

# The Dismantling of Rationality, Heterosexuality and Patriarchy in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway: Debunking the officially sanctioned normative discourses

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## ABSTRACT

*Virginia Woolf's modernist novel Mrs Dalloway (1925) offers an insight into the psychoscape of the characters, their inmost thoughts and anxieties, worries as well as the resistance and dismantling of the apparently normative discourses and the dominant repressive ideology. The agencies of control include ideological state apparatuses as well as repressive state apparatuses; the former controlling directly through coercion while the latter controlling via indirection by stratifying and dominating the minds of the masses into desired subject positions. Woolf registers her own excruciating experience of loss and pain due to societal control and ingeniousness of medical science as an agent of overweening control over the psychological aberrant, his mind and body; the final gesture of this rebellion being Woolf's own suicide by drowning herself into a river. The pre-eminence of male-centred discourse of rationality, heterosexuality, and patriarchy to the total censure of the emotive, the irrational, sexual dissidence and psychological deviance is undercut in the novel as a deliberate ruse employed by the establishment constituted by the chauvinistic male principle for the maintenance and perpetuation of their autonomy, capricious whims and to camouflage their inconsistent, erratic, fickle and shifty nature as well as to mould their judgement as per circumstances.*

**Keywords:** Normative epistemological discourse, Capitalist class, Hegemony, Resistance, Sexual dissidence, Madness, Psychological aberration.

## INTRODUCTION

Septimus Smith is presented in the novel as a victim of society's judgemental and formulaic exercise of power and the discourse of medicine prevalent in the times, subjecting human being to the frosty gaze of the other which freezes the individual into a formulated phrase. This stratifying gaze is highly reminiscent of T.S.Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin

The eyes that have fixed Septimus constitute the complacent gaze of the establishment, the power structures which govern and modulate the political

strategies and normative discursive practices while preserving their own power- position and self- interest.

Septimus, a victim of the shell shock, disillusioned with the inhuman, merciless and gratuitous loss of human life, the indignity and ignominy in the life of a common soldier, has realized the blatant lie behind the passionate fervour of hyper- nationalism. It brings to mind the registration of an intense sense of futility and the loss of human life and the nugatory aspect of wars and battles as represented in literary works. In a self-written article titled "From Modern to Post-Modern: A Sociological Analysis of Genet's *The Balcony*" published in a journal, this aspect is elucidated as follows:

The irrationality and chaotic off-handedness of the battle is reminiscent of Stephen Spender's "Two Armies":

*Once a boy hummed a popular marching song,  
Once a novice hand flapped the salute;  
The voice was choked the lifted hand fell,  
Shot through the wrist by those of his own side.*

and the helter- skelter confused soldier, in Charlie Chaplin's film "The Great Dictator" (1940). A highly self-centred General (in Genet's *The Balcony*), he is concerned only with the first person 'I' and 'my'. The common soldier's death is just a decorative detail to enhance the General's glorified image. The deplorable plight of the war situation has found emphatic expression in Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1985), where Mother Courage remarks that victories are for those to celebrate who run the war machinery. In a war, the lot of the poor man is always disastrous: hunger, deprivation and strife. She remarks:

*They're ruined, that's what. They are so hungry I've  
seen them digging up roots to eat. I could boil your  
leather belt and make their mouths water with it.*  
(Brecht 14) (Mittal, 14).

Hence, the irrationality of the war is camouflaged under the discourse of virtue, bravery, manly fortitude and courage. The aforementioned textual instances substantiate the extent of idiocy, coldness and dehumanization that war entails. This psychosis associated with war is registered with immediate cogency by the common soldier, not by the policy making parliamentary federation. They are immune to the immediate impact of the frontier and act as, what Bernard Shaw calls, "arm-chair revolutionaries". Such arm-chair revolutionaries in Mrs Dalloway are Richard Dalloway and Lady Bruton. For Septimus, the first hand experience of war becomes unbearable.

Septimus's mental divergence from normative behaviour can be understood through Foucault's idea of how and why society created the terminology of 'madness' to acquire power over all aberrants; to fortify the power position of the establishment through an alliance with the normative, the sanctioned, the legitimate code of conduct in a civilized society; and further to annul and quash any possibility of alternate modes of thinking that go against the grain of authoritative, epistemological power-centred discourse.

