

Study on Mrs. Dalloway's Critique of Patriarchal Society from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

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Abstract. Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf, the outstanding British modernist writer presents a profound critique of the traditional patriarchal society. Based on the opposition between ecofeminism and the patriarchal system shown in the writing, it can be found that the novel criticizes the natural predatory and exploitation of women by the marriage system under the patriarchal society, the hypocrisy, boredom and irony of the extravagant life of the aristocracy under the hierarchy, and the destruction of the environment and blow to life by war. This paper aims to explore the reduction of the negative effects of the traditional patriarchal system, to safeguard women's rights, to promote resource conservation and environmental protection, in order to advocate the establishment of an equal and harmonious society, which reflects relevance in contemporary governance based on a critique of the patriarchal system in Woolf's works.

Keywords: Ecofeminism; Patriarchal society; Mrs. Dalloway; Virginia Woolf.

1. Introduction

Ecofeminism is a product of the women's liberation movement and the ecological movement. In *Le Feminisme ou la mort*, Francoise d'Eaubonne, in her call for women to participate in saving the planet, first introduced the term Ecofeminism, which reveals the correlation between the domination of nature and the oppression of women, and argued that women and nature have a metaphorical relation and are closely related. Eaubonne intended to highlight the potential of women in solving the global ecological crisis, to call on women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet, as well as to create a new relationship between human and nature, between men and women. "What allows ecologism and feminism to be closely aligned is that both are identical in their ways of thinking and both oppose anthropocentrism and patriarchal centrism (Zheng 7)." Ecofeminism illustrates the ecological issues from a female perspective, examines the contradictions between human and ecology, and offers a profound critique of the view rooted in patriarchal logic that male power is superior to female power and that human rule over nature. "The core idea of ecofeminism is the special connection between women and nature, aiming to reveal the oppression of nature and women by patriarchy under the traditional dualistic concept (Jiang 244)." Ecofeminism combines feminism and ecology, and studies from a gender perspective to solve ecological problems. Moreover, it criticizes the oppression of nature and women by patriarchy, which is conducive to advancing the development of ecological conservation while defending women's rights.

The opposite of feminism is masculinity, and the goal of feminism and the feminist movement is to change male domination and shake the patriarchy, which Johnson defines in *Gender Knot* as a society that is ruled by men, is identified with men, is male-centered, and one of the key elements of this society is the oppression of women. "Patriarchy is a systemic and unjust system of male domination over women. They confer higher status values and privileges on men (Hatfield 7)." A patriarchal society, also known as a male-dominated society, "is one in which all positions of authority, whether in the political, economic, legal, religious, educational, military, or domestic spheres, are reserved for men (Li 15)." Thus, patriarchy acts as an invisible hand that puts men in a dominant position in society and women in a relatively inferior and submissive position.

As an important school of feminist studies, ecofeminism is in opposition to patriarchal system and patriarchal society in which men dominate and oppress women. According to Ynestra King, the founder of American ecofeminism, "We see the destruction of the earth and the ecology by the same

actors. The whole world is full of the threat of war, and the exploitation of women's rights to their own bodies and to their own gender by patriarchy, which is based on the patriarchal worldview and other oppressive ideas and systems (King 21)." Karen J. Warren, a professor of philosophy at Macalester College in Minnesota, explored the conceptual roots of patriarchal domination of nature and women, and exposed the theoretical foundations of "patriarchal" control over women and nature. He pointed out that its theoretical basis is dualistic: The two are seen as separate and antagonistic, and one rules over the other. "The logic of patriarchal control of feminine and natural domination has been used to justify gender, ethnographic, ethnic or class domination and domination of nature as well (Warren 24). " Therefore, human domination of nature is coterminous with male domination of female based on such framework.

Mrs. Dalloway is a masterpiece of the stream of consciousness by the distinguished British author Virginia Woolf, which narrates the life and mental journey of Mrs. Dalloway in a day. Domestic scholars have extensively studied this work, including a stylistic analysis of the dialogue between Clarissa and Hugh Whitbread from the perspective of male oppression and female resistance in a patriarchal society by Yang Liu; a study of feminist narratives by Wang Hongyu, and a spatial analysis by Wang Junping. Relevant studies abroad are fruitful as well. For example, Sivaranjani Senthilkumar.K made comparative analysis of the works of Anita Desai and Woolf from an ecofeminist perspective. Mahboubeh Moslehi studied the gender identity of the heroine of *Mrs. Dalloway*. O. P. Sharma analyzed feminism from an aesthetic perspective.

