



Virginia Woolf's Empire Reconstruction and Female Narrative: On Mrs. Dalloway

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Abstract. From double characterization to space transformation in Mrs. Dalloway, this paper points out that by criticizing the imperial violence in urban space through the veteran Septimus' suffering of spiritual oppression, Woolf explores the transformation of power relationship from urban to rural and domestic space in the characterization of the heroine Clarissa and attempts to realize the empire reconstruction driven by women's growth.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; Mrs. Dalloway; empire reconstruction; female narrative.

1 Introduction

Virginia Woolf notes in her diary that *Mrs. Dalloway* is written to show the same world from the point of view of a sane person and a mentally deranged person, thus profoundly criticizing the social system, and explicitly positions Septimus as Clarissa's "double" in the introduction to the book in 1928.^[1] What is puzzling is that this clear writing intention does not become an explicit textual feature. In the novel, Septimus and Clarissa do not know each other, and their lives are like two parallel lines that are not related to each other; their meeting seems to appear only in the emotional resonance of Clarissa's hearing the news of Septimus' death at the dinner party. Feminist critic Elaine Showalter sees it as a fictional survival strategy of Clarissa's attempt to escape, mapping her self-anxiety onto others, with Septimus playing the role of scapegoat for her failure in life.^[2] Showalter is keenly aware that Septimus plays the role of a functional character through which the female character, Clarissa, escapes from her self-anxiety and survives, yet is blind to Clarissa's efforts to resist oppression and aspire to the public sphere and Woolf's stated socially critical stance. In fact, Woolf's so-called "double" is not only reflected in the similar flow of consciousness between the two, but also in the complementarity of the space they represent. From double characterization to space transformation in *Mrs. Dalloway*, this paper points out that by criticizing the imperial violence in urban space through the veteran Septimus' suffering from spiritual oppression, Woolf explores the transformation of power relationship from urban to rural and domestic space in the characterization of the her-

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oine Clarissa and attempts to realize the empire reconstruction driven by women's growth.

2 The Spiritual Wasteland in the City

Centrally located in the empire, London is seen by Woolf as the most oppressive space. At the beginning of the novel, Clarissa, the heroine, goes to the street to buy flowers, showing a mixed picture of London after the war: on the one hand, Mrs. Foxcroft and Mrs. Bexborough are grieving over the loss of their son in the war, and on the other hand, there is a joyful atmosphere in the streets, amusement parks, and jewelry stores. The trauma left by the war in the urban space as a result of the empire's atrocities is reflected in the perspective of the functional character Septimus, whose personal background and psychological activities are described in detail in the novel. Septimus comes from humble beginnings, then travels away from the countryside to London and falls in love with Miss Poe, who lectures on Shakespeare's works in Waterloo Street. At the start of World War I, he volunteers for the army to protect England. In his eyes, the concept of England is almost entirely derived from Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Ball, who often walks in the square wearing a green dress. But the bloodshed and brutality of the war, especially witness to his close friend Evans' death, causes his faith in the imperial authority to crumble, and even after the war he is still trapped in it, fearing and despairing of each place he passes through in London. The explosion of wheels from the seemingly royal automobile driving through Bond Street arouses the imagination of royalty among the crowd in the street, but in Septimus' eyes it is horrifying: "The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames"^[3]. For Septimus, the battle never goes out, moving from the battlefield to London. These visions also include pygmies wielding sticks, coins symbolizing the sun and stars, and messages from the dead Evans: "do not cut down trees; tell the Prime Minister. Universal love: the meaning of the world"^[3]. In the illusory space of these images and words, Septimus tries to make sense of the traumatic experience. The violence of conquering other nations with force and wealth ultimately claims the lives of his countrymen. Cutting down the trees is a variant of the bloodshed on the battlefield, and universal love is his advice and hope for the rulers of the empire.