Septimus Smith's psychological aberration, which is understood as a sign of apathy, inertia, distraction, indifference or madness is actually a sign of greater perspicuity in perceiving reality, an intense analysis of profound truths of life or an existentialist search for the meaning of existence beneath the apparent emptiness and inconsequentiality of life. Significant parallels exist between Septimus Smith and Virginia Woolf. Both attempt to understand life on their own terms, discarding all pre-arranged givens. For both, life itself becomes a "writerly" or a "scriptible text", open to their own interpretations:

"It is this writing that gives me my proportions", writes Woolf in her diary, pointing out the fact that the written word is her own way of defeating madness which she defines (through the perspective of Sir William Bradshaw, one of Woolf's voices in *Mrs Dalloway*) as "not having a sense of proportions." (Nicolae)

But there is a significant difference. Virginia Woolf maintains her sanity by giving vent to her psychological vacillations and waverings; by finding an apt register for her manifold thought processes and discursive dissidence from the dominant epistemological discourses. This exercise finds fruition in providing her with space for a free play of mind, whereas Bradshaw's 'proportion' finds materialization in delimiting the interpolator's choices; in circumscribing, policing, restricting his awareness to fixed knowledge systems, which are defined by himself. While the author's impulse is defined by lack of fixities, eccentricity in expression, iconoclastic expression of ideas; Bradshaw's medical discourse makes it incumbent on him to fix human beings into fixed frames, treat them like robotic scientific machines, and apply stringent laws on psychological deviants.

According to the narrator, men like Bradshaw "secluded her lunatics, forbade child-birth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion." (Woolf.) The lineaments of Proportion in its exactness will be frozen in a fixed definition by the bastions of civilized society. The word is therefore appended with the connotations of a sense of balance, symmetry, wholeness, equilibrium, poise and steadiness, all of which are mercurial, relative and subjective terms. Hence, the very foundation of Bradshaw's, the bastion of society's normative categories is devious, dubious as well as deceitful.

Woolf expresses her outrage at psychiatry's assumed control and absolute power over the patient, the patient's complete surrender of his autonomy, and the physician's assumption of an overwhelming and a fantastic power over him. Septimus Smith, who has witnessed his friend Evans blown up in the war, is further outstripped under the care of Bradshaw.

In Foucauldian terms examination of the patient is a technique of a case study of a patient subjecting him to the gaze of a normalizing judgement, a gaze qualified to classify and punish the specimen.

Foucault expatiates that "power is everywhere"; that power is not singular and concentrated, but diffuse and dispersed; that it is not just yielded by power groups via acts of domination and coercion; rather, power is in constant flux and negotiation and is constituted through variations in forms of knowledge, scientific understanding and truth.

In Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction* (published 1984, just after his death), he begins with the premise that there is no "system of domination" exerted over one group by another that "pervades the entire social body":

"It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization." (Foucault, 92)

Interestingly, all of the aforementioned variables are controlled, manipulated and directed by the dominant power groups; yet, the silenced voices of the marginalized groups play an instrumental role in confronting, resisting and finally subverting the dominant discourse. These peripheral voices find a leeway through the cracks and fissures which the dominant discourse attempts to conceal. In Gramsci's concept of hegemony, the capitalist class maintained control not just through violence and political and economic coercion, but more significantly through ideology. The bourgeoisie established a hegemonic culture, which propagated its own values and norms as the common sense values for all people, so as to subsume, contain and repress all voices of dissent.

In the novel *Big Ben* acts as the most cogent marker of rationalism and unflinching coherence, strict policing of social deviance, operative ascendancy of reasoning faculty, careful taxonomizing, supremacy of totalizing knowledge systems:

Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. (*Dalloway*, 4)

Here, Clarissa's free play of mind, imagination, her love of flowers, her sensitivity and a positive response to the impressions of nature, her empathy with the sufferer, are pitted against the irrevocable, irretrievable, harsh, grating, exasperating sound of the tolling of the hours registered by Big Ben. Roxanne J. Fand remarks:

"Since Woolf foregrounds the microevents that enter into thought and feeling and marginalizes the macroevents, her work defamiliarizes conventional narrative and tends to induce altered or subversive states of attention in the reader" (Fand, 49)

