



Reconstructing Female Identity: A Feminist Analysis of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway through Liberal and Existentialist Perspectives

Resti Rahmadani

English Education, Faculty of Training Teacher and Education, University of Bengkulu
restirahmadani40@gmail.com

Ayu Hudzaifah

English Education, Faculty of Training Teacher and Education, University of Bengkulu
ayuhudzaifah@unib.ac.id

Corresponding email: restirahmadani40@gmail.com

Abstract

This research aims to analyze the feminist aspects reflected in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. The study focuses on how the novel portrays women's struggle for identity, freedom, and equality within a patriarchal society. Using a qualitative descriptive method and the frameworks of liberal feminism (Virginia Woolf) and existentialist feminism (Simone de Beauvoir), this research examines the characterization, narrative techniques, and social context presented in the novel. Data are collected from textual analysis of the novel and supported by secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and previous feminist studies. The analysis reveals that Virginia Woolf portrays women as complex individuals who resist traditional gender roles and seek autonomy in defining their existence. The protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, represents the internal conflict between societal expectations and personal desires, reflecting the limitations imposed on women in early 20th-century England. Furthermore, Woolf's use of the stream of consciousness technique effectively exposes women's psychological depth and suppressed voices. The findings show that through Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf not only criticizes patriarchal structures but also advocates for female independence, self-awareness, and gender equality.

Keywords: *Mrs. Dalloway; Existentialist Feminism; Liberal Feminism*

Introduction

Virginia Woolf is one of the important figures in modernist literature who is known for her courage in raising the themes of women, identity, and criticism of the patriarchal social system. One of her famous works, Mrs. Dalloway (1925) is a literary work that is a relevant object because it depicts the inner life of upper-middle-class women in British society after World War I. Through stream of consciousness techniques, Woolf deeply explores social demands, pressure from gender norms, and loss of identity. At the end same time, this novel also presents the second main character, that is Septimus, as a symbol of men's suffering due to the war system. The complexity of the narrative and the depth of meaning make Mrs. Dalloway an important work to be analyzed within the framework of criticism of feminism, psychology, and sociology. This study uses a liberal feminist approach, which highlights the importance of individual freedom and gender equality, as well as existentialist feminism, which emphasizes women's search for meaning in life and identity in a tense social structure. Liberal feminism aims to make women aware that they are on the side of oppression (Aulia, et al. 2024). Meanwhile, existentialist feminism sees that problems happen in women because burden of production on women's bodies (Siswadi, 2022)

As with the progress of the times, they play a role in people's lives; unfortunately, women still play a supporting role that is not within their scope. Patriarchal culture is still inherent in modern times. Even though there have been technological advances, this does not prevent gender standardization from

occurring. This is what makes the relationship unequal, because there are groups that control other groups. In this case, men are the center of all systems regarding the movement of women. This gives rise to discrimination from within society itself, carried out from generation to generation. This standardization narrows women's space as the axis of civilization; they must be required to stay at home, taking care of children, even though this is a shared task. Another example is being a taxi driver, which is actually done by men, but women can also be drivers like men. Potentially, this relationship causes relationships on the women's side to become unequal, subordinate, marginalized, unfair, oppressive, controlling, and can have an exploitative impact (Mohajan, 2022). The impact of patriarchy on women's side includes stigma, violence, double burdens, marginalization, and a lowering of dignity. On the men's side, they actually get the opposite, such as privileges, freedom, control, and power.

Gender standardization refers to the compartmentalization of men's and women's roles. This is a label for feminine (women) and masculine (men) gender attributes. In fact, this is a form of feminism, namely an ideology that demands equal rights between men and women in provisions such as politics, decision-making, having a foothold, and having children (Mohajan, 2022). Feminine and masculine are not fixed, but a combination where each gender must have these two labels in life. From this label, it becomes a separate characteristic for women and men. Men are braver and not whiny, which makes many men emotionally stiff, even though it is important for their health. Meanwhile, women are labeled as being softer, motherlier, and more emotional, so many women always obey rules, which is actually not always good for them. This is what limits women's space in life, especially after marriage; women tend not to be their own artists anymore. Women work a lot and behave according to the norms that exist in the habits of their society. This is not something that has just happened; in fact, it has been rooted in the past, which apparently does not see a place for this patriarchy to occur. The proof is the novel by Virginia Woolf entitled *Mrs. Dalloway*, which was published in 1925 as proof of identity of women who are labeled as feminine but in the wrong understanding of the concept.

