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THE HOME FRONT AS WOUND: CIVILIAN FEMALE WITNESSING IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MRS DALLOWAY*

Sara Ghauri
Senior Executive - Creative Writer, Intersys Ltd, Karachi, Pakistan
saraghauri48@gmail.com

Abstract

Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway (1925) is conventionally read as a modernist experiment in stream-of-consciousness narration and the representation of subjective time. This paper proposes a revisionary reading that repositions the novel within the field of First World War literature, arguing that Clarissa Dalloway occupies a critically neglected subject position: the civilian female witness who neither fought nor nursed, yet carries the war's invisible wound. Drawing on Elaine Scarry's theory of wounding in The Body in Pain (1985), this paper contends that war's destruction of language is not confined to the battlefield but extends into the domestic and social spaces Clarissa inhabits in post-war London. Through close readings of Clarissa's opening movement through the city, her interior response to Septimus Warren Smith's shell shock, and her act of silent witnessing at the novel's close, this paper demonstrates that Woolf formally encodes civilian female trauma through narrative ellipsis, fragmented interiority, and strategic silence. Clarissa's inability to articulate her grief is not a personal failing but a structural consequence of a culture that denies civilian women a legitimate language for war loss. Mrs Dalloway thus emerges as a feminist counter-narrative to dominant masculine war discourse, one that insists on the war's reach into bodies and minds that official memory chose to overlook.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* civilian female witness, Elaine Scarry, First World War, feminist literary theory, trauma, modernism, home front, shell shock

1. Introduction

First World War literature is, in its canonical form, a literature of the trenches. From Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est* to Siegfried Sassoon's memoir prose, the dominant tradition grants the authority of war testimony to the male combatant body. Women appear in this tradition most often as the mothers and sweethearts left behind, as nurses at the margins of the killing, or as allegorical figures of the nation for whose protection men fight and die. What the tradition systematically excludes is the civilian woman as a subject of war's violence: a figure who suffers the war's psychological and social damage without occupying any officially recognised position within it, and who is therefore denied the language and the cultural space in which to articulate that suffering.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, published in 1925, is set in a single June day in London seven years after the Armistice. Its central figure, Clarissa Dalloway, is a society hostess who throws parties, buys flowers, and walks through Westminster. She did not fight. She did not nurse. She is, by every official measure, untouched by the war. However, the novel insists, through its formal techniques of fragmented consciousness, ellipsis, and strategic silence, that Clarissa is wounded: that she carries within her a grief and a dislocation that she cannot name, and that the culture in which she moves does not recognise or permit.

This paper argues that *Mrs Dalloway* is a novel about what war does to women who were never in it. It reads Clarissa's famous silences, her broken sentences, her habit of absorbing other people's pain into herself, as the formal expression of a civilian female trauma that Woolf understood but for which the literary and cultural vocabulary of her moment had no ready name. The paper uses Elaine Scarry's framework of wounding in *The Body in Pain* (1985) as its primary theoretical lens, extending Scarry's argument about the destruction of language by pain to encompass the socially and culturally inflicted silence of the woman who witnessed the war from the home front. Judith Herman's account of trauma and testimony in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) provides a complementary framework for understanding why Clarissa's grief cannot be spoken, and Sandra Gilbert's analysis of gender and the First World War in *No Man's*

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Land (1988) situates the novel's feminist stakes within the broader history of women's marginalisation from war narrative.

The argument proceeds in four stages. Section 2 surveys the critical realm of *Mrs Dalloway* scholarship and feminist war literature criticism to establish the gap this paper addresses. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework of civilian female witnessing by synthesising Scarry, Herman, and Gilbert. Section 4 conducts close readings of three key moments in the novel: Clarissa's walk through London, her parallel consciousness with Septimus, and her act of witnessing at the party's close. Section 5 argues for the significance of this reading for feminist literary studies and for how we understand the reach of war into bodies and minds that official culture chose to overlook.