The time *Big Ben* navigates is standard time, the highly objective, rationalized, teleological, linear and orderly mode of time which contrasts with the non-standard, disorderly, non-rationalized, non-linear, introspective mode of time lived by characters like Clarissa *Dalloway* and Septimus Smith. The latter mode of experiential, psychological time allows latitude for human feelings

and emotions whereas the former standard rational mode of time circumscribes human being into an analogous model of the time-machine, an automaton, incapacitated to think and feel the rhythm of life. Interestingly, based on this dual notion of time, the novel is poised between two sets of characters. In an article titled "The Concept of Self in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*", Cristina Nicolae, aptly remarks:

"On the one hand, there are characters in Woolf's fiction to which the impersonal, egoless state brings about a feeling of anxiety, of terror and despair as a result of felt powerlessness, of lack of control over "the impersonal universe of chaos", as she calls it, over time. On the other hand there are characters for whom the egoless state results in a feeling of liberation, of peace." (Nicolae, 691)

The authority of 'leaden circles' is entrenched by the placement of Big Ben at the houses of Parliament in Westminster. The power of Big Ben is aligned in the British National imagination with the legislative authority of the Houses of Parliament in Westminster. The connotations of Big Ben, along with its physical location, align it with the establishment and authoritative cultural discourse and the legislative authority of the houses of the parliament. This is evinced in the potency of the medical discourse upheld by Dr Bradshaw, 'the ghostly helper, the priest of science'. It is the supremacy of the dominant discourse of medicine finding an objective correlative in Big Ben, and made operative through the parliamentary procedures which secures the extradition of shell-shocked soldiers off the streets of London. The potency of the dominant discourse is instrumental in approving Lady Bruton's proposal to ship 'superfluous youth' to Canada. The same meta-discourse deprives England's psychological deviants of the basic right of survival.

Petar Penda in an article titled "Politicising Cityscape: London in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*" discusses the ideological operations of power:

"The way power and oppression are exerted is quite subtle and inconspicuous. It is related to the feelings of non-being and emptiness that Clarissa and the rest have. According to Terry Eagleton in *After Theory*, human beings cannot ever possess the sense of meaning, 'since neither can those who fashion it' (212). Its fashioning implies that it has been created as an artifice for a certain purpose and that it does not exist as something within us, but is either imposed or accepted through free will. Eagleton later adds that 'our present political order is based upon the non-being of human deprivation' (221) and suggests that this spiritual void and our desire for meaning enable those in power to rule by giving us something to fill the fissures of our lives. As human beings desire something tangible, our materialistic nature craves the material. If we generalise this statement and take it as universal for any political order, then it can be well applied to *Mrs Dalloway*" (Penda, 1)

Penda explains how the impact of World War I, the devastation and casualties exceeding three million people, along with a concomitant of unemployment, damaged economies and welfare systems, there arose a greater need for imposition of social order through political action and the facade of giving meaning to life seemed more than necessary at this chronotopic moment. That is why the nature of order imposed by the establishment is both political, self-serving and ideological. The social order, hence, imposed by the parliamentary procedures as well as medical science is a coercive or ideological political act:

“The streetscape of Bond Street with its shops, flying flags and radiance offers a vague possibility of bridging the gap between the emptiness and its fulfilment, a prospect that the characters’ desires may be quenched.” (Penda,1)

Mrs Dalloway does not have a well-formulated narrative structure. Many narratives work simultaneously on various levels. There is an intricate interweaving of time and memory. There’s the physical, concrete, external, linear, absolute, time chimed by Big Ben, as it booms across the city centre with morbid precision. The fetish with Big Ben and its social and moral connotations are stratified in the dominant power structures and discursive practices. Woolf disapproves of the excessive premium placed on precision, exactness and accuracy and attempts to create some space and validity for alternate modes of thinking by inscribing her novel in the more fluid, chaotic aspect of psychological time, registering the sense of fragmentation, discontinuity and consequent introversion. Woolf attaches immense significance to the random-seeming micro- events which she includes as part of the subliminal consciousness:

“Septimus is alienated by a doubly monologic situation: he is mad insofar as he ignores others, being fixated on his own states, while those who ignore his truth are equally mad, as Mrs. Dalloway understands.” (Fand, 49)