Mrs. Dalloway is considered one of the pioneers of modern editions of feminist literature. This book describes social life in upper-middle-class England after World War I, and also subtly explores the limited role of women in patriarchal British society at the beginning of the 20th century. In that century, women also did not receive enough appreciation (Jweid, 2021). This shows that feminism was created a long time ago in society, reflecting that women are inferior to men. This created repeated treatment where women are placed in the domestic position, while men are freed to take up politics. As a figure, Clarissa Dalloway is shown to represent a woman who seems socially perfect. This happened because Clarissa Dalloway was the wife of a politician, lived in comfort, and was busy with the magnificent parties that were often held at her house. Clarissa becomes a creature used to complement men's interests (Maulid, 2022). But behind that, the author, in this case Virginia Woolf, shows the emptiness and inner isolation of women in a social system that limits women's freedom and identity. In this context, the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* not only depicts post-war social realities, but also becomes a medium for criticism of the patriarchal system that restrains women, especially in terms of social roles, marriage, identity, and their inner psychological space.

At that time, English society placed women in a domestic position, while men were free to move in any space. This indicates that no matter how smart and cool a woman was at that time, she would still be placed in the house, as if her soul was being subtly silenced. Even in her own novel, Virginia Woolf said that "She would not say of anyone in the world now that were this or were that. She felt very young; at the same time, unspeakably aged." This quote reflects how Clarissa feels a contradiction in identity; she is young in spirit and mind, but old because she is confined in a social structure that limits women's movement. Virginia Woolf uses 3 female characters to represent views on patriarchy. Sally, Clarissa's close friend who lives an unconventional life, rejects women's traditions but eventually gives in. Miss Kilman represents women outside the system, because she is depicted as physically unattractive, does not follow the upper-class rules of beauty and feminine manners, so that Miss Kilman's role becomes marginalized. Clarissa is a figure who accepts the system, living in a safe but depressed way.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf conveys that marriage is not something that makes people happy, but, on the contrary, it is a space that limits and blurs a woman's identity. Dalloway's decision to marry Richard was not based on love, but on safety from social demands. The decision to refuse to marry Peter indicates that Clarissa adheres to upper-middle-class social norms that value stability and reputation above personal feelings. Even though in the end Clarissa seems to be a successful woman,

because she is symbolized as a politician's wife, host of big parties, behind that, she feels empty. Clarissa often laments her life choices because they cause existential confusion and loss of identity. Virginia Woolf mentioned that the impact of marriage on women is often a mechanism for taming women, eliminating choices, and weakening their voices. This theme of alienation is also reinforced through the character of Septimus, a World War I veteran who experienced mental disorders but was ignored by the medical and government systems. Like Clarissa, Septimus also loses space to be himself. The presence of these two main figures voices criticism of the patriarchal and capitalist system, which suppresses individual identity, both women and men.

In this context, the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* not only displays post-war social life, but also becomes a tool to criticize the patriarchal order that closes down women's voices, limits individual freedom, and eliminates human identity, both for women and men. This study uses a liberal feminism approach, which is reflected in the thoughts of Virginia Woolf, and uses existentialist feminism, which is influenced by the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, to analyze the dynamics of women's identity and freedom in the novel. Feminist analysis of this novel will help to understand the dynamics and impact of patriarchy experienced by Mrs. Dalloway to looking for identity and to find the meaning of life.

