

# Quest for Authentic Existence in Marleen Gorris's Movie *Mrs. Dalloway*

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**Abstract :** *The paper attempts to make a cinematographic study of Marleen Gorris's film Mrs. Dalloway, the screen adaptation of the popular novel Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf through the perspective of Existentialism introduced by Jean Paul Sartre. The movie by Gorris seems to be a love story but it also portrays the existential quest of the protagonist for the meaningful life or for the authentic existence. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the society of England, Clarissa determines herself to choose a life of her own choice for which she has to face many objections, but her courage to go beyond that and make own choice of life is the main purpose discussed here. This research is studied through cinematographic analytic way, which is drawn upon the concept of authentic existence relating to the theory of Existentialism. This study comes to the conclusion that to live the meaningful life or to lead a life of meaningful existence Clarissa puts her love behind, and marries Richard for her own authentic sake.*

**Key Words :** authentic existence, freedom, choices, authentic, responsibility, authentic being.

## 1. Introduction

*Mrs. Dalloway*, a movie by Marleen Gorris, is a screen adaptation of the famous novel, with the same title *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf. The director, Marleen Gorris is an Oscar Award winner Dutch writer-director. A Bayly/ Pare' Production by Stephen Bayly and Lisa Katselas Pare', the movie is distributed by First Look Pictures. In association with Bergen Film, this Marleen Gorris film is the presentation of the Newmarket Capital Group and BBC Films with the participation of the European Co-production Fund U.K., NPS-Television, Dutch Co-production Fund (CoBo) and The Dutch Film Fund. Although the movie is heavily based on prominent English writer, Virginia Woolf's master piece *Mrs. Dalloway*, Eileen Atkins has done the screenplay for the movie

and won the Evening Standard British Film Award entitled Best Screenplay Award for the movie in 1998. The cinematography has been done by Sue Gibson. Sue Gibson was a British cinematographer known for the film *Mrs. Dalloway*. She was the first female member of the British Society of Cinematographers, and later became the first female president of the society. The music for the movie has been given by Ilona Sekacz. The movie was initially released in September 1997 in San Sebastian Film Festival but worldwide it was released in year 1998. In addition, the movie was nominated for the Golden Seashell Award in San Sebastian International Film Festival for the best film in year 1997.

## 2. Methodology

The paper utilizes Jean Paul Sartre's theory of existentialism in order to exhibit

the authentic or inauthentic existence looking at the faces of the characters depicted in the movie. It also utilizes the technique of cinematography developed by Blain Brown's in his work *Cinematography: Theory and Practice*. The movie by Gorris seems to be a love story but it also portrays the existential quest of the protagonist for the meaningful life or for the authentic existence

### 3. Analysis

To quest the theme of the movie different frames, shots, scenes and sequences are used in the film in order to make it meaningful and evoke intended effects on the audience. Such components have played the role of language which on the one hand employ cinematographic elements in order to bring impressive visual effect to the viewers, and on the other hand they explore the point of departure of the film i.e. the quest for the genuine self by the protagonist.

The movie is all about a middle-aged woman who is preparing for her party, she is giving tonight and during that preparation she recalls her young days, when she has daring choices to make and she decides to be authentic to herself and chooses the reliable one. These all happens in one day time span. So, here the movie starts with the sad, mourning music which opens up with the brief sequences of war scenes in Italy, 1918, Septimus losing his friend, Evans. Then, the scene cut out to five years later to the introduction of Clarissa, who is getting ready to go shopping for her party tonight. As she expresses her wish to buy flowers herself and praises the day of her party, the music turn to be the lively one. As she opens the door to go outside, she recalls herself opening the French door in Bourton's house in close up shot, which presents her

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facial expression, indicates her love for the life, to live it fully, love for the freedom to live in her own way.



*Fig.1. Protagonist Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway opens her French window in Bourton in her young age. (00:03:36)* Fig.1 is the first introduction scene of young Clarissa in the movie. We can see Clarissa's medium closeup shot which shows her facial expression. Here, the director is very conscious about Clarissa's character introduction. So, everything are used carefully, from her dress-up to her body gesture and facial language. She opens the door indicates her love for freedom, love for living life freely. Her white dress symbolizes purity; pure and being genuine; genuine and authentic of oneself. Her wide hands indicate that she wants to embrace the freedom of life. The warm sunny day of London indicates the softness of nature in life which Clarissa enjoys.