1.1 Research Questions

This paper is guided by the following questions:

1. How does Woolf use narrative form, specifically ellipsis, fragmented interiority, and free indirect discourse, to encode civilian female trauma in *Mrs Dalloway?*
2. In what ways does Clarissa Dalloway's subject position as civilian female witness differ from, and challenge, the dominant masculine subject position of First World War literature?
3. How does Elaine Scarry's theory of wounding, extended to encompass social and cultural silencing, illuminate the formal and thematic structure of Woolf's novel?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Mrs Dalloway in Critical Context

Mrs Dalloway has generated an extensive body of criticism since its publication, but the dominant critical tradition has engaged the novel primarily as a modernist experiment in consciousness, time, and subjectivity. Erich Auerbach's foundational reading of the dinner party scene in *Mimesis* (1953) established the paradigm: Woolf's achievement is the representation of multiple subjectivities flowing through a single moment, the dissolution of the authoritative narrating voice into a web of interior perspectives. Subsequent critics working within this framework have examined the novel's debt to Henri Bergson's theory of duration, its use of free indirect discourse to blur the boundaries between narrator and character consciousness, and its formal echoes of the stream-of-consciousness technique developed by William James and applied in different ways by James Joyce.

Feminist criticism of the novel has expanded this picture considerably. Patricia Waugh's *Feminine Fictions* (1989) reads Clarissa's domestic and social world as an arena of female self-invention within patriarchal constraint. Rachel Bowlby's *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (1988) examines the novel's engagement with commodity culture and the politics of women's consumption. More recently, Anna Snaith's *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (2000) has positioned the novel within the public culture of the 1920s, attending to Woolf's engagement with the social and political climate of inter-war Britain.

What has received less sustained attention is the novel's specific engagement with the First World War as a gendered event, one whose meaning for women at home differs fundamentally from its meaning for men in the field. The critical work that does address this dimension, including Karen Levenback's *Virginia Woolf and the Great War* (1999) and Mark Hussey's edited collection *Virginia Woolf and War* (1991), tends to focus on Woolf's biographical relationship to the war or on the Septimus subplot as the novel's primary war narrative. What remains underexplored is Clarissa's own relationship to the war: the possibility that her consciousness, not only Septimus's, is shaped by war's destruction, and that her silences and dislocations are not simply the marks of a socialite's shallow inner life but the formal traces of an unacknowledged wound.

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2.2 Feminist War Literature Criticism

The question of women's relationship to First World War literature has been transformed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1988). Gilbert's influential essay on the war argues that the First World War produced a profound destabilisation of gender relations: while men suffered and died in the trenches, women entered the workforce, gained new freedoms, and emerged from the war in a position of relative social advance. Gilbert reads this as a source of cultural anxiety that shaped the literature of the 1920s, with male writers responding to women's wartime gains with hostility and nostalgia.

Trudi Tate's *Modernism, History and the First World War* (1998) offers a corrective to Gilbert's framework, arguing that it overstates women's gains and understates the ways in which women, too, were damaged by the war. Tate reads a range of modernist texts, including *Mrs Dalloway,* as registering a diffuse, socially distributed trauma that affected civilian women as well as combatant men, though in different and less publicly legible forms. Sharon Ouditt's *Fighting Forces, Writing Women* (1994) documents the range of women's wartime writing, from nursing memoirs to poetry to fiction, and demonstrates the formal and ideological diversity of women's responses to the war. Taken together, this body of criticism establishes the critical context within which the present paper's argument about Clarissa as a civilian female witness must be situated.

2.3 The Gap This Paper Addresses

What the existing scholarship has not provided is a sustained reading of *Mrs Dalloway* that takes Clarissa's civilian subject position as its central analytical object, that reads her narrative silences and formal dislocations as the specific wounds of the woman who witnessed war without official recognition, and that grounds this reading in a theoretical framework capable of explaining why civilian female suffering resists articulation. Scarry's theory of wounding provides precisely this framework, and its application to Clarissa's consciousness opens a dimension of the novel that has remained largely closed to criticism. This paper makes that application, arguing that *Mrs Dalloway* is not only a novel about shell shock (Septimus's story) or about social performance (Clarissa's party) but about the structural silencing of women's war grief, a silencing that Woolf's formal innovations both record and resist.