Research Methodology

This research employs qualitative descriptive analysis. The descriptive method is a study that describes the object of research to explore its problems based on facts. Qualitative research also presents descriptive discussions by displaying the speech, writings, and actions of the object under study (Nugrahani 2014, cit. Aulia et al. 2024). This method aims to describe the role of the main character in Virginia Woolf's legendary novel, "*Mrs. Dalloway*." Mrs. Dalloway is portrayed as a figure representing a feminist attitude towards the system in England at that time, which is still relevant to life today. The research data consists of quotations about attitudes that indicate feminism in the main character's life. The data analysis technique used was qualitative analysis with data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

Findings and Discussion

From the perspective of liberal feminism, Clarissa is a symbol of how women are conditioned to accept domestic roles to maintain social status and stability. Despite her apparent success, Clarissa does not have complete control over her life. This study uses two main theories: liberal feminism and existentialist feminism. Liberal feminism focuses more on the importance of the rights and freedoms of all people being equal. Liberal feminism aims to create a society that is just and cares about freedom to develop with each other (Aulia et al., 2024). Existential feminism focuses on the social and cultural identity of women in society. This confirms that gender differences cannot only be seen from a cultural perspective (Marx 2003 as cited in Siswadi, 2022). Existentialists state that women's oppression is the life of a society that uses a patriarchal system. All the characters portrayed by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* display the pressures women face and the space they have to move because of the social order. Virginia Woolf shows these pressures in the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*, who represented every order in ancient times, and had an impact on each individual's choices.

But it needs to be underlined that the patriarchy discussed in this novel is a social system that regulates society based on male domination, not only individual attitudes, but also includes institutional norms and rules. Based on the setting in *Mrs. Dalloway's* novel, which takes place in the early 20th century, specifically in England. At that time, women in society had limited roles in the household and social events. Meanwhile, men can have political careers, and the public sphere is indeed dominated by men. Law and morality really emphasize that women are only 'supporters' and not the main subjects. This is very clearly depicted in the main character, Clarissa, who plays the role of the perfect wife and social host. It is a social rule that is not an individual choice. This does seem quite similar to masculinity but masculinity is not a social system but rather traits or behaviors associated with men. If women adopt attitudes such as aggressive, ambitious, assertive, then this is called masculinity, not patriarchy. In terms of impact, patriarchy limits women's identity and life choices, whereas masculinity can be an individual strategy but does not replace the structure. As Clarissa said, "*There being no more marrying,*

no more having of children now" (Woolf, 1925), shows that the role of women in themselves is closely related to marriage and reproduction. After marriage, Clarissa's living space did not develop, and this is a patriarchal structure that is not just individual behavior.

To explore this research, the author uses two main theories- liberal feminism and existentialist feminism. Actually, liberal feminism is not an ideology that demands a higher status than men, but an ideology that shows how women have power over themselves (Sangeetha et al. 2022). Liberal feminism refers to equal rights and opportunities for education, politics, and economics, as well as how to be a woman as a rational citizen. In Mrs. Dalloway's novel, women are excluded from public spaces and institutions. Meanwhile, existentialist feminism was proposed by Simone de Beauvoir, namely to examine the depiction of emotion as a real woman, but still able to exist (Martinus & Marsih, 2022). Existentialists focus on subjectivity, freedom of choice, and women as 'the other'. In the context of patriarchy, Clarissa becomes a woman who is reduced to a role, not a subject who chooses. Patriarchy in Mrs. Dalloway novel consists of a system that has a structural (public) and existential (inner meaning of life) impact. This is not masculinity, which constructs character and identity as a rational, strong, and dominant man. But this is a matter of patriarchy, which is formed from a social and power system that prioritizes men, regulates roles based on text, and determines who has authority (political, medical, moral, household).

Patriarchal Structures and The Limitation of Female Roles

In British society at that time, women were always positioned in the domestic sector, while men could move freely in all areas. In this novel, Clarissa, as an intelligent and educated woman, still does not have space to express herself. The early 20th century was a tense time for women individually were not appreciated enough (Jweid, 2021). Politically, they do not have the right to vote; legally, great power is always on the side of men. Socially and culturally, women are always expected to behave submissively and are limited to narrow gender norms. Economically, women only work in the kitchen (in the house), and educationally, it is very difficult for women to have the opportunity to study.

