

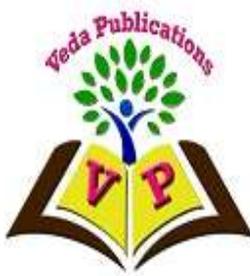


## REPRESENTATIONS AND TREATMENTS OF WOMEN IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S TO THE LIGHTHOUSE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Sushma Chaudhary

(Research Scholar, L.N. Mithila university, Darbhanga, Bihar.)

### ABSTRACT



This paper aims to address Virginia Woolf's personal stand in her answer to "women can't paint, women can't write", a reflection on the Victorian prejudice of the role of women in the family and society shared by both her parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen. By bridging a close textual analysis with the most recent psychological critical analysis, I argue that apart from the political, social and artistic implications, Woolf's attitude to the Victorian stereotypes related to gender roles carry a deeply personal message, being undeniably influenced and determined by the relationship with her parents and her need to lie to rest some unresolved issues concerning her status as a woman artist.

This paper further aims to explore Woolf's 1926 novel, *To the Lighthouse*, which is, undoubtedly, her most autobiographical novel. Lily Briscoe, the unmarried painter who finally manages to conceptualize Woolf's vision at the end of the novel, has a double mission in this novel. First, she has to resolve her own insecurities and come to peace with the memory of the deceased Mrs. Ramsay, a symbol of the Victorian woman and Julia Stephen's artistic alter ego. Second, she has to connect with Mr. Ramsay and prove to herself that women can, indeed, paint. As she matures as a painter Virginia Woolf is overcoming her anger and frustration caused by the fact that she didn't fit into the generally accepted pattern of the woman's role in society and in the family life, and especially of the status of women as artists. By creating one of the most challenging novels of the English Literature, Virginia Woolf also proves to herself and to the readers that women can, indeed write.

**Keywords:** *Patriarchy, Feminism, Gender, Sexual Superiority, Society.*



## INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse* is a piece of literature which belongs to the literary genre of modernism and which shares with *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves* the climax of the novelist's creative powers (A.N. Subramanayam, 103). The whole novel is divided into three parts. Part 1, "The Window", describes a house-party on the island of Skye. Prof. Ramsay and his wife are on holiday with their children and some friends. They have promised to take their youngest son James to see a lighthouse. The father predicts unsuitable weather conditions and the journey is postponed. Part 2, "Time passes" elaborates how during the long years of war the house is left to dust and silence and loneliness. Then the family, without Mrs. Ramsay and two of the children, returns. Part 3 "The Lighthouse" describes the visit to the lighthouse after the passing of the years. The quiet, efficient and thoughtful personality of Mrs. Ramsay has a similar position in this novel to that of Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The characters struggle to bring meaning and order to the chaos of their lives. Woolf chose an anonymous narrator who speaks in the third person and describes the characters and actions subjectively, giving us insight into the characters' feelings. The narrative switches constantly from the perceptions of one character to those of the next. The tone is poetic, rhythmic and imaginative. The novel takes place during the years immediately preceding and following World War I on the Isle of Skye, in the Hebrides (a group of islands west of Scotland).

In this paper, I would like to focus on the two central women in the story. I want to show that Virginia Woolf created two totally different characters but with a very interesting and complex connection and that Lily is a brilliant example of modernism. The first one is Mrs Ramsay, a woman still belonging to the Victorian age, the second, Lily Briscoe, a so called "New woman". I want to compare Mrs Ramsay and Lily by presenting similarities and differences. I will look on different aspects and reveal the attitude or the behaviour of the women towards them. This is possible because of the stream-of-consciousness-technique which Virginia Woolf chose for her novel. In this way it is possible for us to get to know the most private thoughts of the characters.

Additionally, with Lily we find some theories of feminism of those days.

*To the Lighthouse* is a study in human relationships between husband and wife, mother and children, love and beloved, man and the universe. Woolf was fully conscious of the inadequacy of human relationships. Human beings seemed to her isolated from one another and communication between them is partial, often unsatisfactory, and sometimes quite mistaken. As said, the novel is divided into three sections, "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse". The first and the last part each cover a day. The middle part covers ten years of war. Mrs Ramsay dies in this time span, which is why the focus in the last part is on Lily, whereas the first part focuses more on Mrs Ramsay.

There is no more living character in fiction than Mrs. Ramsay (Blackstone). This is probably a very enthusiastic appraisal but there is at bottom some truth in considering Mrs. Ramsay one of the most feminine of characters created in fiction. There have been women who are vain, proud, class-conscious, dreamy and mystical, and saintly too, as Mrs. Moore in Foster's *A Passage to India* or his Mrs. Ruth Wilcox in *Howard's End*. Mrs. Ramsay is the very apotheosis of a woman as the embodiment of life, giving and sustaining it all around.

