Patriarchal Dominance in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*: A Study of the Female Characters

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Abstract: *This paper aims to analyze and clarify patriarchal dominance in the Victorian era as described by Virginia Woolf's three novels, Mrs. Dalloway (1925), To the Lighthouse (1927), and The Waves (1930). Woolf revolts against the patriarchal behavior of dominance that treats women as prisoners during that age. The view of the feminist approach is that women are portrayed as socially and economically dependent in a society with male hegemony. Moreover, society has dealt with gender in a way that harms women into which men are trained to believe that they are superior to them. Woolf declares her revolt against women as prisoners of reality. Woolf stands against the popular image of her age _ the woman is devoted to be submissive to her husband. The female characters struggle to free themselves from restraint, seeking purpose and agency in the world through interaction with men. Throughout the analysis of female characters, Woolf contested the inferior situation of women in the Victorian age. The female characters' words, speeches, and interior monologues reveal that their pain, sadness and loneliness are because of the patriarchal dominancy.*

The Victorian age, as a patriarchal society, marginalized women's position. It introduced various problems related to women. With all its strict ideal and curious puritanical aspects, sex was regarded as a taboo concept. Victorian women were expected to be weak, helpless and fragile delicate flowers incapable of making discussions beyond selecting the menu. The woman also had to ensure that home was a place of comfort for her husband and family from the stresses of industrialized Britain. In this age, men were seen physically stronger than women; therefore, men were meant to dominate women by nature. Moreover, the churches were very influential at this time in the society. A church gave instructions to men on how to act towards women and defined the role of the women in the society. The only way for a woman to get progressed in society was by getting married.

Gorham (1982) asserted that the preservation of Victorian values about family and femininity underestimated women's self-image. They were only expected to be domestic women; therefore, they did not have much time to consider themselves to be anything. A woman had no time or direction to form any image at all. By being forced to live in this confinement in the house, women attempted for independence.

Women of the Victorian age can be regarded as the first group to do battle for the equality of the sexes. Feminism was not outright spoken of in this time, rather passed through literature, such as novels, short stories and essays. The continuity of women's suffrage has led to feminist and Women's Right Movements. Wollstonecraft (1791) projected rudiments of the feminist movements. Wollstonecraft argued that women ought to have education equality with their position in society and then proceeded to redefine that position. She claimed that women are essential to the nation because they educate its children and because they could be copious to their husbands, rather than mere wives. Instead of seeing women as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, they are human beings who have the same fundamental rights as men.

Woolf was a pioneer in feminism. In her works, Woolf depicted her criteria on how society put little importance to the female gender. In fact, Woolf was not only a supporter of the female gender but also she had influence on feminism. Woolf encouraged women of the era to revolt against the Victorian morals such as the patriarchal dominancy. Woolf rebelled through her literary feminist writings in which she revealed woman's experience, inner conflict, thoughts, and feelings. She had much to say about her society and the post-war changes, but feminism, i.e. the roles of women at that time and their seeming insignificance, was a steady underlying theme in her novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1930).

Feminism aims to understand the nature of gender inequality and focuses on power relations: women and their contributions are valued. It is also based on social, political, and economical equality of women. Obviously, Woolf is concerned with the place of women in her society. Bowen (2004) examined the phenomenon of women doing autobiography on the Internet and contextualized the phenomenon in the poststructuralist ideologies of the postmodern feminist critics, namely, Virginia Woolf, Rachel Blau DuPessis and Helen Cixous. Bowen demonstrated that women had successfully yielded a new feminist discourse in their online journal. Bowen used the works of Woolf, DuPessis and

Cixous together to introduce and theorize the significance of this new discursive tradition within the context of postmodernist feminist theory.

