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Gender Politics in *To the Lighthouse*¹

Ferhat Ordu², Murat Karakaş³

Abstract

To the Lighthouse is one of the most influential works of Virginia Woolf and it is inevitable to find traces of Feminism in any of Woolf's works. From the perspective of Feminist Criticism, this article tries to solve the gender identity problem in *To the Lighthouse* and focuses upon the struggle of the Modern woman against the dominant Patriarchal male characters and submissive female characters trying to find her own way out.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, A Room of One's Own, *Angel in the House*, Modernism, Patriarchal Society, Victorian Woman, Gender Politics, Identity.

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² Karabuk University, ferhatordu@karabuk.edu.tr

³ Karabuk University, muratkarakas@karabuk.edu.tr

It is almost impossible to read any work of Virginia Woolf without paying attention to the traces of Feminism visible throughout the text. As widely accepted she is still among the strongest symbols of the struggle of women for gaining rights in public. *To the Lighthouse* is one of her popular works in that sense and we claim that Feminism is generated from the three dimensional perspective through the characterization of three major characters: Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe and Mr. Ramsay together with other minor characters, such as Charles Tansley, William Blankes and Macalister. These three dimensions are personified by these characters on purpose, in order to criticize the two fundamental productions of the Patriarchal society which are the roles of the Victorian woman image and man's role in it and finally to praise the modern woman against them. Mr. Tansley and Mr. Ramsay are nothing but symbols of the Patriarchal man, Mrs. Ramsay is the best symbol for the Victorian woman which is also a product of patriarchal society and Lily Briscoe is the symbol for the modern woman and her struggle within the burdens of traditional gender roles and prejudices. Throughout this essay, we will try to prove our claim, giving sound examples and citations from the book itself.

To begin with Mrs. Ramsay we need to know the image of the Victorian woman to see how she corresponds to that image. As known, the Victorian woman "could be divided into four cardinal virtues-piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity." (Welter, 1996, p. 152). In *To the Lighthouse*, there are not too many remarks of "piety" about Mrs. Ramsay except for her unintentionally saying "We are in the hands of the Lord." (Woolf, 2013, p. 74). However, her pure beauty is praised several times with sentences like "[...] she was beautiful like that light," (p. 74) which is uttered by herself, "[...] now become very still and beautiful [...]," (p. 102) and "Of course Ramsay had dished himself by marrying a beautiful woman," (p. 104) which are uttered by William Blankes. Mr Ramsay's ideas about his wife are relevant when he says "[...] she was not clever, not book-learned at all", but "She was astonishingly beautiful," (p. 136). They reveal the image of the woman from the perspective of the Patriarchal society: all a woman needs is being beautiful and dealing with the satisfaction of her family, she does not need to be educated at all. Ironically enough this is what makes the Victorian lady feel content and worthy which is revealed in Mrs. Ramsay's internal monologue as: "You are more beautiful than ever. And she felt herself very beautiful.", (p. 138). All these are contributions to the "angelic" pure beauty image of the Victorian woman in the book.

Moreover, Mrs. Ramsay's "submissive" image is best given throughout the book while deciding whether to go or not to the lighthouse. Even though he is a guest in the house, Charles Tansley is more dominant in giving decisions about their plans to pay a visit to the lighthouse with her family than Mrs. Ramsay. Saying repetitively that they would not go to the lighthouse because of bad weather without considering it might hurt the feelings of his children and his wife, Mr Ramsay shows his macho character. Mrs. Ramsay's "domestic" attitudes arise in those moments; she tries to console her children, especially James about their strong will and disappointment to go to the lighthouse. In addition to consoling the children and keeping the balance in the house, Mrs. Ramsay is the one who takes care of children's ordinary needs like feeding them, making them go to sleep, playing with them and reading stories for them, while doing her "knitting". These feminine occupations are the best archetypal images of domesticity and domesticity is the most notable characteristic of the Victorian woman.