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, is thus a fictional model of her ideologies regarding women in marriage and in society. When Woolf publicly announced to female writers that before they can write they need to "kill the angel in the house", she was not kidding, for this is exactly what she does in this wonderful work of literature that beautifully examines women's role under the umbrella of particular rule.

## VICTIM FEMINISM

In *To The Lighthouse*, we see conventional usage of feminism's challenged. Woolf uses many different styles and techniques. While dealing with challenges, representation and treatments of women; and the social relationship between men and women, this is shown most poignantly within the novel, *To the Lighthouse*.

Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe are the two main female characters in the novel. The beliefs of women characters are there to care for others, marry



people off and harmonize everyone. They are also there to protect men, and to nurture their ego.

From another point of view, Virginia Woolf pictures Lily as an independent figure who enjoys spending time by her own painting, reading poetry and secluding more than socialising, especially as an empowered weapon against men. But it could be asserted that such seclusions provoke doubts in her head through the novel whether she knows what she desires or even if what she yearns for. All such so-called modern traits observed in Lily mingled with an unwanted misandry developing through her existence, turn her into auspicious lonely woman who is both scared of her masculine boundaries and is in favour of her own pure independence in spite of her natural desire for heterosexual passions. Accordingly, Lily Biscoe, as one of the most biographically feminine personages among Virginia Woolf's novels, could be regarded as both a radical and a victim feminist figure since she is sacrificed by a rigid patriarchal community bound by aggressive radical feminist ideologies which have sustained her floating survival through a sea of suspicion and dualism, a sea of suspicion that keeps asking her who a woman is and what a woman should be. Consequently, Lily does not seem to swim consciously ashore, she merely veers away floating through the waves provoked both by massive masculine norms and also by radical separatist codes of feminism stressing misandry as a means of resistance, while the most available log to save Lily from such wild waters is what a rational and constructive feminist etiquette could allocate, an etiquette which is exempted from any misandry and misogyny.

### SEXUAL SUPERIORITY

*To the Lighthouse* is a novel that is fascinated by women, as the perspectives of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily are the most fully developed narratives within the text. Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* asks the question of sexuality of women, and questions the women's role within the family. Lily does represent Woolf's 'ideal women' and Mrs. Ramsay in direct contrast is portrayed as the 'angel of the house'.

Woolf's essay 'Professions for Women' attacks Victorian institutions, she writes about 'killing the

angel of the house', which she successfully manages through Mrs. Ramsay's death in *To The Lighthouse*. Mrs. Ramsay is a product of the Victorian era, she is described in terms of delicateness of femininity and Woolf, romanticize her and uses passive language to portray her. Woolf's theory in 'A Room of One's Own' is significant because it helps to understand her issues with gender and feminist politics set by patriarchies.

*"Whether these are sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness....In each of us two power reside, one male and female....It is fated to be a man or woman pure and simple, one must be woman Manly or man Womanly"*

Woolf attempts to show these differences through her portrayal of Lily and Mrs. Ramsay, and again through Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. Woolf believed that patriarchy always tried to silence and repress women and women's experiences, this is why she rejects the series of feminine characteristics set by patriarchy; sweetness, modesty, humility and subservience..., and shows these qualities in direct contrast to Mrs. Ramsay, and his masculine rationality that has reason, order and lucidity. In keeping with Woolf's 'Angel of the House' figure, Mrs. Ramsay is projected more as a symbol as the 'earth mother' than as an individual, as she is never called by her first name, she represents the feminist figure as she rejects irrationality, chaos and fragmentation, which has come to represent femininity.

Mrs. Ramsay's gender roles are shown in soft response to Mr. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay emerges as a heroic tyrant and appears to represent the 'typical male'. He is compared to sharp instruments, knives, axe, poker with which his son wants to hit him: "Had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have killed him, there and then James would have killed him, there and then James would have seized it"

### PATRIARCHY

Woolf outstandingly shows how the prioritization of the domestic space has repressed women and prevented them from taking part in everyday activities-commerce, travel, work and



education: This is seen in *To the Lighthouse* in the public and private realms; Mrs. Ramsay and Lily finds that oppression in the public realm is linked to that of the private. This illustrates how Woolf can deal with material and economic, historic conditions, which effect men and women's lives, and their ways of viewing the world, their perceptions and imaginative response's that differ. Woolf investigates gender and the power of men and women, she explores the way in which we are constructed as gendered beings, and how culture, and society, restricts our actions, opportunities and speech.

