

A Study of Female Identity Anxiety in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* from the Perspective of Female Gothic

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Abstract— *Female Gothic*—first defined by Ellen Moers in 1976—uncovers women's predicaments and resistance under patriarchy, with rich gender-political implications. Adopting this framework, this paper examines female identity anxiety in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* via protagonists Clarissa Dalloway and Lucrezia Warren Smith. It explores how patriarchy and war trauma erode female identities through Gothic elements: enclosed spaces, spectral imagery and self-division. Woolf internalizes Gothic horror into women's psychological reality, laying bare gender repression and identity crisis. Their ambiguous attempts at identity reconstruction reflect the inherent tension between resistance and compromise in *Female Gothic*.



Keywords— *Female Gothic; Identity Anxiety; Mrs Dalloway*

I. CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

The birth of the Gothic novel can be traced back to the first Gothic work, *The Castle of Otranto*, created by British writer Horace Walpole in 1764. With its subtitle, "A Gothic Novel," the emergence of the Gothic genre was formally announced. This work created the foundation for the basic model of Gothic literature: mysterious and terrifying castles, wandering ghosts, and inexplicable supernatural elements. In Gothic literature, beautiful yet fragile women are often entangled by evil men from whom they cannot escape. Gothic literature often aims to portray the dark side of human nature, including desire, violence, madness, and murder.

Female Gothic grows out of the soil of Gothic literature. Female Gothic is the product of the combination of the Gothic novel genre and feminist literary criticism and can be traced back to the 1790s. The term "Female Gothic" was first introduced by Ellen Moers in her 1976 work *Literary Women*, where she defined it as Gothic literature written by women since the 18th century (Ellen Moers. *Literary Women* [M]. New York: Oxford UP, 1976. 90-110.). This subgenre emerged in the late 18th century, characterized by themes of fear, oppression, and the supernatural, often through the lens of female experiences. In female Gothic works, women are no longer confined merely by supernatural entities in haunted castles, but

rather by a “haunting agency” that induces anxiety and fear in the female individual. This mechanism originates from the real world, manifesting specifically as gender-based constraints and restrictions imposed on women, such as patriarchal family structures and marital institutions (林斌. 西方女性哥特研究——兼论女性主义性别与体裁理论 [J]. 外国语, 2005(2): 70-75.). Therefore, female Gothic not only incorporates traditional elements of horror and mystery but also emphasizes a deeper expression of women's struggles and rebellion within a patriarchal society.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), a landmark work of modernist literature, portrays the identity struggles and personal crises faced by women in post-war British society through its distinctive stream-of-consciousness technique and profound psychological insight. The novel, often described as “capturing a woman's whole life in a single day,” follows its protagonist Clarissa Dalloway as she prepares for an evening party, weaving together her reflections on youth, love, marriage, and death. On the 84th anniversary of Woolf's passing, this work remains profoundly relevant, continuing to shine with modernity through its portrayal of the female experience.

When Virginia Woolf states in her essay “Edith Birkhead's The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance” that “It is at the ghosts within us that we shudder” (Woolf, Virginia. *Gothic Romance, Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf*: Ed. Andrew McNeillie [M]. London: The Hogarth Press, 1986: 304-307.), she alludes to new sensibilities of the Gothic mode which emerge at the heart of women's Modernism and function as a narrative feature. This breaks away from the external spectacle of traditional Gothic, focusing instead on the inner anxiety of women within patriarchal society and the post-war context. This shift endows Female Gothic with modernist qualities: women's “Gothic fear” no longer stems from supernatural monsters, but from the fragmentation of self-identity, the forced imposition of social roles, and suppressed voices and desires—serving as

a psychological mirror of women's resistance against patriarchal oppression.