In his book *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, Stone asserts that "the ideal woman of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was weak, submissive, charitable, virtuous and modest [...] Her function was housekeeping, and the breeding and rearing of children"(cited in Francis, 2009,p.24). Stone's short explanation could not have been less comprehensible if he had made this description thinking about Mrs. Ramsay in the novel. She is the one who never rejects his husband's decisions; even though her disapproval can be revealed only through her internal monologues, she always tries to keep the balance between people and she passively submits to other people's decisions being "a sponge sopped full of human relations" (Woolf, 2013, p. 41), she has the virtues of supporting her family's needs without questioning them, she even supplies her husband's emotional support need; the only thing that she thinks about is marriage and conducting her domestic roles at home.

Being the woman of family life and marriage, she also wants the women around her to be like her: married and happy with their children. She does not hesitate to make use of any opportunity of matchmaking. Lily Briscoe is the only person around her who strictly disapproves Mrs. Ramsay's behaviour and that is why she is the symbol of the modern woman, a symbol which will be later explained in more details.

According to Mrs. Ramsay the motto for happiness can be "people must marry; people must have children" (p. 71). She plays a role in the engagement of Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley and when she learns at the dinner party that they are engaged she becomes really

happy, “Instantly, for no reason at all, Mrs Ramsay became like a girl of twenty, full of gaiety. A mood of revelry suddenly took possession of her,” (p. 130) because according to her “an unmarried woman has missed the best of life,” (p. 60). Different from the view in Lily Briscoe’s canvas the view which makes her really happy is when “The house seemed full of children sleeping and Mrs Ramsay listening; shaded lights and regular breathing.” (p. 60). Even in the moments when she questions the value of life she is sure that “Marriage [was] needed [...] that was essential; the thing she had with her husband.”(p. 71). She wants Lily Briscoe and William Bankes to get married, too, feeling that they are fit for each other “William must marry Lily. They have so many things in common. Lily is so fond of flowers. They are both cold and aloof and rather self-sufficing. She must arrange for them to take a long walk together.” (p. 118) and she feels sorry because she missed the opportunity of matchmaking at the dinner table seeing that “Foolishly, she had set them opposite each other. That could be remedied tomorrow. If it were fine, they should go for a picnic.” (p. 118). However, in the last part of the article we will explain how much Lily is against marriage and family life.

The best way to summarize this part would be with a quotation from Virginia Woolf’s essays about the Victorian woman or as she names it the “angel” in the house the tragic end of whom will be explained in the final part:

She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it--in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all--I need not say it---she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty--her blushes, her great grace. In those days--the last of Queen Victoria--every house had its Angel (Woolf, 2014).

What Woolf explains and in a way criticizes and “kills” in the last part of this speech is the sound image of the Victorian lady. This is also the very best summary of Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay is charming to her environment with her peaceful intentions to everybody and her struggle to make everybody happy according to her worldview and most people around her adore her because of that. She is unselfish and self-sacrificing even though she has a lot of duties at home like taking care of eight children two of which are very young, entertaining guests and friends who are frequently hosted at home, satisfying her husband’s emotional

needs; she even cares for the little boy of the Lighthouse keeper and knits stockings for him, she never reveals her true thoughts even when she is angry or unhappy, she never revolts even when she is depressed or furious, she just sits and knits or runs the errands at home just like numerous Victorian women did.

When it comes to the second dimension of the Feminist criticism in the novel, we need to have a look at the characteristics of the Patriarchal man and analyse how much Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley fit those characteristics. Patriarchy is explained in the online dictionary of the Merriam Webster as being a “social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line.” (Merriam Webster). “Woolf uses Mr. Ramsay to represent her sense of the tyranny and egotism of modern masculine culture and allows her reader to appreciate the difficulties which this culture produces for people, particularly for women,” (Güneş, p. 179). The tyrannical image of Mr. Ramsay can be seen from the very beginning of the novel. He ignores his wife’s and son’s will to go to the lighthouse and he says “it [the weather] won’t be fine.” (Woolf, 2013, p. 9) and they will not be able to go to the lighthouse because of this weather. James, his son, feels extremely angry and Mrs. Ramsay feels really sad because she knows how important that is for James, but Mr. Ramsay does not care about their emotions. Mrs. Ramsay tries to console her son saying “But it may be fine - I expect it will be fine” (p. 10) which is always her duty. Another Patriarchal symbol appears in this conversation saying “No going to the Lighthouse, James” (p. 21) as if he was happy with Mr. Ramsay’s behaviour and makes Mrs. Ramsay really furious and upset and she thinks him to be “Odious little man” trying to reason “why go on saying that?” (p. 21). Towards the end of the novel Mr. Ramsay’s tyranny is literally revealed through James’s internal monologue, “I shall be left to fight the tyrant alone” (p. 192).

