

**Sense and Sensibility :
Selfhood and Gender
Problem In Virginia
Woolf's To the
Lighthouse**

Salah Bouregbi,
Faculty of Letters, Social
& Human Sciences,
Dept of Foreign Languages,
Section: English.
University of Badji-Mokhtar,
Annaba.

My modest paper revolves around the composition of the self in Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse. Virginia Woolf believes that selfhood is not a matter of gender based on patriarchal culture and its institutions, but a sensibility of both the spirit and the mind. She emphasizes conscious development of the self and makes from reality abstract values. The constraints of patriarchal institutions over women make the latter feel persecuted and subsequently isolated. But the more they are isolated, the more they feel free. They want to break with the commonly known gender which was inculcated for them through generations. The value of the person is in the inner growth sensibility achieved through the contemplation of the outside world.

In her stories, Virginia Woolf tries to shed light on the psychological oppression of women, who are seen as weak and submissive in the traditional world they find themselves in. She records their development and how they reach their authenticity in a world which does not praise them.

The woman is a body rather than a spirit for man. She is born to serve and satisfy his ever-demanding desires. She is predestined to submit, reproduce, then rot. Her only salvation is in art. The latter has become a means of resistance and assertion. In art, she recreates the self she wants, and transcends the earthly matters so that they become true to her self. The feminist critic, Ellen Morgan, emphasizes such idea and says that :

The dignity and value of a person are to be found in the degree of inner growth achieved, in compassion, in the affirmation and acting out of humanistic values over and against the specifics of one's conditions.^a

Virginia Woolf strongly believes that selfhood is not a matter of gender which is fundamentally based on sex difference, as: male versus female, strong versus weak, master versus slave. Selfhood, according to her, is a conscious belief in one's self as being so. In other words, her physical existence should submit to the conscious belief which resides in her state of mind. It is the mind that learns to assess and evaluate the various sensibilities and modes of thought to which it has been exposed. Sex-difference is, then, arbitrary. It is a system of thought and culture enforced by men upon women so that they keep hold on them.

Virginia Woolf does not emphasize too much the physical beauty, because it leads to sensual attraction and thus to physical degradation. Beauty should reside in the **within** -- in the internal world of every woman, but not outside it.

So early, in 1730, Mary Astell drew our attention the problem of culture and how such culture gave priorities to men over women. She wrote :

Our Fathers have all along, both taught and practised superiority over weaker sex, and consequently women are by nature inferior to men, as was to be demonstrated.^b

Virginia Woolf herself was a victim of such priorities. In her adult years, she was marked out by violence and sexual abuse. She saw herself an outsider in a society that is fundamentally structured in terms of dominance and subordination :

Not only did Woolf perceive society as fundamentally structured in terms of dominance and subordination as fundamentally gendered. Institutionalized in a sexual division of labor, the unequal power relations were also internalized by men and women as 'sex characteristic', if not 'instinctual'.^c

Patriarchal institutions breed in men a will to power and authority, whereas they incite women to expect marriage as a unique goal in their lives. Women should learn that marriage is a change of authority from parents to husbands.

Women were bounded by church-centred values and interdictions that gave privileges only to men. The duty of women was to serve and please__Man for God and Woman for Man. For the rebellious woman Mary Wollstonecraft, the origin of the physical weakness and subordination of women to men are a matter of education and culture. The feminist critic Sheila Rowbothan, in her book Women, Resistance and Revolution , sums up what had happened in the Eighteenth century, the period of Mary Wollstonecraft. She writes :

Women's subordination was apparently part of the immutable order of things. It was well known that with a woman, a dog and walnut tree, the more you beat'm the better they be . Equally 'natural' was the duplicity of women. According to the proverbial wish, they were saints in the church, angels in the streets, devils in the kitchen and apes in bed.^d

Virginia Woolf, in her book, Three Guineas, witnesses such partial inhumane type of education inculcated into women from generation to generation. She writes :

It was with a view to marriage that her body was educated, a maid was provided for her ; that the streets were shut to her ; that the fields were shut to her ; that solitude was denied her_all this was enforced upon her in order that she might preserve her body intact for her husband. In that the thought of marriage influenced what she said, what she thought, what she did. How could it be otherwise ? Marriage was the only profession open to her.^e