II. CHAPTER TWO THE REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMALE IDENTITY ANXIETY IN GOTHIC ELEMENT

The Gothic setting is a core element of Gothic fiction. Traditional Gothic novels often use dark and mysterious settings such as castles, graveyards, and dungeons to create a sense of eeriness and dread. In contrast, female Gothic writers place greater emphasis on depicting enclosed spaces and uncanny supernatural phenomena to reveal the anxiety and helplessness of their heroines. As Juliann Fleenor notes in her edited essay collection *The Female Gothic* (1987): The “Female Gothic” uses traditional spatial images such as decaying castles or confined rooms to symbolize both culture and the heroine; as a psychological form, it evokes emotions like fear, anger, and awe, and at times triggers women's fear and aversion toward their own gender roles, female sexuality, physiology, and reproduction (Juliann Fleenor. *The Female Gothic* [M]. Montreal and London: Eden Press, 1987.).

2.1 Self-Imprisonment in Enclosed Spaces

In the tradition of Female Gothic literature, enclosed spaces often symbolize the restricted social status and psychological oppression experienced by women. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf constructs a geography of identity anxiety for Clarissa and Lucrezia through a series of spatial images. The upper-class London society in which Clarissa lives is a golden cage—seemingly open yet fundamentally confined. Within it, she plays the role of the “elegant politician's wife,” yet is forced to “see things through his eyes—one of the tragedies of married life” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.). Here, “he” refers to her husband, Richard Dalloway. Through marriage, Clarissa is incorporated into a symbolically enclosed space; her identity is submerged by her husband's, and even her own name is erased by the social title “Mrs. Dalloway.”

When Clarissa climbs the stairs alone to her room for an afternoon rest, she feels:

"The core of life is hollow—like an empty little attic. Women must take off their fine clothes. At noon they must remove their makeup... Her bed, too, will grow narrower" (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.).

This scene is rich with Female Gothic imagery—the attic, the narrow bed, the removal of makeup—elements that together form a spatial metaphor for a middle-aged woman confronting the dissolution of her identity. The narrow bed symbolizes her diminishing presence within the social structure, while removing her makeup represents confronting the absence of her true self once societal masks are shed. This connection between spatial oppression and identity anxiety is a hallmark of Female Gothic literature.

Lucrezia's situation, on the other hand, reflects another form of spatial imprisonment—as a foreigner (Italian) and a war widow, she suffers dual marginalization in British society. She feels "trapped" even in London's public spaces like parks and streets: while walking, she wants to call for help but no one responds; when she mentions memories of her hometown garden in Milan, her "voice gradually fades." She cannot truly integrate into British society, nor can she alleviate her husband's mental suffering. "The whole world does not know how much she loved all this; at every moment..." (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.)

This unfinished sentence suggests the inexpressible loneliness and isolation within Lucrezia. The "openness" of public space stands in stark contrast to her internal "enclosure," highlighting the Gothic despair of women having "nowhere to escape" in post-war society.

2..2 Self-Division

Female Gothic literature often explores themes of schizophrenia and dual personalities to depict women's identity crises. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar divide women into two

categories: those who belong to the "angel in the house" due to their compliance with men, and those who are classified as "madwomen in the attic" because of their rebellion against patriarchy. The former are often regarded as models of introspection, obedience, and selflessness (Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic* [M]. New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale UP, 1979.).

Focusing on female characters, it becomes evident that the anxieties of the First World War forced the return of the figure of the "angel in the House." In this era filled with mourning and trauma, modernist women found themselves ultimately unable to escape the role of the "mother" inherited from their Victorian-era predecessors. Thus, the Gothic mode is expressed here through techniques of "haunting" and "spectral returns"—as Kelly Hurley observes, "The Gothic is rightly, if partially, understood as a cyclical genre that reemerges in times of cultural stress in order to negotiate anxieties for its readership by working through them in displaced (sometimes super-naturalized) form" (Hurley, Kelly. "British Gothic fiction, 1885-1930". *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* [M]. Ed. Hogle, Jerrold E. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002: 189-208.).