If we analyse *To the Lighthouse* from an autobiographical perspective, we need to have a look at the characteristics of Leslie Stephen as he personifies Mr. Ramsay in the novel: “Stephen was insensitive, egotistical and, in a subtle way, tyrannical.” (Annan. 1993, p. 38). Just like Stephen, Mr. Ramsay carries all these three qualities the third of which (tyrannical) was explained above. He was insensitive because he did not pay attention to the feelings of the people around him: to Lily, to his wife and his children. The only thing he thought about was his intellectual success and whether he could be among the people like Shakespeare whose names will never be forgotten. He always demands emotional support but never

considers other people's emotions. "Nothing would make Mr. Ramsay move on. There he stood, demanding sympathy," (Woolf, 2013, p. 48). While judging his father's single-minded worldview and his disrespect of other people's ideas, James criticizes "his [Mr. Ramsay's] own accuracy of judgement. What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all of his own children," (Woolf, 2013, p. 10).

He is egotistical from another perspective, too, he thinks family life is a burden for his achievements in the academic world and he says; "he would have written better books if he had not married." (p. 81). Just like him, Mr. Tansley also sees women as a distractor and he reveals these ideas at the dinner table in his inner monologue, "They did nothing but talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat. It was the women's fault. Women made civilisation impossible with all their "charm", all their silliness" (p. 100). Mr. Bankes also thinks identically: "How trifling it [family life] all is, how boring it all is, he thought, compared with the other thing – work" and he adds "The truth was that he did not enjoy family life," (p. 103). Work and success at work is everything for men where there is no place for women and women and other elements of family life are all burdens for the development of men according to these major male characters in the book. Even though a trivial character in the novel, Macallister, the boatman, says "He liked that men should labour and sweat on the windy beach at night; pitting muscle and brain against the waves and the wind; he liked men to work like that, and women to keep house, and sit beside sleeping children indoors, while men were drowned, out there in a storm" (p. 189) drawing the gender roles with strong lines.

Another aspect derives from the stereotypes between man and woman according to which man is the strong one while woman is the weak and fragile one, man is the independent one, woman is the dependent one or man is rational while woman is emotional: Woolf mocks the rational, concrete and result-based vision of man towards life throughout the whole "Chapter 6" in "The Window" part. The secret of the lifelong target of Mr. Ramsay is revealed in this chapter. He wants to be remembered together with the people like Shakespeare, yet he knows it is impossible because he feels he is stuck. He uses the alphabet as the achievement chart of a person and he sees himself in Q. He is insanely nervous that he will not go any further and his name will be forgotten because he will never reach R. He says real geniuses pass from A to Z very quickly and without many difficulties but such people come to world very rarely: "Z is only reached once by one man in a generation" (p. 42).

Throughout this chapter he wonders about his final score and he continuously thinks about it which is in fact an artistic way of criticizing the very rational worldview of man which she thinks is nothing but funny.

The Patriarchal man's duties are described in Alexandra Shephard's article entitled "Manhood, Credit and Patriarchy in Early Modern England c. 1580-1640." "The dutie of the Husband is to get goods [...] The dutie of the Husband is to travel abroad, to seeke a living [...] The dutie of the Husband is to get money and provision [...] The dutie of the Husband is to deal with many men [...] The dutie of the Husband is, to be entermedling [...] The dutie of the man is, to be skilful in talke [...] the houshold dependeth only on the Husband," (Shepard, 2000, p. 75). This was the earliest image of the Patriarchal man; however, it would be much exaggerated to say that Mr. Ramsay wholly fits it. Nonetheless, there are some parts suitable to him: he is the one who invites and "deals with many men," he generally owns the intellectual missions and majoring in Philosophy he is "skilful in talk."

