with the idea of self-destruction as a way of preserving their integrity against forces in their common social world which threatens to annihilate them as individuals. The line from *Othello* that Clarissa quotes "If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy" foreshadows Septimus' suicide. Thus, both are

“insane”, insofar as the state of their minds is wholly anti-intellectual and anti-scientific. The difference is that this insanity is one of degree, not of kind. Ralph Samuelson is of view that if Sir William Bradshaw were to have ‘examined’ Clarissa Dalloway as he does Septimus, he would without a question have pronounced her case nearly as serious as Septimus; even though she is unlike Septimus capable of rational behaviour in dealing with the small surface problems of daily living. (Kincer,1954)

Leon Edel points out that Mrs Dalloway’s mind that of Septimus Warren Smith’s hold the centre of the book as did those of Bloom and Dedalus in *Ulysses*. (Edel, 1964) They seem to be two facets of the same personality- indeed, the projection by Woolf of the two sides of herself. Mrs Woolf’s diary shows that she conceived this novel as an attempt to show “the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side.” (Woolf,1953) Though like Bloom and Dedalus, Septimus and Clarissa doesn’t meet; yet they being referred as “doubles” has baffled critics. Not only does their paths converge during the day, it is the doctor of Septimus, the clumsy inept Harley street psychiatrist who brings the news of Smith’s death to Mrs Dalloway’s party. This incident plunges Clarissa into a deep fantasy and identification with the unknown dead man. “What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party- the Bradshaws talked of death.” Without even knowing Septimus when in the party she hears about his suicide, she clearly opposes the values more consciously than she has yet done in the novel. She sees Bradshaw as a threat to everyone who believes, as she does so highly in the necessity of spiritual and intellectual privacy, in dignity and necessary inviolability of human personality. (Samuelson, 1958) The need for the individual to withstand the conforming pressures of society- the need, in effect for some form of “insanity” within an atmosphere of Bradshaws is expressed in Mrs Dalloway. The worth of individual personality and the need for its expression, the affirmation of diversity itself is what the novel celebrates as a definite view of life. After returning from the Great War when the soldier Septimus finds it difficult to adjust, experts like Bradshaw tries to confine his imaginative flight as a mental illness and tries to take him away to the mental hospital. His the then decision to suicide is a way of defiance, as Clarissa observes; in order to save his soul from the societal clutches. Septimus’ suicide is the last expression of his individuality. His death is not an “escape from responsibilities” (the usual stigma that is associated with suicide). His suicide is a final stand; it is righteously- heroic. The crude parallel between the roles of Mrs Dalloway and Septimus is obvious and their links are often made

through the “life” metaphor. Septimus’ participation in life is interrupted, as was Clarissa’s, by one of the compellers, Dr Holmes. His suicide is a protest against having his life forcibly remade by others. She recognizes his death has a further meaning in relation to his life and hers. By killing himself, he had defied the men who make life intolerable, and though he had “thrown it away,” he had not lost his independence of the soul. He preserved it. By contrast, Clarissa realize that she has sacrificed her soul, her identity to a huge extent. It is that side of her which can be associated with a man. She had made compromises for the sake of social success, “She had schemed; she had pilfered.” (Brower,1951)

On surface, they might seem quite dissimilar but embodies many characteristics and thinks pretty much in the same way. They both have beak-noses, love Shakespeare and fear oppression. As Clarissa’s double, Septimus chooses to escape his problems by killing himself, a dramatic and tragic gesture that ultimately helps Clarissa to accept her own choices as well as the society in where she lives. The physical and psychological similarity hints towards the factor that they are one. My study believes that Septimus is Clarissa, the other part of Mrs Dalloway.

On hearing his death news at her own party Clarissa withdraws herself from the rest of the party gossipers and went inside her room. His death to her, is a disgrace and she says, “Somehow it was her disaster- her disgrace. It was her punishment...here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress.” Thus the novel completes a full circle. The above quotation suggests the whole party to be a horrible travesty, as Samuelson calls it and this recalls the theme of Katherine Mansfield’s *The Garden Party*. Clarissa understood his suicide as a ‘defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically evades them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death.’ (Wright, 2006) As Makiko Minow-Pinkney says, what is crucial is not Clarissa decipher Septimus’ suicide but that she deciphers it, a relationship is thus established between the two figures. ‘She felt very like him.’ (Minow-Pinkney, 1987) Woolf probably for the first time tries to show that the ‘animus’ is not inside and outside the body in its full flesh and blood and only when that flesh gets destroyed it can return back to its original holder.

Androgyny for Woolf and many feminist critics was a way of liberating women from the negative forces placed by patriarchy on their sex. Carolyn Heilburn in *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny* stated that the term ‘did not mean hermaphrodite, or ... bisexual or homosexual’. It meant for Woolf to be “fully human”. (Wright, 2006) Thus, going by the Woolfian concept

of the definition, the patriarchy which expects Clarissa and women like her to be only women (that is to be domesticated, submissive and without rationality) is obstructing her full growth and suppressing the androgynous identity that is present in all. The adventurous spirit is lost. The androgynous identity defines the personality where the mind must contain both sexes in order to be truly productive. She states, "It is fatal to be man or a woman pure and simple; one must be a woman-manly or a man-womanly". Ellen Carol Jones argues that *Orlando* is more woman than man because "woman is defined by the absence of stable position. In this sense, *Orlando* is 'woman' precisely because she changes sex". (Wright, 2006) Keeping this concept in mind, Clarissa tries to settle for a stable state by marrying Richard. If she would have wedded the adventurous Peter then as she feared her this stability would have been lost. Peter, being a man was allowed to be adventurous and try his luck and marry in life

whenever he wanted but Clarissa who wished the same is aware of the fact that she is not allowed to do so as she is a woman. Thus she have to make a choice and kill her that 'manly' self which wants the adventure and marry the eligible suitor Richard Dalloway.

Mrs Dalloway, as the novel progresses realise the fact that the suppression of her other side is turning her insane much like Septimus but with a difference that she has put on the mask of 'sanity'. He is projected as her other self and without whom the formation of androgynous identity is not possible. His leaping out of the window and committing suicide makes her feel somewhat better inside as if her claustrophobia gets decreased. Since it's an open-ended text, her life after Septimus' death is not divulged. Probably the hidden psychological androgynous identity would find its platform after his death and her coming out of the room to join the party might resurface her older self as well, ultimately forming the perfect balance.

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