The normative dominant heterosexual normative discourse is undercut in the figure of Doris Kilman, Clarissa’s daughter’s history teacher who has a German ancestry. Doris Kilman adores Elizabeth, Clarissa’s daughter. However, she dislikes Clarissa and Clarissa dislikes her. Clarissa feels uncomfortable about her daughter’s inordinate liking for Kilman. She wants her daughter to endorse and testify to the normative code of conduct, a heterosexual relationship. However, Clarissa is not just tacitly conscious about her own failing marriage with Richard Dalloway, she is simultaneously nostalgically reminded of her own sexual attraction for Sally Seton. Clarissa was impressed by Sally Seton’s wild manners: a handsome ragamuffin who smoked cigars and would say anything, liberated, undaunted, uninhibited. Clarissa regrets not having accepted herself as she was. She regrets not having lived the way she wanted to live; her regret is all

about conformity, self-repression and acquiescence with the sanctioned legitimate world-view:

Oh if she could have had her life over again! she thought, stepping onto the pavement, could have looked even differently! (Woolf, 9)

Clarissa who wishes to maintain the facade of normative behavioural pattern has seen the discrepancies, the lacunae and the madness inherent in what is termed the ‘normative’ in these socially sanctioned codes. The discursive binary of sanity and madness falls apart. We are reminded of Hamlet’s ‘reason in madness’. Madness appended to Septimus’ psychological aberrance has more validity than the insensitivity and the irrationality inscribed in the dominant normative scientific, medical, political and rational discourses.

The novel is placed at the chronotopic juncture of the inter-war period. On the socio-political front, the British Empire was in decline. Britain’s colonial rule was being strongly resisted and questioned in countries like India. In England, the labour party, with its plans for economic reform, was beginning to challenge the conservative party, with its emphasis on self-aggrandisement and imperial business interests. In this scenario, we realize that there emerges a certain alliance between the conservative party, imperialism and the dominant discourse of oppression, control and self-centred ethic of apathy, insensitivity towards the other, egocentric, self-seeking utilitarianism. Such a negative, life-denying ethic is embodied in characters like Richard Dalloway and Lady Bruton. Their self-centred complacency, nurtured by their own solipsistic consciousness, harsh conventional rigidity and suppression of inner font of life incapacitates them to appreciate poetry and the beauty of nature. A direct antithesis to this set of characters stand characters like Clarissa and Septimus Smith, whose aesthetic sense and the capacity to appreciate poetry evinces a positive, receptive bent of mind, prolific emotional and sensitive springs and anti-establishment stream of emancipated thought process.

Interestingly, the latter set of characters offer a strong anti-establishment discursive challenge to the stringently fortified dominant discourse of the former. Richard Dalloway finds Shakespeare’s Sonnets indecent and he compares reading them to listening at a key-hole. Richard finds difficulty in expressing himself. Lady Bruton, who cares to invite Richard Dalloway for dinner, does not bother to invite his wife, Clarissa, for the same. Lady Bruton never reads poetry either. Her demeanour is also so rigid and impersonal that she has a reputation for caring more for politics than for people. Here, we have a stonified, self-gratifying, psychological ethic of remaining complacent and fortified in one’s own fake superciliousness. In contrast, Clarissa reads a few lines from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* in a book displayed in a shop window. The lines which come from a funeral hymn are suggestive of how death

can be accepted as a release from the constraints of life. Clarissa, who otherwise favours death, finds an alternative hopeful way of addressing the prospect of death. Before the war, Septimus appreciated Shakespeare. He even aspired to be a poet. The aftermath of the war is that he no longer finds solace in poetry.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the subversive power derives from these insignificant little narratives where we witness the protagonist's love for flowers, for the commonplace sights and smells of London, her appreciation of Shakespeare, her love for life itself:

June had drawn out every leaf on the trees. The mothers of Pimlico gave suck to their young. Messages were passing from the Fleet to the Admiralty. Arlington Street and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the very air in the Park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved. To dance, to ride, she had adored all that. (Woolf, 6)

