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Oppression of Masculinity on Men Under Patriarchy in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, is one of her well-structured modernist novels, in which the stream-of-consciousness technique and free indirect discourse are extensively employed to portray the inner thoughts of the characters. One of the prominent themes in the novel is patriarchy, which pervades all social strata and exerts a profound influence on the characters' lives. This paper aims to explore the oppression of masculinity on men within a patriarchal framework through the lens of gender theory. As the executors of patriarchy, men are supposed to conform to masculinity defined by patriarchy and social convention. In the novel, masculinity is manifested in the form of proportion. Men, truly masculine ones, are expected to have a sense of proportion, based on which women make their judgments of them. Through the analysis of the theme of "oppression", the conclusion is that patriarchal power is the source of the male characters' sufferings. As long as patriarchy exists and rules, oppression will continue to exist.

Keywords

Mrs. Dalloway; the oppression of patriarchy; masculinity

Introduction

In a patriarchal society, men are the executors of patriarchal power over women, which, however, does not mean that all men share this privilege, but only those who follow the rules of patriarchy. Patriarchal power defines what masculinity is in its society. In her book Masculinities, Connell (2002) argues that masculinity should be in its plural form masculinities since masculinity is associated with class and race, among which hegemonic masculinity remains supreme. Hegemonic masculinity is connected with the governing class. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, in the upper-class society, masculinity defined by patriarchy is connected with the ruling class values, convention, order and proportion, which takes Dr. Bradshaw and his set as representatives. Those who do not adopt this masculinity will be expelled from the society. In this sense, patriarchy is exclusive and oppressive in the novel. The rigid and ideal sense of masculinity (seen as the sense of proportion) renders its proponents rigid like Dr. Bradshaw and its opponents oppressed and ambivalent. In other words, men as the executors of patriarchy suffer from the power of which they are in control in one way or another; the rigid definition of masculinity under patriarchy is accounted for the death of Dr. Bradshaw's soul, Richard Dalloway's repression of his feelings, Peter Walsh's living dilemma and Septimus Smith's suicide in the novel.

1. Dr. Bradshaw and His Sense of Proportion

Sir William Bradshaw is a typical representative of patriarchal power in upper-class society in the novel. He stands for medical authority and makes judgments about who is sane or insane with his strong sense of Proportion, which means the control or repression of emotional feelings and doing what one is supposed to do according to the social

conventions and the values of the ruling class. To Dr. Bradshaw, Proportion is everything and all his judgment is based on it. “Health is proportion”. “Worshiping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair”. He intends to “propagate it among people until every man in the society shares his and every woman shares Lady Bradshaw's”. In this sense, his patients all lack a sense of Proportion. Dr. Bradshaw's diagnosis of Septimus is a lack of proportion. His advice for Septimus to “try to think as little about yourself as possible” reflects the substantial meaning of Proportion, as the “atrophy of the heart, repression of instinct and emotion (Zwerdling, 1986). The nature of Proportion is conversion in disguise, which demands power as it is described in the novel.

Proportion and conversion are ubiquitous in the lives of both women and men, in society and inside the family. Proportion demands men to be rational and able to deal with their passion. The governing class uses its influence to exclude and sequester alien or threatening forces—the Septimus Smiths, and the Dori Kilmans and to protect itself from any sort of intense feeling (Zwerdling, 1986).

Proportion in its nature is oppressive. Proportion renders Dr. Bradshaw “mechanically-minded” (Whitworth, 2000): he gives each of his patients exactly the same period of time. His relationship with his wife is reduced to a photograph on the mantelpiece of her. “He has lost all sense of personal contact and relates only to an abstract vision of the community as England or empire” (Dowling, 1991). Obsession with proportion is accounted for the death of his soul and turns him and his wife into 'damnable humbugs” in even Richard Dalloway's eyes, who also suffers from this sense of Proportion.

2. Richard Dalloway

As a member of the conservative party, Richard Dalloway himself belongs to the upper class, being one of the representatives of patriarchal power in the society. Richard Dalloway’s attitude toward the social system he lives in is complicated. The real Richard is not the one in public with his admirable and gentle appearance.

On the one hand, he acts in compliance with the social norms. He liked continuity and the sense of handing on the traditions of the past. He is cautious with his behavior and does not make any mistakes in his life. On the other hand, Richard Dalloway detests the society he lives in and people like Dr, William Bradshaw and Hugh Whitbread. “Why people stood that damnable insolence he could not conceive. Hugh was becoming an intolerable ass Richard Dalloway could not stand more than an hour of his society”. Richard is fully aware of the restriction bound on him; “It is a thousand pities never to say what one feels. However, Richard Dalloway usually takes a passive stance; “things pass over if you let them.”