In line with the view of ecofeminism that "women and nature have a close relationship (Zheng 8)," the women in the novel maintain a close and friendly relationship with the nature, and the text is full of descriptions of the harmonious scenes of women in the natural environment. Thus, the narrative of women being oppressed and bound by patriarchal society can be seen as a metaphor for ecological nature being exploited by patriarchal society. Based on patriarchal society, the novel depicts the predatory and bondage of women as subordinate to the marriage system, the luxury and wastefulness of aristocratic life under the hierarchy, and the destruction of life and nature by war. "Under the rule of patriarchal centrism, male oppression of female body and spirit is often accompanied by human conquest and destruction of natural ecology. The deconstruction of patriarchal centrism is the basis for the promotion of ecofeminism, the re-examination of human rights and the reconstruction of an egalitarian social order (Zhao 144)." Therefore, it is of great practical significance to interpret the novel's critique of patriarchal society from an ecofeminist perspective.

This study focuses on the novel's critique of patriarchal society from an ecofeminist perspective with a more focused reading of the novel, as well as a critique based on the opposition between feminism and the patriarchal system in the text. It helps to explore ways to further safeguard women's rights, and advocate the establishment of an equal social order for all. Furthermore, it is expected to promote resource conservation and environmental protection, and build a harmonious and beautiful world.

2. Indictment against the Predatory and Exploitation of Women by the Marriage System

The novel criticizes the natural predatory and exploitation of women by the marriage system in a patriarchal society. Engels once pointed out, "The modern independent family is based on the overt or covert enslavement of the wife (Engels 60)." The traditional marriage system requires women to depend on their husbands, which is a denial of women's personal independence. Women are also required to obey their husbands' commands, meet their needs, and nurture offspring for them. According to ecofeminism, such conception of marriage justifies the devaluation and rape of nature and women by grouping women with nature, reproduction, materiality, and otherness, and men with culture, production, form, and selfhood.

In the British marriage system at the beginning of the 20th century, from the pre-marriage, women were in a passive position, both in terms of the right to choose a spouse and their life status. The

education, laws and exchange of benefits associated with women in marriage at that time also put women into dilemma. "After marriage, the subordinate plight of women remained unchanged, and women were only the 'responsive angels' in the family (Yu 49)." The prevailing belief was that a woman should marry someone of higher status and wealth rather than someone she loved.

"With twice his wits, she had to see things through his eyes- one of the tragedies of married life (67)." In the early years of the 20th century in England, women were in exactly such a position in married life. Women were confined to the private sphere, who had to rely on men for their survival and endure all kinds of injustices from the public. Although Clarissa's husband Richard is honest and considerate, she remains in a subordinate position of oppression and exploitation. Instead of being with Peter, whom she truly loves, she follows tradition and marries Richard, who has higher status and wealth. After her marriage, she gives birth to children, obeys her husband's words, and goes from side to side for social parties and his career. Her life is frayed and wasted in idle chatter. Her days are wasted in corruption, lies and gossip, leading herself to a lonely and boring shell in a luxurious house.

The women of the time were not herself when it came to choosing a marriage partner. Sally, the heroine's girlfriend, also believes that "save Clarissa from Hughs and Dalloways who would stifle her soul, make a mere hostess of her, encourage her worldliness (66)." Clarissa is married to someone with a privileged life and status, but she has become a subordinate to marriage, who gives her youth and passion in silence. Her poor health is obviously the result of the lack of outdoor activities and the sacrifice of devotion to her family in that era. In the end, she becomes what Sally calls a refined, fragile and boring thoroughly worldly person. It is shared by many married women at that time, as the result of the "marginalized woman" criticized by ecofeminism that a woman who gradually loses herself in marriage and has to live for others.

Under the traditional marriage system, Rezia's right to a happy life is also deprived by the selfishness of men. The death of Septimus' comrades in battle causes him to go insane. When he loses his senses, he cheats her by lies and Rezia marries him, so that the simple and ignorant girl sets foot on the miserable marriage. Rezia has to be bound to a marriage destined to be painful because of the man's lies. As a woman with limited knowledge, she only hopes that she would not be childless when she gets old, reflecting that as a woman, her cognition has been labeled as reproduction and heirloom, which is considered as a woman's obligation in marriage. However, the simple desire is not fulfilled and her husband has no regard for her happiness or feelings. Rezia is pitiful and pathetic, for her insane husband turns a deaf ear to her laments, while her selfless dedication forms a sharp contrast with the man's selfishness. Meanwhile, she does not want to leave the man who has made her unhappy because of the limitations of the time. Finally, her husband kills himself due to a mental breakdown, which puts her in an even more lonely situation.

