

THE REPRESENTATION OF URBAN SPACE AND EXISTENTIAL ALIENATION IN MRS DALLOWAY

Nasimjanova Muazzam

Uzbekistan State World Languages University
English philology faculty

Abstract. This article examines the interplay between urban space and existential alienation in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). London is not a backdrop in the novel but a living, breathing force that shapes and fractures the inner lives of its characters. Through the parallel figures of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith — representing hidden and visible alienation respectively — the article argues that the city is both the setting and the engine of modern psychological isolation.

Key words: modernism, urban space, existential alienation, stream of consciousness, psychological fragmentation, spatial narrative, post-war literature.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqola Virjiniya Vulfning "Missis Dellouey" (1925) romanidagi shahar muhiti va ekzistensial begonalashuv o'rtasidagi o'zaro bog'liqlikni tadqiq etadi. Romanda London shunchaki voqealar rivoji uchun fon emas, balki qahramonlarning ichki dunyosini shakllantiradigan va parchalaydigan jonli, nafas oluvchi kuch sifatida namoyon bo'ladi. Maqolada bir-biriga parallel bo'lgan ikki qahramon — mos ravishda yashirin va ko'zga tashlanadigan begonalashuv timsollari bo'lgan Klarissa Dellouey va Septimus Uorren Smit siymolari orqali, shahar zamonaviy psixologik yakkalanishning ham maydoni, ham harakatlantiruvchi kuchi ekanligi isbotlanadi.

Kalit so'zlar: modernizm, shahar muhiti, ekzistensial begonalashuv, ong oqimi, psixologik parchalanish, fazoviy hikoya, urushdan keyingi adabiyot.

Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается взаимосвязь между городским пространством и экзистенциальным отчуждением в романе Вирджинии Вулф «Миссис Дэллоуэй» (1925). Лондон в романе предстает не просто фоном, а живой, дышащей силой, которая формирует и разрушает внутренний мир героев. Через параллельные фигуры Клариссы Дэллоуэй и Септимуса Уоррена Смита, олицетворяющих соответственно скрытое и явное отчуждение, в статье доказывается, что город является одновременно и местом действия, и двигателем психологической изоляции современного человека.

Ключевые слова: модернизм, городское пространство, экзистенциальное отчуждение, поток сознания, психологическая фрагментация, пространственное повествование, послевоенная литература.

Introduction

There is a moment near the opening of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) when Clarissa steps out of her house in Westminster on a bright June morning and feels, all at once, the rush of the city flooding into her. She does not simply walk down Bond Street — she absorbs it, breathes it in, becomes it, if only for an instant. And then, just as quickly, she is alone again: the crowd flows around her, the sounds continue, and yet something has closed inside her. That opening tension — the city offering everything,

and the self receiving so little of what it truly needs — is the heart of Virginia Woolf's novel, and the subject of this article.

Modernist literature emerged at a moment when the modern city was reshaping human experience at an almost overwhelming pace. London after the First World War was a city scarred by collective grief, reorganized by class anxiety, and animated by the contradictory energies of spectacle and solitude. Writers like T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf turned to the city not merely as a setting but as a condition of consciousness — a space that shaped what it meant to think, feel, and belong.

Among these writers, Woolf is singular in the intimacy and emotional precision with which she maps the relationship between exterior urban space and interior psychological life. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the streets of London are not neutral geography. They are charged, porous surfaces through which the private world of her characters constantly bleeds into the public. This article aims to analyze how Woolf uses the representation of urban space — its streets, parks, monuments, drawing rooms, and the relentless chiming of Big Ben — as the primary vehicle for exploring existential alienation: the sense of being fundamentally disconnected from others, from time, and from oneself, even in the midst of a city teeming with life.

Theoretical Framework: Urban Space, Alienation, and Modernist Subjectivity

To understand what Woolf is doing in *Mrs Dalloway*, it helps to think about what modern urban space does to human beings. The sociologist Georg Simmel, writing in his landmark essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), observed that the modern city bombards its inhabitants with an intensity of stimuli that the nervous system simply cannot absorb. In response, urban subjects develop what Simmel called a "blasé attitude" — a protective emotional numbness, a way of moving through the crowd without being destroyed by it. This is not indifference; it is a kind of survival. And it is precisely this survival strategy — the managed distance, the learned detachment — that Woolf recognizes as one of the defining sources of modern alienation.