Richard Dalloway is chained by the social obsession with proportion, which prevents him from telling his wife that he loves her. At the end of the novel, at the party, he makes progress by expressing his appreciation of Elizabeth's beauty. “But Richard was proud of his daughter. And he had not meant to tell her, but he could not help telling her. He had looked at her, he said, and he had wondered, who is that lovely girl? and it was his daughter!’

Richard Dalloway's efforts to shake off the force of Proportion on himself wins the praise of Sally and Peter at the party, but how far he could go remains unsettled since the oppression of Proportion which has its advocates like Dr, Bradshaw is long-settled and Richard himself is not decisive on this matter.

3. Peter Walsh and His Paper-knife

Peter Walsh has always pursued freedom of love, of passion, and has remained faithful to his true feelings. Peter Walsh is romantic and impulsive. He falls in love with Clarissa and later after being rejected by Clarissa, with a married woman Daisy, who is married to a Major in the Indian army and has two children. He follows an unknown lady in the streets and fancies his having a conversation with her. He has an obsession with passion which he considers as something to make him young even over fifty. However, this obsession with passion is what society aims to repel. Masculinity is connected with rationality, with proportion, which Peter is unwilling to conform to. He is rebellious against this fixed definition of masculinity and femininity as well. He revolts against convention and considers himself an outsider. He criticizes Clarissa Dalloway once for her “coldness” and conventionality” then later for her “being worldly”. He admires the Morries for “they don't care a hang for the upper-classes and they like what they like and Elaine (a female's name) is training for the family business”. Peter is persistent in his pursuit and expression of passion. Therefore, living in this society, Peter cannot demonstrate what is masculine in himself and becomes isolated from the power center. He's going to India--a foreign country is the symbol of his isolation and expel.

Peter Walsh holds a contradictory attitude toward the upper-class standard. He condemns the upper class and their values but he cannot help but depend on their power since he is a member of this society. He admits his dependence in the novel: “It was true he would have sometime or other to see whether Richard couldn't help him for a job”. Another thing that shows Peter Walsh's ambivalence is his paper-knife which has probably been with him for over thirty years. A knife is something aggressive which is one feature of being masculine in a patriarchal society and something that symbolizes male power. Just as Jeremy Tambling (1993) comments Peter's playing with the paper knife is “a symbol of awkwardness within the desire to be aggressively male--his irresistible returning to patriarchy.

Peter's playing with his pocket-knife is parallel to his psychological thinking and feelings and uncovers the emotions disguised under. The different context in which the knife appears in the novel clearly indicates its significance to him. During Peter's meeting with Clarissa, there are five times Peter playing with his pocket-knife. When Peter feels embarrassed by Clarissa's looking at him, he plays with his paper-knife. Seeing Clarissa's dress, he tilted his knife toward it and asked “And what's all this?” Later when he ponders his failure of life and the luxurious material life he witnesses in Clarissa's house, he plays with his pocket-knife. The knife appears again when Peter makes his preparation to follow an unknown woman in the street, by “straightening himself and stealthily fingering his pocket-knife he started after her to follow her”. Later his recollection of his weeping before Clarissa makes him feel awkward; he shuts the knife with the consolation that women do not know anything about passion. “But women, he thought, shutting his pocket-knife, don't know what passion is. They don't know the meaning of it to men. Clarissa was as cold as an icicle. When thinking about Daisy's possible unfaithfulness toward him, he becomes furious and searches for his knife.

With the reference to the context of Peter’s playing with his pocket-knife, the significant meaning of this pocket-knife to him is revealed, rather than being simply something as a toy. Peter plays with his paper-knife mainly under two circumstances. The first one is when he has the desire to feel comfortable or confident, especially before women. The paper-knife functions as something to distract him from feeling embarrassed before Clarissa, and support him from making a show of himself before the love of his life, the futile and frustrated love, Clarissa. When Peter starts to stalk the woman in the street, his straightening and fingering of the pocket-knife imply. Peter's irresistible desire to become masculine before the presence of a woman, is to be armed with the quality of masculinity. As Mitchell A. Leaska (1985) maintains on this occasion the knife is “a substitute for sexual aggression in his phantasy with the unknown young woman, a violent means of stoutly denying his impotence.”