Virginia Woolf is more feminist in her essays than in her fiction. In her stories, she transcends the earthly life and emphasizes more the importance of her experience as a feminine. In other words, there is no clear idea of feminism in her stories. Berenice A. Carroll develops further this idea and points out that :

Woolf declined to call her position 'feminist'. This did not imply a rejection of feminist theory or politics, to discomfort with all labels, dogma, and hierarchical or bureaucratic organization.^f

Virginia Woolf's characters suffer a lot because of certain hostility and indifference on the part of their community. Alienation is their disease which is the subsequent result of their personal struggle in isolation. They are unable to make any change because of the vigorous moral rules that determine their behaviour and society that control their acts. They have a moral conduct determined by church-centred rules that gave privileges to men over women. What is left for women, thus, is either to rebel and become their own moral agent, or submit, serve and rot.

In To the Lighthouse, Virginia Woolf is trying to show how patriarchal values are transmitted, through education, for generations, without any 'serious' revolt. Women learn that male is masculine, and masculine means muscular, authoritarian and rational ; female is feminine, and feminine means soft, weak and stupid. Women internalize such meanings and live with them till death. This is what actually Mrs Ramsay represents in the novel. She listens to them, and she rarely takes part in their discussions. She is rather present-absent in their circle :

She learnt on them ; on cubes and square roots ; that was what they were talking about now ; on Voltaire and Madame de Stoel ; on the character of Napoleon ; on the French system of land tenure ; on lord Rosebery ; on Greevey's Memoirs : she let it uphold her and sustained her this admirable fabric of the masculine - intelligence, which ran up and down, crossed this way and that, like iron girders spanning the swaying fabric, upholding the world so that she could trust herself to it utterly, even shut her eyes or flicker

them for a moment, as a child staring up from its pillownks at the myriad layers of the leaves of a tree.^g

Mrs Ramsay is aware of such difference that should not, 'naturally', exist. She knows she is excluded from the circle of men by the laws of tradition. She is a learnt woman. She knows what they are speaking about ; but official morality and stupidity of education make of Mrs Ramsay an alienated. This is what Virginia Woolf herself witnessed. She assumed that, « the birds are killed by men, starved by men, and tortured by men__ not vicariously, but by their own hands . »^h

Virginia Woolf accuses men and the patriarchal society to be responsible of the deplorable state of women, but at the same time, she blames women of being too passive and totally responsible of their plight. Alien to the world she lives in, she tries to dream of no limitations and no social constraints. This day-dreaming is a kind of contemplation ; a mental escape and an avenue of freedom. Berenice A. Carroll points out :

To be poor, to be alien, to be 'ugly', in a society that values money , conformity, national and class pedigrees, and demands physical beauty is not the formula for producing a woman of poise, grace, humour and self-confidence.ⁱ

Virginia Woolf's women are frequently isolated, because they are in a world of imprisonment dominated essentially by men. There is a failure in communication because there is no 'real' communication. There are only men who decide. The passivity of Mrs Ramsay can have two interpretations : first, she is the upper-servant of her husband and thus she has to obey and accept such responsibility ; second, she is unsatisfied, and, thus, the only escape for her is to live in reclusion__ in her **inner world**. In other words, if she is a servant from the outside, she is a free woman from the inside :

So they argued about politics, and Lily looked at the leaf on the table-cloth ; and Mrs Ramsay, leaving the argument entirely in the hands of the two men, wondered why she was so bored by this talk, and wished, looking at her husband at the other end of the table, that he would say something. One word she said to herself. For if he said a thing, it would make all the difference.^j

These opinions are just internalized thoughts. Mrs Ramsay does not speak them out so that she reveals them to the surrounding. The 'good' woman should listen to men, but never interfere in their discussions. Her passivity makes her absent in the course of discussion.