The imagination, positivity, sensitivity and emotional springs of characters like Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith pose anti-establishment resistance to the pro-establishment ethic of complacency, insensitivity and self-centred freeze of characters like Richard Dalloway and Lady Bruton. In the midst of these two categories stand characters like Peter Walsh, absolutely unsure of themselves, where they stand, with completely muddled, bewildered, cluttered sense of identity. Characters like Walsh waste time dawdling and vacillating between this and that; they are comparable to T.S.Eliot's, "we are the hollow men, we are the stuffed men, headpiece filled with straw..." A priggish and fastidious hypocrite, Peter Walsh is quick to criticise people. He is utterly unsparing towards his beloved Clarissa. Later on, Clarissa realizes that currently he is in love with a certain Daisy, a married woman in India and has come to London to secure her divorce. His indecision and gratuitous vacillation amongst the available choices is the cause of his ridicule. Peter, a self-centred dithering hypocrite, a supercilious sham, excessively judgemental about Clarissa, insensitive towards the emotions of his interpolator, unable to appreciate the beauty of things:

But Peter – however beautiful the day might be, and the trees and the grass, and the little girl in pink – Peter never saw a thing of all that. He would put on his spectacles, if she told him to; he would look. It was the state of the world that interested him; Wagner, Pope's poetry, people's characters eternally, and the defects of her own soul. How he scolded her! How they argued! She would marry a Prime Minister and stand at the top of a staircase; the perfect hostess he called her (she had cried over it in her bedroom), she had the makings of the perfect hostess, he said. (Woolf, 7)

The chronotopic juncture of the novel (1923) and the historicity of the text entails a definite disillusionment with the British empire. Though the nineteenth century was the period of the expansion and the flowering of

the British Empire into many countries like India, Nigeria and South Africa; the invincibility of the Empire got a rude shock from the World War I. The English were found vulnerable on their own land. The Allies technically won the war, but the extent of devastation England suffered made the victory insignificant. English citizens lost much of their faith in the Empire. England could no longer claim to be invulnerable and all-powerful. English citizens like Clarissa and Septimus could feel the failure of the empire as much as their own personal failure.

Those citizens who prevaricate reality check, the gradual decline and disintegration of the old establishment and its oppressive values are Aunt Helena and Lady Bruton.

The threat of oppression forms a perpetual backdrop for Clarissa and Septimus. Septimus chooses to evade the oppressive social pressure to conform by committing suicide. This is also a gesture of release from the grating harshness of official medical discourse and against all authoritative normative behavioural patterns. The strict rule-bound demarcation between categories like right and wrong, social etiquette and mannerisms and lack of them, fixities of religion, science and social convention are undermined in a single stroke. A big question mark is posited on the validity and feasibility of the dominant normative discursive practices. Are societal norms maintained as enhancing beneficiaries of society or as life-annihilating abortive moralistic codes, detrimental to the sustenance of individual well-being, denuding them of what Ibsen would call the joy of life, the immanence of unexplained ecstasy and blissful contentedness. In the context of the spatio-temporal chronotope of the novel, the characters are precariously poised between a desire for self-expression and a simultaneous compulsive need for privacy; desire for life and fear of impending death; fear of psychological disintegration and suicidal thoughts. On the one hand, there are characters like William Bradshaw, Aunt Helena, Lady Bruton and Richard Dalloway, who live in their own illusionistic sphere of self-complacent security about their self-righteous, self-sure championing of the English tradition and the official political polemics. There's a certain superciliousness and insensitivity appended to their behavioural patterns. Aunt Helena, with her eye glasses is turning into an artefact; her eyeglasses are perhaps symptomatic of her inability or unwillingness to see the empire's disintegration. Lady Bruton remains frozen in her own self-delusive psychological stasis, condescension and disdain towards others.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf finds an apt register for presenting the unfounded aspect, illogicality, non-acceptability of socially sanctioned norms. The self-centred, self gratifying ethos of the establishment, which formulates the normative standards of conduct as well as the punitive measures for the delinquents,

are exposed thread-bare. Dominant official ideology is posited as the normative standard behavioural code and masks the ulterior power motive of the establishment. Both form and content cohere in undercutting the official epistemological discourse of medicine, heterosexuality, rationality and patriarchy. There is a simultaneous attempt at creation of an alternate space which accommodates and validates dissident discourses of homosexuality, the emotive, the irrational and the imaginative panorama of artistic freedom.

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