*Fig.2. Clarissa runs toward her backyard garden. (00:03:49)*

In both the figures, Fig.1. and 2. are the character shot of Clarissa, which introduce her; young days in Bourton. In fig. 2. here the director is very conscious of the background scene that intensifies the message that he wants to convey about the character of protagonist. The above figure 2. shows, Clarissa runs towards her backyard garden. In the background, there are green trees which refers to the liveliness. The director has used the greenery background towards which Clarissa is running to highlight her immense passion to live life fully. The open gate indicates that there is no burden and hurdles in her way. She is free to go. Clarissa is running towards garden which symbolizes her deep desire to live life, her excitement for life, her passion for life and also her freedom loving nature. Her white dress symbolizes her pure intention to celebrate and enjoy the life. She knows that she is a free human being as all human are born free and have freedom to choose and make their own choices. She is free to live her life with her own choices. She is free to set her life.

The reviving music follows Clarissa to her shopping. On the way, she meets Hugh, her Bourton's friend. For liking him, Peter criticizes her. Clarissa again remembers the past day, when Peter said, "Hugh Whitbread. I can't forgive you liking him, Clarissa." (00:06:00 -03)



*Fig. 3. Opening the twisted rope Clarissa considers Hugh as a good man. (00:06:42)*

As Clarissa remembers Peter's criticism for her liking Hugh, she was playing swing. She twisted the rope of swing herself by sitting on it, as Peter started to criticize Hugh barbarically. And she opens it by appreciating Hugh for being sweet and selfless. But again Peter criticizes her for being sentimental and making sentimental judgements. Here director makes Clarissa sit on the swing, make it twisted and untwisted by herself to emphasize the mental state of Clarissa; where there causes friction in her mind. Fig. 3. scene shows the twisted rope of swing where Clarissa is sitting means some stress is there. But as she opens the twisted rope herself and at the same time she puts her words forward in favor of Hugh by appreciating him in front of Peter. It illustrates that she is conscious of her own self, of her own decisions and her opinions which determines her own self or identity and her quest of being authentic. So, she puts her opinions forward and to open the twisted rope by herself indicates her being responsible for herself, for own freedom, for own identity and for her own existence.

While they were discussing about their judgements, Peter kisses Clarissa. As he is her one of a close friends, she does not resist him directly but after that the sharp focus of camera on two pointed railings bars is a perfect use of camera by director to highlight her feeling towards the situation. As the fig.4. it illustrates her feeling of being impaled in the situation for not being able to take own responsibility. She lacks her freedom. She feels being forced in situation. When one feels impaled or forced, uncomfortable with the situation means one is aware of his freedom, of becoming authentic or living in authentic existence. So, the quest for it arises here.



*Fig. 4. Sharp focus on two pointed railings. (00:07:17)*

Clarissa arrives at the flowers shop. While she was buying the flowers there was a terrific sound of motorcar which frightens everyone. Clarissa sees a young man being frightened by the sound and feels bad for him. The young man was Septimus whom Clarissa has neither met nor seen before. Then, she reconnects her flashback memory where she says, "Life seems to me to be very dangerous." (00:10:27 - 30) Clarissa's this saying shows her awareness of her freedom. Her existential anguish can be seen in the above statement as she recognize her solely responsible for her own authentic existence. As we recognize our own responsibility for what we do and what we are, the anguish occurs. Responsibility really frightens you, because it is all up to you; responsibility of own existence even frightens you more because you are the only responsible for it, while no one else is to blame for. Sartre in his lecture asserts, "Thus, the first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence" (23).



*Fig. 5. Clarissa recalls Septimus frightened expression. (00:15:46)*

Clarissa reaches home. In her room she opens the curtain and looks outside of glass of the window and to the connecting shot (what the character is looking at) the green trees is shown and suddenly, where appears an image of frightened Septimus face, over the green tree's leaves. This use of overlapping image by director in the movie as shown in fig. 5. above, illustrates painful consciousness of life to Clarissa, where green leaves denotes to the life and stressful face of Septimus indicates painful awareness of abandoning self. According to Jacob Golomb, "When people are confused as to their self-identity, a serious quest for genuine self can begin. When one is painfully conscious of the danger of abandoning one's self, a cry for authenticity is heard" (21). Although the quest for meaning in life seems to be unpleasant start up, it may make you feel like a worthless effort for happiness, pleasure or space that you want in your life and it leads to the life that you need, that you want to live, a meaningful life and an authentic existence of your own. When one is conscious about self-identity, then, he is aware about his freedom, his responsibility towards himself, his individuality and about his authentic being.

Aunt Helena's appeal to, "Don't run, Clarissa! Young ladies don't run." (00:18:09 -13) represents the patriarchal society of late 19<sup>th</sup> century of England. Clarissa talks to Sally about how marriage structures the different life patterns to men and women. Clarissa claims that, "The men led such exciting lives, but their poor wives don't seem to do so well." (00:19:18 – 22) Clarissa also talks about marriage being inevitable. As the society of late 19<sup>th</sup> century of England was patriarchal, it considered women as inferior to men, and are born to be dominated.