Mrs Ramsay is somehow enigmatic and confusing. She knows what they are speaking about, but she does not 'want' to participate. Portraying her this way, Virginia Woolf wants, probably, to say that her women characters are not stupid and inferior to men. They are clever and as good as them. Mrs Ramsay knows what she means. She is a generator of thought_a meditator. A cry needs words and her words are full of cries. « We see throughout the book, » writes the critic Perdita V. Hooper in her Notes to 'To the Lighthouse', « that each character can only be completely true, honest and frank when alone. Society and relationships would become dislocated by the total truth, yet each person seeks and finds truth of a kind. »^k

Mrs Ramsay is conscious of her isolation, and of the differences that exist in her society. She is in want of a change that never comes. Tradition remains the lonely guide, and submission to its rules the lonely safety. She should be an angelic woman : pure, chaste and obedient :

The Angel can be of any age, married or single, pretty or plain. She is above earthly concerns, generous to the point of self-sacrifice, quiet, forgiving, and capable of absolutely selfless love. Her strength may come from formal religion or an inner guide. She frequently discovers and reveals her saintly nature in part as the result of an unhappy experience in love_a broken engagement or the death of her beloved. Her subservience and self-effacing love allow her to subordinate her own needs and wishes to those of her lover in his relationship with another woman ; More frequently, however, the angelic woman finds her only rewards in her own behaviour, in its occasional quiet recognition by others, or in her thoughts of a future life in heaven

In the story, two selves are noticed : there is a false self that submits to social exigencies, and a 'true' self that is full of dreams, vies and fantasies. These two worlds_false and true_co-exist in every woman character . Every woman is seen isolated, because she fails to reconcile the external world with the internal one.

Stupidity of education carries with it humiliation and compel men to act as a master : « a man's life is his work ; a woman's life is her man. »^l Mrs Ramsay is always absorbed by her thoughts, as if she was peripheral to life, and as if she was born to suffer. Life she spends is nothing but a means to contemplate what comes after_death :

But what have I done with my life ? Thought Mrs Ramsay, and looking at all the plates making white circles on it...At the far end, was her husband, sitting down, all in a heap, frowning. What at ? She did not know. She did not mind.

She could not understand how she had ever felt any emotion or any affection for him.

She had a sense of being past everything, thought everything, out of everything, as she helped to soup, as if there was an eddy__there__ and one could be in it, or one could be out it, and she was out of it. It's all come to an end, she thought."^m

Virginia Woolf explores, through Mrs Ramsay, women's quiet suffering and helplessness. Their submission to men makes them more introspective and remote.

The continual threat and the disruptive forces around Mrs Ramsay made her escape spiritually from her situation and live in a world of **never-never time** and **never-never land**. In other words, if her body is present, her mind is ever-absent.

Lily Briscoe, the other woman in the story, has another vision different from that of Mrs Ramsay. She learns from the contradictions of others, mainly Mrs Ramsay, and tries to realize her vision of life in painting. She is interested in art but not husbands :

Yet she said to herself, from the dawn of time odes have been sung to love ; wreaths heaped and roses ; and if you asked nine out of ten they should say they wanted nothing but this ; while the woman, judging from her own experience, would all the time be feeling. There is not what we want ; there is nothing more tedious, puerile, and inhumane than love ; yet it is also beautiful and necessary."ⁿ

Lily learns a lot from Mrs Ramsay, but as a spinster, she has different expectations and different view in life. She is fascinated by males power, but at the same time, horrified by their tyranny. Responding to the needs of men is to be jailed and rot for ever under their power. Accepting life without love is becoming lifeless and abnormal :

Such was the complexity of things. For what happened to her, especially staying with Ramsays, was to be made feel violently two opposite things at the same time ; that's what you feel, was one ; that's what I feel was the other, and then they fought together in her mind, as now. It is so beautiful, so exciting this love, that I tremble on the verge of it, and offer, quite out of my own habit, to look for a brooch on the beach ; also it is stupidest, the most barbaric of human passions, and turns a nice young man with a profile like a gem..."^o

In all her relationships with others, Lily insists on her autonomy and her aloofness from others' lives. She wants to maintain her independence and to spend life she wants and the way she wants it. For her, marriage is mothering, and mothering is a threat for her freedom : « She liked to be alone ; she liked to be herself ; she was not made for that. »^p ; « She need not to marry, thank Heaven : she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. »^q

Lily Briscoe's refusal of sexual love and her preoccupation with art make her transcend the sensation of love into her painting : a sensation which is strongly felt through the colours she uses. She is not a wife that satisfies her husband's desire, nor is she a mother that cares about her children ; she is an artist with fecund imagination which gives life to her picture.

