

The Dilemma and Trauma of Women in *Mrs Dalloway*

Miqin Wu

School of Foreign Languages
Fuzhou University of International Studies and Trade
Fuzhou, China

Abstract—This essay intends to analyze *Mrs Dalloway*, the most important work of Virginia Woolf from the perspective of trauma theory. In the patriarchal society, women, who are disadvantaged groups subordinated to men, are rendered powerless and helpless. They witness and go through threatening or disastrous events. So, they often experience negative feelings, the accumulations of which traumatize them. Virginia Woolf creates several disadvantaged women characters in *Mrs Dalloway*. The essay will explore the trauma and dilemma faced by women in *Mrs Dalloway* and the gender oppression against women.

Keywords—trauma; dilemma; *Mrs Dalloway*; patriarchy; *The Great War*

I. INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf is widely regarded as a great English novelist and literature critic. She has been known as a notable modernist who employs skillfully the consciousness-stream technique in her novels, including *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves*. She was from a wealthy family and received education at home. Her father was a distinguished Victorian writer. Thomas Hardy and Henry James were among his friends and regular visitors at his home. [1] It had a great influence on Virginia Woolf and had contributed to her success as a writer. However, her childhood and adolescence were troubled by the sexual abuse of her stepbrothers. Her mother, who was always the center of the merry family, died when Virginia was thirteen. It caused the first mental breakdown of Virginia Woolf. When her father died, she suffered from another mental breakdown. Throughout her life, Virginia Woolf had several mental breakdowns. She even stayed in a mental nursing home for a while because of her mental decline. Her life as an adult has been marred by the trauma which was caused by the sexual abuse and the loss of her parents. Her experience of trauma is also reflected in the experience of characters of the novel in *Mrs Dalloway*. Her attempt to commit suicide can be known by the repetition of the refrain “fear no more the heat o’ the sun, nor the furious winter’s rages” in the novel.

As a writer whose life spanned Victorian and modern times, Virginia Woolf witnessed the great changes of the modern times and her novels covered many aspects of modern life, including feminism. The modern times saw great change in women’s rights because feminism arose

during this period. Virginia Woolf was also concerned with the feminism and *Mrs Dalloway* is, to some degree, about the trauma of women, whose identity is circumscribed by men. Virginia Woolf mentioned that “I want to criticize the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense” by writing *Mrs Dalloway*. [2] The novel is characterized with the loss, struggle, trauma and dilemma of women in London after the Great War.

Mrs Dalloway has been approached in terms of feminism, formalism and even homosexuality. The characters in the novel *Mrs Dalloway* include Mrs Dalloway the wife of a politician, Lucrezia the wife of a shell-shocked war veteran, and Kilman the tutor to Mrs Dalloway’s daughter. They had different life experiences and went through different difficulties. But they shared delicate feelings and sensitive emotions. Virginia Woolf wrote this novel to articulate for women and dedicated it to women. She achieved this by creating different and struggling women like Clarrisa Dalloway and the despairing wife of the shell-shocked war veteran. Undeniably, they were from different classes and struggled in a different way. But they all reflected the dilemma and trauma of women in a patriarchal society.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This essay is finished under the Trauma theory. Trauma, which used to be a medical term, refers to physical wounds in the organs or other parts of body and it is caused by external force. In the second half of the 19th century, with the development of psychiatry, the term trauma developed another meaning. It now also refers to the grief, fear, or the feeling of helplessness of people who have gone through or witnessed some threatening or disastrous events. In 1980s, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) was defined by the American Psychology Association for the first time and it marked the beginning of the research on trauma in the contemporary time. The research was advanced by the war trauma of the veterans who fought in the two Great Wars. The researchers, as was represented by Freud and Jung Carl Gustav, have devoted themselves to discovering the characteristics, symptoms and therapies of trauma. They also worked on the cultural and ethic connotation of trauma.

Nowadays, the trauma researches focus on the long-term accumulation of the negative feelings, which may seem unlikely to pose a threat to life but the sufferers will

experience affective disorders, behaviour and cognitive problems, and even overall obstacles. [3]

III. THE DILEMMA AND TRAUMA OF MRS DALLOWAY

The novel begins with Mrs Dalloway saying she would buy the flowers herself. In that age, hostess was not supposed to go to the street alone. Chores like shopping for ingredients and buying flowers were usually done by the servants while the hostess was just for appreciation, like a painting. The beginning of the novel indicates that Virginia Woolf was not happy about the social status of women and intended to explore how women could gain more independence from men, discover more about themselves and become equal with men.