In addition, another impressive female character Sally, whose ideas are more advanced than many women, even argued with Hugh that women also have the right to vote. However, she ends up giving birth to five sons for her husband, which also confirms what Engels once said that "the essence of the marriage system is the deprivation and control of women's reproductive rights (Engels 59)." In those days, no matter how advanced, independent and enlightened women were, they served as subordinate to marriage, had to compromise with the marriage system of patriarchal society, and even to be extracted by their husbands. The novel also implicitly criticizes the depletion and damage to women's bodily functions caused by marriage system under the patriarchy.

Ecofeminism exposes and opposes the natural predatory and exploitation of women in marriage system. "Women and nature become, in effect, exhausted entrepreneurs and resources for husbands to cultivate their minds and bodies (Machette 3)." Having the ability to nurture children is one of the natural attributes of women, which has been over-consumed in the traditional marriage system. *The Origin of the Family, Private Ownership and the State* by Engels states that "the marriage system, which has its origin in the patriarchal desire for 'purity' of blood, is essentially a denial and control of the reproductive rights of women (Engels 60)." In the novel, it is women who are marginalized in the traditional marriage system in the patriarchal society, whether they are constrained by the traditional concept of choosing whom to marry according to their family background and identity, unable to

pursue their own happiness because of the bondage of marriage, or being exploited as resources in the marriage and labeled as reproductive function. The roots of patriarchal domination over nature and women have been clearly explained by the American scholar, Warren: "Because the theoretical basis of patriarchy domination in women and nature is dualistic, that is, 'regarding the two as opposites, one suppresses the other' (Warren 24)." Ecology and feminism oppose both anthropocentrism and androcentrism, so the oppression of women by patriarchal society is closely related to the oppression of nature by human beings.

3. Sarcasm of the Aristocratic Life of Luxury and Waste

The novel criticizes the hypocrisy, luxury and boredom of aristocratic life under the hierarchy in a patriarchal society. Ecofeminism attempts to clarify the interconnectedness of oppressive systems in cognition, aiming to eradicate dualistic ways of thinking and notions of value hierarchies. Therefore, from an ecofeminist perspective, it makes sense to criticize the hierarchy-induced polarization between rich and poor and the extravagance and wastefulness of aristocratic life.

"In the century after the Glorious Revolution until the beginning of the 20th century, British society could basically be divided into three classes: the upper social class with large landowners as the core, the middle class with small landowners, farmers, and merchants as the mainstay, and the lower social class with small farmers, agricultural workers, urban poor and urban laborers (Liu 3)."

Hierarchy is not unique to patriarchal societies, but in an era when male discourse is dominant, resources such as power and status are almost always in the hands of men. Even if women are able to enjoy and own them, they serve as an appendage of the marital relationship. Ecofeminism holds that life on the earth forms a web of interconnection, and there shouldn't be hierarchy. But in those days, the life of the upper class was characterized by excessive consumption and waste of resources, while the poor had to beg and suffer from hunger.

From the point of view of Hugh, the typical upper-class stooge in the text, he has embodied hypocrisy and snobbery to the fullest. He excels in flattery, and by virtue of his marriage to the daughter of a royal family, he obtains a position in the palace, where he is in charge of the king's wine cellar, the polishing of the royal shoe buckles, and other trivial matters, which he regards as a great honor. "He has the most conspicuous, natural, and sublime respect for the English upper classes (3)." As an outstanding example of the values of the English aristocracy in a patriarchal society, even if he is not at the very top, he is complacent and self-important in his royal service. He is, as Peter put it, "He had no heart, no brain, nothing but the manners of an English gentleman (4)." The vulgar English gentleman who grooms himself properly is the link between the aristocracy and the middle class, and his extraordinary status highlights the influence and power of the former.

The nobles that Hugh serves attentively are at the top of the hierarchy, whose every move has an impact on society like a stone falling into water, setting off ripples that spread outwards. For the middle class, the appearance of the nobles arouses their enthusiasm and loyalty. While Clarissa is buying flowers, she witnesses a royal outing, and she feels that the royal pass "by force of its own lustre, burnt its way through, to blaze that night in Buckingham Palace (14)." Her mental activities reveal a curiosity, awe and longing for the identity of the royal figure. However, in men's view, "The pale light of the immortal presence fell upon them. They seemed ready to attend their Sovereign, if need be (15)." In a distinct hierarchy, the middle class's flattery and blind admiration for the royal family is evident, and they are willing to sacrifice themselves for the fate of the so-called great men. Such blind reverence and flattery further reflect the impact of class division in the hierarchy on society. The state of the poor in the text is listless yet confident. As ignorant trifles, they imagine and admire the heavenly and sacred life of the royal family, and "Mr. Bowley actually had tears in his eyes. A breeze lifted some flag flying in the British breast of Mr. Bowley (16)." The adoration and inexplicable passion of the lower-class characters for the British royal family comes from the ignorance caused by the class division. By contrast, it highlights that the noble life is at an unreachable

height, and their grand gestures and high-profile postures are extravagant and exaggerated, which are despised by the author.