2.2.1 Clarissa Dalloway: The Spectral Self Behind the Social Mask

The Angel lives in two other female characters in Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*: Clarissa Dalloway and Lucrezia Warren Smith. Clarissa faces a maternal ambivalence. Clarissa's haunted self appears through her complex maternal role because she seems to have a complex relationship with her daughter Elizabeth. For example, Clarissa exhibits a sense of jealousy and threat as she sees her daughter's close relationship with her history teacher Doris Kilman. Woolf expresses this threat through the Gothic themes of monstrosity and spectrality:

"For it was not her one hated but the idea of her, which undoubtedly had gathered in to itself a great deal that was not Miss Kilman; had become one of those

spectres with which one battles in the night; one of those spectres who stand astride us and stuck up half our lifeblood, dominators and tyrants ... it rasped her, though, to have stirring about in her this brutal monster" (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.).

Clarissa's envy, hence, springs from her insecurity about her maternal position. It is not the physicality of her that Clarissa fears but "the idea of her" the specter. Miss Kilman's close relationship to Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth indicates Clarissa's maternal superficiality. She is not the ideal mother to Elizabeth, yet she fears losing her role to Miss Kilman. The latter is presented as a monstrous figure that "stuck up half our lifeblood" indicating a threat to Clarissa's maternal authority. The complexity of her maternal position occurs in the way that despite the sense of confinement that it offers, Clarissa still clings to it. The Angel figure lives "within" Clarissa as it veils and controls her hidden wishes. Like Mrs. Ramsay's, it is this Angel image which remains visible to her society. Indeed, "She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway" (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.).

As she walks outside her private sphere, she is like an apparition of herself. This apparition has the name of Mrs. Richard Dalloway. In order to achieve a unified identity, Clarissa needs to release herself from this apparitional entity. Jim Hansen argues that Clarissa represents the confinement of twentieth-century women. Woolf, he adds, used Gothic formulae "to reveal the unnoticed and unconscious structure of a cultural ideology that has confined modern women as fully as the castles of the eighteenth century had confined the young heroines of Gothic fiction" (Hansen, Jim. *A Nightmare on the Brain: Gothic Suspicion and Literary Modernism* [J]. Literature

Compass, vol., 8, no.9, 2011: 635-644.). She is rather haunted by the likes of such Gothic heroines, her mother from the past which intrudes into the present disguising itself in the Angel. This figure has to be repelled in order for Clarissa to come to terms with her repressed desires.

2.2.2 Lucrezia Warren Smith: The Living Ghost Under the Shadow of War Trauma

Septimus and Rezia have been married for five years, and the reader first meets them as they are walking in Hyde Park. Rezia's struggles start to occur at this point of the narrative where she witnesses her husband's horrified and alienated self. Burdened with the responsibility to cure him, she starts to project a sense of marginalization akin to his. She brings to light the experience of women who had to bear with the physical and psychological chaos of their male relatives in a time of women's feminist prosperity. Septimus's trauma evokes the Angel within her. This Angel figure is characterized by being confined and subservient to her ailing husband. The imprisonment of the Gothic heroine in the underground vaults of Gothic castles becomes accurate in literary Modernism in that Rezia is trapped in the liminal passages of London's "Waste Land".

In addition, it is important to notice that Lucrezia endures a sense of confinement even when she is in the public sphere as she becomes a carer for her psychologically wounded husband. In this novel, the Angel finds its promotion in mothering the shattered male character Septimus. As she witnesses this shattered man who seems to be detached from reality, Lucrezia is thrust into the female space of liminality which seems to emerge as a characteristic of women's complex position in Modernism, particularly during and after the First World War. Therefore, the "feast of horror" that modern women "breakfast upon" originates from witnessing war atrocities as well as feeling the responsibility to appease the chaotic state of the male. Women's newly gained freedom is consumed by their reinforced performance of the maternal.

The spectral return of the "Angel in the House" shaped the Gothic mode in modernist narratives explored

in this study. Because the Gothic is capable of expressing “the unspeakable,” writers used it to convey the hidden fears of women during and after the First World War. As Gina Wisker points out that “Women’s Gothic writing deals with the domestic, with sex and sexuality, spaces, places, behaviours and norms which oppress women” (Wisker, Gina. *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction: Carnival, Hauntings and Vampire Kisses* [M]. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016).