Lily Briscoe wants a mode of life different from the existing one. She wants to be solitary : to live from her art and for her art. She is an artist, and the artist creates a world in this world.

Both, Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, want their autonomy and independence. Married and unmarried, both try to escape from the physical love and look, instead, for an everlasting and undeniable relationship, which only Lily succeeds to reproduce in her painting.

Mrs Ramsay's power of creating harmony and radiance in a world of humdrum life is like the light, of the lighthouse, that lays over a chaotic world of darkness. The lighthouse generates its own autonomy of light and so does Mrs Ramsay. Like the lighthouse which is the symbol of quest of conscience, she is in search of her own identity through her conscious self. Like the sea, she wants to be formless, and like the lighthouse, she wants to illuminate everything with her beams of conscience.

If Mrs Ramsay's conscience is a conscience of strokes she gets from the lighthouse, Lily's conscience is a conscience of impressions she receives from her painting. Her painting represents the wholeness of life in art. Colours, she uses, are equated with the flux of her perception of this world.

Both light and colour have stimulated the two women. They become aware of their authentic selves. This authenticity, in fact, implies alienation from the already-established canons of gender, and opens the way to a more centred-perspective based on their **sensibility** to the world they live in.

Virginia Woolf adopts the philosophy of solitude and remoteness in her stories. This solitude is more **inner**. It is a solitude of the artist into her art. The more she is detached from reality, the closer she is to her art ; the more she is persecuted from the **outside** , the closer she is serene in the **inside**.

The world Virginia Woolf creates in her art is a world of isolation ; it is **a world in this world : the world of the individual into the social, the mad into the rational, the unknown into the known**. In other words, she transcends reality and immaterializes its substantial matters. She wants to **create life in this life, and a reality in this reality**. For her, reality is not a matter of fact, but a **matter of spiritual intensity**. Thus, reality exists only into consciousness. It is there that we conceive it and give it a **sense**.

Endnotes

- ^aEllen Morgan, « Humanbecoming : Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist novel , » in Images of Women in Fiction : Feminist Perspectives , ed. Susan Koppelman (Bowling Green : Bowling Green University Press, 1973),p.186.
- ^bMary Astell, Some Reflections upon Marriage(1730) (New York : Sources Book Press, 1970),pp.123-4
- ^cRuth Roach Pierson, « Historical Moments in the Development of a Feminist Perspective on Education, » in Resources for Feminist Research , 13 (March 1984),p.1.
- ^dShiela Rowbothan, Women, Resistance and Revolution (Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin, 1977,repr.1980),p.18.
- ^eVirginia Woolf, Three Guineas(1938) (Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin, 1977,repr.1978),pp.44-5.
- ^fBerenice A. Carroll, « "To Crush Him in Our Own Coutry" : The Political Thought of Virginia Woolf , » in Feminist Studies, Vol.4, N°1(1978),p.121.
- Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (1927) (Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin, 1964, repr.1970),p.122.
- ^hVirginia Woolf, « The Plumage Bill, » in The Women's Leader,23 July,1920,' **AppendixII**, in The Diary of Virginia Woolf(1920-1924),Vol.II, ed. Anne Olivier Bell(Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin, 1978, repr.1981),p.338..
- ⁱBerenice A. Carroll, « "To Crush Him In Our Own Country" : The Political Thought of Virginia Woolf, » in Feminist Studies ,Op.Cit.,p.105.
- ^jVirginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse ,Op.Cit.,p.105.
- ^kPerdita V. Hooper, Notes on 'To the Lighthouse' (London : Pan Books Ltd, 1979),p.62.
- ^lFlorence Howe, « Feminism and Literature, » in Women in Images of Fiction : Feminist Perspectives , ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green : Bowling Green University Press, 1973),p.34.
- ^mVirginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse ,Op.Cit.,pp.95-6.
- ⁿibid.,p.118.
- ^oibid.,p.118.
- ^pibid., p.58.
- ^qibid.,p.118.