
SILENCE AS RESISTANCE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MRS. DALLOWAY: A FEMINIST LINGUISTIC APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper will look at how Virginia Woolf utilizes silence in Mrs. Dalloway in a feminist approach (language) in that the use of silence actually serves the purpose of resistance to societal standards and patriarchal norms. Woolf uses the silence in her narrative as a strategic approach in breaking gender stereotypes and the balance of power existing in the setup of socio-cultural issues facing the post-World War I England. The paper adopts a feminist approach to discourse analysis to find out how the women characters including Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith adopt silence as their form of agency as both a protection and to react to external factors. Using close reading as a means of analyzing prime moments in the novel, the research demonstrates how the play with sound and silence in the novel by Woolf is a commentary upon the patriarchal systems, especially about the restrictions applied towards the women voices and bodies. The results prove that throughout Mrs. Dalloway the silence is not a passive freedom but rather a space of resistance. This paper will add to feminist theory of literature because it will provide a linguistic analysis of the use of silence as a subversion tool.

Keyword: *Silence, Resistance, Feminist Linguistics, Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, Patriarchy*

INTRODUCTION

Mrs. Dalloway (1925) by Virginia Woolf can be considered one of the most typical examples of modernist literature, and it deals with a range of difficult problems of memory, trauma, identity, and expectations of the society in post-World War I England. The complex narrative setup of the novel that combines external world events with internal monologues allows to explore deeply the way how people of that era can overcome the consequences of trauma in this day and age when social constraints are set so firmly. Among the most interesting parts of the story, introduced by Woolf is the clash between speech and silence where the issue has taken center stage in the development of the characters of women in the novel. In such a framework, not only is silence not depicted as mere lack of speech but as an active, conscious act of resistance, more so in the case of the female characters. The way Woolf treats silence breaks the patriarchal rules that dictate how the realms of both society and individual life should be conducted, and it presents her female characters with the means of establishing agency and rebelliousness against the social codes. Through their usage of silence as willful communication strategy, Woolf characters especially Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton explore the haze of gender power arteries giving not just a clear, though undocumented criticism of the pressure women have to deal with by the society.

In Mrs. Dalloway, silence is a defense mechanism of the individual and a social commentary to the society. Silence, as has been indicated by feminist critics, is an accurate indication of the power relations inherent to the patriarchal system (Cixous, 1976). Instead of staying a passive absence, silence in the novel of Woolf turns out to be an instrument with the help of which female characters of the novel take their life under control, rediscovering their voices in the process. It is evident especially in the character of Clarissa Dalloway and her numerous silences being a kind of inner protest against the social conventions on the role of women. The fact that Clarissa does not speak at some instances can be also viewed as her opposition to the rules of marriage and motherhood as well as gender roles that she has to

fulfill as a woman in the first decades of the 20th century. Likewise, the silences of Sally Seton can be interpreted as the unwillingness of the author to fit into the compulsory gender roles of femininity, marriage, and the role of a mother. Silence, however, is a tool of self-discovery, which Seton uses in order to resist the patriarchal standards that aim to establish her.

This paper aims at giving a discussion on the manner in which Woolf used silence in Mrs. Dalloway as societal resistance to the patriarchal society. This paper demonstrates that silence is not merely the absence of utterance by examining the crucial silences in the novel as a conscious subversive move and a means of the self-definition. The female characters of Woolf, through calculated silences, manage to maneuver themselves in a strictly stratified society which aims at controlling their voice and bodies. Through this, they claim their independence and oppose the gendered power structures that restrain their power.