This is clearly illustrated in a quote from the novel Mrs. Dalloway's "*She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen, unknown, there being no more marrying, no more having children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them*" (Woolf. 1925), this quote reflects Clarissa's as an 'invisible' person, notably women condition where they have married. This is Woolf's criticism of the patriarchal system that makes women just exist without social visibility. This is in line with the Liberal feminism concept that highlights inequality, rights, opportunity, and recognition of women as individual in patriarchy social structure.

A physically stable life, but impacted by the conflict between identity and social roles that was experienced by Clarissa, is really turbulent. As "liberal feminism, this is caused by the feelings of frustration and resentment of Western society, which is unsupportive of women in life" (Ningrum, 2024). Clarissa feels alienated from herself. Remembering her youthful relationship with Sally, Clarissa remembers not only love but also a moment of freedom and existential wholeness that has been lost. This dissatisfaction implies that her marriage symbolically became a torture that robbed her of her autonomy in life. This form of frustration strengthens Woolf's criticism of the social order that defines women through their roles, not through their complete humanity.

Female Consciousness, Internal Conflict, and Existential Anxiety

The party held at Clarissa's house becomes a symbol of the social stage where identities are formed and performed. Woolf uses how women try to create new meanings in the narrow spaces provided by the patriarchal system. Clarissa has no other alternative to express her existence other than through the superficial roles that society assigns her. Meanwhile, humans with the capacity for reason are subjects of equality and freedom who have the right to be universal humans (Goel & Sinha, 2022). This shows that without personal space and structural freedom; women remain confined to shallow social roles even though they appear 'empowered' on the surface.

Clarissa asks about her existence, the meaning of life, and death- this happens due to the power of meaning, which seems to ask, 'what am I living for?'. In the narrative of the novel Mrs. Dalloway "*Did it matter then, she asked herself, waling towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to*

believe that death ended absolutely?" Woolf (1925). The quote shows that the oppression of the patriarchal social structure also touches the inner level. In the view of existentialist feminism, Clarissa is described as a woman who was "born as a human but was forced to become a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949). This shows that his life is going on, but not really chosen.

In line with the concept of 'the other' by Simone de Beauvoir, women are positioned not as active subjects in society but only as complements. Beauvoir gives three reasons to emphasize the existence of women as equal to men: 1) Women have to work so they can develop themselves, 2) Women should be intellectuals, and 3) Women must reject subordination and become agents of social transformation (Azzahra, 2022). Inequality in Clarissa's life, who does not have the space to contribute to her work and express herself, simply because of social expectations that limit women's potential. Clarissa presents a critique of the English social system that places women in a subordinate position. Although Clarissa comes from the upper middle class and has access to education, she still cannot transcend the frozen boundaries of gender. This shows that gender issues are not only about economics or education but also about systemic power structures.

Reconstructing Female Identity Through Awareness and Self-Definition

Even though Mrs. Dalloway describe limitation imposed by patriarchal structures and the inner conflicts experienced by its female protagonists, Woolf does not present Clarissa as a figure who openly opposes or escapes from these social boundaries. On the other hand, Woolf displays a more subtle but significant process of identity reconstruction that occurs within the consciousness of Clarissa itself. Clarissa's identity negotiation does not take the form of social rebellion but emerges through moments of self-awareness, reflection, and existential recognition.

Through a literary approach, Woolf seeks to find women's identity. In line with the gyno-criticism concept put forward by Showalter regarding the critical approach through literature, which focuses on the experiences and voices of women in literature, which seeks to read from the perspective of women as whole subjects (Showalter, 1979). Woolf presents Clarissa to provide space for readers to enter the inner world of women as an act is not only literary but also ideological.

Woolf presents Clarissa as a woman in a dual position- inside and outside. Inside, she experiences a life that is not herself; outside, she reflects on the life she lives. "*She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced a knife through everything; at the same was outside, looking on*" (Woolf, 1925). This is the moment of identity reconstruction. Clarissa is no longer completely immersed in her social role. She begins to realize herself as a thinking creature. Clarissa does not rebel socially, but the reconstruct her identity through self-awareness or self-definition within constraints, which is basically not the same as total liberation.

