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**FROM MODERN VIRGINIA WOOLF TO  
POSTMODERN CLARISSA DALLOWAY IN MICHAEL  
CUNNINGHAM'S THE HOURS: A POSTMODERN  
CRITIQUE**

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**Abstract:** The analysis, as detailed in the paper, is critiqued from the feminist perspective to instigate how three women, as portrayed in *The Hours* express their subjectivity through a number of eras. From Woolf to Cunningham, women have been found expressing subjectivity in two different mediums in two different eras respectively. Virginia Woolf discovers men being patriarchal, and thinks that it is man, who gives woman a structure in a society. Secondly, Laura Brown shares the same experiences as Woolf experienced in her time thinking to leave everything behind to live a life of her own. Finally, Clarissa Vaughn, a postmodernist, is found to be an independent, and carefree middle aged woman, and keeps believing in love with person of same sex. Literally, The novel, being a social commentary, inquires the gender roles in today's world that counts on the time of Woolf, and of Laura whose lives are not like of Clarissa's.

**Key words:** John Cunningham, Patriarchy, Feminist Movement, Subjectivity, Identity, Performance.

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**Introduction**

*The Hours*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998 has been widely considered as an attempt by its author, Michael Cunningham, to retell Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. As James Schiff, in *Rewriting Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway*, states: "Cunningham Americanizes and Popularizes Woolf's text. Her novel about an upper class English socialite living in London is transformed and democratized, in part, into an American novel" ( Schiff

369). He continues that in this novel, Cunningham tries to link characters, who live in three different historical eras, and places, and he is successful in compressing the twentieth century in a thin volume by using leaps through time and space (Schiff 370). Other critics, like Mary Joe Hughes and Henry Alley, write about Cunningham's novel as a representation of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Much has been written on how *The Hours* echoes the voice of

its predecessor. Hughes argues that it is very common in the postmodern era to retell an earlier work of art. He believes that this practice of representation is "nothing new... Many earlier art forms acknowledged their predecessors and borrowed liberally from both the structure and the content of earlier models" (Hughes 349). Yet all arts of postmodernism try to make something new as well. They open up their predecessors to alternative perspectives, and in doing so, they go beyond a mere imitation and repetition. So there can be many things to discover in the works of art that echo their predecessors in the postmodern era, and Cunningham's *The Hours* serves as a rich source.

This article is not concerned with the many ways in which *The Hours* extends, and repeats the themes of life, death, and time which exists in Virginia's *Mrs. Dalloway*, nor it attempts to analyze its intertextual relationship with other texts; rather it tries to look at this brilliant work of art from the postfeminist point of view. According to Peter Barry, the "feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of 'women's movement' of the 1960s" and not "the start of feminism" (Barry 116). It aims to show how the three main characters of the novel, Virginia Woolf, Laura Brown, and Clarissa Dalloway can match the three feminist waves in the history of feminism with the first one beginning in the nineteenth, and early twentieth century, the second in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third one in the 1990s extending to the present. To get an idea of what is meant by the postfeminism, the reader of this

article will be provided with a background of the revolutionary movement of feminism.

### **Literature Review**

In the 16th and 17th century, skeptical attacks were against the medieval worldview, or according to Christopher Falzon, "the idea of a God given cosmic order" (Falzon 25). One could argue that this resulted in Nietzsche's famous pronouncement that "God is dead". In the age of the Enlightenment, Descartes announced his well-known phrase "I think therefore I am", which made the human subject or the "self" to be viewed as the ultimate source of knowledge and action. Thus, human beings started to play a foundational role, and take the place of the medieval God. In the late half of the twentieth century, there came a major shift in Western thinking, a shift that can be summarized in the phrase "the death of the Man". This shift involved skepticism about the modern notion of a timeless and transcendental human nature. In the 1960s' waves of anti-subjectivist thinking manifested themselves in the work of Foucault, along with other thinkers like Jacques Derrida. Falzon argues that this skepticism denies the existence of any universal, permanent "framework or essence to which we can ultimately appeal in order to determine what counts as reason, knowledge or right action" (Falzon 26). This postmodern view of the human being brought about disputes over absolutism versus relativism, and foundationalism versus fragmentation.