3. Theoretical Framework: Civilian Female Witnessing

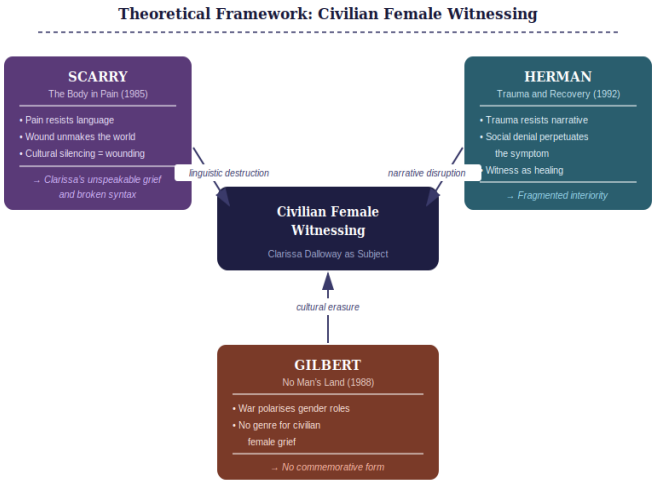

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: Civilian Female Witnessing (Scarry + Herman + Gilbert)

3.1 Scarry's Theory of Wounding

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) argues that physical pain is uniquely resistant to language. Unlike other interior states, pain has

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no referential object: it cannot be described with the precision with which one describes an emotion, a sensation, or a thought. When we say we are afraid, we name the object of our fear; when we say we are in pain, we can only gesture toward an experience that exceeds linguistic capture. This resistance to language is, for Scarry, one of pain's most politically significant features. Pain unmakes the world of the sufferer by dissolving the shared linguistic fabric through which reality is constructed and communicated. The tortured prisoner loses the world of language, of human connection, of selfhood, not only through the physical damage inflicted on the body but through pain's destruction of the capacity to articulate and therefore to make real one's experience to others.

Scarry's analysis is developed primarily in relation to torture and to the phenomenology of physical pain, but its implications extend beyond those contexts. If pain unmakes the world by destroying the language through which reality is shared, then any experience that destroys language, any wound that forecloses articulation, may be understood within Scarry's framework. The question this paper poses is whether the civilian female experience of the First World War, an experience that was systematically denied cultural recognition and linguistic form, can be understood as a Scarrian wound: not a physical wound, but a wound inflicted by the culture's refusal to provide the language through which civilian female grief could be made real and shared.

3.2 Herman's Trauma and Testimony

Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) provides a complementary framework. Herman argues that traumatic experience resists narrative form because it overwhelms the ordinary mechanisms through which experience is encoded in memory and retrieved in language. The traumatized subject cannot construct a coherent story of what happened to her because the event shattered the conditions of coherent experience: time fragmented, causality dissolved, the narrative self that could have witnessed and recorded the event was itself damaged in the witnessing. The result is not the absence of memory but its excess, a flood of intrusive, fragmentary, non-sequential recollection that cannot be shaped into the linear story required for testimony.

Herman also argues that trauma is a social as well as a psychological phenomenon. Traumatic symptoms, including intrusive memory, dissociation, and the inability to narrate, are perpetuated not only by the original injury but by the social conditions that deny the survivor recognition, validation, and the cultural space to speak. The survivor who is told that her experience does not count as trauma, that it does not qualify for the official categories of suffering that culture recognises, is denied the conditions of recovery. Her symptoms persist not only because the original wound was severe but because the culture refuses her the language and the audience through which she might begin to articulate and thereby begin to metabolise it.

3.3 Gilbert and the Gender Politics of War

Sandra Gilbert's account of gender and the First World War in *No Man's Land* establishes the cultural context within which Clarissa's silencing must be understood. Gilbert argues that the war produced a radical polarisation of gender: men's experience in the trenches was defined by extreme, public, physical suffering that generated a vast cultural apparatus of commemoration, testimony, and canonical literature. Women's wartime experience, by contrast, was split between two equally unsatisfactory positions: the nurse or VAD who approached the suffering body but remained outside the defining experience of combat, and the civilian woman whose war was conducted entirely in the domestic and social spaces that official culture classified as untouched by the fighting.

The civilian woman's experience of the war was real: she lost sons, brothers, husbands, and lovers; she endured the anxiety of waiting; she absorbed the trauma of the men who

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returned changed beyond recognition; she lived in a city that bore the marks of bombardment and loss. But her experience had no official form, no uniform, no genre, no commemorative structure. She could not write the trench memoir, could not claim the testimony of the witness, could not mourn publicly in the modes that culture provided for male grief. Her suffering was invisible, not because it did not exist but because the cultural apparatus for recognising and giving form to civilian female war experience was never constructed.