In this paper, all the female characters struggle to flee from restraint, seeking purpose and agency in the world through interaction with others. i.e. men. Woolf's novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1930) exposed her denial of the Victorian patriarchal dominant policy over women in that society at that time. The paper aims to focus on the feminist approach as the basic principle to analyze Woolf's female characters in which Woolf employed her narrative technique, i.e. the stream of consciousness, thoughts, feelings and impressions to reveal certain truths about woman's social status in the Victorian era.

Gilbert and Gubar (1984) believe that up to and including the time of Woolf wrote, the creative atmosphere was "defined purely in male terms" and women wrote in the same genres and styles as men (66), whereas Fernald (2006) asserts Woolf's importance to educated women and the world: Fernald says that her importance derives much more "from her legacy as feminist artist and theorist than from her feminist social activism" (15). Woolf's feminism was embodied in her stand for women's rights. Moreover, she opposed conventional views that believe women have very few choices outside marriage and motherhood.

Marcus (2000) values Woolf's views and considers her as the "mother of the feminist critics of the late twentieth century" and remarks that Torli Moi thinks that Woolf "becomes the alpha and omega of feminist critics" (231). Peach (2007, 171) refers to Woolf as "social realist" regarding her works of the 1930s. Woolf's rebellion against Victorian values, namely, patriarchal dominated policy over women appeared through her novels, in particular, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931).

Mrs. Dalloway is a day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, who while planning a party, reflects on her life and feels as though much of it has been trivial. Often subtle, a feminist tone is established from the very beginning. Clarissa has decided to go out to buy the flowers for the party herself as her maid has much work to do. She immediately begins to think of Peter Walsh, a past lover.

In an Introduction to Modern Library edition, Lewis (1975, 36) says that Septimus "is intended to be Clarissa's double." The idea of being the double emphasizes that both are similar. There is no difference or domination by any; man and woman are alike and possess the same qualities. Woolf shows Peter Walsh as a rival for Mr. Dalloway who appears lacking sentiments and does not have enough courage to tell his wife [Clarissa] that he loves her. Instead of that he just buys flowers for her. Although Clarissa has fond of Peter, who is possessive, she has married another man, namely, Mr. Richard Dalloway. Richard seems more steady, predictable and able to protect her against the shocks of life as when her dog has been injured. However, Peter has not more interest in female issues. Woolf's narrator describes her condition: "it was the state of the world that interested him; Wagner, Pope's poetry, people's characters eternally" so that he rejects "*the defects of her own soul* [Clarissa's]" (my italics). These defects are narrated: "(i) having a sense of comedy into which she is always apt to make people bring such comedy out, (ii) lunching, (iii) dining, (iv) giving things she does not mean, (v) talking nonsense (vi) and losing her discrimination" (p. 67). All these Clarissa's values lead him to see her as "the perfect hostess". Thus Walsh's interior monologue indicates within this text that he, as a man especially, has the capacity of mind to be concerned with far more important matter.

According to Smith (2011), in *Mrs. Dalloway*, "Woolf explores the debilitating effects of feminizing and medicalizing grief that leave Septimus without any legitimate means to express his sorrow." Woolf's powerful personality has inscribed her revolt against women as prisoners of Victorian age. She resists the invisible barrier of Victorian patriarchal society and exposes the subversion of traditional male construction. Woolf depicts Clarissa by the frame of Peter's vision: "And it was awfully strange, he [Peter] thought, how she [Clarissa] still had the power, as she came tinkling, rustling, still had the power, as she came cross the room which he detested, rise at Bourton on the terrace in the summer sky" (40). Elaborating on Clarissa's character, Peter says:

> There was always something cold in Clarissa, he thought. She had always, even as a girl, a sort of dimity, which in middle age becomes conventionality, and then it's all up, it's all up, he thought. Looking rather drearily into the glassy depths, and wondering, whether by calling at that hour he had annoyed her, overcome with shame suddenly at having been a fool, wept; been emotional; told her everything, as usual (41).

