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“Feminism and Female Identity in the Novels of Virginia Woolf”

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Abstract

As a novelist, essayist and feminist thinker, Virginia Woolf plays a prominent role in modern English literature. Her novels deal with the inner psychological conflicts, the social restrictions, the quest for women to achieve a sense of self-reliance and autonomy in a male dominated society. In the present study, “Feminism and Female Identity in the Novels of Virginia Woolf,” the condition of women is explored in the major novels of Virginia Woolf like Mrs Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, Orlando and The Waves. Woolf's feminism does not take the form of overt political agitation; instead it is revealed in the faintest of hints, in the expression of women's consciousness, women's silence, women's emotional turmoil, women's creativity, resistance against male dominated structures. Clarissa Dalloway's respectability and her private solitude expose the covert subjugation of a respectable woman. In to the Lighthouse, Mrs Ramsay is more representative of the traditional domestic femininity, while Lily Briscoe is a more representative of the modern female creativity. Orlando defies the notion of gender roles and introduces the idea of identity as socially constructed and malleable. In The Waves, the characters' voices and consciousnesses shift, revealing the complexity of female identity. The interior monologue and stream of consciousness in Woolf's writing bring women into the literary world with their thoughts, memories and emotions. The research reveals that Woolf's fiction depicts the identity of women as multifaceted, fluid and close to freedom, creativity, memory and self realization. Her novel questioning the patriarchy and asserting women's right to voice, space and individuality is still very relevant.

Keywords: Feminism, Female Identity, Virginia Woolf, Patriarchy, Women's Consciousness, Modernism, Gender Roles, Stream of Consciousness, Selfhood, Female Creativity

Introduction

The themes of feminist and female identity are two of the main concerns in contemporary English literature and both are very much expressed in Virginia Woolf's novels. The title “Feminism and Female Identity in the Novels of Virginia Woolf” indicates a critical examination of the role of women, their inner world, social restrictions, mental liberation, and women's quest for selfhood in Woolf's novels. Virginia Woolf is one of the most important modernist novelists of the 20th century. Her novels aren't just about women as characters in a story, they're about women's minds, emotions, memories, conflicts and desires. In her book, Woolf speaks out for the inner life of women, that was once unheard or suppressed in mainstream literature. In general, feminism is about equality, dignity, freedom and individuality of women. It challenges the social and cultural structures that marginalize women. In literature,



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feminism is focused on the depiction of women, the silencing of women's voice, the construction of women's identity by patriarchy, and women's struggle for independence. Virginia Woolf's feminism is not a slogan-driven, public one but a subtle, intellectual and psychological one. She shows the forms of patriarchy that are hidden in the family, marriage, education, social manners, language and literary tradition (Marcus 13). The oppression of women is not always overt and visible; it is also in silence, emotional burden, social norms and lack of creative space, as seen in her novels.

Female identity is a woman's feeling of being a separate person. Traditionally, a woman's identity in a patriarchal society is one that is connected to others. She is valued as a daughter, wife, mother or carer but her individual needs, intellect and creativity is often overlooked. Woolf defies this restricted definition of womanhood. Female identity in her novels is revealed as complex, fluid, and deeply related to memory, consciousness, social status and personal freedom. Her female characters are not helpless beings. They observe, experience, ask questions and work to know themselves outside of the societal roles they have been assigned. In Mrs Dalloway, Woolf shows Clarissa Dalloway as a respectable, respectable woman, who exists within the limits of upper-class English society. She is outwardly graceful, disciplined and successful as a wife and hostess (Goldman 2). In her inner consciousness, she feels lonely, suffering from emotional conflicts and a sense of questioning. With Clarissa Woolf demonstrates that even a woman in a privileged class isn't really free. Marriage has an impact on her identity, as do social expectations and patriarchal values. The difference between a woman's public image and her private inner life is disclosed in the novel. Woolf gives two competing images of womanhood in *To the Lighthouse*, in the characters of Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Mrs Ramsay is the embodiment of the traditional feminine. She is loving, caring and self-giving, but mostly she is a wife and mother. Lily Briscoe, however, embodies the modern female individuality and artistic freedom. The difficulties she faces in finishing her painting becomes a metaphor for a woman's struggle to create her own vision in a world of men. In Lily, Woolf argues for woman's intellectual and creative voice (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 4).

Woolf explores gender and identity in quite an experimental manner in *Orlando*. Orlando's transgression of genders and eras calls into question the notion of "fixed" identity. The novel challenges the conventional notions about gender roles. The novel questions the rigid gender divisions. The body is not the only thing that formulates gender; society, history, clothing, law and culture do too. Thus, *Orlando* is an important source of information concerning the notions of female freedom and that of gender identity. Woolf's feminism is also linked to her modernist "narrative style. Furthermore, Woolf's feminist stance can be related to her modernist narrative technique. She employs a form of stream of consciousness, interior monologue and psychological narration to enter the inner world of her characters. These methods are particularly relevant to feminist writing, as these techniques enable the voices of the women to



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rise. Novels are usually concerned with the external events but Woolf gives weight to thoughts, feelings and perceptions. She demonstrates that a woman's mind is teeming with memory, imagination, intelligence, conflict and creative power (Moi 3).

