Evolving Ideas of Feminism and Value of Identity in Virginia Woolf's Novels

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf is an English writer whose novels, through their nonlinear approaches to narrative, exerted a major influence on the genre. While she is best known for her novels, especially *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Woolf also wrote pioneering essays on artistic theory, literary history, women's writing, and the politics of power. The formation of these traditions was based on the ground, which harshly affects the value of life and relationships' relevance. These issues could be crudely described as a movement in the air for staking up women's level by redefining society's conventional norms. These norms were being continued from the ages without any direct phase of questioning and confrontation of opposition. It was based on the foundation of male dominance. The portrayal of characters in Virginia Woolf's novel is framed as wives, mothers, and daughters and the prospective bride's role often. Through these novels' characters, the writer has attempted to present her concerns regarding the domination of beliefs through the imposed mode of Victorian ideals.

Keywords: Women, Domination, Reorientation, Inferiority, Patriarchy, Perception

Introduction

I must not settle into a figure. – Virginia Woolf

The novels of Virginia Woolf are the amalgamation of integrated aspects of women's life. Her novels with their characters display a shared commitment towards women's political and social stake through the lenses of a feminist perspective. Even at present to see and be analytical for any incident and activities with the approach of feminism is not such easy and accessible so it would not have been easy for Woolf to stand with their feminist standpoint. Woolf's consideration as a writer was never impersonal despite being focused on the requisite changes of time in their compositions.

She had always been stood with their strong, daring views for condemning the patriarchal cultural sphere. She was the person

and believer in the value of communication and balanced integration among personal relations. However, her understanding of traditional values was different as she was the keen observer of the created obstacles on these traditions' name in women's lives. The formation of these traditions was based on the ground, which harshly affects the value of life and relationships' relevance. These suffocative surroundings forced to be associative with a rotten human chain on the name of bond and family. Woolf tried to raise the segmental feminist issues through their novels.

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foundation of male dominance. Woolf raised the concerns for women when women's consciousness was imprisoned along with their bodies. Before the mid 19th century, women's distinctiveness was identified as puppetry and be treated as an intellectually dumb creature. The consolidation of these formidable realities was getting back support from the established conventional standards of society. Any individual could not be blamed for such a pathetic situation of women while it was a part of the plan that had been in existence for centuries.

Historical Framework of Woolf's Novels

The portrayal of characters in Virginia Woolf's novel is framed as wives, mothers, and daughters and the prospective bride's role often. Through these novels' characters, the writer has attempted to present her concerns regarding the domination of beliefs through the imposed mode of Victorian ideals. Understamodelg feminist preunderstanding there stood by analysing Woolf's selected novel such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Through these fictional characters' portrayal, she has narrated the Victorian sphere's socioeconomic, religious, and ideological reflection. The time frame of the nineteenth-century had been vital for reforming the new idea of womanhood which could lead new identity for the upcoming generation of women. The selected novel of Virginia Woolf dealt with women's central relationship with their husbands and prospective husbands. These novels are analysed with a different mode of narratives through the mirror of feminism. The first decade of the twentieth century witnessed the arrival of a writer who countered society's conventional framework through their piece of writings.

The established attitude of society for women in the Victorian era was the outcome of a long process of forming patriarchal norms. The display of narrow mentality through behaviour to a woman was not confined at the lower sphere of society while its domination was strong enough in the upper level in whole western civilisation. Women's fragile status is combined with the distribution of land and customary position of

women in the family. The feudal oriented norms of inheritance were not in favour of women. The right of property and land were used to pass to the male members of the family. Women's status was woven with their mail partner, and such a situation led to complete economic dependency for women on men.

The striking attitudes for the reorientation of ideas towards women were resonated with the ideas of conflicting nature from ages. However, they could not get a voice in such dire circumstances when every single unit of society's behavioural attitude was against women. The ideas of feminism spread by the author like Woolf cause the new perspective of socialism which imported the sign of fear for the majority, and it had occurred spontaneous response in contradiction of new ideas noticed by the majority of male section.

The writing scenario has prevailed the reality of time as the women of the educated class were also taught more or less that women should be up to date in different types of fine arts to conquer her position strongly at the place of their male partner cum lord. The Woolf sharply condemned the superficial impact of the conventional form of education for women through her writings. Ideas did not come suddenly its need the nourishment of thought process, which comes from great readings and consumption of ideas through great surroundings. In Woolf's case, she denied being surrendered intellectually in front of the conservative conventional form of education. She started to go through various form of readings of her father's expansive library. She met there a few of the great writers such as *Thomas Hardy* and *William Thackeray*.