Feminism has been greatly influenced by these modern, and postmodern views of the self. A few decades ago feminism seemed to be simpler. It concerned with a common question: What is the reason for women's oppression, and how can we put an end to this oppression? According to Ann Brooks, the second wave feminists have inherited some of the assumptions of the enlightenment feminism, such as "patriarchy" and "oppression" (Brooks 30). Yet the difference between feminism of the 1970s, and the feminism of the 1990s is so great that the former is called modernist, and the latter, postmodernist. Modernist feminists are interested in gaining back the rights of women; the rights, which have been taken away from them for centuries. They want to fight against female oppression, and inequalities. Gregory Castle points out that in the United States on the second wave of feminism, "attention on civil rights, specifically social and economic equality" were called for (Castle 95). They want women to be treated like men with equal rights, equal pay, and equal opportunities. On the other hand, Postmodernist feminists, on the other hand, do not find it a good idea to define an identity for women. What bothers these feminists is this identity stick. In other words, whatever identity labels which are given to women cannot be considered as a fixed and unchanged truth about the nature of women. In recent years post feminism has gained greater currency. According to Ann Brooks:

"The concept of post implies a process of ongoing transformation and

change□post feminism can be understood as critically engaging with patriarchy and postmodernism as similarly engaged with principles of modernism. It does not assume that either patriarchal or modernist discourses and frames of reference have been replaced or superseded" (Brooks 1).

As noted earlier, poststructuralists, in contrast to liberal humanist assumptions, reject the notion of a unified, and rational self, and feminism, which was under the influence of postmodernism and also post structuralism has been provided with a range of critical postsructuralist frameworks, such as deconstruction and difference. As Brooks states feminism used these frameworks to challenge the traditional assumptions of subjectivity and identity, and "feminist poststructuralists reject the concept of an essential, unified female nature" (Brooks 21).

Many feminists, and feminist poststructuralists were influenced by Michael Foucault's approach to the "subject". Brooks argues that "Foucault's subject is decentred and dispersed" ( Brooks 22), and she continues that "Judith Butler□ draws on Foucault's genealogical method to deconstruct the subject of feminism" (Brooks 22). Butler believes that gender is "performative". In *Gender Trouble*, she argues: "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler 173). She asserts that gender is not a fact, and the idea of gender is created by the various

acts of gender, and there would be no gender without those acts. So it takes on a guise of naturalness through repeated performances, and "this repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set meanings already socially established" (Butler 178).

So the postmodern feminist interest in gender, and the female does not specifically mean that they look for a true definition of woman or gender, since to them, truth is associated with power. Also, they do not intend to free women from oppression because they think all fixed identities are oppressive. Freedom is equal to non-identity. The truth about woman, for example, what she is, how she should act, are oppressive by themselves. As Marysia Zalewski states, becoming subjects requires conforming to specific representations of women, like good mothers, wives or daughters. He continues that for a postmodernist specific definitions, and expectations of women are to a great extent restrictive in nature. Those women who demand rights which are not usually demanded by their gender will feel out of place (Zalewski 43). Yet this deconstruction of the subject of woman does not appeal to modernist feminists. They think this way of thinking leaves no room for a woman to claim for her rights, and leaves her in a state of fragmentation. They see the claiming of the identity of a woman as necessary, since through that a woman can speak about her rights. Modernist feminists believe that a female's true identity can free her from oppression, injustice and domination. Hence bridging the gap

between these two notions of the modern existence of an inner self, and a postmodern constructed self does not seem to be an easy task to do.

### **Discussion**

Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, which relies on the uncertain and fragmented selves of its three female characters can be considered a typical example of postmodern literature. Each of the three parts deals with a different time and place, and a different female protagonist. The first deals with Virginia Woolf, who lives in a London suburb in 1923. She is engaged in writing and producing her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and struggles with her own mental illness. The second depicts Laura Brown's life; a pregnant housewife, a mother, and a wife to a World War II veteran. Living in Los Angeles in 1949, she reads Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and is quite impressed by the book. She is planning a birthday party for her husband. Finally, in Greenwich Village in the 1990s, lives Clarissa Vaughan, a lesbian, and a literary editor, who plans a party to celebrate the literary award received by Richard, a poet, and her former lover who is suffering from AIDS.

It can be argued that Cunningham's *Mrs. Woolf* is more like those modern feminists, who believe in a suppressed inner self, which has to be taken up to the surface. Yet to do so requires self-confidence, and some kind of courage, which Virginia desires. In the morning, when she rises from her bed, and goes to the bathroom to wash her face, she does not look at the mirror. She actually does not dare

to face her dark self, which is reflected in the mirror; the self, which works against her true self; "In the bathroom... she does not look directly into the oval mirror... she is aware of her reflected movements in the glass... the mirror is dangerous; it sometimes shows her the dark manifestations of air that matches her body" (Cunningham 30-31). Then she does not go to the kitchen to talk to Nelly, the servant, since she thinks her communication with Nelly disturbs her satisfaction of being alone with her true self. So, "she gets to her study, quietly closes the door. Safe" (Cunningham 34). It is in her room that she finds "infinite possibilities, whole hours ahead... She can feel it inside her, an all but indescribable second self, or rather a parallel, purer self" (Cunningham 34). However, she is never sure about the efficiency of the hours she has got, and the day, which is ahead does not seem enough for her to finish her novel; " But can a single day in the life of an ordinary woman be made into enough for a novel?" (Cunningham 69); "Always, there are these doubts. Should she try another hour" (Cunningham 72)? She has difficulty believing in the hour.