Unfortunately, Septimus' voice is not only unheard, but even ruthlessly suppressed by those authorities represented by Dr. Holmes and Sir Bradshaw. This is a domestic continuation of overseas violence, and London has become a field of competition between the state and the survivors for the right to interpret the war: "Once the survivors hold the power to interpret the trauma, the socio-political structure could easily be forced to be modified. If the dominant culture can skillfully interpret the trauma from its own standpoint, the status quo will be maintained."^[4] The network of imperial violence that continues to fill the metropolitan space in the post-war period has made Septimus an outcast. London, instead of providing him with a sense of security as his homeland, has made him suffer a secondary victimization under the pressure of power, which is indirectly reflected in his wife Rezia's lament: "Why should she ex-

posed? Why not left in Milan? She had given up her home. She had come to live here, in this awful city." [3]In London, a space where violence dominates everything, Septimus's spiritual wandering under pressure everywhere and Rezia's inner sobbing with no one to depend on condense into a centrifugal force, which reproduces a picture of what the violent empire has inflicted on the people. The quest for home becomes a theme behind the trauma in the urban space, paving the way for the heroine Clarissa to open up alternative spaces-- the countryside and home.

3 New Space for Women in the Countryside

If urban wanderings embody the ubiquitous imperial violence, memories of the countryside, in contrast, reflects a new space for women to eliminate its oppression. Clarissa's recollections of rural life in Bourton revolve around her entanglements with Sally, Peter, and Dalloway, where homosexuality is distinctly revolutionary. Clarissa and Sally regard their love as protective, and they describe marriage as disaster. This sense of self-protection indicates Woolf's positive attitude towards lesbianism and the rebellious spirit against the tradition, which is underpinned by women's determination to break away from gender oppression and move into the public sphere. Clarissa and Sally discuss their lives together and explore ways to transform the world by building a new society that abolishes private property, similar to "the Outsiders' society" advocated by Woolf in *Three Guineas*. Woolf attributes the war to the social system of male hegemony, and advocates replacing it with a new one based on female values: "Today, more than ever before, women have the opportunity to build a new and better world."^[5]

It is worth noting that this new space does not simply mean a reversal of power relationship, but an adjustment of it. Even in the countryside, men are still the masters, but the patriarchal domination is undergoing a subtle change in which oppression is being replaced by protection. For Clarissa, the space for healing the wounds of war and rebuilding the home of empire lies in Bourton where she not only develops female strength from homosexual love, but also wins patriarchal protection in heterosexual romance. If Clarissa's homosexual affair with Sally makes the courtship plot deviate from the norm, it is easy to see from Peter's memory that this deviation does not last to the end. In the love story, Sally, Peter, and Dalloway, Peter and Sally form an alliance to jointly oppose Clarissa's union with Dalloway; Clarissa's father dislikes both of them due to their forthrightness and defiance of convention, and the denial of Dalloway becomes a bond between Peter and Sally, suggesting that there is some similarity between Dalloway and Clarissa's father. In Peter's eyes, Dalloway, as conservative as Clarissa's father, is only stereotypically rational and unimaginative. He wins Clarissa's love precisely because of his role as a loving father. When Clarissa's shaggy dog falls into a trap and tears its paw, Clarissa faints while Dalloway keeps his head, bandaging the dog and comforting Clarissa. Freedom and safety created by this psychological protection explains why she loves Dalloway. The unusually close relationship between Elizabeth and Kilman is seen by Clarissa as a very serious matter, while Dalloway downplays it, which is justified when Elizabeth leaves Kilman behind

and flees the department store. Kilman's failure lies in her independent views and behaviors completely detached from the mainstream. Elizabeth can not stand the emotional oppression caused by Kilman's efforts to instill in her too fervent work ideals and religious beliefs and chooses to run away. The desire for a career inspired by Kilman is fleeting, as she willingly follows the patriarchal norm of having to dress well for a dinner party. Her father is always her support and companion in her heart: "she so much preferred being left alone to do what she liked in the country, and London was so dreary compared with being alone in the country with her father and the dogs."^[3] The picture of father and dogs echoes Clarissa's love story, which once again highlights Dalloway as a loving father. The changing role of women as outsiders causes the transformation of the patriarchal empire, which is more evidently reflected in Clarissa's dinner party at home.