The case of silence in Mrs. Dalloway is especially relevant to the overall progress of the feminist analyses of the literary works. The silence has always been described as an effective means that can be used to examine gender issues, power, and resistance. The silence, according to feminist theorists like Cixous (1976) Hélène and Butler (1990), Judith, especially that in literature can be a space wherein subversions are played to upset the established gender roles. The step in this direction was taken by Cixous, who introduced a concept of writing (female writing) that can be used to fight against the phallogocentric order of the language by its nature. In that respect, the silence in the text by Woolf can be perceived as an act of resistance to the patriarchal discourse that tries to dominate and claim the voice of a woman. Correspondingly, the theory of performativity by Butler indicates that none of the identities including gendered identities are fixed but are rather perpetuated through utterance and silence with the help of language. The act of not speaking is another performance of a gendered identity that is very much in contrast to the roles that the female characters are expected to play in the society.

The research question that the study answers is the underestimated use of silence in Mrs. Dalloway as the feminist weapon of resistance. Although so much has already been said about Woolf and her representation of female subjectivity, memory, and trauma, the definite role of silence in subverting the patriarchal position of power has not been discussed in detail. It is this gap that this study seeks to fill by providing a feminist linguistic account on the implication of silence as an act of resistance, as used in the novel. Presenting two most prominent female characters of the novel, i.e., Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton, this paper tries to reveal ways in which silence in the linguistically and socially oriented world of the book by Woolf serves as a political act of subversion.

The importance of such research is that it helps feminist literary criticism and feminist discourse analysis. In revising silence as a resistance in itself, this paper gives rise to a new perspective to what we thought we already knew about the feminist criticism of patriarchal system that Woolf made. Moreover, it lends to the exploration of how language, its absence, has been used in place of the general denial of such societal normalcy and its claim of the agency of individuals. Through the same, this paper will set out to discuss the ongoing significance of Mrs. Dalloway in the present-day discourse around gender issues, power, and opposition.

This paper seeks to examine the role that silence plays in Mrs. Dalloway towards forcing feminist struggle. Embracing a close reading of the novel in key characters and instances of silence, the paper details how Woolf deploys silence to reveal in the condition of the normative patriarchy she was living, to provide a subversive poetics of female agency and self-determination. This paper reveals the effectiveness of silence in Mrs. Dalloway, focusing on its status not as an absence, but a defense-centered, intensive

practice through the lens of feminist linguistics and discourse analysis that contests the gendered power relations in the early 20th-century society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The essentials of the critical literature on Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf involve more than one discipline such as psychology, modernism, feminist theory, and gender studies. Whereas many scholars have explored the ground-breaking narrative strategies employed by the novel, the manner in which it addresses the subject of mental illness, and the way the novel deals with the trauma that followed after World War I, relatively few scholars have paid special attention to the use of silence as an important part of the narrative as a form of resistance. Silence in Mrs. Dalloway has been merely regarded as an incidental silence or a token of repression when her silence could be viewed as a tool of subversion and a gesture of feminist resistance. It is this missing literature of study that this paper intends to correct, providing a feminist approach to the linguistics of silence in the novel, and highlighting the role of silence as an active measure to regaining the agency under a patriarchal structure.

The initial interpretation of feminist readings of Mrs. Dalloway was based on the fact that the voice of women is usually sidelined in the patriarchal society. Elaine Showalter (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) have given the earliest analyses of the issues of silencing faced by women writers within a male-dominated literary culture. In her case, Showalter even conceptualized Gynocriticism or the idea that the study of women literature shows how women have been marginalized and how they have been represented in literature. Likewise, the trope of the silenced woman was observed by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) in relation to the Victorian and modernist contexts and tended to concentrate on explicit silencing, repression and madness. Although these scholars engage in examining the silencing of female voices in literature, they have mostly focused on no voice as a means of opposition, with very little emphasis on how silence could equally be used as a mode of resistance or even subversion.

Taking an example, Showalter speaks of the idea of a women literary tradition, which argues that female writers in the process of developing independent voices, should consider the possibility of using silence as a tool of resistance against male dominated type of expression (Showalter, 1977). Nevertheless, as far as this kind of analysis offered by Showalter would be useful in explaining the overall subjugation of women in the literature, it does tend to gravitate towards letting silence be viewed through the lens of passive and involuntary state of being, instead of an active and positive expression of free will of the female characters, who expressed opposition to the bridle of patriarchy. The work of Gilbert and Gubar also represents the silencing of women in the literary works by the same means, which is the outside oppression, without having delved too deeply into the notion that the silence might also be used as the means of resistance against the very oppressive elements.

