



DEPICTION OF MRS. RAMSAY AS EXALTED TO GREAT HEIGHT OF AUTHORITY IN ‘FAMILY SPHERE’ AS PICTURED BY VIRGINIA WOOLF IN TO THE LIGHT HOUSE: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper has been written with an aim to interpret the depiction of the character Mrs. Ramsay represented by Virginia Woolf herself whose cloistered life was experienced under the Victorian order of patriarchal society through her novel To the Lighthouse. This novel examines two distinctive worlds; masculine and feminine. Where Mrs.Ramsay represents the conventional and the submissive female to patriarchal society in the voice of Virginia Woolf. In spite of the dominating patriarchal society. Mrs. Ramsay with her sphere takes a delightful authority in various roles as woman, mother and wife and grown herself to be the symbol of fecundity, regeneration and serenity. This neatly analyses also how being a woman writer, Virginia Woolf deeply dined into the inner mind of submissive women, which is emphasized in this research paper.

Key Words: *Prominent Writer, Protagonist, Chaos, Materialism, Philosophy, Submissive Nature, Patriarchal Society, Cloistered Life.*

As a prominent writer, Virginia Woolf strove hard to include in her novels the great paradows of her life’s emotional bondage in society and in solitude of all the protagonists in her novels. The Blakean doctrine of salvation through the art or the Taoist technique of preserving solitude in the midst of chaos has been quoted by Bernard Blackstone as Woolf’s philosophy of life. Woolf shunned falsity in literature and glorification of materialism. The uphill task of accurately representing life in its truest form was undertaken by Woolf unfolding experiences from her own life with lyricism and lucidity, not unmixed with poignancy. No doubt, Virginia Woolf ruminates on women’s issues in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when education for girls was unheard of and marriage was the ultimate goal. Woolf always stated that as a young girl, she was trained to silence a quality she carried with her like a family heirloom into womanhood and she vowed that a new species of women would emerge from her writings. Various factors did influence her writing; her turbulent adolescence, Woolf’s cloistered life without her mother’s maternal presence around her and the appalling conditions of the women in the Victorian society. However, her lifelong battle was wages against ‘the Angel in the House’. The novels Woolf penned after 1920 were nothing but a whole-hearted attempt to paint a woman’s portrait of a woman’s without any embellishments.

The perennial question that lurked uppermost in Woolf’s mind as a writer was about writing as a woman and relating to her readers as a woman. Thematically and stylistically, Woolf steered clear of prejudices that would warp her consciousness as a woman she tried her best to infuse in her writings an irrefutable feminine essence like some of the well-known feminist writers of the preceding era, perhaps more poignantly than any other word of modern fiction. The novel To the Lighthouse (1927) dramatizes the essential fragility of the passage of time, its transience and tragic depth. To the Lighthouse is concerned with the Victorian arrangement of patriarchal society and it questions the distinction between man and woman’s social roles. Throughout the novel, it is found that there are two distinctive worlds; the world of man, the masculine and the world of women, the feminine. The masculine is marked by egotism, rigidity and insistence on intellect over feeling, while the feminine is marked by imagination, intuition and compromise. The patriarchal society has discouraged mixing the characteristics of these two worlds’ thus preventing the creation of a modern society in which there is balance between the masculine intellect and the feminine emotion.

Mrs. Ramsay represents the conventional and the submissive female to patriarchal society. Her medium is emotion and her form is human relationship. Lily Briscoe is a representative of the unconventional and rebellious against gender boundaries. Her medium is intellect and her form is her painting. Through Woolf’s projection of Mrs. Ramsay’s life and her relationships to men characters, she affirms the female values of fertility, giving and creating harmonies which are well associated with Mrs. Ramsay, but Woolf criticizes the way she has chosen to subject her positive femininity to masculine definitions. Woolf’s projection of Lily’s life and her relationships to Mrs. Ramsay and male characters is an attempt to teach women to accept their femininity, cultivate their masculinity and choose the role that they want to play as independent women. Examining the lives of these two female characters, one can find Woolf seeking to integrate the masculine and feminine qualities into a balance whole that would render men and women the capacity to achieve meaning in life.