Through Peter's interior monologue, Woolf illustrates Clarissa as a powerful guide woman into which Peter, who is supposedly to control his emotions and decisions, is still under Clarissa's mercy. However, throughout Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf's refusal of writing conventional format contends her rejecting traditional male techniques of writing at that time. Woolf, as a member of the Bloomsbury Group and a peer of James Joyce, does not feel a need to prescribe to traditional organization, thus allowing for a much more loose form in terms of syntax, plot, and narrative voice. In the narrative, Woolf's characters do not go back in time and just face the actual moment. There is no distinction between past and

present, dream and reality. Kincer (2008) believes that Clarissa flees from reality and chooses to live in illusion of peace and purpose rather than embrace herself in the world and confront responsibility because of the oppressions of the [patriarchal] society. Hence, Woolf's language too is moment to moment, short, and dense. She writes in a flow of consciousness, floating from sensation and from the mind of one character to the next.

However, the names used when referring to Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs. Dalloway* signify different meanings. Mrs. Dalloway, who has responsibilities and power, is used in the novel to signify a distinguishable lady of class. She is also her husband's wife when this term is used as if she is the other half of her husband. This is displayed on the first page when she says that she will buy the flowers herself. Not only she attempts to show herself but also plans for a party to advance her husband's career. As such, of Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf writes in her diary: "In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity" (56). Throughout Mrs. Dalloway, Woof presents contradicting issues and paradoxical experiences in the lives of her character. Perhaps more than any other, Clarissa personifies Woolf's desire to show the multifarious nature of identity. Clarissa, looking into a mirror, ponders her identity:

> She pursed her lips when she looked into the glass. It was to give her face point. That was hers elf __ pointed; dart-like; definite. That was herself when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one center (37).

Clarissa seems not one thing, but many. Obviously, she chooses which facet of herself to present to the world. The image in the mirror changes; Clarissa's identity adjusts depending on her environment. This point stresses the woman's powerlessness which is enforced by male power. Thus, one cannot find real women, namely Victorian's, since they have only embodied their patriarchal more. Women fail to show their own image which they desire; they compelled to that Great Man, which is a concept that has spread at Victorian age indicating the superiority for men.

Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) seems to be narrated by women, as the perspectives of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily are the most fully-developed narratives within the text. In this novel, Woolf asks the question about sexuality of women, and questions the woman's role within the family. Mrs. Ramsay is portrayed as the angel of the house. It is regarded as the popular Victorian image of the ideal woman who is expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The angel herself indicates passive, powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and pure. Throughout the novel, Mrs. Ramsay is described in "flashing her needles, confident, upright; she created drawing room and kitchen, set them all aglow; bade him [Tansley] take his ease there, go in and out, enjoy himself" (Woolf, 1927, 38).

Woolf questions the connotative meaning of words, attitudes, emotions, and value judgments. She illustrates how man's word can create internal conflict for women. Thus Gilbert (1978) has noted how difficult it was for women to break free from the eternal types imposed upon them by centuries of masculine writers: "Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy . . . , she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face" (17). The internal and external descriptors of Mrs. Ramsay serve excellent examples of this conflict. Throughout the narrative, one can see Mrs. Ramsay's struggle with the concept of the universal mother.

Woolf (1927, 32) remarks: "They came to her; naturally, since she [Mrs. Ramsay] was a woman. All day long with this and that; the children were growing up; she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions." The woman is considered nothing in this male-dominated society; she has to endure and cope with all various situations, especially those are related to man's position. Throughout the novel, Mrs. Ramsay was seen as the epitome of feminine devotion, the perfect mother and wife. Mrs. Ramsay has been "drunk and quenched by . . . the arid scimitar of the male, which smote mercilessly, again and again" until she is left with "scarcely a shell of herself for herself" (38). Unlike Lily, whose internal conflict arises from her defiance of male definitions, Mrs. Ramsay's internal conflict arises from her attempt to fulfill them.