Cunningham depicts Virginia's fear of her feminine self through the headaches she suffers. These headaches make her suffer both physically, and psychologically. These headaches "which are not in any way ordinary pain... inhabit rather than merely afflict her" (Cunningham 70). She hears voices which are "indistinct, but full of meaning, undeniably

masculine, obscenely old" (Cunningham 71). Cunningham deliberately makes her female character, who lives in 1923, suffer the pain, and the fear of the opposite sex by making her hear these masculine voices. She suffers from this pain, but when she is with Leonard she tries to act "more firmly healthy than she sometimes is" (Cunningham 71). Her feminine self knows that these headaches will come back again to her after they are over for a short time. They inhabit her.

Virginia is a patient, who has to be nursed. Leonard should protect her, telling her what and when to eat; When she wakes up and walks down the stair, Leonard asks her if she had breakfast, and then tells her what she will have for lunch; "You will have lunch... A true lunch, soup, pudding, and all. By force, if it comes to that" (Cunningham 33). She accepts this "impatiently but without true anger" (Cunningham 33). To Leonard, Virginia Woolf is Virginia Stephen; his wife. He thinks "she has aged dramatically, just this year, as if a layer of air has leaked out from under her skin... she is suddenly no longer beautiful" (Cunningham 33).

Virginia is not satisfied with her ordinary life, and wants to move away to London; "It seems that she can survive, she can prosper, if she has London around her" (Cunningham 168), and "all London implies about freedom" (Cunningham 172). She believes that it is enough to stay in Richmond, so while taking a halfhour evening walk, she decides to turn toward the rail station to go to London.

"Right now, walking, free of her headache, free of the voices, she can face the devil, but she must keep walking, she must not turn back" (Cunningham 167). On seeing Leonard walking towards him in the train station, she thinks for a moment to "run back to the station; she thinks she will escape some sort of catastrophe" (Cunningham 170). Yet she is forced by Leonard to go back home. She will never tell her husband that she had the plan to flee.

The last chapter on Mrs. Woolf depicts her trying to concentrate on her book. She is happy, since they have decided to go to London. Suddenly she remembers the kiss; Vanessa's kiss. She calls it an "innocent" kiss; "It feels like the most delicious and forbidden of pleasures" (Cunningham 154). She wants to free this forbidden pleasure that she felt when she kissed her sister, Vanessa, in her book. She decides to make the Clarissa of her novel immortal:

"Yes, Clarissa will have loved a woman. Clarissa will have kissed a woman, only once. Clarissa will be bereaved deeply lonely, but she will not die. She will be too much in love with life, with London. Virginia imagines someone else, yes, someone strong of body but frail minded; someone with a touch of genius, of poetry, ground under by the wheels of the world, by war and government, by doctors... Clarissa, sane Clarissa... will go on, loving London, loving her life of ordinary pleasures, and someone else, a deranged poet, a visionary, will be the one to die" (Cunningham 211).

The second major character of the novel, Laura Brown, is a pregnant housewife living in 1949 Los Angeles. Unlike Virginia Woolf, who tries to find her true self, Laura has "trouble believing in herself" (Cunningham 38). The first time Cunningham introduces her to his reader, he talks about her having difficulty with herself; "Laura Brown is trying to lose herself. No, That's not it exactly she is trying to keep herself by gaining entry into a parallel world. She lays the book face down on her chest" (Cunningham 37). By reading Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, she tries to locate herself. She knows when she gets out of her bed, she has to move from sleep to obligation, and so she tries to linger in bed and read one more page. She has to love her husband and Richie, her son, because now she is a housewife; "So now she is Laura Brown. Laura Zielski, the solitary girl, the incessant reader, is gone, and here in her place is Laura Brown" (Cunningham 40).

Like Virginia Woolf, Laura finds herself free, when she attempts an escape and finds a hotel room to read alone. She knows that in places where she meets other people, she has to perform. She wants a private place where she can think. "If she goes to a store or restaurant, she'll have to perform" (Cunningham 145). She tries to free herself of the subject positions that she receives from her society; a housewife, a mother and also a mother to be. She has to keep her being away for a few hours a secret, because she simply cannot think how she can explain this to her husband. When she

comes back home, "she knows herself as a wife and mother, pregnant again, driving home" (Cunningham 191). Any way she can convince herself that "she must continue" (Cunningham 205).