Unlike Clarissa who portrays a sense of independence as she strolls in London streets as she thinks: “I love walking in London” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.), Rezia unravels a sense of entrapment while she accompanies Septimus for a walk. This is made clear in the narrative: “Help, help! She wanted to cry out to butchers’ boys and women” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.) as Rezia listens to his war hallucinations of wanting to kill himself. It can be noticed that there is a sense of unhomeliness overwhelming both characters for their experiences appear to be analogous. Their mutual sufferance is dictated by foreignness and estrangement. Rezia is drawn to her husband’s ghosted world which renders her as vulnerable; she reflects: “far was Italy and the white houses and the room where her sisters sat making hats, and the streets crowded every evening with people walking, laughing out loud, not half alive like people here” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.). She describes people as “half alive”; this of course does not exclude Septimus. As previously noted, Rezia’s inability to restore her ill husband to health gradually drained her energy. Thus, her marginalization stemmed not only from her status as a “foreigner,” but also from Septimus’s mental condition, which pushed her further into the periphery.

III. CHAPTER THREE THE ROOTS OF FEMALE IDENTITY ANXIETY IN MRS.

DALLOWAY

3.1 Dissolution of Identity under Patriarchy

A fundamental source of female identity anxiety in *Mrs. Dalloway* stems from the systematic erosion of women’s subjectivity within the patriarchal social structure. Through Clarissa’s experience of marriage, Woolf reveals how women gradually lose their sense of self in traditional marital relationships, ultimately becoming extensions of their husbands. As the novel piercingly notes: Even though Mrs. Dalloway was twice as intelligent as her husband, she had to see things through his eyes—and that was one of the tragedies of married life. This cognitive reliance and subordination of perspective prevent Clarissa from understanding the world and defining herself in her own way.

The dissolution of female identity under patriarchy is achieved not through overt violence, but through the micro-level practices of power in everyday life: “Without noise, without shouting, there was only a slow sinking, as if submerged in water, until her will merged into his. Her smile was sweet; her submission swift” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.). This “slow sinking” vividly captures how the female self is gradually eroded and replaced within seemingly harmonious marital relationships. Female Gothic literature often portrays this form of oppression as an invisible, permeating horror rather than explicit violence.

When she is a little girl, Clarissa is happy, imaginative, romantic, adventurous and has a perfect notion of what she wants. She admires Sally just because of her bravery and creativeness. She sees “a sort of abandonment” in Sally, “as if she could say anything, do anything” (194). Besides, she values Sally’s willingness to experiment with flowers, to cut their heads off and make them swim on the top of water in bowls in a fashion that horrifies the stodgy Aunt Helena. However, at present Clarissa has become neither independent nor creative. In Peter’s words, she has become a “prudish” victim of “the death of soul”. Like most women in England, Clarissa

attaches herself to her husband and “see things” through her husband’s eyes, even though she is armed “with twice his wits”. In other words, Clarissa loses her identity after marriage. As she grows older, after giving birth to Elizabeth, she finds her useless, aimless, disoriented in her life (郭丽萍. 《达洛维夫人》的暗恐研究[D]. 山东大学, 2016.). In Hansen’s words, Clarissa “confronts how marriage and money stories that helped to shape her social class have restricted her even more profoundly than the castle walls” (Hansen, Jim. *A Nightmare on the Brain: Gothic Suspicion and Literary Modernism* [J]. Literature Compass, vol., 8, no.9, 2011: 635-644.). To be more precise, Clarissa’s sense of fear is aroused because she has no idea what she can do in the future and nothing could bring her the sense of accomplishment. In her own words, she had the oddest feeling of being herself “invisible”, “unseen”, “unknown” and her body, “with all its capacities, seemed nothing-nothing at all”. Therefore, she calls herself Mrs. Dalloway, “not even Clarissa any more” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.) .

Rezia’s experience as an Italian woman in British society reflects the dual oppression of patriarchy and cultural otherness. Not only is she subordinate as a woman, but as a foreigner, she also suffers from cultural marginalization. This dual identity places her in a more complex predicament of anxiety. As noted in the novel: “Miss Kilman did not try to make herself likable. She had always had to earn her own living” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.). This remark indirectly reflects the social pressures faced by marginalized women like Rezia, who cannot conform to traditional feminine ideals.