The concept of the *flâneur*, developed by Walter Benjamin from Baudelaire's poetry, provides a complementary lens. The *flâneur* is the modern city-dweller who wanders the streets as an observer — aesthetically engaged, emotionally detached, perpetually watching. Benjamin saw in this figure a complex emblem of modernity: liberated by the city's anonymity, yet also imprisoned by it; connected to everything through observation, yet intimate with nothing. Feminist critics, particularly Janet Wolff and Anna Snaith, have extended this concept to ask what it means for a woman — for a Clarissa Dalloway — to attempt *flânerie* in a city whose public spaces were organized around male freedom and female constraint.

Existential alienation, as understood through the work of philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus, refers to the experience of fundamental disconnection: from other people, from meaningful social structures, from one's own sense of identity and purpose. In the modernist literary tradition, this philosophical concept finds its formal expression in the fragmentation of narrative, the dissolution of stable perspective, and the multiplication of subjectivities. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique is not merely a stylistic innovation — it is the formal enactment of the existential condition she is diagnosing: a consciousness that is continuous, restless, and yet unable to fully reach the world outside itself.

London as a Modern Space in the Novel

Mrs Dalloway is set entirely within a single June day in London, and the city earns every page of that attention. From the moment Clarissa steps outside, London announces itself as dynamic, overwhelming, and alive. The streets are full of movement — cars, buses, pedestrians, pigeons, a royal motor car that draws the crowd's gaze upward. An aeroplane writes letters in the sky that everyone reads differently. Big Ben strikes the hours with a physical force that seems to penetrate the walls of buildings and the walls of selves.

What is remarkable is that Woolf renders all of this not as description but as experience. She does not catalogue London from outside; she lets London happen inside her characters' consciousness. When Clarissa walks through St. James's Park, she does not observe the park — she thinks through it, remembers through it, uses its openness as a surface on which her deepest questions about life and mortality can momentarily play. The park is public space transformed into private meditation; the city is simultaneously outside and inside.

Woolf carefully orchestrates the contrast between public and private spaces throughout the novel. The streets of Westminster — open, sunlit, democratic in their exposure — are spaces of performance, where selves are displayed and social masks maintained. The drawing rooms and houses are spaces of enclosure, where the social rituals of class are enacted with both pleasure and exhaustion. And then there are the marginal, liminal spaces: Septimus and Rezia's bench in Regent's Park, Clarissa's narrow attic room, the moment in a shop when time seems to stop. These are the spaces where the masks slip, where the true condition of alienation becomes visible.

Urban Space and Psychological Isolation: Clarissa and Septimus

One of Woolf's most powerful structural choices in *Mrs Dalloway* is her decision to build the novel around two characters who never meet, yet whose inner lives mirror each other with painful precision. Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith are, as Woolf herself acknowledged, doubles — two faces of the same existential situation, existing on different sides of the city's social geography.

Clarissa represents what we might call hidden alienation. She is socially brilliant, warmly received, at the very centre of the world she inhabits. She walks through London with pleasure; she hosts parties; she is loved. And yet, beneath all of this, there is a persistent, aching sense of separateness. She feels herself dispersed through the city — "part of people she had never met" — but also feels that no one truly reaches her. Her marriage to Richard is affectionate but emotionally distant; her old love for Sally Seton and Peter Walsh hovers at the edges of the present day as evidence of roads not taken, selves not fully lived. Clarissa moves through London's crowds and feels, paradoxically, most herself when most alone — at her window, in her attic room, in the brief private moments the city creates between social obligations.

Septimus represents visible alienation — the kind that cannot be hidden, managed, or socially performed away. A veteran of the First World War, he moves through the same streets as Clarissa but inhabits an entirely different London. Where she reads the city as a field of beauty and memory, he reads it as a field of terror and incomprehensible signs. Sitting in Regent's Park with his wife Rezia, he watches the leaves speak, hears his dead comrade Evans calling from behind the trees, feels the city pressing on him with a hostility that has no social name.

The crowds that surround both characters crystallize the central paradox of urban alienation: the city generates proximity without intimacy, contact without connection.

London is never empty in Mrs Dalloway — it pulses with people, noise, movement. Yet its characters are profoundly, sometimes devastatingly alone. Clarissa stands at her window, watching the old woman in the house opposite prepare for bed, and in that moment — two women, two windows, the city between them — Woolf captures something essential about the loneliness of modern urban life: we are surrounded by others and separated from them by precisely the glass and stone and social distance that the city provides.