Mrs. Dalloway's novel is not only a landmark in the history of modern literature, but also becomes a tool to critique on patriarchy system that has silenced women's voices. By representing female characters who are fully aware of their identities and the conflicts that churn within them, Anisa invites readers, especially women, to recognize their existence as thinking subjects who are just as worthy and worthy of being heard as men. According to the concept of liberal feminism, gender equality can be achieved through adequate changes in society (Zhang & Rios, 2022). This makes the novel Mrs. Dalloway an important contribution to feminist literary writing, which also opens up new and greater opportunities for a literary tradition that is more inclusive and reflective of women's experiences.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Mrs. Dalloway is a pioneering stream-of-consciousness novel that shows criticism of the patriarchal system of society before the 20th century. Apart from that, through Mrs. Dalloway, writer Virginia Woolf encouraged women to become independent women. This research provides an opening for readers to reflect on the impact of patriarchy on women's freedom of thought and existential space. Independent to be able to achieve freedom of thought, action, and work. You can determine your own life and not just live to be an accessory that pleases other people. Woolf really hopes for self-awareness and gender equality for women to continue to realize how important their lives are. By displaying a patriarchal system and gender standardization, it should not limit women's potential.

References:

- Aulia, R., Nugroho, Y. E., & Supriyanto, T. (2024). *Analisis feminisme pada tokoh utama dalam novel Amba karya Laksmi Pamuntjak*. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia*, 13(1). <http://jurnal.umt.ac.id/index.php/lgrm>
- Azzahra, N. (2022). *Eksistensi perempuan dalam novel Jumhuriyyatun Ka'anna karya Alaa al-Aswany: Kajian feminisme eksistensialis Simone de Beauvoir*. *Jurnal Middle Eastern Culture & Religion Issues*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.22146/mecri.v1i2.6382>
- Beauvoir, Simone de. (2011). *The Second Sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)
- Goel, R & Sinha, G. (2022). *Research Handbook on Gender and Sexuality*. USA: Alexis Press.
- Jweid, A. N. A. (2021). *Women individuality: A critique of patriarchal society in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 22(2). <https://doi.org/10.3968/12024>
- Ningrum, W. S. (2024). *Fenomena keberhasilan feminisme (studi gender feminisme liberal dan feminisme radikal)*. *Jurnal Hukum Keluarga*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.24239/familia.v5i1.197>
- Martinus, Berya & Marsih, Linusia. (2022). Existentialist Feminism Reflected In Acevedo's "With the Fire on High". *Elite International of education, language, and literature*, 2(4). <https://doi.org/10.26740/elitejournal.v2n4.p235-243>
- Maulid, P. (2022). *Analisis feminisme liberal terhadap konsep pendidikan perempuan (studi komparatif antara pemikiran Dewi Sartika dan Rahmah El-Yanusiyah)*. *Jurnal Riset Agama*, 2(2). <https://journal.uinsgd.ac.id/index.php/jra>
- Mohajan, H.K.. (2022) An Overview on the feminism and its categories. *Munich Personal RePEc Archive*, 1(3). Retrieved from: <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/114625/>
- Showalter, E. (1979). *Towards a Feminist Poetics*. In **Elaine Showalter (Ed.)**, *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. Pantheon Books.
- Sangeetha, J. Mohan, S. Kannan, R. (2022). Liberal Feminism: Emphasizing Individualism and Equal Rights in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1301.03>
- Siswadi, Gede Agus. (2022). Perempuan merdeka dalam perspektif feminisme eksistensialis Simone de Beauvoir. *Jurnal penalaran riset*, 1(1). <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/364987222>
- Zhang, Y & Rios, K. (2022). Understanding Perception of Radical and Liberal Feminisms: The Nuanced Roles of Warmth and Competence. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-021-01257-y>