3.2 War Trauma and the Distortion of Gender Roles

Mrs. Dalloway was written shortly after the First World War, a period when the disruption of traditional gender roles and family structures served as a crucial backdrop for the novel’s exploration of female identity anxiety. Septimus’s war trauma not only affects himself

but also directly contributes to Rezia’s marginalization and identity crisis as a war widow. Through the experiences of this couple, Woolf demonstrates how war indirectly shatters women’s worlds and sense of self.

It can be remarked that war fictions are dominated by male writers and they often revolve around describing the male experience of the war. Women writers are consequently pushed to the corner of the other in this respect. This is because they did not take an actual part in the fight at the Western Front. Women, to compensate for their sense of burden and guilt regarding this matter, participated in the war aid serving in hospitals particularly. Apart from their physical participation as nurses, women had endured psychological trauma resulting from witnessing the anxieties of the war and mainly the breakdown of male figures. The psychological cost of this has cast women in the role of strangers. This means they become strangers to themselves because the atrocities of the war had compelled them to replay traditional roles which they thought they moved beyond. In Mrs. Dalloway, Lucrezia Warren Smith exemplifies the body of women who had not taken a physical part in war effort but endured an equal suffering to that of their male’s counterparts.

The psychological cost of the war for women stirred the Angel figure to emerge and to spread her legacy of domesticity and entrapment. In that, the Angel that Lucrezia confronts emerges as a result of Septimus’s trauma. After the First World War, Woolf states “we breakfast upon a richer feast of horror than served our ancestors for a twelvemonth we are impervious to fear”. At this level, Woolf implies that women experienced a new sense of “horror” emblematic of war trauma in the trenches.

The war fostered a distorted form of masculinity that demanded men suppress their emotions and fight bravely—an expectation that ultimately led to the psychological collapse of soldiers like Septimus. The war left him emotionally numb; the death of his close friend Evans filled him with grief; a society complicit in

destruction fueled his anger; and his inability to care for his wife filled him with guilt. This breakdown, in turn, affected Rezia's experience as a wife—she could neither receive emotional support nor Security from her marriage, but was instead forced to shoulder the responsibility of caring for her traumatized husband.

The Angel's characteristics of being self-sacrificing and a subservient woman are found in the woman carer of returned veterans, meaning that the conditions resulting from the war have let women embrace the traits of a figure that they despise. Further to this, in a *Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf has given an illustration of the silent and victim woman writer who lacks freedom in patriarchal society. Naming her Judith Shakespeare, Woolf argues that “she lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed” (Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own* [M]. London: Penguin Classics, Jovanovich, 2002.). Although it is beyond my focus, Woolf's expression about the woman writer evokes a Gothic ideology of haunting which is relevant to the character of Rezia. Miglena Nikolchina, in this respect, states that “both Shakespeare's sister and the Angel in the house are Woolf's allegories of female silence”.

The liminal space of the trenches and the terror associated with it – often depicted in relation to male characters – becomes symbolic of women's nebulous position during this period. This means that despite the fact that women have had little physical experience of the fight on the Western Front as well as being in the trenches, they face an equal terror during the war as well as in its aftermath. Woolf developed a Gothic approach in staging the traumatic complexity of women's place during and after the Great War. In other words, the Gothic elements of spectral returns and haunting allow a better understanding of the anxieties of women in post-war Britain.

IV. CHAPTER FOUR AMBIGUOUS RECONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE IDENTITY

The transformation of the female character can, to some extent, be seen as a positive change. She undergoes a shift for the better, even though the ending of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* remains rather ambiguous.

4.1 Clarissa Dalloway: Spatial Reconstruction and Self-Awareness

In traditional male Gothic fiction, women are often portrayed as victims trapped in castles, awaiting rescue. In contrast, Female Gothic is a narrative of resistance. It acknowledges fear—fear of marriage, childbirth, loss of self, and social discipline—yet its protagonists do not merely endure passively. Instead, they actively confront the sources of their fear (often the family, society, or their own subconscious), struggle against them, and ultimately achieve a kind of reconfiguration of self-awareness. This transformation seldom results in a clear victory but rather leads to a blurred, fluid, and contradictory new identity that refuses to be easily defined.