Clarrisa is a girl who has a strong desire for independence. But her pursuit of independence is not consistent with the role of upper-class woman in the family. 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 and wife. That places Clarrisa in a dilemma. On one hand, she has a strong desire for independence, refusing to be someone who may lose oneself by subordinating to others. She wants to be the true self. On the other hand, she chooses to marry Charlie Dalloway and becomes a housewife, which leads to her powerlessness and her identity crisis later. Besides, she is not true to her own feelings. It can be reflected from her choice of marriage. She is in a relationship with Peter for quite a long time. They are intimate and enjoy each other's companionship. But the problem about their relationship is that Peter is too critical and demanding. He demands that Clarrisa had to share everything with him, which is totally unacceptable for Clarrisa, who believes that in a marriage a couple should have their own independence. When Clarrisa meets Mr Dalloway, she likes him and decides to marry him in spite of her deep affection for Peter. However, she is not happy about her marriage and feels alienated from her husband. She misses Peter and sometimes wishes to elope with him. When she gets the news that Peter has married an Indian woman whom he meets on the ship, her heart is pierced with jealousy and agony.

Clarrisa Dalloway's pursuit for independence also can be seen from her relationship with Sally. The reason why Clarrisa is attracted to Sally is that Sally is a special girl who despises the social rules about ladies and lives a life at her own will. For example, she smokes like a man and even runs in the hallway naked to get the shower sponge when she is going to take a bath. Her appearance fills the heart of Clarrisa with a strong desire for independence. The independent spirit and courage immediately attract Clarrisa and they become great friends, talking about everything. Actually, their affection for each other is more than friendship. Once they even kisses each other and Clarrisa values the kiss and thinks of it as a diamond in her life.

Basically, it is the society Clarrisa inhabits that has caused her unhappiness. She is in a relationship with Peter,

but Peter does not always support her nor give her a sense of safety. Instead, he likes to criticize her and nickname her "the perfect hostess", which annoys and disturbs her a lot. She feels bitter about that even when she thinks about it many years later. Peter always carries a knife with her, which is a symbol of Patriarchy. In the patriarchal society, women are subordinated to men and oppressed in various ways. In the same way, Clarrisa feels oppressed by Peter because he does not fully respect her and tries to control her by wanting her to share everything with him. It will deprive her of freedom and independence and ruin her. That places her in the dilemma. She loves Peter but can not marry him. It causes the unhappiness of her marriage.

Actually, the happiest memory for Clarrisa is the time spent with Sally. She enjoys Sally's companionship and Sally proves to be a good soulmate for Clarrisa but homosexual love is forbidden in the patriarchal society. That's her second dilemma. They love each other but dare not embrace the love. "In the Victorian times, homosexuality is a taboo." [4] Clarrisa does not have the courage to challenge the society but chooses to conform to the norms in the patriarchal society. She marries Mr. Dalloway and becomes an upper class housewife, just as people expect. After marriage, Clarrisa seems to feel lost. Actually, she has no say in the household and feels powerless. For example, she can't decide who should be the tutor to her daughter. Her daughter is very close to Kilman the tutor even though Clarrisa Dalloway is averse to Kilman. As Lucy the servant notices, Mrs Dalloway is "the mistress of silver, of linen, of china." Each time faced with choices, she always stoops to compromise and it leads her to the loss of the sense of independence and the crisis of identity. [5]

As a powerless housewife, Mrs. Dalloway attaches great importance to organizing the party of the people of the upper class. She hopes to derive a sense of fulfillment from organizing parties. However, the easy and boring life kills her soul gradually and she lives in doubt and depression. It is when she hears the news that the shell-shocked war veteran Septimus Warren Smith kills himself that she begins to realize that life is valuable and meaningful. She suddenly finds herself and overcomes her fear of life and takes a more determined attitude toward life.