Feminist thought and Virginia Woolf

The Virginia Woolf and the feminist thought are tightly linked to the evolution of modern literature in England. Woolf is seen as one of the most important modernist novelists and one of the most important feminists thinkers of the twentieth century. Her feminism is not to be found in overt political rhetoric or social slogans – it is to be found in her profound examination of women's inner lives, social status, intellectual and creative lives. Woolf knew that the situation of women needed to be explored from within. For her the real issue was not that women were in society, but that they were given permission to think, create, speak and live as independent human beings. Her feminist perspective thus transcends the domestic sphere of social equality and extends to the psychological, cultural and literary aspects of femininity (Black 16). The meaning of feminist thought in Woolf's writing is related to the questioning of patriarchy. Patriarchy: A social system in which men are in authority in the family, society, education, economy and literature, and women are in a dependent or secondary role. Women were denied education, property, income, privacy, literary recognition by men, observed Woolf. In *A Room of One's Own*, she makes it quite clear, that a woman who wishes to write fiction must have money and a room of her own. It's not just a matter of space, it's also a matter of mental liberation, financial autonomy and creative dignity (Goldman 2). Without independence, a woman's mind is in the power of others, and her inventive power cannot be fully developed, Woolf thought. Virginia Woolf ke feminist idea *A Room of One's Own*:

She asks not only for shelter or bread,
But for the freedom of heart and head;
A silent room, a thinking mind,
A self that no chain can bind.

The lines convey the core of Woolf's feminism. Woolf's request for a room" is a space where a woman can find herself, a room that is intellectual and emotional. In a patriarchy-based society, women are expected to serve others, make sacrifices and change themselves. They are governed by families and society in regard to their time, body, emotions and labour. In the absence of such a condition, Woolf argues that a woman must have her own space in which to think, write and establish her identity. The intellectual freedom is thus associated with material conditions in her feminist thinking. She knew that it's not possible to be creatively independent without being economically independent. A dependent woman may be talented, intelligent and imaginative, but society will not let her utilize them freely (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 4). Feminism is also intertwined with the feminine identity in Virginia Woolf's thinking. Female identity is having a sense of herself as a woman, and not only as a daughter, wife, mother, or target of male desire. In traditional society, the woman is usually identified by her association



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with men. They are not seen as individuals but as part of family roles and social responsibilities. Woolf questions this limited definition of womanhood. Women are not two-dimensional or appendages in her novels. They have memory, fear, desire, imagination, conflict, loneliness and self-questioning. For Woolf women's inner consciousness is important because she feels that the real life of a woman can only be grasped from within. Her mind is a world, too, and it is worth of expression in literature. Clarissa Dalloway is a woman whose public image and private identity are different in *Mrs Dalloway* (Barrett 11). She seems to be a good and respectable woman of the upper class society. She sets up parties and carries out her social responsibilities; she is a proper wife. On the inside however, she feels lonely, empty and questioning herself. Bynum uses Clarissa to demonstrate that respectability in society is not necessarily freedom. Even though the woman who is comfortable is with her husband, she can experience inner suppression. This is an essential element of Woolf's feminist point of view as she reveals the secret emotional expense of patriarchy.

The comparison of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe is Woolf's attempt to express the feminist point of view in *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs Ramsay is the type of woman who was once the norm. She is love, caring, beautiful and selfless. Her identity is formed by her responsibilities as a woman at home and her service to others through her emotions. Lily Briscoe, on the other hand, represents modern female identity (Marcus 12). She wishes to create, think and paint according to her imagination and vision. When the male vocalists question her as an artist, Lily keeps going. Her painting is a symbol of female creativity and self-expression. In *Lily*, Woolf implies that no woman can give her consent to the verdict of a world dominated by men. It's up to her to develop her own vision, and to rely on her own inner strength. Whereas Woolf's feminism is not rooted in male-hatred. It is based on the demand for balance, freedom and human dignity. She criticizes those social systems that give power to one gender and silence the other. Woolf was a campaigner for literature and society to acknowledge women as whole persons. She did not think that women ought to take on the characteristics of men to be of importance. Rather, women are to be given opportunities to share their personal experiences, feelings and artistic expressions. This renders Woolf's feminism very sensitive and original (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 48). She does not just say that women ought to look like men; she says that women ought to be allowed to be themselves.

Female Identity in Woolf's Fiction

The theme of female identity in Virginia Woolf's fiction is one of the most important themes that can be found in her literary vision. It means a woman's self-understanding as a unique person, who is not defined by her role in the family, marriage, society and patriarchy. In the traditional social system, a woman would have her identity defined by other people. She should be a good daughter, wife, mother, hostess or caretaker. She eludes to her own desires, intellectual powers, emotional struggles and her own creative aspirations, which are typically overlooked. This limited definition of womanhood Woolf challenges. Women are not only seen



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as the characters in the life story of men in her fiction. They are shown as complex human beings with their own thoughts, memories, fears, dreams and inner struggles. Woolf's conception of womanhood is at the psychological level. She does not see the woman in terms of outward appearance or social status (Moi 13). Rather, she moves into the inner world of women and uncovers how their identities are created through memory, feelings, silence, social pressure and self-questioning. Her female characters are frequently caught between two worlds: outer world (duty) and inner world (desire). While outwardly they are calm and graceful and will obey, internally they will feel conflicted, lonely, and desperate for self-expression. The tension between public and private identity is at the heart of Woolf's fiction. It is an observation about Virginia Woolf's female identity/feminist thought.

A woman stands where voices fade,
Behind the roles that custom made;
Yet in her silence, deep and wide,
She seeks the self she must not hide.

(Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 37)

These lines point to the subtext of the novels that Woolf wrote: the struggle of the female identity. A woman's voice does not indicate that she is without thoughts, as Woolf demonstrates. In many of her fiction characters, women are silent because society doesn't allow them enough room to speak. Behind Manners and Duties and Expectations is their identity. Woolf attempts to make this unknown self a part of literature. She values women's inner voice because she argues that the actual life of a woman can only be comprehended from her social function. The authentic woman is in her mind, feelings, memory and imagination (Marcus 13). Clarissa Dalloway is the most subtle and strong character of the female identity in *Mrs Dalloway*. To the world, Clarissa is a proper woman, a good hostess. She is a member of the upper class, and she carries out her social responsibilities well. But her inner eyes see a different reality. She doubts herself, recalls her childhood, considers her marriage with Sally Seton, and experiences a great loneliness in her marriage. Clarissa's identity is split between what society expects her to be and what she feels within herself. By the character of Clarissa, Woolf demonstrates how a woman can be well respected in society and yet feel empty and lost within her. Clarissa's character demonstrates that female identity is not a straightforward category or an integral part of their identity. She's not totally traditional and totally rebellious. She takes on numerous roles, but those roles also press upon her. Her party represents her social identity, and her mind opens up a window on her inner emotional life. Clarissa is used by Woolf to illustrate how there are intangible limitations placed on women's lives. Their objections may not always be expressed but it is their questioning from within that is a rebellion. The reader can learn about Clarissa's emotional state through her consciousness, and how she attempts to maintain her identity within a male-dominated society (Minow-Pinkney 22). To the Lighthouse



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discusses the female identity through two female characters Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Mrs Ramsay is the classical model of a woman.

She is loving, caring, beautiful and self-sacrificing. She is unmistakably identified with motherhood, marriage and household duties. She is emotionally supportive towards others and is the hub around which the entire family revolves. But Woolf does not only represent her as a conventional, ordinary woman. Mrs Ramsay also has an inner life, fears and unspoken desires. Such dignity and limits of traditional womanhood are revealed in her identity. Her strength is in the private universe, but her strength is limited to services to family and emotion (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 32). On the other hand, Lily Briscoe embodies the modern womanhood. She is independent, unmarried and artistic. Her want to paint turns into a symbol of a woman's wish to create her picture. The novel explores her issues of competence as a painter and writer, given her male-dominated authority. Lily's battle is thus both aesthetic and feminist. She has to battle the doubts of society and herself. The moment when she finishes her painting is a crucial moment of female self-realization. In Lily, Woolf demonstrates that female identity emerges when a woman believes in her own judgment and does not allow the judgment of the patriarchy to be her final word. Woolf's presentation of the identity of the female in Orlando is experimental and symbolic. The change from male to female in Orlando blurs the boundaries of gender identity. The novel illustrates that the world is different for the same person when he or she changes gender. In this metamorphosis, Woolf uncovers female identity as determined not only by the body, but also by law, dress, culture, property, social rules and historical conditions. Orlando challenges the dichotomy of masculinity, femininity. It implies a fluidity, a shift, an expanding or a mutability of identity beyond the rigid divisions that are socially imposed (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 11).

Feminism in Mrs Dalloway

The subject of the feminism in Mrs Dalloway by Virginia Woolf is intricately related to the emotional identity, social status and inner life of women. Feminism is never directly protested in the novel, nor is it argued politically; it is argued in the quiet, but powerful, exploration of a woman's consciousness. The main female character, Clarissa Dalloway, is seemingly a respectable upper class woman of London society. The wife of Richard Dalloway and a graceful hostess who organizes parties, she is known as such. But Woolf does not confine Clarissa to these social roles. She is invited into Clarissa's mind and shows her her memories, fears, desires, loneliness and self-questioning. Thus, the novel is feminist, as it pays attention to the inner world of a woman, which is something that is ignored by patriarchal society. In traditional patriarchal society, the identity of the woman is mostly associated with marriage, family and social respectability. This is also the house where Clarissa Dalloway lives. Her identity is connected with her husband, her house, her party and her social class. She is respected by society as "Mrs Dalloway," not just as Clarissa (Goldman 59). This is a woman's naming of herself as a part of her husband's identity. This state of affairs is Woolf's way of



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revealing the secret issue of womanhood. Clarissa's status, comfort and social recognition are present, but her emotional freedom is not complete. Her life teaches the lesson that privilege does not equate with independence. A woman can have all these blessings and have nothing at all going for her. Clarissa is a feminist because she is aware of it on the inside. Virginia Woolf writes in *Mrs Dalloway*:

“She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible;
unseen; unknown.” (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 8)

It is here that these lines capture the main conflict between the feminists, as they appear in *Mrs Dalloway*. Clarissa acts out her societal expectations of her, but there is an internal self, an inner life, that questions, remembers and feels. Woolf shows that a woman's silence does not mean that she has no thoughts. Clarissa has a rich inner life, though it embodies an external politeness. This is one of the most important feminist aspects of the novel. Woolf is giving a literary form to the ideas and feelings of a woman who may be interpreted as just a social hostess. Clarissa's mind becomes the focus of the novel, which Woolf seeks to disrupt the male literary tradition that tended to dismiss women's domestic and emotional lives (Lee 473).