Mrs. Ramsay finds the silence terrifying, as the clock stopping seems to show her identity falling apart. Mrs. Ramsay's ambitions can only be achieved when she is dead, and through Mrs. Ramsay's death, Lily achieves Mrs. Ramsay's unconscious desires. Yet unconsciously Mrs. Ramsay wants the freedom that Lily has, she rebuffs it because she cannot have the freedom:

*"She could never marry: one could not take her painting very seriously; she was an independent little creature, and Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it; so remembering her promise, she bent her head. The painting is the one thing that holds the novel together, and reconciles everything that has happened, through Mrs. Ramsay; Lily has clarity and is able to have clear vision; she must escape somewhere, be alone somewhere. Suddenly she remembered when she had sat there last ten years ago there had been a little spring or leaf pattern on the tablecloth, which she had looked at in a moment of revelation....She would paint that picture now: The painting orders life and unifies, it shows how everything is related to each other: All were related".*

*To the Lighthouse* exemplifies the condition of women when Woolf was writing and to some extent yet today. It offers a solution to remedy the condition of both men and women. To say the novel is a cry for a change in attitude towards women is not quite correct. It shows the plight of both men and women and how patriarchy is detrimental to both genders. Mrs. Ramsey. Both suffer from the unequal division of gender power in Woolf's society. Lily is

also very much a product of society, yet she has new ideas for the role of women and produces one answer to the problems of gender power. Besides providing these examples of patriarchy, *To the Lighthouse* examines the tenacity of human relationships in general, producing a novel with twists, turns, problems, and perhaps a solution. Mrs. Ramsey is the perfect, patriarchal woman. She scarcely has an identity of her own. Her life is geared towards men:

*If he put implicit faith in her, nothing should hurt him; however deep he buried himself or climbed high, not for a second should he find himself without her. So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by.... (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 38).*

Identity is a strong desire in all humanity, yet in a patriarchal society it has been denied to women. Women who are owned by men are mere possessions, having no control over themselves and no way to develop their own personalities. Mrs. Ramsey needs people about her at all times because she has nothing internalized. She must create herself through other people. She is always bouncing off someone else, preferably a male who has power, yet needs her to keep that power.

Even today there are strong remnants of patriarchy dominating society. Men consistently climb higher in management and receive higher pay for equal jobs. This novel shows both men and women suffering and struggling with societal roles. The answer to the problem lies with both genders. For as Mill states, "Women cannot be expected to devote themselves to the emancipation of women, until men in considerable number are prepared to join with them in the undertaking" (194). This is not a female problem; it is a human problem.

## CONCLUSION

Nineteenth-century radical feminism launched a very sporadic movement to modify majority of economic, political and social rules that had been established by masculine constitutions. Likewise, feminism was meant to nourish women socially as well as personally, while it seems to have been trapped in broad modern policies which tended to magnify women and men's differences on the one



hand and strengthening attitudes concerning women's implied dependence on men - who have all suppressed women as their victims in history - on the other: a so-called feminine freedom in modern times.

For instance, women are allowed to justify and play their victim role in case of rape could be both significant on the one hand and it may be considered to be decelerating on the other. It makes no sense to sit still and victimise ourselves doing nothing to fight cruelty effectively. Modern radical feminists, who condemn any kind of masculine trace through women's lives, have been attempting to shape women as eternal victims of patriarchal societies and this has been the absolute discrimination primary feminist scholars aimed to eliminate (Staggenborg *Gender, Family and Social Movements*, 26).

As they finally reach the lighthouse, it ends on a woman achieving her vision with negotiating the pitfalls and expectations of gender. The ending of *To the Lighthouse*, is significant in relation to the essay little because Lily is unable to make the self-sacrifices that Mrs. Ramsay made, she is unable to provide the sympathy to Mr. Ramsay that he feels is the women's role to provide for a man. Because she can't and won't give sympathy, she is able to achieve clarity and be selfish in order to complete something that interests her. She is able to do this because she refuses to conform to her gender role, thus showing *To the Lighthouse* as Woolf gives rise to feminist analysis of a women's situation of the female experience One of the most prominent literary figures of the twentieth century, Woolf is widely admired to her technical innovations in the novel, most notably her development of stream of consciousness narrative. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf sought come to terms with her parents' stifling Victorian marriage and events of he own childhood, as well as to explore such feminist issues as the necessity, or even desirability, of marriage for women and the difficulties for women in pursuing a career in the arts. "A striking mix of autobiographical elements, philosophical questions, and social concerns, *To the Lighthouse* is generally considered to be Woolf's greatest fictional achievement" (Bhatt, Lajja).

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