IV. THE TRAUMA AND DILEMMA OF LUCREZIA

Septimus Warren Smith, who is a war hero, comes back to the UK with his wife Lucrezia, the war bride. Septimus has survived the war while his commanding officer Evans is killed in the war. He even feels lucky that he did not show too much sadness about the death of his comrade. But the aftermath is more devastating than he thought. Although he is physically uninjured, he has been mentally injured. Soon after coming back to London, he suffers from a deep sense of guilt and finds that he can't feel. Besides, after fighting in the battlefield for a long time, he finds that London is strange to him and he has difficulties fitting in the society of London. He is confined to his own mental world and keeps talking to himself. He suffers from the trauma caused by the war.

But Septimus is not the only one who suffers from the trauma. Lucrezia suffers, too. She used to be an innocent Italian girl and comes to London as a war bride. She must have envisioned starting a happy family with Septimus. But her dream is smashed when Septimus suffers from the trauma caused by shell-shock and barely talks to her. This is devastating for Lucrezia because she comes to England as a stranger and Septimus is the only one she can often relate to. Now that Septimus is insane and ignores her, she has no one to talk to and feels isolated and frustrated in the cold England. Life is hopeless and miserable for her. Besides, no one reaches out to her and helps her to deal with her loneliness and helplessness. She tries to help Septimus recover and they go to see the doctor. But the psychological doctors, who know little about postwar stress disorder, fail to make any useful suggestions. Their ignorance and indifference finally kills Septimus. All her efforts do not help to improve the situation and she could not escape nor fight. And she is trapped; her suffering is silenced; her desperation and hopelessness are aggravated by the death of Septimus. Herman notes that trauma occurs when action is of no avail — when neither resistance nor escape is possible. He also believes that the recovery of trauma is a tripartite process that includes building up safety, reconstructing story and restoring a sense of community.[6] Lucrezia, who is a foreigner in London and abandoned by her husband, has difficulties in building up safety and restoring a sense of community. She will probably suffer from trauma for a long time unless she chooses to return to her family in Italy.

Life becomes miserable and meaningless for Lucrezia. To some degree, she is marginalized in the society. She is no longer what she used to be and likely to be depressed for a long time. The suffering of Lucrezia is just a microcosm of the fate of the females in and after the war.

V. THE TRAUMA OF THOSE MOTHERS WHO LOST THEIR SONS TO THE WAR

The novel *Mrs Dalloway* is set in London which was damaged in the World War I. Britain was torn in the World War I and many young men were killed in the war. A large number of England women remained single throughout their lifetime because their lovers went to field and did not come back. Meanwhile, numerous mothers lost their beloved sons to the war. Mothers across the Britain received the telegrams informing the news they dreaded most. As is depicted in the *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, “The war was over, except for someone like Mrs Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed.” [7]

It is really heartbreaking for those mothers. They have gone through a lot of difficulties to nurse their children through their childhood. Everyday they dread that they will receive the terrible news and prays for their children. Unfortunately, the bad news still comes in spite of their prayers. Life will never be the same for them because they have lost their beloved ones forever. They have to live on without their beloved ones. As is described in *Mrs Dalloway*,

Lady Bexborough was still holding the telegram when she was hosting the telegram. It can be imagined that she is consumed with grief at the sight of the telegram. The world has been too cruel for the women. It is men who launches the war. But women have to pay dearly for it. Some of them have lost their husband to the war and have to bring up the children on their own and some lost their sons, suffering a lot. As people observe, bereaved parents will experience some terrible emotions. Some of them cannot cope with their loss and cry suddenly all the time. They have sleep problems like difficulties in falling asleep. Sometimes, they suffer from some physical symptoms. It may take several years or even many years for them to recover from these trauma. Some may never recover from these mental wounds. They will never live as happily and normally as before.

VI. CONCLUSION

Virginia Woolf described a day of Clarrisa Dalloway and other people in London with consciousness-stream technique and creates several characters who suffered from the Great War in the patriarchal society. It gives a vivid picture of the life of people in London after the World War One and tells the readers how women of different classes live their lives in United Kingdom. It demonstrates how women were oppressed in the patriarchal society and the dilemma and trauma of women in and after the Great War.

In the novel, the two lines “fear no more the heat o’ the sun, nor the furious winter’s rages” can be read several times in the the novel. The refrain is from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*. It is an elegy to the heroine in the drama which implies that death is a relief since the dead won’t suffer any more. It suggests that this novel is an elegy for women in and after the Great War and the dead of the Great War. They have gone through various difficulties. The earth is a place where they suffer their fates. All the suffering and fear will disappear when death comes.

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