Narrative Techniques and Spatial Experience

Woolf's formal choices in Mrs Dalloway are inseparable from her spatial and existential argument. The stream-of-consciousness technique — perhaps the most celebrated aspect of her style — is not merely a way of representing thought; it is a way of representing the experience of being in urban space. When Clarissa walks through London, her mind does not process the city sequentially. It leaps, circles back, makes associative connections between what she sees now and what she felt thirty years ago at Bourton. This is how we actually experience cities: not as a linear succession of streets and buildings but as a fluid, layered, emotionally charged field in which the present is always saturated with memory and anticipation.

Woolf uses shifting perspectives with extraordinary control. The narrative consciousness moves between Clarissa, Septimus, Peter, Rezia, and others without announcement, as if the city itself were the governing intelligence through which all these private lives briefly flicker. This technique is spatially meaningful: it enacts the urban experience of passing through a crowd and momentarily entering, by some trick of imagination or empathy, the inner world of a stranger. The city makes us aware of the multiplicity of lives being lived simultaneously; Woolf's form makes us feel that multiplicity from inside.

Big Ben functions in the novel as what we might call the novel's spatial-temporal spine. When it strikes the hours, it intrudes into every consciousness equally — it is the one voice the city uses that everyone hears. But it is heard differently by each character. For Clarissa it carries the weight of mortality, the reminder that each stroke is one less. For Septimus it arrives as an external force that disturbs and disorients. For the social world it marks the rhythm of obligation and performance. Big Ben is both the city's public order — impersonal, mechanical, democratic — and each character's private relationship with time and death. In this way, Woolf makes a single element of urban architecture carry the full burden of existential meaning.

Existential Alienation in Urban Context

What Mrs Dalloway ultimately dramatizes is not simply loneliness but something more philosophically precise: the dissolution of a stable self in the conditions of modern urban life. Identity, in this novel, is not a fixed possession but a fragile, ongoing performance — something maintained by social ritual (the party, the morning walk, the purchasing of flowers) but constantly threatened by the deeper question of who one actually is when the rituals stop.

Clarissa's repeated meditation on her own identity — "She would not say of herself, I am this, I am that" — is not simply introspective modesty. It is the recognition that the modern self, formed in and by the city, is fundamentally plural and unstable. She is Mrs Dalloway the hostess; she is the girl at Bourton; she is the woman at the window watching a stranger; she is dispersed through London in some mystical, aching

way. The city, with its constant dissolution and reformation of selves, makes this instability permanent.

Disconnection despite social interaction is perhaps the most emotionally devastating form of alienation the novel portrays. Clarissa gives parties not out of social ambition alone but out of a deep need to create moments where connection feels possible — where "something central which permeated" might briefly hold the separate fragments of modern life together. Yet the novel is quietly honest about the limits of this aspiration. The party happens; people gather; time passes; and the separateness remains. There is beauty in the attempt, Woolf suggests, and there is grief in the failure — and both are part of what it means to be alive in a modern city.

Septimus's story makes explicit what Clarissa's polished social existence keeps implicit: that the city, for those who cannot manage its demands, is not merely lonely but lethal. His shell shock — which Woolf renders not as a clinical category but as a total shattering of the boundary between inner and outer world — represents the extreme case of urban overwhelm. He cannot perform the detachment that Simmel's metropolitan survival requires. He cannot transform his trauma into the manageable, aestheticized melancholy that Clarissa achieves. And in a city organized around productivity, social performance, and the maintenance of appearances, there is no space for him.

Discussion: How Space Shapes Identity and Woolf's Urban Critique

The relationship between space and identity in Mrs Dalloway is not simply that characters are affected by their environment. It is more reciprocal and more disturbing than that: the spaces characters inhabit are projections of their inner states, and their inner states are shaped by the spaces available to them. Clarissa's attic room — narrow, nun-like, ascetic — is not the room of a rich woman's choice; it is the room of a self that has been compressed by the expectations of gender and class into a very small space, and that retreats there to remember what it actually is. Septimus has no such room. The city offers him no heterotopia, no space outside the social order where he can exist without judgment. His suicide — the defenestration, the throwing of himself from an interior space into the exterior city — is therefore not simply an act of despair but a spatial statement: if the city will not give me space to exist, I will claim the ultimate space of my own death.