The stream of consciousness technique which fragments the plot of *To the Lighthouse* is unified through Mrs. Ramsay's efforts to bring the whole family and guests together in a pleasant atmosphere. Variable internal focalization changes from one character to another; it foregrounds Mrs. Ramsay's domesticity and her unifying role in part one, "The Window". Focalization passes from Mrs. Ramsay to the other characters. The focalized becomes Mrs. Ramsay in most instances. The realistic and sterile philosopher, Mr. Ramsay, thinks that his wife is not very clever and well-educated: He wondered if she understood what she was reading. Mr. Ramsay's ideas about his wife suggest the stereotypical male view of the woman as an object of beauty. He represents the patriarchal dominance.

However, Woolf (1927) shows how the priority of the domestic space has repressed women and prevented them from taking part in everyday activities-- commerce, travel, work and education. This is seen when Mrs. Ramsay and Lily find that oppression in the public realm is linked to that of the private. This also illustrates how Woolf can deal with material and economic, historic conditions, which affect men and women's lives, and their ways of viewing the world, their

perceptions and imaginative repose that differ. This is highlighted with constant comparisons between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. This is also shown through the inner monologue of the characters and the inter-subjectivity. Woolf investigates gender and the power of men and women; she explores the way in which people are constructed as gendered beings, and how culture and society restrict their actions, opportunities, and speech. Mrs. Ramsay eases her audience into this: "For the fact that they negotiated treaties, ruled India, controlled finance, finally for an attitude towards herself which no woman could fail to feel or to find agreeable . . . pray heaven it was none of her daughters" (13).

Although at times Mrs. Ramsay does appear to be an idealized version of a woman as being the angel of the house. Throughout her inner monologue, it is seen that inwardly she questions male and female roles and that in her inner thoughts an independent thinking woman is trying to eradicate the presence of the Victorian female ideal. Although as an idealized perfect mother figure, she has greater aspirations for her female daughters, namely, Prue, Nancy, and Rose. They could sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris, perhaps a wilder life, not always taking care of some man or other, there was in all their minds a mute questioning of deference and chivalry.

Woolf also laments her oppressive masculine society by which Mrs. Ramsay's gender role is shown in soft response to Mr. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay emerges as a heroic tyrant and appears to represent the typical male who is compared to sharp instrument, knife, axe and poker with which his son wants to hit him. The language which Mr. Ramsay uses is assertive, opinionated and slightly patronizing. It shows his philosophical prowess. He has reached the level of ordinary experience, as Lily calls it; he feels simply:

> "That's a chair, that's a table," however in Mr. Ramsay's term he has managed to reach Q, but not R. The use of the alphabet shows the male mind; logical, chronological and linear but also childlike; "Still, if he could reach R it would be something. Here at least was Q." He dug his heels in at Q. Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate. . . Then R. He braced himself. He clenched himself. (54)

Furthermore, Woolf highlights male dominance through Mrs. Ramsay's intimate feelings towards her husband.

It did not matter, any of it, she [Mrs. Ramsay] thought. A great man, a great book, fame -- who could tell? She knew nothing about it. But it was his way with him, his truthfulness _ for instance at dinner, she had been thinking quite instinctively, if only he [Mr. Ramsay] would speak! She had complete trust in him. And dismissing all this, as one passes in diving now a weed, now a straw, now a bubble, she felt again, sinking deeper, as she had felt in the hall when the others were talking. There is something I want – something I have come to get, and she fell deeper and deeper without knowing quite what it was, with her eyes closed. And she waited a little, knitting, wondering. . . (105)

Mrs. Ramsay's interior monologue, which is amalgamating with Woolf's voice, declares her full authenticity, locality, appreciation and full dependency on her husband as if she favorably copes with his attitudes and thoughts. This speech discloses a certain male dominance. When Mrs. Ramsay raises her husband's attributes, Woolf hides her presence. Mrs. Ramsay's suppression by the force of a masculine culture forbids her to speak in the name of herself. Reflexively, Mrs. Ramsay cannot have enough courage to speak her inner thoughts and she becomes like a "weed", "bubble", and "straw". Through her patriarchal milieu, Mrs. Ramsay is suffocated and is unable to catch what she really wants as if she relentlessly sinks into an endless space. . . "wondering".