4 Imperial Reconstruction at Home

The family dinner hosted by Clarissa lies at the center of the text, and Clarissa compares the dinner at Buckingham Palace to her own. This spatial leap from the living room to the world makes the home a symbolic representation of empire, and women's central position in the living room empowers them to participate in the imperial affairs. Unlike Mrs. Bradshaw, who is subservient to her husband and occupied by household chores, Clarissa creates the atmosphere of her home at specific moments; unlike Mrs. Bruton, who replicates male power in an attempt to lead the imperial expansion, Clarissa prepares elaborate banquets and attends to the daily routine of the household. This image of a woman who both follows and breaks with tradition is naturalized in the novel as a London nightscape: "Like a woman who had slipped off her print dress and white apron to array herself in blue and pearls, the day changed, put off stuff, took gauze, changed to evening"^[3]. The metaphor of dressing up here suggests a transformation of the female role: from housewife to socialite. The temporal division is a continuation of the novel *Night and Day*. Like Catherine, Clarissa, although accepting marriage, divides herself into two parts based on day and night, leading a double life of running the household during the day and participating in circulation at night, which greatly enriches the spatial-political connotations of the living room.

The confined space of home is originally associated with patriarchal oppression, but the autonomy of women to participate in public affairs under the protection of patriarchal power is manifested in external decorations and internal psychology of Clarissa who hosts a feast in the living room. Mrs. Hilbery called Clarissa "a magician" and regarded her living room and its surroundings as "an enchanted garden,, Lights and trees and wonderful gleaming lakes and sky"^[3]It is easy to find that Clarissa has integrated urban and rural elements into the decoration of the house, and this spatial combination is even more reflected in the figures in the living room. The Prime Minister wears golden laces, but the omniscient narrator describes him as "a poor chap"^[3], echoing the feelings of the characters who pass through the streets of London experiencing the trauma of war. On the other hand, the Prime Minister repre-

sents British society and imperial authority. Clarissa feels honored to accompany him around the room, condensing the imperial authority of the urban space into the living room, in the same way that Woolf tries to “be at the center of the spectacle, to know those in power, to be part of the decorative, magnificent world”^[6]. However, Clarissa's complacency in her closeness to the bigwigs does not last long, as the confrontation with the news of Septimus's death makes her suffer, recreating the warlike visions of Septimus. To her consolation, all of the main characters from the countryside appear at the dinner party. Dalloway sees Ellie alone and greets her amiably, once again acting as a protector of women. Peter and Sally continue to oppose Dalloway in vain, and they sit down to catch up on old times. The garden, the trees, old Joseph singing Brahms without any voice, the drawing-room wallpaper, the smell of the mats, everything evokes the common memories of the past and gives Clarissa a sense of natural affection. The urban and rural elements merge through the decoration of the living room decoration as well as those figures who join the party, highlighting the female subjective consciousness under the shelter of male power, which becomes a strong support for Clarissa to continue the party.

In addition to the combination of urban and rural elements to enrich the spatial politics of the drawing room, the novel also constructs a special bedchamber that directly relates women's power to imperial affairs in the domestic space as a way to transform imperial domination. The drawing room, where Clarissa sleeps alone after her marriage, becomes a place for the Prime Minister and Lady Bruton to talk about India during the dinner party, making the political theme more explicit and moving women's participation in imperial affairs from the background to the frontstage. Relations between Britain and India in the early twentieth century are difficult for the empire, and as the Indian national independence movement grows, the British government makes concessions while maintaining its rule through military repression, as in the case of the Amritsar tragedy of 1918. The significance of Clarissa's access to the public sphere and the center of power is that she views her husband as the spiritual protector of women, a disadvantaged group similar to colonies, and the new patriarchal rule constructed by women's criterion for marriage provides an effective reference for the British Empire in dealing with the overseas crisis in the wake of its decline.

5 Conclusion

As Zink notes in *Virginia Woolf's Rooms and the Spaces of Modernity*, the diversity and complexity of the transformations between physical, textual and metaphorical spaces constitute the value of Woolf's “rooms”^[7]. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, with double characterization leading to space transformation, Woolf advocates women's active role under men's protection, which parallels the ideal relationship between colonies and empire. Not only does it show the trauma caused by the imperial violence in the city, but also sees the female value as a way to save the empire through the memories of the love story in the countryside. Moreover, women's participation in the imperial affairs by holding the dinner party reconstructs home, the traditional space for women's activities, as a new space of the urban and rural elements. The transgression of

women over public and private spheres are changing the operation of imperial power, highlighting the spiritual dimension of Woolf's reconstruction of the empire.

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