The party of *Mrs Dalloway*'s is also important for being a feminist event. At first, Clarissa's party seems like a social gathering. But on a more profound level, it is her quest to find connection and meaning in a world that is broken. Clarissa brings people together through social events. This seems a purely female job, but Woolf treats it seriously and complexly. Clarissa's social work is not in vain. It is her wish to provide harmony, beauty and human contact. Meanwhile, the party also reveals the constraints that are imposed on women. Clarissa is a creative not in writing, art or public or official power, but in arranging the domestic and social. In this way, Woolf deems the dignity and the limitation of women's roles (Goldman 59). The topic of marriage is another area of feminist interest that is explored in *Mrs Dalloway*. Clarissa's marriage to Richard Dalloway provides her with a sense of security and a social position but her emotional depth and freedom are restricted. Richard is not portrayed as an easy-to-describe scourge. He cares for Clarissa, but their relationship doesn't have a lot of emotional content. Thus Woolf's feminism is subtle and realistic. There is a distance, a silence and a social habit. There is a distance, a silence and a social habit. Clarissa's marriage is an example of how women can have relations within the confines of respectability and yet feel lonely and incomplete in their inner lives (Marcus 13).

There is also another clue about Clarissa's struggle for identity in the presence of Peter Walsh in the novel. Peter is a judge of Clarissa, and he frequently sees her through his own eyes. He scolds her about her social life and believes that she has become conventional. But despite his judgment, it is still an indication of male authority. He wants to tell who Clarissa should be based on his conception of what she should be. Woolf defies this by giving the reader access to Clarissa's own mind. Clarissa is not limited to Peter's opinion of her. She's depicted as a multifaceted individual whose decisions are not necessarily an easy one to evaluate from afar.



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It's a big feminist move, as Woolf grants the woman inner complexity. Miss Kilman's character even brings another facet of the concept of feminism to the novel. Miss Kilman is the poor, angry, passionate woman. She is different from Clarissa in class, appearance and temperament. Miss Kilman's character and her relationship with Clarissa illustrate Woolf's view that gender is not the only factor that influences the lives of women; class, religion and social position are also significant. Anger is a form of exclusion and frustration for Miss Kilman. She is intelligent but she is not given dignity or emotional satisfaction by society. Her character conveys that there is no single women's identity. Women don't suffer in the same way within social structures (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 8).

Feminism in to the *Lighthouse*

The themes of feminism in to the *Lighthouse* are explored through the tension between the feminine and the modern women. Feminism is not talked directly about in a political way; it is talked about in terms of the relationships between women, women's roles in society, women's struggle against art, women's emotional labour and the search for freedom for women. Woolf features the female perspective primarily through the two significant female characters, Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Mrs Ramsay is the type of woman who is a wife, mother, caregiver and the emotional heart of the family. Lily Briscoe is the modern woman who is not afraid to think, create and live according to her vision. In these two, Woolf explores the situation of women in a man's world thoroughly. Mrs Ramsay is beautiful, graceful, loving and self-sacrificing in *To the Lighthouse*. She is the heart of the Ramsay family and provides emotional support for all. She takes care of her children, consoles her husband and strives to keep harmony among the people in the house. She might seem to be the perfect woman of traditional society on the surface. She does what is expected of her as a wife and mother with patience and dignity. But, as a feminist, her character is also a reflection of the burden of domestic aspirations. She is primarily defined by her service to others (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 37).

She is appreciated for her comforting, supporting, sacrificing but little voice of her own desire. Through Mrs Ramsay's life it is clear how patriarchy glorifies women's sacrifice. Women who dedicate themselves fully to a family are lauded in society, though, they are not asked about their aspirations at the same time. The power of Mrs Ramsay is within the domestic sphere, but it is confined. She affects human beings passionately, but not completely in their thinking and creativity. She is married; she is a mom; she is the person who is responsible for the domestic sphere (Goldman 64). She is married, she is a mom, she is the one who is responsible for the domestic sphere. Woolf does not condemn Mrs Ramsay; she shows him/her sympathy and depth. She reveals the beauty of the traditional feminine, as well as its weakness. Mrs Ramsay is strong but she uses her strength primarily for others, not for herself. To the *Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf writes:

“For now she need not think about anybody.

She could be herself, by herself.” (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 83)



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The inner meaning of Mrs Ramsay's character is reflected in these lines. She becomes comforting and warm to others but her personal identity is lost in her social roles. Woolf demonstrates that women have been taught to identify through service and sacrifice. Feminism challenges Mrs Ramsay's meaning as it relies on her usefulness to the family, whereas her life is made meaningful by her ability to love others. Woolf reveals the emotional work that women are expected to perform through Mrs Ramsay. Emotional labour is a constant job of caring and comforting, adjusting and keeping relationships up. This work is not often acknowledged, however it ends up being the basis for family life (Black 18).

Another of the characters that assist understanding of the novel is Mr Ramsay. Yet another character that assists understanding of the novel is Mr Ramsay. He is a symbol of manly power, of man's ego and emotional needs. He is a philosopher and a learned man but always needs sympathy and reassurance from Mrs Ramsay. This is a significant paradox of patriarchy. Women are presented as emotional and without power while men are presented as rational and powerful. Mrs Ramsay has to uphold Mr Ramsay's self-esteem, despite being weary or emotionally stressed. Not only is Woolf aware of patriarchy's direct domination of women, but she also understands that patriarchy imposes invisible emotional burdens upon women. In *The Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe is the most significant feminist character. She's an artist and an unmarried woman who is finishing her painting. Her difficulty to paint is not just a struggle with art, it is also a struggle for female identity and self-expression. Lily's society is a society where the creative ability of women is doubted. The attitude of the patriarchy towards the creativity of women is declared by the phrase: "women can't paint, women can't write". This notion turns into a mental hurdle for Lily. She has to battle against the outside opinions, and the ones she put in her mind by the judgment of the men (Marcus 12).