4. Close Readings: The Wound in the Text

4.1 Clarissa Walking: The City as Scar

The novel opens with Clarissa stepping out into a June morning in 1923 to buy flowers for her party. The opening sentences are among the most celebrated in modernist fiction, and they have been read primarily as a formal achievement: the sudden immersion in Clarissa's consciousness, the blurring of past and present through memory, the sensory richness of a London morning. But the opening passage also establishes the post-war environment through which Clarissa moves, and that context is one of residual damage barely covered by the surface of ordinary life.

What Clarissa sees and feels as she walks through Westminster is a city that has survived but not healed. The men on the streets bear the marks of the war in their faces and their bodies. The public buildings that Clarissa passes, the government offices, the memorials, the ceremonial spaces of imperial London, are marked by the war's transformation of what they stand for. The ease with which Clarissa moves through this realm is deceptive: her fluency in the city's social geography is the learned competence of a woman who has adapted to damage, who has absorbed the war's alteration of her world into the ordinary rhythms of shopping, walking, and preparing for a party.

Woolf's formal technique in this opening section is crucial. The narrative shifts constantly between Clarissa's immediate perceptions and her memories, between the sensory present of a June morning and the past that inhabits it. The memory of Bourton, of the young Clarissa who loved Sally Seton and Peter Walsh, intrudes without announcement into the present-tense walk through Westminster, creating a temporal structure in which past and present coexist rather than succeed each other. This formal choice is usually glossed as a representation of Bergsonian duration, the subjective time of consciousness as opposed to the clock time of social obligation. But it can also be read as a formal expression of trauma: the intrusive, non-sequential quality of Clarissa's memory, its tendency to surface unbidden in the middle of ordinary perception, mirrors precisely the symptom structure that Herman associates with unprocessed traumatic experience.

The objects Clarissa notices on her walk are charged with a significance she does not consciously register but that the narrative makes legible to the reader. The backfiring car, which stops the London street in a moment of collective shock, is read by the crowd as a possible threat, an echo of wartime explosions that the body has not yet unlearned to fear. Clarissa's own response to this moment is characteristic: she absorbs it, briefly registering the shared flinching of the crowd, and then moves on. The movement on is Clarissa's dominant mode. She feels, registers, and continues, never pausing to name what she has felt or to demand that it be recognised. This is the civilian female witness's characteristic gesture: to absorb and move forward, because there is no available form, no recognised category, within which the feeling could be stopped and given a name.

4.2 The Parallel Consciousness: Clarissa and Septimus

The structural innovation most discussed by critics of *Mrs Dalloway* is the parallel plotting of Clarissa's and Septimus's narratives. The two characters never meet, yet their consciousnesses are connected through a series of formal rhymes: shared images, parallel emotional responses, and a network of associative echoes that link Clarissa's interior to

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Septimus's. Critics have generally read this parallelism as Woolf's formal argument about the universality of consciousness, or as a way of integrating the war's psychological damage (Septimus's shell shock) into the fabric of civilian social life (Clarissa's party). This paper proposes a different reading: that the parallel is not between the novel's two main characters but between two forms of the same wound.

Septimus's shell shock is legible, named, and institutionally managed. He has doctors, a diagnosis, a wife appointed as his carer, and a social role, the damaged veteran, that the culture of 1923 recognises and, in its inadequate way, attempts to address. His suffering is visible in his face, his dissociation, his inability to function within social norms. It is, in Scarry's terms, a wound that has at least a culturally available name, even if the treatment on offer, Dr Bradshaw's enforced rest and social discipline, is more about containing the disruption his suffering causes to others than about addressing the wound itself.

Clarissa's wound has no name. She does not have a doctor. She is not identified as a patient. Her dissociations, her sudden withdrawals from social engagement, her moments of disconnection from the body, are read by those around her as the eccentricities of a delicate and charming woman. Her heart condition provides a medical alibi for the physical manifestations of her distress, a somatic displacement that allows her suffering to be registered at the level of the body without requiring that it be understood as the consequence of loss, witnessing, and grief. Woolf's formal device of giving us access to Clarissa's interior while keeping it inaccessible to the other characters in the novel enacts the precise structure of the civilian female wound: we can see it from the inside, but the social world Clarissa inhabits cannot.