Finally, the third dimension refers to the rise of the "modern woman" who is neither interested in the characteristics of the Victorian lady nor the demands of the Patriarchal man; she tries to draw her own path between those "dead" and "stuck" elements and her only aim is to find her individual self and focus on her own targets. The strongest reaction in the book from the modern woman is against the ideology of the Patriarchal society that is "Women can't paint, women can't write" (Woolf, 2013, p. 58) which was uttered by Charles Tansley. These words did not discourage Lily; on the contrary, they provoked her. The very best solution is given by Woolf in her highly known essay entitled "A Room of One's Own": "All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved" (Woolf, 2014). Lily Briscoe acts as the personification of Woolf's ideology. She tries to prove that a woman can paint and a woman can write throughout the novel and in the end she finishes it. No one can doubt it is not accidental that she succeeded in an atmosphere where the Patriarchal man lost his power getting stuck and the Victorian lady passed away. Woolf wants to give the message that if you shake the modern woman off the loads which are put on her not only by the opposite sex but also by her own sex, if you give her a room and independence to stand on her own, she can write and she can paint.

Lily Briscoe's only challenge is not the Patriarchal man but also the Victorian woman because Mrs. Ramsay continuously insists on her marriage and she secretly tries mating opportunities for her with other men. However, she is strictly against marriage and she thinks it will limit her art and she believes married couples are not as happy as everybody believes them to be: "She would feel a little triumphant, telling Mrs Ramsay that the marriage had not been a success" (Woolf, 2013, p. 199). She criticizes Mrs. Ramsay's matchmaking attitude towards the women around her saying "Marry, marry! [...] And one would have to say to her, It has all gone against your wishes. They're happy like that; I'm happy like this" (p. 199) as well as she criticizes Tansley's thoughtless utterances towards her "[...] not lose her temper, and not argue; and if she wanted revenge take it by laughing at him?" (p. 100), and Mr. Ramsay's need for emotional support, "His immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy poured and spread itself in pools at her feet, and all she did, miserable sinner that she was, was to draw her skirts a little closer round her ankles, lest she should get wet" (p. 177). Being the symbol of the modern woman in the novel, she rejects all these, focuses on her painting and gives all the answers by finishing it at the end of the novel.

The message that Woolf wants to give at the end of the novel is that the image and traditional gender roles which the society put on the Victorian woman died with the death of Mrs. Ramsay, the developments and achievements of the Patriarchal man had to get stuck and stop (as case Mr. Ramsay's case who got stuck at the letter "Q" and is hopeless about going one step further to the letter "R") which will not survive without the support of the Victorian woman after Mrs. Ramsay's death and which will not be supported further by the modern woman; in other words, the Patriarchal man has to share the stage with the modern woman and the modern woman is the only one to develop and finish her mission as in the case of Lily Briscoe who finished her painting. "The failure of Mr Ramsay is, in fact, closely linked to that of male culture as a fundamental paradox in the sense that this culture is so ambivalent even though it seems strong" (Güneş, 1999, p. 180).

For the death of the Victorian lady, Woolf has a wonderful essay entitled "Professions for Women" which was read to the Women Service League (1931) – the earlier part depicting the characteristics of this angel image was cited above - criticizing the "angel" image of the woman created by Coventry Patmore in her poem called *The Angel in the House* (1854) confessing that:

I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing ...Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer. (Woolf, 2014)

Woolf's intention and the difference between her and other woman writers could not be better depicted in any other way. Throughout her life she wanted to reflect the power of the woman instead of her naivety, purity, beauty, self-sacrifice and domesticity and in all her works and ideology we can see that she blames this angel image and the traditions behind it that created it as well as the patriarchal man who benefited from it as far as he could.

To sum up, Woolf's feminist criticism in the novel *To the Lighthouse* is directed not only towards man and pressures of man towards woman who is trying to find a place in the outside world of the house but also towards her own sex who is willing and happy to live according to the standards the society sets for them. She did not want the ideal women to be pure or beautiful and submissive but she wanted them to be ugly but independent and she ironically stated this through Mrs. Ramsay's ideas about Lily, "With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face, she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; she was an independent little creature" (Woolf, 2013, p. 24).

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