In *The Waves* (1931), Woolf's six characters are presented in a vacuum of family and wholly in relation to each other, even in their early youth. For the most part, they are presented in a vacuum of contact. Woolf shows them not acting and interacting, but instead providing ongoing accounts of their actions and interactions:

> I pad about the house all day long in apron ad slippers, like my mother who died of cancer. . . I, who used to walk through beech woods noting the jay's first turning blue as it falls, past the shepherd and the tramp, who start as the woman squatted beside a tilted cart in ditch, go from room to room with a duster. (Woolf, 1931, 96)

Far from being disembodied, however, these "speeches" are preoccupied with kind of sensation, a feeling of like her mother. The feminine feeling is emphasized in doing housework and moving from one room to another, trying to keep the house clean.

The Waves can be seen as a verbalization of a mystical vision which Woolf refers to as "that fins the waste of water which appeared to me over the marshes out of my window at Rodmell" (Woolf, 1931, 169). The 'fin' may represent a feeling or intuition about her male dominance reality which cannot be described but rather must be. Mulas (2005, 76) asserts *The Waves* complex images: "it is this mystical awareness of Reality or Being [capitalized are original] that Virginia Woolf tries to evoke through the lives of the six characters in."

However, Woolf, by her critical spectator self, has managed to evade psychological pull of society. In other words, she has to fight conventional identity forming influences in order to be who she is, and she is, in a sense, living beyond society and gender. The reader may wonder if Woolf thinks men are especially disposed toward investing their identities

in society as her father and brother has done, or that men are simply what they are, when it comes to understanding emotions. This seems doubtful, however, for many reasons, but primarily because Woolf has such an acute understanding of the complexity involved in personality.

One might also cite the great pressure that Victorian men face to become particular, consistent, logical and social contributors: "Every one of our male relations was shot into that [patriarchal] machine at the age of ten and emerged at sixty a Head Master, an Admiral, . . . " (Woolf, 1931, 153). One may also examine Bernard's psychological acumen and self-awareness in *The Waves* as evidence of Woolf's open-mindedness toward men on this issue; "she is in love with words, like Bernard" (9); and an exhausted man in an another situation:

> I, who had myself so vast, a temple, a church, a whole universe, unconfined and capable of being everywhere. . . am now noting but what you see – an elderly man, rather heavy, grey above ears, who (I myself in the glass) leans one elbow on the table and holds in his left hand a glass of brandy. That is the elbow you have dealt me. I have walked bang into the pillar-box. I reel from side to side. I put my hands to my head. My hat is off – I have dropped my stick. I have made an awful ass of myself and am justly laughed at by any passer-by (Woolf, 1931, 207).

Woolf also exposes the rigid, stiff and taut patriarchal dominance through Percival character. Patriarchy is any system of organization in which the overwhelming number of upper positions in hierarchies is occupied by males. According to this, Percival has been taken as the silent patriarchal "hero" figure in *The Waves* whom Bernard, Louis and Neville meet at school. Neville first describes Percival as a remote person and he is hopeless in the love of women. These six characters would not endure such suffering if they did not have some aspiration of fulfillment. Woolf embodies this objective in the character of Percival. Percival, a silent character whom Woolf describes only through the views of the six characters, enters the novel with an immediate sense of leadership and heroism. However, the descriptions of Percival all lead to quizzical assumptions that he is an easily-mocked leader with no real substance other than what others perceive in him. Regarding Percival, Hackett (1999, 269) believes: "With this construction of a hero, Woolf parodies the archetypal male hero." This can be seen from the first mention of Percival when Neville comments:

> "Now I will lean sideways as if to scratch my thigh. So I shall see Percival. There he sits, upright among the smaller fry." He breathes through his straight nose rather heavily. His blue and oddly inexpensive eyes are fixed with pagan indifference upon the pillar opposite. He would make an admirable churchwarden. He is allied with the Latin phrases on the memorial brasses. He sees nothing; he hears nothing. He is remote from us all in a pagan universe. But look __ he flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures, one fails hopelessly in love for a lifetime (35-36).