The moment of closest parallel between Clarissa and Septimus is the scene in which both sit near open windows, simultaneously experiencing a moment of dissociation from ordinary time. Septimus looks out at the trees and hears the dead speaking in their leaves; Clarissa, alone in her drawing room, experiences a momentary dissolution of the boundary between self and world. Both scenes involve the same formal technique: the sudden shift from social surface to interior depth, the suspension of linear time, the sense of a consciousness that cannot fully inhabit the present moment because it is haunted by something that the available language cannot name. The parallel suggests that Septimus's shell shock and Clarissa's social performance are not opposite conditions but variants of the same underlying wound, differently located in the gender order and therefore differently visible and differently treated.

4.3 The Party and the Act of Witnessing

The novel's culminating scene is Clarissa's response to the news of Septimus's death, which she learns of at her own party when Sir William Bradshaw mentions it in conversation. The scene is brief, but it is the ethical and emotional centre of the novel, the moment toward which all of Woolf's formal preparation has been building. Clarissa withdraws from the party, goes to a small room, and stands at the window, processing what she has heard.

What Clarissa does in this scene is witness. She takes Septimus's death into herself, imagines his fall, feels something that the text represents not as grief in the ordinary social sense but as a recognition: a sense that what happened to him is in some way continuous with what has happened to her. The passage in which Clarissa processes the news is rendered in the characteristic style of the novel's interior sequences: fragmented, associative, moving between present perception and memory, refusing the linear, causal structure that would allow it to be read as a simple emotional reaction. Clarissa does not mourn Septimus in the way that she might mourn a friend. She absorbs him, takes his death as a kind of knowledge about her own life and her own wound, and then returns to the party.

Scarry's framework illuminates what is happening in this scene with particular precision. Clarissa cannot narrate what Septimus's death means to her because the meaning

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exceeds the linguistic resources available to a society hostess standing at a window in 1923. The social world of the party, with its hierarchies of recognition and its protocols of appropriate feeling, has no category for what Clarissa is experiencing: the recognition of a parallel wound, the sense that the veteran's publicly acknowledged suffering and the socialite's publicly invisible suffering are not different in kind but only in the degree of cultural recognition they receive. To say this in the drawing room would require a language that does not exist. So Clarissa witnesses in silence, absorbs the knowledge, and goes back.

The return to the party is Clarissa's most ambiguous gesture. It can be read as the novel's quietest feminist statement: the civilian female witness absorbs the wound, witnesses in the only mode available to her, private, silent, interior, and then resumes the social performance that is both her prison and her arena. She does not choose differently. She cannot choose differently. But she has been changed by the witnessing, and the novel insists that this change, invisible to everyone at the party, is real.

5. Discussion and Significance

5.1 Extending Scarry: From Physical Wound to Cultural Silencing

The application of Scarry's wounding framework to Clarissa's civilian female experience requires an extension of Scarry's original argument. Scarry developed her theory in relation to the phenomenology of physical pain, a pain that destroys language because the suffering body cannot construct the referential structures through which experience becomes communicable. Clarissa is not physically wounded. Her wound is cultural: the systematic denial, by the society in which she lives, of any recognised form in which civilian female grief about the war could be expressed, validated, and incorporated into the shared fabric of public memory.

This extension is theoretically defensible within Scarry's own framework. Scarry argues that pain's political power lies in its capacity to be made invisible: the torturer uses pain to produce a silence that can then be filled with the torturer's own narrative. The silenced civilian woman is not tortured, but the structure of her silencing is analogous: a culture that refuses her the language of war testimony also refuses her the capacity to contest the dominant narrative of what the war was and who it affected. The wound is the silencing, and the silencing is inflicted not by physical force but by the withdrawal of the cultural resources, the genres, the commemorative structures, the social permissions, through which suffering becomes testimony.