Lily's painting is a metaphor for female creativity. Through her painting, she tries to express her own vision of reality. She doesn't want to view the world through a male's eyes, she wants to establish an independent form of art. This clearly is a feminist statement, in that Woolf equates art with women's freedom. Painting is more than Lily's hobby, it is a way to appropriate her identity. She is not convinced that a woman has to marry to be full and complete. She defies the norm that marriage and family are the only appropriate fate for women. Lily demonstrates that women have a life of their own, an artful purpose and intellectual seriousness. The female character of Mrs Ramsay, contrasted with Lily Briscoe, is a key element in the feminist interpretation of the novel. Mrs Ramsay is married, is a wife and a family man. She would like people to get married and fulfill their roles. But Lily doesn't agree. She has respect for Mrs Ramsay, but cannot fully accept her model of womanhood. Lily isn't defined by being a wife or a mother. She'd like to be an artist and an independent thinker (Barrett 15). In this opposition, Woolf is not just rejecting Mrs Ramsay or praising Lily. Rather, she demonstrates that there is more to being a female than can be conveyed by a single word.



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Creativity and independence may be a source of meaning for one woman, whereas for another it may be found in domestic life. Yet another feminist element of *To the Lighthouse* is women's voice. Mrs Ramsay may often speak in silence, through gestures and the understanding of the other person's emotions. Both women are victims of a society that is dominated by men's voices and needs to be expressed through art. In public and intellectual language, Mr Ramsay's philosophy takes over the space that is occupied by women's speech, whereas in the private space, women's speech is reduced to the emotional or to the artistic. Woolf refuses to accept such a distinction, and bestows upon women's silent thoughts and creative perceptions a depth of value. She demonstrates that the work of women is not of less value because it is not written in masculine terms (Moi 13). The novel also has a feminine theme, with Woolf's narrative technique supporting this idea. She employs stream of consciousness to enter her characters' consciousness. This technique will enable the reader to read what women feel, think and recall, as well as what they want. Women were usually described in traditional fiction from the outside, but Woolf describes them from the inside. The recognition of women's inner life is important, for feminism in Woolf's fiction rests on it. Woolf highlights the emotional depth of Mrs Ramsay and also Lily's artistic struggle, emphasizing the importance of female consciousness. She shows that a woman's mind is full of richness, activity and creativity. There is also a feminist meaning in the structure of the novel. In the first section, "The Window," there is a predominantly domestic atmosphere, where Mrs Ramsay is always present. The middle section "Time Passes" depicts the passage of time, death and emptiness. Mrs Ramsay is dead within this part of the novel and her death alters the novel's emotional dynamics. The last section, "The Lighthouse," is about Lily finishing her painting and going to the lighthouse. This is a movement that is significant from a feminist perspective. The novel shifts from domestic, traditional and old-fashioned Mrs Ramsay to the modern creative self-realization of Lily. Lily's final sight transforms into a moment for female art achievement (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 48).

Feminism in Orlando

The feminism of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is given in an imaginative, experimental and symbolic way. Although it shares certain common themes with *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, where Woolf investigates the nature of women through domesticity, marriage and social roles, as well as through inner consciousness, *Orlando* takes a wider approach to the issue of feminism through the issues of gender, history, body, identity and social construction. The novel disrupts the dichotomy of male/female and demonstrates that gender identity is not as static and binary as society suggests. Woolf undermines the patriarchal notion that men and women have different roles through Orlando's change in sex. Woolf challenges the idea of the division of labour between men and women because Orlando changes sex. Many differences between men and women are socially constructed, legally enforced, through fashion, and in education and historical expectations, the novel implies (Goldman 122).



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In the opening of the novel, Orlando is described as a noble youth in the Elizabethan era. Orlando is a man who has a high level of social freedom, right to property, freedom of public travel and personal power. Can move about in courtly society, writes poetry, falls in love and enjoys the privileges of the aristocracy. He has the power and independence due to his male identity. In this early section of the novel, Woolf demonstrates the free nature of men's existence within society, as though it were natural to them, without anyone asking them whether they are allowed. Opportunity, movement and authority are the factors that shape Orlando's life as a man. This will help come into play later on when Orlando is a woman and sees the world differently. The novel's main feminist event is Orlando's metamorphosis into a woman. Woolf portrays this change as a change in social status rather than an identity loss (Woolf, *Orlando* 13). The change of gender means that society treats Orlando differently, but Orlando's inner person remains the same. Virginia Woolf writes in Orlando:

“The change of sex, though it altered their future,
did nothing whatever to alter their identity.”

(Woolf, *Orlando* 87).

This original line definitely demonstrates the main notion of Orlando feminism. Orlando's inner self does not weaken, be passive or dependent after being made a woman, as Woolf demonstrates. The actual transformation takes place in society's expectations. As a woman, Orlando has to face restrictions regarding dress, movement, property and behaviour. The novel thus clearly distinguishes between biological change and social treatment. Here Woolf is a feminist because she challenges the notion of nature, fixity and inferiority of femininity. She demonstrates how “womanly behaviour” is created by rules, training and pressure within society. Feminist Orlando includes an important role for clothes. Once Orlando becomes a woman, it is expected of her to dress and act like a woman. Woolf demonstrates how clothing affects the perception of the self and how society perceives the self. A change of dress changes Orlando's social identity. This implies that gender is done by using external features like clothes, behaviour, gestures, and manners (Black 105). Through this concept, Woolf's aim is to challenge the limitations of gender definitions and the distinction between man and woman. She demonstrates how society looks at the body and then applies rules to it via cultural symbols. Another feminist issue in Orlando is the issue of property. Once Orlando is turned into a woman, there are legal issues of inheritance and ownership. This is an accurate representation of the past when women's legal and property rights were denied. It is in this context that Woolf demonstrates the workings of patriarchy by law and institutions. Women have identities beyond just those based on family or marriage; those identities can also be diminished by legal systems. Woolf reveals the injustice of a society where rights, authority and social value are determined by gender in Orlando's experience. The novel makes the points that it is a critique of the patriarchal building of literary history.