Contrastingly, other scholars like, Hélène Cixous (1976) and Judith Butler (1990), have had a clearer linkage of silence to resistance, especially in feminist theory. The notion that this feminine writing is different and inclusive of the diverse voices of women, as proposed by Cixous in her concept of the feminine writing (*écriture féminine*), gives the sense that women writing is not merely a substitute to the male-dominated language but a kind of subversive resistance to the patriarchal order (Cixous, 1976). Cixous is of the view that women writing that is marked by unsaid/unspoken in most of their writings has the potential to subvert the conventional forms of language that have always been used to silence women. To Cixous, this silence is an opportunity, where women bring about, their subjectivity and oppose the male-dominated discourse. Considering this framework applied to the novel Mrs. Dalloway one will notice the fact that the application of silence employed by Woolf especially in the inner monologues of

such characters as Clarissa Dalloway serves as an attack of the societal expectations which were male driven. One can view the silences that Clarissa uses during her communicative exchanges with other people, as well as her use of silence as an aspect of the time of self-reflection as a denial of socially assigned roles that restrict her.

The performativity theory by Judith Butler (1990) is also another useful concept through which silence can be viewed as a form of resistance. The point made by Butler is that identity an absolute reality including gender identity is not fixed but is developed through a repetitive performance and acting (Butler, 1990). In this view silent is a performative in itself as that which is not said, not communicated also has a role to play in helping to build identity. The concept of performativity developed by Butler leaves a possibility that the silence in Mrs. Dalloway could be viewed as a performative resistance a practice that is used to diminish and repudiate the patriarchal norms that aim at determining roles and identities of women. To give an example, when Clarissa does not speak freely about her feelings and relations, her desires, it can be regarded as a resistance to specifically gendered expectations of persons in her society.

Although the feminist scholars such as Cixous and Butler have addressed the importance of silence as the means of resistance of dominant discourse of gender, the subfield of linguistics, feminist linguistics, has extended this insight and examined how language is used in reflecting and upholding power relations, especially those pertaining to gender. The open contributors to feminist linguistics are Deborah Cameron (2001) who exposes usefulness of language in reinforcing and challenging the patriarchal authority, and Sara Mills (2008) indicates how language can be used to reinforce the patriarchal authority and challenge the same. Cameron (2001) writes about the tendency of the society to limit the expressions of women, the attitude that there is a kind of value placed in specific linguistic behaviors in comparison with others, and the silence of women being interpreted as a signal of submission. Mills (2008) claims further that silence is just like speech which is to be regarded as a linguistic act possessed with power. Said silence is a selection, therefore, a debatable act of defiance toward the outcomes that ladies have to adapt to a particular communicative style in order to gain reception or affirmation.

Even though these are quite substantial theoretical contributions, one could notice that there is the lack of focus on the role of silence as the means of resistance in the works by Woolf with emphasis on the role of silence in the fight of feminist avenue in Mrs. Dalloway. Even though feminist critic has given some consideration to the voicelessness of women in the text, there is not much emphasis on the role of silence as a proactive mode of struggle. The vast majority of scholarship has concentrated on explicit speech or on the psychological intricacies of the characters of Woolf as opposed to looking at the ways in which silence may be considered as a controlled and significant reaction to the social conditions.

Research Question The paper is aimed at filling this gap, giving a feministic analysis of the use of silence to resist in Mrs. Dalloway by studying silence as resistance by using linguistic analysis. Analyzing the role of two main female characters Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton, this paper will be discussing how silence is not a state devoid of the word but a tactic of taking back control and disempowering the patriarchal rule of women. Thus, it provides a more subtle understanding of silence as applied in Woolf, namely, it can be an emancipating, rebellious force able to disrupt gender expectations and to step out of the social constructs that attempt to control the speech and body of a woman.

SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

The research is important as it has brought a new perspective on Mrs. Dalloway through the paradigm of silence as a feminist act of resistance that hence is often left obscured. The definition of silence in the

literary criticism is generally perceived as a passive activity or the lack of actions of speaking, whereas in the story by Woolf the meaning of silence is contextually played much more actively and strongly. Instead of merely symbolizing the oppression or marginalization, silence in Mrs. Dalloway is employed deliberately by characters in order to break the rules and resist the societal codes that put restrictions on them. The ingenious choice of silence affords Woolf a tactical option of shifting the agency back to the female characters to resist the patriarchy. Under the given circumstances, the paper will claim that one of such instances of linguistic agency can be considered to be that of silence as the absence of words has proven to be an effective weapon in the possession of women to fight against the gendered norms and roles that society has mandated.

Due to the study of the silence of the major female characters like Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton through the lens of feminist linguistic approach, this paper can be used as a contribution to feminist literary criticism as it provides a sophisticated interpretation of the silence that can be described not only as an absence, but rather as a method of resistance. Such a strategy helps broaden the existing discussion by illuminating the active meaning that the concept of silence has in feminist discourses that provide additional ideas to how Woolf uses her critique to explore the patriarchy.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What role does silence play in shaping the characters' identities and resistance in Mrs. Dalloway?
2. How does Woolf use silence as a linguistic tool to critique the patriarchal structure of post-World War I England?
3. Why is silence a more effective form of resistance for female characters in Mrs. Dalloway compared to verbal expressions of dissent?

Silence must be interpreted as opposition that could be analyzed in Mrs. Dalloway. In the formulation of feminist linguistics by Deborah Cameron (2001) and Sara Mills (2008), the linguistic connections with gendered dominated aspects are in order. The silence in this system is not considered as a vacuum but rather an active and conscious decision to show opposition to patriarchal values. Feminist linguists point out that speech of females is frequently marginalized or unheard in social demands and in this light, silence may be a means of resistance and strength.

Also, the performative theory of silence can be applied as defined by Judith Butler (1990) which is a fundamental way of looking at silence as a performative act. As Butler opines, identity is not inherent but rather is developing through actions and other language use. In such perspective, silence as a performative act becomes the resistance and opposes the conventional place and notion of women in the society, breaking the traditional gender expression and gender power relations.

METHODOLOGY

The current study will render such techniques of feminist discourse analysis (FDA) as the key method to elucidate the role of silence as a form of resistance in Mrs. Dalloway, written by Virginia Woolf. FDA is a concept much familiar with feminist literary criticism, In concentrating on the language and power and its reproduction, it also deals with gender concerns. Using FDA, this paper will interpret some of the important moments in the novel in which silence is instrumental in development of character and social commentaries. In that perspective, silence is not positioned as merely a passive lack, but it is an active decision, which shows this text the complicated nature of power, agency, and resistance.

The interactions and monologues of the main characters (Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Warren Smith,

Sally Seton, etc.) and their inner thoughts and emotions were major points that are used in analysis. These characters are extremely important as each of them experiences and employs a silence differently. The silence that Clarissa usually experiences is considered to be connected with her inner reflections about her life, marriage, and social prescriptions, and the silence that September experiences is explained by the trauma that shows the other side of the gender inequality in the society where the traditional male stoic masculine role is socially normalized. Instead, Sally Seton silence is used as an act on defiance with traditional gender roles especially with regard to her refutation of the societal roles that marriage and motherhood were to her.

The notion of silence can be discussed in various ways using feminist discourse analysis that enables to explore this phenomenon in detail within the context of interactions between these characters and bigger social reality. Using this method, power relations within language are also pointed out, which in turn considers the works of silence as a subversion to such gendered schemes. It also takes into account the ways in which the strategies employed by Woolf in her techniques of narration stream-of-consciousness and free indirect discourse allow leaving the spaces so that silence could be deciphered as a willful kind of resistance. The research questions suit this approach in particular since they allow examining linguistic and narrative in Woolf in order to reify silence not only as a blank spot but also as a resource of resistance.