Privacy and independence of self is not for women, it was believed. Individual freedom was not for women. Instead, Clarissa wants freedom of her own as well privacy, independence freedom, space, individual freedom. But Peter couldn't understand the importance of her emotional need. Peter lacks the concern for her sentiments. He is rather able to see worldliness and affairs of the world and society but not of authentic self.



Fig.6. Reaction shot of Clarissa for Peter's intervenes in her privacy with Sally. (00:21:02)

While Clarissa was spending her private time with Sally, Peter intervenes. Fig.6. shows her medium reaction shot to the interference of Peter; in her freedom of choice to live. Peter's love for Clarissa is too possessive and

Kaladarpan | Volume :2 | Oct/Nov. 2022 domineering. Peter wants Clarissa to do as he wants. Peter is possessive about Clarissa's love which he does not want to share with anyone, not even with Sally, one of Clarissa's close friends. He does not even give her freedom to have her own opinions, her own choices, not even to spend some private time with her friends. No privacy, nor space. She is struggling to have her own authentic life. As authentic existence encourages creativity, originality and radically different patterns of life, which is your ownness. Here, in fig. 7. we can see Clarissa's internal struggle to become free and accomplished the freedom. The director has used the two characters: Peter and Clarissa in one frame. Here, Clarissa is shown indulging with her own inner struggle due to the interruption of Peter. But Peter is shown smoking and has no care about Clarissa's mental state, her inner feelings.



Fig.7. Clarissa's anguish for Peter's interference in her freedom. (00:21:24)

Fig.7. includes two characters in one frame which is called two shot. It shows two characters: Peter and Clarissa. As Peter interrupts in her privacy, Clarissa feels anguish for Peter's interfere in her privacy or freedom. But Peter does not care about Clarissa's feeling. Anguish occurs as we recognize our own responsibility for what we do and what we are. Anguish also arises with the recognition of one's freedom and freedom is the consciousness of being self. As, Sartre asserts,

First, what do we mean by anguish? Existentialists like to say that man is in anguish. This is what they mean: a man who commits himself, and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility. (25)

When one is aware of his self, then, he is aware of his freedom, his responsibility, his individuality and his quest for authentic being begin. So, anguish of freedom of Clarissa lead her towards her quest of authentic existence. Clarissa wants everyone to be themselves. To quote her, "I've never wanted to convert anyone, I hope. I just want everyone to be themselves" (00:22:18 - 23). This saying of Clarissa shows how much she is conscious about being authentic, being own self; so, she wants everyone to be themselves, an authentic version of their own. Because one should establish themselves based on the true own self rather than the external pressures of the world.



*Fig.8. Clarissa's answer to Miss Kilman upon the conversion. (00:22:22)*

This statement was for Miss Kilman by Clarissa, who has preoccupied her daughter for some religious mission. Clarissa does not even force her daughter, Elizabeth to stay for

her party while she was going out with Miss Kilman for some history lecture. Later, she came for the party by her own wish.



*Fig. 9. Clarissa's close up shot for her indignant look. (01:05:53)*

Fig.9. shows Clarissa's close up shot for her reaction. The director has witty use of environment here. The frame includes greenery background, sunny day and Clarissa's reaction. As she said that the day is too hot and scorchy for playing tennis and they need one player more to play it, to Sally and Peter. They make fun of Mr. Dalloway, as he might come for tennis with his perfectly matching white teeth and white dress. And Clarissa had her indignant look on especially, Peter who is always against her every choices she makes. Her indignant look indicates her attempt to step forward for authentic existence. Here, Clarissa's reaction on making jokes upon her choice 'Mr. Dalloway' stands for her choice of freedom and for her quest to authentic existence. Green background refers to life; hot sunny day refers to Peter's harsh criticism to Clarissa's every choices and Clarissa's reaction refers for her attempt to her quest for authentic being. So, green background and her white dress indicates the life and hot

scorchy sun refers Peter's hard criticism which symbolizes the pointed thrones exist in Clarissa's life; which is hurting her time and again in her way to her authentic existence. Peter takes Clarissa as granted. Peter symbolizes a possessive, dominating, demanding, self-centered, and self-important person. A relationship with him would have been a caged one, full of burdens with no freedom, no choices to make, no authentic being anymore and nor authenticity rather suffocating one. For her quest of authentic existence, she does not discuss to Sally or Peter rather makes her own opinion and choice to marry Richard, for her authenticity, to have an authentic existence. Roger Ebert, a movie critic talks about the choices that Clarissa makes in the movie in his movie review like this:

Once she was young and fair, and tempted by two daring choices. Peter would have been a risk, but he was dangerous, and alive. Even more dangerous was Sally, with whom flirtation threatened to develop into something she was unwilling to name. Clarissa took neither choice, deciding instead to marry the safe and sound Richard Dalloway, of whom young Peter sniffed, 'He's a fool, an unimaginative, dull fool.(n.p.)