Woolf's London serves as a vast, modern Gothic setting. Its bustling streets and the precise chimes of clocks (symbolizing the patriarchal order of time and social expectations) act as invisible cages, while the inner worlds of the characters are haunted by ghosts (past selves, un-lived lives), whispers of madness, and the dread of confinement.

In female Gothic literature, enclosed spaces (castles, mansions, rooms) are core images—they serve both as physical sites of confinement for women and as projections of their inner fears and anxieties. The drawing room, in the traditional sense, is precisely such a space: it is the “internal sphere” designated for women under patriarchy, the place where the “Angel in the House” fulfills her hostess duties, all ultimately in service of her husband's social status. Clarissa's subversion lies in the fact that while she accepts this space, she completely alters its function. The “Angel in the House” is an accessory to

the space; her existence is meant to reflect the respectability of her husband and family. In contrast, Clarissa proactively transforms the drawing room into a stage that she directs, creates, and controls. She is no longer a decorative object within the space but rather its director, playwright, and protagonist (李碧芳. 从身体空间争取看达洛卫夫人“他者”身份的自我突破尝试[J]. 北京化工大学学报(社会科学版), 2014(01):25-29.). As she herself reflects: “she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.). Therefore, the queer and fastidious Professor compliments Clarissa on her successful party and Jim Hutton believes her house is nice and she “the best of the great ladies” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.). As for Clarissa herself, she proves her worth, regains her sense of fulfillment and experiences a sense of relief and relaxation.

Furthermore, the party allowed her to establish a connection with a stranger, Septimus, and his story would remain in her memory forever, influencing her for the rest of her life. When Clarissa learned of the young man's suicide from Lady Bradshaw, she felt a resonance with Septimus: “She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.). By this empathy and identification she can face the terror of life and death and go through it to a greater affirmation of life. Additionally, Septimus's death made Clarissa aware of the brevity of life and the meaninglessness of her class-bound existence, meaning she must gather the courage to continue living and begin to cherish her own life: “He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the sun. But she must go back. She must assemble” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.). Through this identification, she was able to face the fears of life and death, overcome them, and affirm the value of life more firmly. In that moment, she could

free herself from the constraints of social conditioning—those forces that compelled her to play the role of an inauthentic self.

4.2 Lucrezia Warren Smith: Invisible Struggle

Woolf wrote about the Angel in her essay *Professions for Women* (1931): “Whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the ink pot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had dispatched her. Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe; it took much time that had better have been spent upon learning Greek grammar; or roaming the world in search of adventures” (Woolf, Virginia. *Professions for Women* in *Essays Virginia Woolf: Volume 6, 1933-1941* [M]. New York: Random House, 2011.).

We have seen the sort of ghosts that Septimus sees but Rezia's ghosts are not as detectable in the novel. Hers occupy part of herself that she is not aware of. This means, there resides within her a ghostly abject which is inherent in her invisibility as she strolls through the passages of modernity. Her invisibility stems from the fact that her inner terrors are unseen and her cries of horror and loneliness would go unobserved. An example of this can be remarked in the scene where she continues to express her estrangement from a place populated by “half alive” people; she says: “‘For you should see the Milan gardens’, she said aloud. But to whom? There was nobody. Her words faded” (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.). She is, then, like an Angel ghost whose task during this period is nurturing the returned soldier who is in a shattered condition. Woolf had referred to such intrusive ghosts in her review of Henry James's ghost stories where states that: Henry James's ghosts have nothing in common with the violent old ghosts—the blood-stained sea captains, the white horses, the headless ladies of dark lanes and windy commons. They have their origins within us. They are present

whenever the significant overflows our powers of expressing it; whenever the ordinary appears ringed by the strange.