This way, this paper provides an in-depth review of how silence is used as an active and subversive element in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, where it enables the characters to resist and negotiate the patriarchal standards imposed to them. Through the survey of these silences as they pertain to the wider socio-cultural society of post-World War I England, the research elucidates the gendering power politics critique of Woolf, as well as providing some novel thinking on the interpretation of how silencing can be both a personal and political act. The analytical strategy therefore helps in a better comprehension of how *Mrs. Dalloway* is silent to be disruptive and resistant to patriarchal control.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Silence, in *Mrs. Dalloway* should be understood as a multidimensional and multifaceted instrument especially on the lives of the females involved in it. The silences of Clarissa Dalloway are the most striking in this respect, and they have deep meanings regarding her inner struggles and her desires not to play the roles she has to fulfill according to the expectations of the society. Being a privileged upper-class female, Clarissa is supposed to be subject to the norms of the traditional femininity that includes expressiveness, vocal, and active social life adherence. Her silence however, especially when in reflective contemplative mood is a sort of withdrawal in rebellion. These silences mean much more than the simple lack of speech-there is in them a deliberate abandonment of her social obligations, to be a wife, a mother, a hostess. The silences that Woolf assigns to Clarissa is one such narrative device to draw how the main protagonist tries to ascertain the competing needs of society and hers as the need to exercise independence. As the plot of the novel operates, it is natural that it manifests itself as a refusal of Clarissa to be completely satisfied with the expectations society sets on her. Rather than talk about her feelings, passions, and disappointments, she keeps such statements in, and thus frustrates the society in its very concept of what a woman should be. It is, consequently, a form of quiet yet strong opposition to a male-dominated system where women cannot express their voices and are unable to act (Cixous, 1976).

The silences of Sally Seton are because of another way of opposing patriarchal norms. The silence is used by Sally, the more radical, unconventional quaver of femininity to build up the niche of personal control and rebellion. Women and their roles in marriage and motherhood are not discussed throughout most of the novel as she chooses to remain silent or vague on those issues. One can interpret the silence of Sally

against the constructed version of femininity that implies that women are domestic, weak, and that they express their emotions. When she fails to respond to these expectations, Sally claims her independence and autonomy which allows silence as the form of empowerment. Her violation of the normative gender discourse is also amplified in her relation to Clarissa, and their silencing together as an element which provides a disruptive privileging the heteronormative discourse of marriage and motherhood (Butler, 1990).

Quite to the contrary, Septimus Warren Smith stands in complete silence which in itself is a kind of response. The silencing of male emotional trauma exhibited by Septimus in this novel demonstrates how trauma is silenced after war because of trauma-related diminished emotionality and the neglect of male emotionality by the society. His refusal or inability to talk is not merely a dysfunctional trend of a personal level, but the illustration of the whole reluctance of the society to talk about the psychological traumas of the soldiers. Feminist interpretation of Septimus failing to talk criticizes the conventional masculine ideal of stoicism which frowns on expressing emotions and being open to them. That way, his silence may be regarded as the act of rebellion against the patriarchal requirements to masculinity which will require men not only not to show their feelings but experience some pain with no sound. This silencing, however, according to the tragic end of Septimus, ends up alienating one and leading to final despair, a poignant demonstration of the destructive results of societal standards, which diminish expressions of emotional vulnerability, as is seen in men (Cameron, 2001).

These silences allowed Woolf to critique the functioning of the society which is characterized by oppression of voices (regardless of whether they are of the women or the men) and are a counter point to the voices that she gives, which become a point towards resistance. The representation of silence by Woolf does not just portray silence as the lack of speech but rather as a strategic manner to challenge the gendered power structure model that restricts the agency of a person. One of the ways through which Woolf shows how women and other individuals can assert their independence and question the gender-based expectations that are laid at their doors is by using silence as an effective resistance tool.