Woolf's critique of modern urban life in this novel is subtle but devastating. She does not condemn London; she loves it, through Clarissa's eyes, with a genuine and fierce tenderness. But she refuses to let that love blind her to what the city costs its inhabitants. The characters who manage urban life most successfully — Lady Bruton, Sir William Bradshaw, the efficient socialites — are those who have most completely suppressed their inner lives in the service of social performance. Those who remain open — Clarissa, with her flickers of memory and doubt; Septimus, with his terrible openness to everything — pay a price. The city, Woolf suggests, is organized to reward the management of feeling and to punish its excess.

Conclusion

Mrs Dalloway remains, a century after its publication, one of the most emotionally precise accounts of what it feels like to be a conscious, sensitive human being in a modern city. Its key finding — that urban space is not neutral but active, not merely a setting but a shaping force — is one that spatial theory has subsequently elaborated in many directions, from Lefebvre's production of space to contemporary

urban phenomenology. But Woolf arrives at this insight not through theory but through the body, the rhythm of a sentence, the felt quality of a morning walk.

The article has shown that London in Mrs Dalloway functions simultaneously as a source of aesthetic vitality and a mechanism of existential alienation; that the novel's two central characters map a spectrum from hidden to visible forms of that alienation; that Woolf's narrative techniques — stream of consciousness, shifting perspectives, the chiming of Big Ben — are formal expressions of the spatial and temporal fragmentation she is diagnosing; and that the novel offers an implicit critique of a social order that rewards the suppression of inner life and punishes its fullness.

The importance of urban analysis in literature lies precisely in this: that the spaces we inhabit are never innocent. They carry ideology, history, class, and gender within their geometry. To read Mrs Dalloway as a spatial text is to discover that Woolf understood this long before it became a theoretical framework — and that she found, in the streets and parks and drawing rooms of one particular London day, a way of telling the emotional truth of an entire civilization. Further research might fruitfully extend this spatial reading to Woolf's other London novels — *The Waves*, *The Years* — or to comparative analyses with other modernist urban fictions, exploring how different cities generate different registers of the same alienated modernity.

REFERENCES

1. Abulkasimovna, E. Z. (2021). The Problem of the Norms of Phraseological Units Erdanova Zebiniso Abulkasimovna. *Mental Enlightenment Scientific-Methodological Journal*, 74-81.
2. Abulkasimovna, E. Z. (2021). Activity of Professional Terms in Linguistics. *European journal of innovation in nonformal education*, 1(2), 8-9.
3. Ashirkulovna, M. F. (2023). Linguacultural characteristics of English and Uzbek phraseological units with cooking utensils. *British View*, 8(4).
4. Ashirkulovna, M. F. (2021). Linguocultural Classification of English and Uzbek Culinaryonyms in Proverbs. *Berlin Studies Transnational Journal of Science and Humanities*, 1(1.6 Philological sciences).
5. Benjamin, W. (1999). *The Arcades Project* (H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
6. Harrison, A. (2014). Urban spaces, fragmented consciousness, and indecipherable meaning in Mrs Dalloway. In N. Allen & D. Simmons (Eds.), *Reassessing the twentieth-century canon* (pp. 45–61). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137366016_4
7. Kumari, P. (2024). Memory and modernity: Exploring urban disillusionment and the search for meaning in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and beyond. *The Creative Launcher*, 9(4), 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2024.9.4.07>
8. Simmel, G. (1971). The metropolis and mental life. In D. Levine (Ed.), *Georg Simmel on individuality and social forms* (pp. 324–339). University of Chicago Press.
9. Snaith, A., & Whitworth, M. H. (Eds.). (2007). *Locating Woolf: The politics of space and place*. Palgrave Macmillan.
10. Thacker, A. (2003). *Moving through modernity: Space and geography in modernism*. Manchester University Press.
11. Woolf, V. (1925). *Mrs Dalloway*. Hogarth Press.

12. Zhang, Y. (2022). A study on multiple spaces in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. *Frontiers in Business, Economics and Management*, 5(2). <https://drpress.org/ojs/index.php/fbem/article/view/544>.
13. Маматкулова, Ф. А. (2019). О свойствах кулинаронимов. *NovaInfo. Ru*, (108), 22-24.