The portrayal of Subordination of Women in Novels

Ideas of the inferiority of women as a notion of behaviour are well described in the novels. The approach of social feminist thought prevailed with the idea of psychological narration of women suppression is the instrument of patriarchal social orientation, which lead to the

brittle destiny of women. Virginia Woolf dedicated her major novels to analyse the formidable deep-rooted roots of patriarchy in English society. She sketched different categorical characters of women with numerous social perspectives. She raised her voice through her different forms of writings to open up women's eyes on their inferior status in family and society.

As in her novel **Mrs Dalloway**, she described the influence of patriarchy in England and its bitter impact on women's lives. Loneliness and the lack of self-esteem were the psychological factors that had been purposely imposed in women's lives through a certain kind of societal conspiracy. The novel rotates around of the institution of marriage and individual freedom where through the character of Clarissa, the author intended to freedom of women life is equal to the state of virginity. The character of Clarissa wants to preserve her virginity so that she can avail freedom of life. Through Peter's character, the novel presents the influential male-dominated character by the powerful assertion of their right and view on women.

The rejection by Clarissa for Peter's marriage proposal is the outcome of the inner unconventional and the ideas wrapped in feministic view by the author. She (Clarissa) gives solidified reason for rejecting to Peter and marrying to some other person Richard,

“For in marriage a little license a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him (where was this morning, for instance? Some committee, she never asked what.) Nevertheless, with Peter, everything had to be shared; everything has gone into” (Woolf, 1925).

The novel is the refined expression of women when she feels attracted and frightened at the same time with the sense of compulsion of others on the sphere of freedom. In "Mrs Dalloway", the failure and fragile bonding in Clarissa and her husband Richard's marriage marked the reality that marital relationship cannot be guaranteed to pursue a happy life.

It is not easy to bring mutuality of understating the relationship of husband and wife due to prevailed patriarchal norms in society, even living together whole life under the same roof. Patriarchy imposes a sense of superiority and dominative attitude in men's minds, so they consciously or unconsciously started to imagine that they are superior to women from every angle. Finally, in the majority, the institutor of marriage pushes women's lives in the zone of loneliness, uncared surroundings, and forced her to be emotionally cold, these forced insensitive behaviours gradually bring a sense of inferiority among women. In the "Mrs Dalloway", the same circumstances took place with the character of Clarissa, as she started to mitigate her loneliness by useless gossip. A situation gulf had been taken place gradually between husband and wife.

The concept of patriarchy is getting fueled by the notions of hierarchy, dominance, and sexual and biological superiority. Woolf intended to focus all these aspects of patriarchy in the novel through her feminist perspective of narration. In the novel, she raises her concern for the alternation of society and abolishes clutches' authoritarian structures, which curtail women's freedom. She insisted on the spread of women's friendship against these dual systems where men are considered superior, and women are considered only the puppet of men's serving desires. Woolf broke the patriarchal authoritarian structure of society through the character of Clarissa strong voice. The outcome of such reaction as Clarissa took was a reaction of being a confronter of patriarchy to form a new society for women.

In the second novel **“To the Lighthouse (1927)”**, Virginia Woolf has tried to raise her concern for the Victorian structural arrangement of society's patriarchal formation. In this novel, she questioned the difference between women's implemented social role and men in society. The revelation of two words as the keywords are masculine and feminine is very obvious throughout the novel. The term masculine is for the manifestation of egotism, rigidity and sense of intellectual superiority over the existence of

women's personality. By contrasting term masculinity, the word feminine is used to portray the sense of imagination, fragile intuition and compromises.

The conventional framework of society has always tried to separate these two entities of emotions separately with a mark of male and female identity. The notion of patriarchy rejects mixing the character of being prevailed with both of these emotions. While in reality, any human being's biological composition can not be a single emotional entity. The prevention of the creation of modern society is well described in this novel by the writer. There are two characters of this novel Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe both represent the different angle of behaviour. As Mrs Ramsay's characterises the conventional mode of emotion certified for women's submissive presence in society and other characters of Lily Briscoe are displayed as the implementer of the unconventional and rebellious mode of activities that confront the boundaries of patriarchy.