The second kind of occasion is when he wants to find support for his rebellion against patriarchy, against the upper class. When Peter compares his life with Clarissa's during their meeting at the interval of their conversation, he again plays with his pocket-knife because he wants to confirm his choice of living against the standard of upper-class society; the knife functions as a “defensive weapon in Clarissa's world, a society which lessens and threatens him (Leaska, 1985). The clenching demonstrates Peter's seeking support from his knife and his insistence on not following upper-class values. Peter consciously rejects upper-class values and masculinity; he wants to assert his rebellion, and his independence from the upper-class. His tilting his knife towards Clarissa's green dress, which is connected with parties, at which Clarissa is a professional and perfect hostess, and shutting the knife when thinking about Clarissa's life pattern with Richard, shows his disapproval and criticism of Clarissa's choice, accompanied with his frustration to win Clarissa over with his passion.

Peter's choice to have a pocket-knife itself indicates his contradictory attitude toward patriarchy. His attitude toward Justin Parry is another proof of his contradiction. Clarissa's father Justin Parry, the head of the family, stands for patriarchal power in the family, with whom Peter fails to identify. In his recollection of Bourton, he “remembered breakfast alone, very awkwardly, with her (Clarissa's) father, who had died...But he had never got on well with old Parry, that querulous, weak-kneeled old man”. These two modifiers used by Peter to describe Clarissa's father--querulous and weak-kneed--indicate Peter's impression and attitude toward patriarchy in a family. In Regent's Park, Peter again recollects his unsuccessful interaction with Old Parry and his frustration of failing to please Old Parry or to be identified with the father of the family.

Peter lives in a dilemma in the patriarchal society he despises. His choice to have a pocket-knife to support him, to help defend himself is self-destructive in others’ eyes others like Clarissa. When she sees Peter playing with the knife, she is irritated. She cries to herself in irrepressible irritation and sees the knife as “frivolous, empty-minded, a merely silly chatterbox”. Peter's pursuit of love seen in the governing class' eves is the “flaw in his character. His coming back from India, “battered, unsuccessful, to their secure shores” is “flattering” to people in the upper-class society such as Hugh Whitbread and Lady Bruton, because consciously or not, Peter shows his compromise and his

failure of complete rejection of this upper-class value, which is further reflected by his intention to get a job with the help from Richard Dalloway. In other words, Peter Walsh cannot totally act in compliance with the social norms required of a man in upper-class society, nor could he totally defy these standards. Different from Peter, Septimus dismisses the social norms and Proportion as masculine thoroughly at the end of the novel and the end of his life.

4. Septimus Smith and Masculinity

Septimus once was a passionate poet in Stroud. He left home because his mother had lied to him. He volunteered to join the war with patriotic reason to "save an England consisted almost of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress in a square". He has always appreciated poetry, Shakespeare's poetry, which is not recommended by the governing class. In such a patriarchal society, in which men are moulded with a sense of proportion, obsession with poetry should be compromised and cleared away.

Septimus did compromise between his feelings and masculinity. "Even in psychosis he realizes that he has his superiors, and he has always conformed to the social system in which he is a born victim" (Larsson, 2017). In the war, Septimus developed bravery; he looked at the shells with indifference. He also developed manliness in the trenches, manliness appreciated by Mr. Brewer, the managing clerk. Not only did Septimus developed manliness in the trenches, but also the sense of proportion required by the governing class through the burial of his own emotions. When Evans was killed in the war, he showed little feeling and he congratulated himself upon feeling very little. However, he panics later because he could not feel, so he jumps into marriage for escape, for "refuge" with an Italian girl Rezia who he does not love. Still, he could not taste, nor feel. He comes to the realization that there is something wrong with the world, something wrong with social system where "the tension between the governing and the governed is shown through the tense relationship between Septimus and the Doctors" (Long, 2021). Septimus refuses to adopt Proportion when he realizes that proportion does nothing good to human beings except turning them into monsters with red nostrils, Dr. Holmes and Dr. Bradshaw and their set. It is Septimus who lacks a sense of proportion and sees under the disguise of duty, love, and sacrifice, the nature of proportion, the desire to devour, demand power, and dominate others' souls. Patriarchy requires men to identify with this sense of proportion in this novel, this sense of rationality as masculine: women follow this definition of masculinity and make judgments of men with it. Peter, who does not possess such a sense of proportion, is rejected by Clarissa, who considers his obsession with passion as destructive. Rezia refuses to accept the weeping and crying Septimus. The real Septimus in her eyes is the one who has fought in the war, won promotion, and has been brave.

5. Conclusion

Masculinity takes the form of proportion in the novel. Men, real masculine men are supposed to be in possession of a sense of proportion, thereby women make judgments of men. Therefore, in a patriarchal society, the definition of masculinity becomes one that is rigid and exclusive. Through the application of gender theory, whose "origin and development have a clear intervention in awareness of the unreasonable and unjust gender status quo in society and politics" (Gao & Wan, 2021), and the analysis of male characters in the novel, Woolf's "critique of patriarchy" (Zink, 2018) about the governing class is established.

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