Freedom is the source of all authenticity. When there is freedom of choices, freedom of decisions, freedom of opinions and freedom of being authentic to yourselves, then, you can make a meaningful life for yourselves which will be truly original, self-created, unique, not determined by social influence but the unoccupied modes of existence. So, Clarissa makes her own decision to go with it, for the authentic existence she quest for. And authenticity is about revealing the essence of the persons, not a given essence but a created one.



*Fig.10. Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway gets shocked by the news of a young man suicide. (01:19:55)*

Fig.10. frame the close up of Clarissa with extra light focus on her face is done to show her mental stress, ups and downs of her thought patterns. In the party of Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, there were many delegates and Sir William Bradshaw, a doctor and Lady Bradshaw who came a little bit late to the party were also there. For the reason, they said that one of their patient attempted suicide. By listening to this, Clarissa is absolutely shattered. Here, director tried to use 'Stream of Consciousness' in form of voice over narration. We hear voice over narration here, where Clarissa speaks in her mind about her perspective towards that news. Clarissa blames the doctors for the reason behind Septimus suicide. Clarissa speaks in her mind, "A young man came to you on the edge of insanity and you forced his soul made his life intolerable and he killed himself." (01:19:31-38) The characters like Dr. Holmes, Sir William Bradshaw in the movie who enforce their patients like Septimus to do according to the law. In the name of law, they compel their patients to surrender to them. They force them without their will. Clarissa feels sad for Septimus as he had been forced to surrender without his will, he had been forced to be

occupied as an object. So, here altogether we can see Clarissa's awareness for being authentic and to live an authentic existence. To live the life of one's own will as a free subject she determines her choice to marry Richard. Absolute freedom does not mean of success in action, does not mean to achieve goal nor does it mean to get your aim, rather it means to live with your own wish, with your oneself. So, Clarissa chooses Richard; it is her attempt for freedom or her step towards her authenticity, authentic existence. The movie ends with confrontation of Clarissa to the suicide news of Septimus and her conclusion to that; that he is able to be a free spirit and not been tied in the others power which would control him. And she feels happy for him as he is able to free himself. Again Clarissa reconnects her memory of running happily in her complete white dress in Bourton which symbolizes her freedom; freedom to authenticity.

#### 4. Conclusion

To sum up, the movie is all about a middle-aged high class housewife, who recalls her young days while preparing for the party she is to give that night in one day time span. And her flashback memories illustrates her quest for authentic existence throughout the movie, it ends up with the happy ending in Clarissa's life which we discuss in above pictures. In this study, here, we have talked about the movie, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Dutch writer-director, Marleen Gorris. A movie which covers only a day span storyline in the life of a middle-aged upper-class housewife, Clarissa Dalloway, who recalls her young days during her preparation for the party tonight. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the society of England, Clarissa determines herself to choose a life

of her own choice for which she has to face many objections is the statement of problem. This study goes through the cinematographic approach which is drawn upon the concept of authentic existence. The literature reviews by different critics are being presented here. And finally, the analysis of the movie is done. This thesis deals with the quest for authentic existence the movie protagonist, Clarissa; the quest to establish themselves based on the true oneself rather than the external pressures of the world. What is important is that whatever choice we make is accepted as our choice; and we must take responsibility for it and its consequences. It is in this way an individual's life is said to be authentic. As Clarissa chooses to take her responsibility by herself throughout whole her life regarding her decisions and its consequences by marrying Richard; because she chooses freedom, own will over possessive love of Peter. Peter never understands her emotional need or her feelings for individual freedom, privacy and independence of self because he is an aggressive and demanding person. But unlike Peter, Richard is an understanding and caring person. So, here Peter stands for suppressive mentalistic person, whereas Richard represents the one who is family loving, understanding woman's feelings, and respecting their privacy and their importance for individuality and independence for self. So, although she was attracted towards Peter, one of her close friend and her lover she found Richard to be protective. Clarissa makes a courageous decision in favor of individual freedom. Thus, the study comes to a conclusion that to live the meaningful life or to lead a life of meaningful existence Clarissa puts her love behind, and marries Richard for her own authentic sake.



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