The projection of Mrs Ramsay's life in the novel has signified the affirmation of female values of fertility and nourishing the surroundings with harmony and compassion. Nevertheless, Woolf also criticises the submissive approach towards Mrs Ramsay's life as she subjected to her kind valued of femininity for defining the idea of masculine domination. Through Mrs Ramsay Woolf's character, the society is overflowed with such nature of women whom herself allows discrimination for them.

The secondary status of Mrs Ramsay in the novel performs all the poor acts where she allows her husband to be rude with her and feel more powerful and dominant. Woolf has narrated the fact that the submissive and undermining attitude of women destroyed her individuality and self-esteem.

"Ramsay's' marriage is a patriarchal marriage based on middle – class Victorian values. We find inadequacy in this marriage which does not allow mature intellectual interchange. The character of Mr Ramsay is based on Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen. Marcus

comments, according to Leslie, It was a natural law that a wife should have no legal rights, no right of her property or money, no training for any job, nor any hope for obtaining one", (Marcus, 1981:152)

The Character of Mrs Ramsay has also been stating the financial dependency of women to men. The needs and requirements of Mrs Ramsay have made her subordinated to r husband, and her crippled and narrow visionary education could not be able to provide the sense of self-esteem to her.

"Being trained to be intellectual inferior has the desired effect on Mr Ramsay. The stupider the wife appears to the husband, the more desirable she becomes", (Marcus, 1981:152).

The Character of Mrs Ramsay is not stupid and dumps as her impression was in her husband's eyes. Mrs Ramsay's fright was the fear of common women of society as she does not dare to be intellectual and potentially more than her man partner and in general, hardly she has the time to be with the pages of books.

The common perception of Victorian society has prevailed in the novel that the women are only as a beauty puppet and she does not have any need to be intellectual as the stupidity of women on the name of innocence makes her bewilderingly beautiful. Nevertheless, in the narration of another aspect through Lily's consciousness, she exposed Mrs Ramsay's hypocrisy as

"Beauty was not everything. Beauty had this penalty – it came too readily, came too completely. It stilled life –froze it. One forgot the little agitations; the flesh, the pallor, some sight or shadow, which made a face unrecognisable... It was simpler to smooth that all out under cover of beauty", (Woolf, To the Lighthouse, P.193).

Mrs Ramsay's character is the reflection of superficial minded women who pacifies her identity and individuality in front of her husband to be nice and innocent in his eyes.

Feminist Approach

The novels and other Virginia Woolf writings are greatly inclined towards the narratives of feminism through various literary characters. The dividing of the world into two spheres where one is in the central position and other is marginalised with subordinate status is against human nature. Through the portrayals of the characters of her novels, Woolf has exactly narrated society's scenario. The analysis of Virginia Woolf's attitude towards feminism can be well understood by demonstrating the incident that took place during the dialogue of her characters in the novels.

The narration of feminism expressed in her novel well as feminism is "the belief in the principle that woman should have the same rights and opportunities as men". Through the characters of novels Woolf represented the different forms of feminism such as "cultural feminism", "individualist feminism", "moderated feminism" and it could minutely be defined in several segments of feminism and imposed numerous forms of patriarchal compulsion in the life of women. Through the description of liberal feminist ideas in her novels, Woolf has described the cause of women oppression which lies deep in the clutches of false traditional moral codes. She has raised her voice through her descriptive analytical tools about the need for proper rational education and need for equal customary inherited property rights for women in society. Woolf's novel is affected by the scenario of time through the collapsing of old concepts and the intended influence of the conceptual world of new ideas based on balanced gender relationships.

Conclusion

Thus, through these novels, Woolf expressed her views about the notion of injustice felt by women. Issue of identity and discrimination on the name of biological determination are the key issues that have been extensively discussed in both of her novels. Through both the novels, Virginia Woolf expressed her vision of feminist views. The description of both writings Mrs Dalloway and To

the Lighthouse, Woolf meant to set up a new framework for nourishing women's identity.

The concept of masculinity and femininity should be integrated into the holistic development of any individual's personality. Through her writings, Woolf intended to mention the importance of balance intellectual and emotional beings are required to develop society. The implication of the conventional identity of gender differences had been restricting the vision of women. Through the different novels, the Virginia Woolf has focused on the importance of reformulation of society where the equal opportunity of expression should be allowed for women. The characterisation of women in the novels of Woolf symbolises the state of hope for women.

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