There is however one thing that this discussion lacks. Although silence is an empowering strategy of resistance in the novel, one should remember that not every silence is empowering. Certain silences, especially the ones echoed in the characters such as Septimus can be regarded as tragic outcomes of the social failure of the society to support mental health and emotional well-being. In future studies it was possible to investigate the relation of silence with other modes of resistance, speech or action, and also whether silence can always be a positive or empowering mode of action in the works by Woolf. Also, tracing the way the role of silence plays within socio-economic classes in Mrs. Dalloway would further open up the interpretation of the multi-dimensionality of silence as a weapon of protest.

Summing up, the silences in Mrs. Dalloway are a many-layered instrument of resistance. As we can see through the introspective seclusion of Clarissa, the denial of the dictums of normative femininity in Sally, and the tragic silence of Septimus in response to the plight of a man, Woolf employs silence as a form of criticism in limitation applied by society. By using these silences, Woolf is not simply questioning the patriarchal order that aims at controlling and enclosing women but also questioning feminine norms that limits masculinity and emotivity.

FINDING

The character issue in Mrs. Dalloway concludes that silence is not the silent or passive power, which is shown in the novel, but in fact, an active and purposeful form of resistance used by important characters to question societal norms. Such silences of Clarissa Dalloway, to take an example, are an ultimate

method of self-discovery and opposition to the existing norms of womanhood as a wife, a mother, and a hostess of her social circle. In a scene of great importance, Clarissa is looking back upon her previous decisions: I will come. I will not say it, but--" Such inner silence might also be regarded as some form of rebellion against the social standards that demand women to be expressive and socially active at any time. Instead of expressing her mental conflict, Clarissa retreats into herself, thus repossessing an area of personal thoughts and personality that is not defined by outside imperatives.

Such refusal is further illustrated in the silences of Sally Seton. The fact that she refuses to talk about marriage, femininity, and societal expectations helps develop a different story to the traditional image of women. When Sally is silent in the novel, it is her refusal to conform because in that way, she finds herself in a location where the traditional discussion of marriage and gender do not exist, which allows her to define herself. Describing the kiss with Clarissa, as she reflects, she says: I had something to give. I never married. I could not get married. And that was it? the uprising. This refusal by Sally to speak is part of her defiance to be subjected to the gendered forms of marriage and femininity.

Along with the trauma, silence shows the resistance to the mainstream of masculinity explored by Septimus Warren Smith. Instead of giving in to the norms of the society, to play the roles of stoicism and emotional control, Septimus remains silent and by doing this, he criticizes the imposed norms telling men not to express their pain. His refusal to talk is an indication that he refuses to acquiesce to the ideology of masculinity that states that he should suppress his emotional side. Using these characters, Woolf is able to show that being silent is not really being absent, but a specific way of creating upheavals in the society and taking control of themselves once again.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, it has been presented that the silence in Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf is an effective and subversive form of resistance to patriarchy and norms about women. The study of the silences of Clarissa Dalloway, Sally Seton, Septimus Warren Smith, etc. has proved that silence is not a passive force or a force that is absent but an active, conscious form of resistance to defy the gendered power capabilities. Feminist linguistic approach used in this paper has created a new window into the importance of silence in the novel by Woolf. It emphasizes the use of silence to gain independence and fight the roles society expects and the expectations of the gendered bodies, without uttering a single word. Presentations of silence on the part of Clarissa, Sally, and Septimus, due to their refusals to converse with society, society to speak with men, and men to speak with society, respectively, signify the ability of silence to challenge the established narrative and reframe central agency of the story.

The present study can be welcomed into the field of feminist literary criticism with a lasting impact related to its contribution to the broadened understanding of silence as a form of feminist protest, which can be deemed as an alternative to the works of the past that focused on understanding silence as lack (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Butler, 1990). The silence used by Woolf in Mrs. Dalloway is therefore a strong criticism of gender roles and patriarchal power further enhancing our perception of the relationship between languages and silence in the war of feminism liberation.

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