Cunningham's Clarissa, an ordinary woman living in the end of the twentieth century in New York City, is more postfeminist in that she is not looking for her true self. She does not believe that there can be an ultimate self with which she feels satisfied. She "simply enjoys without reason, the houses, the church, the man and the dog" (Cunningham 12). She just enjoys being alive. She loves her ordinary life. She is not looking for something new. If the thought of being alone comes to her mind, it leaves her very soon. In her apartment she thinks if she leave Sally, her Lesbian partner, "She'll be herself... Then the feeling moves on... It simply moves on, like a train the stops at a small country station, stands for awhile, and then continues out of sight" (Cunningham 92). She is relieved to find that her life is her own and that she wants no other. Unlike Virginia or Laura, she is not obsessed with the idea of suicide. Even when she runs down the stairs of Richard's apartment after his fall, she is aware of herself "as a woman running down a set of stairs, uninjured, still alive" (Cunningham 201).

While walking in the park, Clarissa thinks she is walking "over the bodies of the dead", and she knows that if someone digs beneath the city, he would find "the ruins of another, older city, and then another and

another" (Cunningham 14). Similarly, when Mrs. Woolf imagines walking in the park, she "is beginning to understand that another park lies beneath this one" (Cunningham 30). Yet the difference is that she thinks this underneath park is "the true idea of the park" (Cunningham 30), while for Clarissa there is no true idea of the city. It is a repetition of a repetition. These two ways of thinking can be compared to the modernist thinking of the human subject, and a postmodernist one. As Zalewski argues:

"If modernists think of the human subject as an apple, with a vital core, then postmodernists think the subject more like an onion; peel away the layers and there is nothing there at the end or at the core... For modernists there is an ultimate core to the self or the subject which inspires modernist feminists to 'tell it like it is' about woman, in other words to say what woman is and should be. Postmodernist feminists, on the other hand, claim that there is no vital core and thus prefer to ask 'How do women become to get said?' " (Zalewski 23-24)

When Clarissa walks in the neighborhood, where she met Richard, when he was nineteen, she remembers that "here on this corner... they had kissed or not kissed, they had certainly argued, and here or somewhere soon after, they had canceled their little experiment, for Clarissa wanted her freedom" (Cunningham 52). Clarissa is able to live an open lesbian life with Sally. Unlike her, Virginia Woolf and Laura Brown live a relatively secret sexual

existence, and both end up in a heterosexual marriage. Clarissa, who is Richard's closest friend takes the role of a caregiver through his illness. Cunningham replaces his insane Virginia Woolf by Richard, and this makes his male character suffer, and her female character gets empowered.

Richard, the son of Laura Brown and Clarissa's former lover, acts as a link between these two generations of female characters. He is left uncertain whether to accept life or reject it. As a little sensitive boy, he realizes his mother's intention of committing suicide and has been affected deeply by that. As an insane poet, he believes that he got the prize for his having AIDS and going nuts; "I got a prize for my performance ...it had nothing to do with my work" (Cunningham 63). He is sick of the hours, which come one after another, and decides to end up his life by jumping out of the window. This accident brings Laura Brown, and Clarissa together by the end of the novel. Even in the very last scene of the novel, the two female figures are depicted differently. Laura is "the woman of wrath and sorrow, of pathos, of dazzling charm; the woman in love with death; the victim and torturer who haunted Richard's work", and Clarissa is "herself, Clarissa, not Mrs. Dalloway anymore;

there is no one now to call her that. Here she is with another hour before her" (Cunningham 226).

### **Conclusion**

Cunningham's three parts' of the novel can prove Judith Butler's argument that "there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there will be no true or false real or distorted acts of gender" (Butler 180). Taking this postfeminist point of view, one can go beyond the compulsory heterosexuality and the masculine restricting frames and become Cunningham's Clarissa. If it is argued that gender is structured through repeated acts, or, in other words, it is socially made, then a lesbian relationship cannot be questioned or condemned, since there is no right or wrong for gender performances. Laura Brown and Virginia Woolf try to escape the social constraints, but they fail. Their failure is the result of their agreement to perform the acts which through repetition have become natural for a female sex. They have to stick to their female identity, or female self, to be a good wife or a good mother. On the contrary, Clarissa sees infinite possibilities before her, and feels free in her life which is free from identity restrictions.

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