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Orlando is a writer through the ages. This is a long literary voyage, which is a reflection of the fight of women to secure their position in literature. Woolf was well aware of the fact that the literary traditions had neglected, ridiculed or suppressed women.

She invents a character who transcends centuries and gender in Orlando to illustrate the ways literature has been produced by power. Orlando's writing is a sign of creative survival. As a woman, Orlando must continue to write despite social expectations, historical restrictions and gendered judgments. The concept of androgyny is also associated with the ideology of feminism in Orlando. Woolf had the idea that the mind must not be confined to a narrow masculinity or femininity. Woolf's creative mind is male and female. This is what Orlando is all about. Orlando is a man and a woman, and symbolizes a more whole and flexible self. Woolf does not show identity as stable in any one category. She instead makes it a fluid, open and changing experience. That is Orlando is one of Woolf's more advanced feminist works. The representation of time also serves to reinforce its feminist perspective. The book follows Orlando's life through the Elizabethan period to modern times (Minow-Pinkney 116). Over this long period of time Woolf reveals that the situation for women has improved, but that their situation has been under the control of men in other ways. Laws for women vary from age to age. Women are lawfully controlled in one time, by manners in another and by marriage and respectability in another. Through time, Orlando uncovers that there is an historical dimension to the female personality created by social and cultural influences. Woolf then equates individual identity to historical transformation. Marriage is also questioned in the novel. In traditional society marriage is regarded as women's ultimate fate. Woolf sets out to counter this notion by depicting Orlando as a woman who does not lose her identity in marriage. The interrelationship of Orlando and Shelmerdine is unusual because they are both characters that seem to have male and female traits. They do not enjoy a hierarchical gender relation. In this, Woolf envisions a more balanced and fluid love. She believes that relationships should not be confining, but should be freeing and recognizing identity.

Feminism in *The Waves*

The Waves is a very deep, psychological and experimental approach to feminism in Virginia Woolf. The novel is unlike Woolf's other novels due to its lack of a conventional plot and easy narrative. Rather, it's constructed by the inner voices of six characters: Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny and Louis. Of these, the female characters Susan, Rhoda and Jinny are a representation of various facets of female identity, female consciousness, and women's struggle for self-understanding. Woolf does not depict feminism in the form of social protest. Instead, she delves into the sense of self, body, society, memory, isolation, and desire and silence from within. Thus, *The Waves* is a feminist work because it puts significance on women's inner voices and displays the fact that the female identity is not fixed, simple or single. In *The Waves*, the female identity is split up, and is changeable. A woman is not one kind of woman, Woolf implies. Her transforming inner changes are dependent on time, relationships, social



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expectations, emotional experiences and inner conflicts. Susan, Rhoda and Jinny are not a single type of woman. Each of them is an image of womanhood (Goldman 101).

Motherhood, nature and domestic life are associated with Susan. Jinny is associated with body, beauty, desire and social performance. Rhoda is connected with fear, isolation, imagination and inner emptiness. In these three women Woolf demonstrates that womanhood is not one-dimensional. There are many aspects of female identity, and it is evolving and personal. Consciousness is the feminist center of *The Waves*. Woolf gives equal importance to the inner thoughts of women. In the patriarchy, women were described by others with reference to their beauty, behaviour or relations with men. This approach is not taken by Woolf. She offers women from within. The reader infiltrates the minds of the reader and their fears, desires, memories and self-doubts are experienced. This is a feminist act as it bestows literary value on the inner life of women. Woolf demonstrates that women are not mere objects of contemplation but thinking subjects who have complex emotional and intellectual lives (Marcus 28). This is an important moment where Rhoda's voice becomes vital to the comprehension of alienation and fractured identity among women. In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf writes through Rhoda:

“I have no face.”

“I am made and remade continually.”

“I am rooted, but I flow.”

This original line is an expression of Rhoda's sense of crisis and her sense of being invisible. Rhoda does not feel a sense of social stability or of being recognized. Her statement is an expression of how a woman can feel erased in a world that demands her fixed roles, and her visible identities. Through Rhoda, Woolf illustrates female identity as not only self-assured and fully formed, but fractured, scared, and unsure. This is a very feminist feature of *The Waves*, as it allows for a representation of those hidden psychological states of women, not usually captured by the common language of society. The instability and change of identity is also made evident by Woolf's own statement, “I am made and remade continually.” This concept resonates with the central theme of the novel which is the fluidity, shifting and experienced nature of the self through relationship and time (Caughie 87).

One of the significant female characters in *The Waves* is Susan. She is the woman who looks at nature, motherhood and household services. She is connected with the fields and seasons, fertility, home and children. On one hand, Susan is perhaps seen as typical feminine due to her association with marriage and motherhood, the rural domestic sphere. But Woolf does not make her an easy or simple character. Susan possesses intensity, passions and emotional strength. She selects a life of the body, family and natural rhythm. By means of Susan, Woolf demonstrates the significance of domestic identity, yet one that can be constricting if society sees the woman via the lens of motherhood and family. Susan's character plays a significant role as she helps to uncover the strength and weakness of the traditional female identity. She has a strong sense of connection to birth and nature, and a sense of disconnection from



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intellectual and public places. She lives in an emotional and material world but one restricted to the confines of her home and her motherhood. Woolf does not dismiss Susan's life, however. Rather, she offers it as a one potential way of being females. On a feminist level, Susan's character asks herself an important question: can motherhood be a strength, without being a prison? By letting the reader glimpse into the dignity of Susan's life as well as the limitations set upon it, Woolf allows the reader to see both sides, the good and the bad (Woolf, *The Waves* 33).