In addition to the high profile of the aristocracy, Clarissa as a middle-class representative is overly elaborate and hypocritical. Her house is luxurious and comfortable, with one servant in the house, "The cook whistled in the kitchen. She heard the click of the typewriter. It was her life, and she felt blessed and purified (24)." She is grateful for the servants, her husband Richard and everything she owns because she loves and enjoys the upper-class life, and knows that it is not easily available to ordinary people. The meals and dinners hosted by the aristocracy affect their own image and reflect their status and strength in upper class, so they are very elaborate from the dress to the banquet. Clarissa's gowns, huge candelabras, crystal dolphins, delicate silverware and jewelry boxes all indicate the elegance and luxury of aristocratic life. Ecofeminism strongly opposes excessive consumption of resources, and the extravagance of aristocratic life is undoubtedly a negative example of resource waste. For the sake of parties, superficial splendor and vanity, excessive consumption to demonstrate strength and image, the monotonous pattern is another manifestation of the boredom, hypocrisy and vanity of the aristocratic life at that time, and deserves to be condemned in the ecological sense.

Clarissa also doubts about life from time to time. When she examines her own soul, she is plunged into contradictions and pain. On the one hand, she loves and pursues upper-class society, but on the other hand, she often feels the meaninglessness of aristocratic life. The existential anxiety stems from the conflicts between the hypocrisy she tries to present, the extravagance of her life, and the conscience she still has. She is also aware that when she does everything to please the other, "How delightful to see you(151)! ", which is her worst performance as exaggerated and hypocritical. She also believes that everyone presents an untruth in one way or another. When the Prime Minister attends her parties, pride and enthusiasm bring only a momentary intoxication, with lack of a sense of achievement and void. It is the false and superficial glory that makes her inner torture and question the life value. Instead, she is still fighting with her unworldly self.

Clarissa is ambivalent about the aristocratic life, while Peter is on the relatively sober side. He thinks it is a big mistake to come to a party, it would be better to read a book at home. Peter is not a man of the world, who is not the hypocritical and cunning English gentleman. He often argues with Clarissa in a discursive manner, and often speaks ill of the higher-ups. The text shows that he is a man of great talent and has a unique view of world affairs, but it is precisely because he is different that he does not want to seek a respectable position, nor does he want to marry and live a comfortable life. He is a cold-eyed observer of Clarissa's vanity and vulnerability, and the extravagance and vulgarity of aristocratic life. Peter makes Clarissa see the unbearable side of herself, so she rejects Peter because she is ashamed to admit that the repetition of aristocratic life is tedious and ridiculous.

"A common concern for society and people is the position emphasized by ecofeminism (Dai 17). " The description of the old beggar being looked down upon by the nobles is the author's concern about the situation of the lower class and satire on the hierarchy. From the banquet, royal characters and the perspective of other different characters depicted in the text, the life of the aristocracy under the hierarchy in the patriarchal society of that era is indeed extravagant and hypocritical. As Starhawk pointed out, "ecofeminism questions all relations of domination. Its aim is not only to change those who exercise power, but to reform the structures of power themselves (Starhawk 28)." Ecofeminism thus insists on a critical and questioning attitude toward the divisions between rich and poor by the hierarchy.

"Ecofeminism extends the traditional feminism's focus on gender oppression to race, class, and nature (Zheng 7)." In the hierarchical system of patriarchal society, the upper aristocratic males hold power and resources, thus the consumption of resources by aristocratic life is ultimately traced back to patriarchal domination, and the ecological destruction and waste of resources caused by this life is the most fundamental point for ecofeminism's critique.

4. Reflection on the Disregard for Life and Nature by War

The novel criticizes the disregard for life, the consumption of resources, and the destruction of the environment in a patriarchal society, reflecting the author's strong anti-war consciousness. Patriarchal society uses ritualized symbols to encourage men's aggressiveness and possessiveness to wage the kinds of wars that Woolf blames directly on patriarchy. "The merit and medals earned at the cost of shooting countless strangers become the male's pursuit of immortality in war realization and the aspiration for which they struggle tirelessly throughout their lives, as a male social mindset and value orientation (Wang 92)."