The rise of protest fiction enabled women novelists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to project their anger and frustration in an acceptable form and expression. In the words of Woolf herself:



“Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth
Century would certainly have gone crazed, shot
Herself or ended her days in some lonely
Cottage outside the village, half-witch, half –
Wizard, feared and mocked at”

(A Room of one's own 33)

The twentieth century heralded the last generation of Victorian women novelists who moved towards self-exploration, withdrawing from male society, and culture, searching for woman's space. In the late 1920's when Woolf picked up the threads of her reminiscences, the central figure of her mother rose like a phantom from the enveloping mists of time. To the Lighthouse evolved from this obsession and became a platform for a series of metaphors to impale the past with the present. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Virginia Woolf's mother, Julia Stephen, is enshrined in the character of Mrs. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse:

“The creator of that crowded merry world which
spun so gaily in the centre of my childhood...
she was the centre; it was herself” (P 84).

Woolf vividly recollects the first summer which the family spent at St. Ives in 1882 which were the initial impressions of her environment. A distinct female voice has emerged from the warp and woof of the novel which has been described by Woolf as an elegy, other than a novel, In it, the daughter laments the absence of her dead mother.

To the Lighthouse have shades of a feminist Bildungsroman, as it traces the journey of its female protagonists from the inner realms of consciousness to the outer realms of discovery and fusion. In this classic novel, Woolf has deployed the stream of consciousness technique in order to probe into the inner recesses of the minds of her characters. Woolf, like her female protagonist Mrs. Ramsay, had a veiled, mysterious facade to her relationship with her parents, but also to assuage the depth of emotional havoc, the Victorian code of conduct for women was wrecking on the female species during that time. The novel To the Lighthouse is divided into three sections, the first part is titled, 'The Window', the second section titled as 'Time Passes' and the third section titled as 'The Lighthouse'. The very first section of the novel is a kaleidoscope of events from Ramsay's life intermingling with the lives of other characters. To the Lighthouse is a vivid potpourri of emotions, tensions, actions and conflicts between the flow of time and individual consciousness. From Mrs. Ramsay's portrayal of the role of virtuous womanhood springs a shower of questions regarding her attitude to life, her love for happy relationships and above all, Mrs. Ramsay's gift for spreading light in the lives of the sick and poor. One can find and examine these paradoxical glimpses of Mrs. Ramsay in its totality and as an epitome of feminine grace. We can also analyse the other female protagonists and their contribution towards a feminine aesthetic leading to a richly textured feminine perspective of To the Lighthouse.

The opening section of the novel provides a glimpse of the colourful pattern woven by the author into a mosaic of human consciousness. The holiday retreat of the Ramsay's on the isle of Skye was a favourite of the Ramsay's family and their guests, comprising of Lily Briscoe the artist, William Bankes, the botanist, Charles Transley, the philosopher. Paul Rayley and Minta Deyle, two young guests and Augustus Cormichael, the old poet. 'The Window' frames the first part of the novel wherein a trip to the nearby lighthouse was planned by Mrs. Ramsay and her younger son, James. Mrs. Ramsay's pessimistic comments on the voyage To The Lighthouse cast a dark shadow on the duo's happy mood, thereby sparking off hostile feelings for Mr. Ramsay in his young son's mind. The short interlude titled 'Time Passes' traces the passage of time trickling like rivulets of memories over the debris of bygone days. Against this backdrop burgeons hope and the forces of regeneration as remaining members of the Ramsay's family return to their house. The long final section of the novel focuses on the sailing trip undertaken by Mr. Ramsay, Cam and James. Lily Briscoe the painter has her vision of life as the narrative comes to a close.

The lighthouse is a symbol of solidity in a sea of shifting emotions. Mrs. Ramsay is a unique being who often sits at the window of her house looking out at the lighthouse as if she were a part of that imposing edifice. In the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay, a mother of eight, is sitting with her young son James, framed in the window, helping him to cut pictures from a catalogue. There is perfect harmony and bliss in their relationship as James adores his mother Mrs. Ramsay, portrayed through the eyes of her son comes as a loving, encouraging and gentle human being who is extremely sensitive to her son's feelings. Even at that young age, James has a secret code hidden in his heart that unravels the mysteries of life, although his impassive face does not reveal his feelings. This idyll with his mother is shattered to pieces by the cruel callous weather predictions by his father Mr. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay is knitting the reddish brown stocking for the lighthouse keeper's little boy with a tuberculosis hip, whose lonely existence at the Lighthouse evokes her maternal instincts. She champions the cause of the weak and underprivileged sections of the society. The thought of the lighthouse keeper living in isolation, cut off from