This passage recalls the way in which the unknown invades the familiar and the ordinary. For instance, "The ordinary" marriage life that Rezia has desired appears to be "ringed by the strange". In other terms, her life is "ringed" by the terrors of her unknown and her neglected position. As such, her marriage only offers psychological entrapment. Although she is enabled to stroll in the city, she remains imprisoned as long as she acts as a nurturer for Septimus. The following quote from the text shows the way she opts for a temporary release from this entrapment that she feels: "Septimus!" said Rezia. He started violently. People must notice. "I am going to walk to the fountain and back", she said. For she could stand it no longer. Dr. Holmes might say there was nothing the matter. Far rather would she that he were dead! ... She spread her hand before her. Look! Her wedding ring slipped—she had grown thin. It was she who suffered—but she had nobody to tell" (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.)

As she attempts to escape her role of nurse to Septimus, she ends up returning like she returns to him after her walk. Thinking that she might find him dead as "he threatened, to kill himself" (Dalloway 26), Rezia is surprised to see him "still sitting alone on the seat" (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.) where she has left him. This, in a way, symbolizes the way that the post-war modern world necessitated a return of women to domesticity and to the maternal. Furthermore, the scene of her "growing thin" is symptomatic of her sufferance with her traumatised husband. As seen earlier in this chapter, the Angel figure can act as an abject which causes the crisis in the proper. Hence, her act of growing thin is symptomatic of the threatening abject. Also, the scene where her wedding ring slips is indicative of her marriage repression and the element of estrangement that it brings with it. Moreover,

her temporary retreat as she walks to the fountain and losing her wedding ring imply the fact that she wants to free herself from the inner confines that the Angel figure imposes on her: "I am alone; I am alone! she cried, by the fountain in Regent's Park" (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.).

Rezia's attempts to step back from her confinement is part of throwing off the Angel in her. When Septimus asks her about the reason why she has taken off her ring, she replies "My hand has grown so thin," she said; "I have put it in my purse" (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.). This scene of hiding her wedding ring in her purse could be symbolic of ejecting the domestic confinement of her marriage, thus ejecting the Angel. Refusing to be thrown away. Rezia is caught in the terror of the in-betweenness where darkness and uncertainty are its main components; she laments: "But I am so unhappy, Septimus" (Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway* [M]. London: Harper Collins Press, 1994.).

Clarissa embodies the Gothic theme of women reaffirming the value of life by confronting death and nothingness. In Female Gothic literature, women often must face their deepest fears—death, madness, solitude—to find the strength to rebuild themselves. Rezia's inner dialogue, though quieter, is equally powerful.

V. CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION

This paper, through the view of Female Gothic literature, offers an in-depth analysis of the manifestations and roots of female identity anxiety in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The study shows that although the two female characters, Clarissa and Lucrezia, come from different social classes and cultural backgrounds, they both face dual oppression from patriarchy and war trauma. Through the social ritual of hosting a party, Clarissa reconstructs her own space within the confined drawing room, achieving a certain degree of self-affirmation and identity reclamation. Meanwhile, Lucrezia, burdened by her dual marginal identity as both a foreigner and a war

widow, attempts to resist her assigned “Angel” role through subtle acts such as removing her wedding ring and seeking temporary escape—though her struggles remain largely internal and unseen.

By employing Gothic elements such as spectral imagery, enclosed spaces, and psychological fragmentation, Woolf not only reveals the invisible constraints imposed on women in post-war British society but also hints at their pursuit of self-liberation amidst fear and suppression. Such liberation does not constitute a clear victory; rather, it manifests as a blurred, contradictory, yet genuine reconstruction of self-awareness. Thus, Female Gothic is not merely a literary genre, but also a narrative strategy of resistance, allowing suppressed female voices to be heard through the “unspeakable” terror and anxiety.

This study further demonstrates that Mrs. Dalloway is not only a masterpiece of modernist literature but also a work deeply rooted in the Female Gothic tradition. Through its internalized narrative of terror, the novel closely intertwines women's psychological reality with external social structures, providing rich textual and theoretical insights for understanding the female identity crisis in the early twentieth century.

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