At the very beginning of the novel, "It was the middle of June and the war was over, except for someone like Mrs. Foxcroft at the embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed", revealing how war hurts ordinary people. However, "The king and queen were at the palace. Everywhere there was beating, a stirring of galloping ponies, tapping of cricket bats (2)." Such a sharp contrast depicts the difference in fate between the aristocracy and the ordinary people in the face of war, indicating that the disregard for life does not affect the lives of the privileged class in any way. Although they are the initiators of the war, they do not have to suffer the tragic consequences of war.

Septimus in the novel is a typical tragic figure hurt by the war. He is supposed to be a young man with courage and resourcefulness, who devours Shakespeare, Darwin and George Bernard Shaw. Although he is a junior clerk in a real estate company, he is diligent and pragmatic, and may be promoted to general manager within ten years. However, "so prying and insidious were the fingers of the European War (75)." He witnesses the death of his close comrades during the war, and so one day at the end of the war, he goes insane and finds himself losing his senses in panic. His selfishness leads him to try to seek recovery and comfort by tricking a girl into marrying him, thus passing on his unfortune to the innocent. It reflects not only the destruction of man and humanity by war, but also the deprivation of happiness in women's lives by war. Septimus' insanity reflects Woolf, the author of the novel, for whom we can find in Lyndall Gordon's biography the effects of the war that brings the writer herself the ravages of mental illness and spiritual torment. War is ultimately irrevocable destruction, bloodshed and killing, not only of lives and property, but also of minds.

There are descriptions of the setting in the novel. After the war, some smog hung over the city, and a constant hum of traffic could be faintly seen in the distance. Planes passed through the clouds like trains passing through a tunnel, with white smoke curling behind them. As the products of industrial civilization, they have intensified war and human destruction of the environment and resources, breaking the original tranquility and harmony of nature.

"Chemical weapons were first used in World War I in 1915, with belligerents producing all types of agents, administering 110,000 tons of poison and causing up to 1.3 million casualties (Nie 37)." It can be seen that the damage of World War I to the environment and resources is devastating. "The European war smashed the plaster cast of Ceres, ploughed a hole in the geraniums beds (75)." Ceres, the goddess of grain as a symbol of abundance, teaches man to farm, and makes the land fertile and fruitful. Geranium is mentioned many times in the text as a flower closely related to women, which symbolizes women and the natural environment. The metaphorical depictions indicate the disregard for life, the destruction of the environment and the waste of resources in World War I from a unique perspective. The research and development, test and use of war weapons, such as chemical weapons and nuclear weapons, have disastrous and irreversible impacts on the environment, and the battlefield also has devastating damage to the ecological environment. In a word, ecofeminism holds the most serious critical attitude towards the environmental damage caused by war.

Having experienced two world wars, Woolf's anti-war consciousness in her works is distinctive and thought-provoking, which is especially closely integrated with feminist ideas. In the text, not only does the war deal a devastating blow to nature, but also repeats many times the harm caused by itself, especially to women, such as the mothers who are devastated by the death of their sons on the battlefield, the wives who lose their happiness because their husbands are mentally disturbed by the war. As a woman who cannot not take part in the war, she is keenly aware of the serious consequences of the war initiated by the men in the patriarchal society out of the desire to conquer and attack, and

also expresses her sympathy and reflection on the harm brought by the war to the resources, environment and women. The damage to nature and to women caused by patriarchy and the wars it wages is irreparable. For this reason, Woolf makes a thought-provoking indictment of war in a patriarchal society: "How many tombs with banners waving over them, tokens of victories not over armies (23)." The victory is at the cost of the loss of environment, resources and lives.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of ecofeminism, the oppression of women by patriarchal society is closely linked to the oppression of nature by human beings. In her novel, Virginia Woolf shows the harm suffered by women and nature in patriarchal society from three aspects: the exploitation of women by the marriage system under patriarchal society, the hypocrisy and luxury of aristocratic life under the hierarchy, and the blow to life and nature in war, expressing criticism and indictment towards patriarchal society. Interpreting *Mrs. Dalloway* from an ecofeminist perspective is conducive to alleviating the negative effects of both the patriarchal society on the ecological environment and the defense of women's rights, further breaking the oppression in terms of gender, class and nature. Moreover, while safeguarding women's rights, it also promotes the construction of an equal and harmonious social order, and the process of resource conservation and environmental protection.

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