the mainstream of life, brings about a sympathetic response from Mrs. Ramsay. “Those poor fellows who must be bored to death sitting all day with nothing to do but polish the lamp, trim the wick and rate about them on their scrap of garden, something to amuse them” (P 9). In this panoply of love and togetherness, Mrs. Ramsay binds together all the characters in a harmonious pattern of human relationships Charles. Tansley, Mr.Ramsay’s protegee, is mocked at reprimanded most sternly by their mother who takes up cudgels for the poor young man. Mrs. Ramsay’s small world is made up of these inner-relationships of the characters dotting her sphere, venerated and flattered like a queen, “Indeed she had the whole of the other sex under her protection, for reasons she could not explain” (P 10).

Her daughters, Prue, Nancy, Rose and Cam gathered round the dining table reventially listening to their mother, whose fading beauty still holds them spellbound with awe. Unlike their mother, these young women have a dream in their hearts, of carving a niche for themselves in the world as ambitious career women, eking a living on their own. These rebellious thoughts crowded into their minds, silently as they are afraid to speak them out loudly, for doing so would have brought on the wrath of their mother. The writer’s own view on the stifling Victorian code of conduct for women is seen in this passage where in Mrs. Ramsay and her daughters are discussing their guests. The girls are very firm about their future plan which does not include domesticity, like their mother. They abhor the thought of becoming perfect angels in the house, always ministering to some man or the other; for they nurture secret dreams of freedom wherein they “could sport with infidel ideas which they braved for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris, perhaps, a wider life not always taking care of some man or other; for there was in all their minds a mute questioning of difference and chivalry” (P 1).

Conditioned from her young age to underplay her intelligence, Mrs. Ramsay excels in magnifying the scholarly image of her husband. It gives Mrs. Ramsay a sense of fulfillment to exert power over the men folk in her household and to have the children depended on her. She navels in the feeling of being needed by her family, her friends, relatives and even acquaintances. The sick, poor and jobless members of the society find a special place in her heart as she spends a lot of time and nursing a vocation and freely went about her nursing duties away from home for days together. On the entrapment of women Toh Stuart Mill says:

“Women are brought up from earliest year...
To live for others, to make a complete negation
Of them and to have no life but in their
Affections” (Essays on Sex 141).

As a woman, mother and wife, Mrs. Ramsay champions the cause of other underprivileged wives and mothers living in squalor and penury. Herself a symbol of fecundity, regeneration and serenity, she has a comforting permanence about her that defies time. Charles Tansley runs off on an errand with Mrs. Ramsay and feels honoured by the lady as she visualises Mrs. Ramsay as a goddess “with stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cycle men and wild violets – what nonsense he was thinking? She was fifty at least and had eight children” (P 21). In spite of her age, Mrs. Ramsay inspires even younger man to think of flowers, of stars in her eyes and the mind in her hair. Mrs. Ramsay too relishes this adulation as she goes about her duties of wife, mother and host less in the Ramsay household. Charles Tansley aspires for a fellowship or a readership in order to impress a beautiful woman like Mrs. Ramsay but Mrs. Ramsay remains untouched by academic achievements or academic jargon; instead in her earthly manner appreciates the beauty of the bay and the lighthouse. Truth and the beauty are of utmost importance to this down-earth woman with her simple philosophy of life – of reigning supreme in her little sphere of home and health. Even the rhythmic beat and the gentle swishing of the waves lacing the beach seem to croon a soothing lullaby. Nature in tandem with her maternal instincts weaves a protective web of security for Mrs. Ramsay’s loved ones. Sometimes, however, Mrs. Ramsay experiences a tremor of fear at the transient moments of time that bring happenings. She would love to bring the fleeting moments of time to a standstill with every fiber of her being, Mrs. Ramsay prays that her younger children never grow up and her idyllic life never ceases. Motherhood for her is of the greatest importance and a gateway to immortality. Cuddling a baby in her arms gives Mrs. Ramsay a sense of deja vu, as she feels powerful and needed by the powerless and totally helpless infants. Thus, Mrs. Ramsay is exalted to great heights of authority in her family sphere in command of destinies.

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