Jinny embodies a female identity of its own. She is associated with beauty, movement, sensuality, social life and bodily confidence. Jinny knows what her body is, and what it can do when she is in social places. She likes attention, attraction and physical presence. In Jinny, Woolf investigates how the body is connected to identity in the female. The body of a woman in a patriarchal society is usually controlled, judged or objectified. This is complicated by the fact that Jinny isn't just a victim. She uses her body to express herself and her social power. However, she also relies on physical characteristics, youth and external recognition. The feminist lens is on Jinny as a representation of the woman who does identity in public. She traverses through parties, social gatherings and moments of desire. Her confidence is strong but at the same time, she is fragile as women are valued based on their beauty and attraction by society. Woolf has demonstrated the social power that can be acquired by a woman through her beauty, but this power is fragile. It is based on others gazes. Jinny's identity, then, therefore demonstrates, the tension between self-expression and objectification. Though she loves her body, she also lives in a world that values women's bodies by their physical attractiveness. Woolf does not condemn Jinny, however; she shows her this complex character of female desire and social performance (Woolf, *The Waves* 94).

Rhoda is certainly the most psychologically complex female character in *The Waves*. She is a symbol of alienation, fear, insecurity and inner fragmentation. It doesn't come easily for Rhoda to fit in with the social world. She often feels unreal, invisible and disconnected from others. Her identity is not solid, because she is not able to easily take on the roles and forms that society provide. She can't find stability in nature or motherhood, unlike Susan. Unlike Jinny, she does not have confidence in her body and social interactions. Rhoda's mind brings to light the suffering of an individual who suffers from a loss of self and a lack of being at home in the world. One of the feminist features of *The Waves* is that there is no plot line centered around the male character. Marriage and romance and domestic strife are not the focus of the novel, in the traditional sense. Rather, it traverses the voices and consciousness. This structure is important because it breaks the conventional form of the novel. Woolf invents a new genre in which the internal life is more significant than the outward action. More poignantly for women, their inner lives were sometimes ignored in traditional stories. Woolf represents the feminine in female consciousness and defies the masculine power of society and of literary technique.



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The title *The Waves* is symbolic because of its feminist connotations. When waves are used, they imply movement, rhythm, change and continuity (Barrett 19). Waves are also used to express the female identity in the novel. It rises and falls, fades and reappears, in various forms. Susan, Jinny and Rhoda are not cardboard cutouts. They grow in their voices as they grow older, wiser, and more emotional. In the story, the word 'wave' symbolizes a lack of solid identity and continuity. This is particularly significant for feminist thinking since patriarchy seeks to confine the role of women to an "assignment" of wife, mother, beauty, caretaker or object. Woolf counters this by demonstrating the fluidity and mutability of female identity. The connection between individual and collective is also examined in the novel. The voices of each character are distinct, yet they also merge with each other. This implies that identity has both individual and communal aspects. There are personal feelings that are involved in the formation of female identity, as well as societal, relational and cultural expectations. Susan, Jinny and Rhoda are three women but they all suffer from the pressure of being seen, judged or defined. They are different and unique, their voices indicate women's experiences, but they are also part of a broader story of women's struggle (Goldman 101). The feminist in Woolf, then, becomes the link between an individual's consciousness and a collective womanhood. As such, the feminism in *The Waves* is psychological, symbolic and experimental. Woolf does not show women as social types, she shows them as inner voices, emotional beings and changing selves. She delves into themes of motherhood, body, desire, loneliness, fear, imagination, search for identity through Susan, Jinny and Rhoda. The novel demonstrates that there is no single definition or role for women. It flows, it is formed by time, memory, society and inner consciousness. Thus, *The Waves* is a significant feminist novel because it affords a glimpse into the inner worlds of women that have historically gone unheard and into the multiple and complex nature of women's identity as a highly human being.

Patriarchy and Women's Struggle

Patriarchy is a major theme in Virginia Woolf's novels, along with the struggle of women against it. Patriarchy is the social, cultural and intellectual system in which men's power is predominant and women are subordinate or dependent. It operates not just through direct control or overt violence, but also through family customs, marriage, education, property, social manners, religion, language and literary tradition. In Woolf's novels, the patriarchy manifests itself as a silent presence in women's lives, affecting them from their youth to their maturity. Teach women to be obedient, soft, sacrificing and socially acceptable. They are frequently identified by their connection to men, not by their own wishes, thoughts and creativity. Virginia Woolf depicts women's struggle not only as a social struggle, but as a psychological one as well. Her female characters don't always rebel against the social norms, but rather have a great deal of internal struggle. They have difficulty grasping themselves as anything other than wife, mother, hostess, favorite or caregiver. Woolf demonstrates how patriarchy penetrates the mind of women and leads to self doubt, silence and hesitation. A woman can be talented, intelligent



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and imaginative, but society can make her feel that her voice is of less value (Goldman 2). That is why Woolf's novel protagonists are linked to themes of women's struggle and self-recognition, creative freedom and the quest for an independent identity. Clearly, in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf is stating women's mental liberty in the face of patriarchal control at this juncture:

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

“Lock up your libraries if you like;
but there is no gate, no lock,
no bolt, that you can set upon
the freedom of my mind.”

(Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 76).

This is an original line which reflects hidden aspects of Woolf's thinking about the struggle of women. The “gate,” “lock” and “bolt” represent “social restrictions,” “intellectual barriers” and “patriarchal control.” Woolf demonstrates that women are sometimes confined to walls that are unseen and unsound. When they realize that these are the limitations they face, and they are attempting to establish themselves outside of them, their struggle begins. This struggle is subtle, but it is strong, because it is against the system, the patriarchal system. Woolf's feminism is the elevation of these hidden battles, to see women's interiority as the heart of literature. Patriarchy is manifested in marriage and social respectability/class expectations in Mrs Dalloway. Clarissa Dalloway is often referred to as Mrs Dalloway, the wife of Richard Dalloway. The name of her husband itself sings of the merging of the woman's identity into his social role. Clarissa enjoys a comfortable and privileged life, but is not wholly free of emotional constraints. Social duties, parties, expectations of respectable womanhood shape her life. She acts as a good hostess, but her inner voice is lonely, remembers and asks questions of herself. “Patriarchy is not always cruel; sometimes it's polite, sometimes it's habit, social order.” (Woolf)

Clarissa's fight is an internal one. She recalls her childhood, her close relationship with Sally Seton and her choosing to marry Richard. These memories reveal a life she once had the opportunity to have that was freer and more passionate. But society was pressing her towards a stable respectable marriage. Her resistance is not a public opposition, it's an ongoing effort to uphold her private personae in a public function. Clarissa is a figure representing the internal and external conflicts of women who are accepted by society. One of the clearest indicators of patriarchy is this separation between the social identity and personal self (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 8).

Patriarchy is discussed in the family structure and gender roles in *To the Lighthouse*. Mr Ramsay is a symbol of manhood, self respect, and emotional reliance. He is expected to be a philosopher, a thinker, and Mrs Ramsay to care and show sympathy and emotional support. This is an indication of the inequitable distribution of roles between men and women. Men are



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associated with intellect and public achievement, women are associated with affection, sacrifice and domestic responsibility. Mrs Ramsay is not presented by Woolf as weak, but she demonstrates her emotional strength. This power is primarily employed to help others. She's not really herself in front of the camera, except as wife and mother (Lee 473).

The burden of the tradition of being a woman in Mrs Ramsay's struggle. She is praised for sacrificing herself for the good of the family but feminism asks the question, why do women have to be valued through sacrifice. But her identity is important, it is constrained by domestics. But Lily Briscoe is a different kind of women's struggle. Her aim is to interpret and create her own vision. The male's assertion that "Women can't paint, women can't write" is a mental barrier that is put in her way. Lily's battle is a combination of artistic and feminist. At the end of the novel, she finishes her painting, which represents the strength of women and their ability to overcome any doubt from the male point of view. In Orlando, Woolf claims patriarchy in the form of law, property, dress and gender roles. The transformation of Orlando from male to female is a reflection on the manner in which the same person is treated differently in society once his gender has changed. Orlando, as a man, is free, owns property and moves in the public. Orlando is a woman, which means he is held back and hindered by law. This indicates that women's challenge is not due to their lack of ability, but their lack of rights in social systems. Woolf uses Orlando's experience to prove that gender roles are created by society. The book questions the notion that women are substandard and lacking in power (Cuddy-Keane 71).

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf novels are significant works in feminist literature for having put women's inner worlds, emotions and identities at the heart of modern fiction. Her feminism doesn't exist only in the form of protest or political demand, but in a psychological, intellectual and artistic way. Woolf examines the covert influence of patriarchy upon women's lives in the family, marriage, education, property, social manners and literary tradition and gender values. She demonstrates that oppression of women is not always overt and physical. It can function silently, in an emotional way, with the respectability of society, without privacy, without creative space, without intellectual freedom. Woolf's feminism is a subtle, yet powerful one in this regard. In Woolf's fiction, the examination of female identity demonstrates that female identity is not solely socially defined, as she can only be known as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a hostess or a caretaker. Woolf depicts women as full human beings who have their own memories, desires, doubts, fears, imagination and creative power. Her female characters frequently traverse two worlds: one outer, that of duty, and one inner, that of feeling. One of the central preoccupations of Woolf's fiction is that of balancing personal identity with personal self. In this tension Woolf reveals the emotional and psychological price paid by patriarchy. Clarissa Dalloway is a woman whose identity is defined by marriage, class and public respectability in Mrs Dalloway. She looks graceful and successful in society but in her inner being she feels lonely, forgetful, questioning herself. Clarissa reveals to us that social privilege is not always accompanied by



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emotional liberation. The story of Clarissa illustrates the ways a woman can be accepted by society but have divided selves inside. Her consciousness is an arena of feminist significance, because it hears the unheard voice of a woman who is typically known only in her social roles. To the Lighthouse explores feminism by the comparison of two women: Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Mrs Ramsay embodies the traditional feminine role of the sacrifice, care and domestic responsibility. She has emotional strength but her strength is limited to the family. The woman, on the other hand, Lily Briscoe, is a modern female identity and artist independence. When she fails to finish her painting, it will serve as a metaphor for women's struggle to believe in their own creativity in a society that does not. Woolf, working through Lily, proposes that it is important for a woman to take up her own thought and art. In Orlando, Woolf offers a new and provocative perspective on gender and identity in Orlando.

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