The absurdity enclosed within this brief description of Percival is abundant. Immediately Neville has fallen in love with him, but only for the way he flicks his hand to the back of his neck. Other boys attempt to mimic this ridiculous gesture, but fail. Neville claims that Percival sees nothing and hears nothing. He is oblivious to the world around him. He is the epitome of the capitalistic soul; he is totally revered for doing so. Louis also notices the conformity that Percival inspires in others.

Look now, how everybody follows Percival. He is heavy. He walks clumsily down the field, through the long grass, to where the great elm trees stand. His magnificence is that of some medieval commander. A wake of light seems to lie on the grass behind him. Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep, for he will certainly attempt some forlorn enterprise and die in battle. My heart turns rough; it abrades my side like a file with two edges; on, that I adore his magnificence; the other I despise his slovenly accents __ I who am so much his superior __ and am jealous (37).

Through Louis's voice, Woolf presents Percival as a clumsy style of a leader, but she also fortifies the contempt Louis feels for the successes of society that will come to fruition within her character late in the novel. Neville notices earlier Louis's jealousy for Percival. Percival is forever shadowed, while the six characters in the novel join the pursuit or are left to the wayside.

Up to this point, one may translate Woolf's thinking into the Victorian society. The Victorian society is oppressive to Woolf's self, namely, Woolf's identity who is incommensurate with such oppression as in the case of *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1949):

> I'm an ignorant old woman. I can't read or write and every morning when I crawl down stairs, I say I wish it were night; and every night, when I crawl up to bed, I say, I wish it were day. I'm only an ignorant old woman. But I pray to God: O let me pass. I'm an ignorant old woman __ I can't read or write (14).

By this speech, Woolf fiercely rejects the Victorian society at all which has obliged women to be "ignorant old _ can't read or write." However, one of the readers may gratefully thank Victorian restricted, oppressive masculine age which explores such great influenced prosaic writings.

The views of patriarchal dominance are examined in accordance with Woolf's feminist intellectual perspective which is presented through her novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931). Feminists views display certain beliefs showing how patriarchal society looks at women, how women actually live under the patriarchal standards and attempt to improve their social situation. Woolf's female characters expressed certain interiority and submission as a result their male-dominated society.

In conclusion, Woolf severely revolted against the patriarchal behavior that considered women prisoners of that era. Patriarchal dominance was one of the worst conducts related to the Victorian women. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf resisted the barrier of patriarchal society and rejected the subversion of traditional male construction. Clarissa was depicted by the frame of Peter's vision. Although Peter was supposed to control his emotions and decisions, he is under Clarissa's mercy. Mrs. Dalloway is presented to dignity; a distinguishable lady of class and has responsibilities and power. In her portrayal of Clarissa, Woolf presents her a woman who tries to show her own image which is compelled to the man. However, Clarissa shows the multitude nature of her identity. In *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay appeared to represent the 'typical man'. Despite the fact that Mrs. Ramsay appears to be an idealized version of a woman, she tries to eradicate the presence of the Victorian female ideal in her inner thoughts. Undoubtedly, Mrs. Ramsay plays the unifying role bringing the whole family and guests into a pleasant atmosphere during the dinner scene. Finally, in *The Waves*, Woolf exposed the rigid patriarchal dominance. This is embodied in the character Percival. Percival is described through the views of the other six characters in the novel. He enters the novel with immediate sense of leadership and heroism.

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