5.2 Woolf's Formal Innovations as Feminist Counter-testimony

Mrs Dalloway's formal innovations, most often celebrated as aesthetic achievements, can be re-read in this light as strategies of counter-testimony. Free indirect discourse, the technique through which Woolf renders Clarissa's interior without the mediation of a narrating voice, gives the reader access to a consciousness that is, within the social world of the novel, entirely inaccessible. The fragmentation of time through intrusive memory mimics the symptom structure of unprocessed trauma while simultaneously making visible, to the reader if not to Clarissa herself, the nature and extent of the wound. The parallel plotting of Clarissa and Septimus refuses the dominant narrative's assignment of war wound exclusively to the male combatant body.

In this reading, Woolf's formal choices are not merely aesthetic but political. By giving the reader access to what Clarissa cannot say, cannot name, cannot testify to within the social forms available to her, Woolf constructs the counter-testimony that Clarissa herself cannot produce. The novel does what Clarissa cannot do: it witnesses her witnessing, gives form to the formless, names the wound that has no social name. This is the feminist intervention of *Mrs Dalloway*, and it is one that criticism has taken a long time to articulate precisely because it

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operates at the level of form rather than content, in the structure of what is not said rather than in any explicit statement about gender and war.

5.3 Implications for Feminist Literary Studies

The reading this paper proposes has implications beyond *Mrs Dalloway* for feminist literary studies and for the study of war literature more broadly. It suggests that the category of the civilian female witness, the woman who suffers the war's consequences without occupying any officially recognised wartime role, is a subject position that needs to be added to the critical vocabulary of war literature studies. The absence of this category has allowed the systematic marginalisation of a significant dimension of women's war experience from the literary historical record, not because women did not write about this experience but because the critical frameworks available have not been equipped to recognise and name what they were doing.

More broadly, the application of Scarry's wounding framework to the cultural silencing of civilian female experience suggests a method for identifying and analysing wounds that leave no visible mark: wounds inflicted not by physical force but by the withdrawal of language, form, and recognition. This method is applicable beyond the First World War context to any situation in which a social group's suffering is denied cultural legitimacy, and it connects the feminist literary critical project to the broader theoretical project of understanding how power operates through the control of who is permitted to testify and whose testimony counts as knowledge.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is, among its other achievements, a novel about the wound that war inflicts on women who were never officially part of it. Reading Clarissa Dalloway as a civilian female witness, and applying Elaine Scarry's theory of wounding to the cultural silencing that her subject position entails, reveals a dimension of the novel that has remained largely invisible to criticism: the systematic encoding, in Woolf's formal innovations, of a grief and a dislocation that the social world of 1920s London had no language to name or accommodate.

The close readings developed in Section 4 demonstrate that this encoding operates at three levels simultaneously. At the level of Clarissa's walk through London, the city itself is rendered as a wounded landscape through which Clarissa moves with an adaptive fluency that is itself a symptom of the wound's absorption. At the level of the parallel with Septimus, Woolf refuses the dominant narrative's restriction of war damage to the male combatant body, constructing instead a formal argument that the civilian woman's invisible suffering and the veteran's publicly acknowledged shell shock are variants of the same wound differently located in the gender order. At the level of the party scene, Clarissa's silent act of witnessing is shown to be not merely a moment of social withdrawal but the only form of testimony available to her: interior, private, invisible to those around her, and therefore, within Scarry's framework, structurally analogous to the condition of the survivor whose pain has been rendered linguistically impossible by those who control the conditions of testimony.

Mrs Dalloway does not resolve the problem it identifies. Clarissa returns to the party. The wound remains unnamed. The culture that denied civilian women the language of war grief is not challenged within the social world of the novel. What Woolf provides instead is the formal counter-testimony that the social world refused: a novel whose technical innovations give the reader access to the interior experience that Clarissa cannot articulate publicly, that names through form what cannot be named in social speech, and that insists on the reality and the significance of a wound that official culture chose, and continued for decades to choose, to overlook.

The significance of this reading extends beyond Woolf's novel to the broader project of feminist literary history. It requires us to add the civilian female witness to our critical

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vocabulary for war literature, to ask not only who narrates the war from the battlefield but who absorbs it from the drawing room, and to understand the formal innovations of women's modernism not only as aesthetic experiments but as political strategies for making speakable what the dominant culture refused to recognise as capable of being said. In recovering this dimension of *Mrs Dalloway,* we also recover a critical framework for all those literary texts in which women's wounds are encoded in silence, in fragmentation, in the formal structures of what is not and cannot be said.

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