



Dialectic of Knowledge and Intimacy: Reading Virginia Woolf's 'To the Lighthouse' in the Time of Pandemic 'New Normal'

Muhammed Jabir MP

Department of English & Comparative Literature, Central University of Jammu, Jammu & Kashmir

Received: 27 Jan 2021; Received in revised form: 02 Apr 2021; Accepted: 09 May 2021; Available online: 23 May 2021

©2021 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Virginia Woolf is perhaps should be most celebrated for her experimentations in the form of the novel and her playing with time, stream of consciousness and narrative point of view, all of which are very sophisticated in *To the Lighthouse* and change the novel from straight storytelling to a much more experimental and a multidimensional of a literary form. What interests in this paper that she does that formal experimentation, while at the same time dealing with some of the key themes of scepticism and human connection of intimacy and knowledge that are important as modernism unfolds in the early 20th century. It is an attempt to examine some of those ideas and how they are 'consumed' in her fiction *To the Lighthouse*. Virginia Woolf was considered 'the ordinary' or 'the everyday' and she did so by focusing on family dynamics to underscore the key issues afflicting European society at the beginning of the 20th century. The moments of sadism and alienation of World War I and Spanish flue as depicted in *To the Lighthouse* can be juxtaposed to the horrors of Covid-19 Pandemic time. It is worth revisiting the philosophical inclinations of *To the Lighthouse*.

Keywords— Bloomsbury Group, Modernism, New Normal, Pandemic Literature, Post-Modernism, Virginia Woolf

I. INTRODUCION

Virginia Woolf is one of the great novelists of the twentieth century, who expanded the boundaries of her genre, whose sensitivity to politics and family life, and aesthetics and philosophy was extraordinary. *To the Lighthouse* is one of the great books of the 20th century. It represents a shift away from the concerns of modernism of finding the fundamental principle of life, by digging deeper to some foundation toward understanding, of knowledge as intimacy. Rather than finding the deeper reality, the book focuses on finding the thing that one can be closest to the person or to the phenomena that one can have intimacy with. Virginia Woolf was part of a group that has stimulated the imagination of historians and literary critics for a long time, the Bloomsbury group. It was an extraordinary group of intellectuals, artists and

writers who in the very beginning decades of the twentieth century came together out of friendship and shared political convictions. They shared a commitment to the arts and to aesthetic principles, and friendship. It was a whole group of artists who defied convention to expand their art. They saw middle-class morality as hypocritical in many cases. And they wanted to go beyond that, although they were very much middle-class people almost all. They wanted to go beyond bourgeois morality and convention in terms of friendship, sexuality, art-making to find something that would be more meaningful and less violent and less hypocritical. Bloomsbury was a nest for Virginia Woolf, a place where she found sustenance and support, and they found some ideas that certainly link the members of this group together. The ideas seem to come mostly from philosopher G.E Moore, who wrote in the early days of analytic philosophy that tries to clarify things by

showing what we can count on and what we can't, or what illusion is and reality along with Bertrand Russell. G.E. Moore made the argument that no scientific or logical deduction of the good would be compelling that the idea of 'the good' was primary. The ethics for G.E. Moore was not empirical rather intrinsic. For Moore, the intrinsic goods like friendship, beauty, art and love stood on their own. And a commitment to them structured other beliefs, rather than other beliefs leading one to commit to these 'intrinsic-core values'. This Meta ethical approach of G.E. Moore towards ethics and aesthetics was the founding stone for the Bloomsbury group. In another sense, the friendship held them together, not because of ideology, but just for friendship. Love was not reducible to anything else; love was its own thing. Aesthetics stood alone; aesthetics wasn't reducible to anything else. Art is its own thing, it doesn't have to be justified in other terms, so too friendship and love, so to aesthetics.

Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is a Modernist novel about the fragmentation of everyday life. From the multiple points of view, the novel expresses how ultimate reality escapes biases of personal perception and therefore no one can truly know the world. Woolf describes the same events from different points of view and these different points of view show slight differences in opinion and emotion for the characters that prevent them from truly knowing each other or grasping the events around them. The novel seems to show how ultimately every character is separate and the fragmentation of the individual characters fuels the notion that humans can't connect, but remain flawed and distant. But the mother Mrs Ramsay is the figure of intimacy in this novel. Though Virginia Woolf's mother, Julia Steven, is not Mrs Ramsay exactly, certainly a model for Mrs Ramsay. She is depicted as a model of a pre-Raphaelite and 'inviting personage'.

Mrs Ramsay reassures her son with some kind of hope for tomorrow at the beginning of *To the Lighthouse*, 'Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow, said Ms Ramsay. But you'll have to be up with the lark,' she added. To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy...' (*To the Lighthouse*: 1) Mrs Ramsay, the maternal voice is the voice of reassurance and intimacy. Mrs Ramsay is one of the characters, as Mr Bankes says, 'nature has but little clay, like that of which she moulded you'. Mrs Ramsay lives for relationships. She lives for her family. She seems to need to make connections. She likes to couple up people, makes matches. She wants to connect with people. She's the Freudian Eros, the combinatory force. She wants to combine things into perfect dinners, into perfect love life matches and friendship.

Mrs Ramsay wants things to cohere whereas Mr Ramsay, as an analyst, pulls things apart to see how they work. There are the questions; ontological and epistemological questions that Mr Ramsay worries about. So the fundamental question that the novel asks is the question of what is 'Real', which is one that Mr Ramsay asks throughout the novel. Mr Ramsay replies to Mrs Ramsay at the beginning of the novel, "But it won't be fine tomorrow". Here is the voice of the science and knowledge. It's also the voice of disappointment. Mr Ramsay is chewing on his pipe and he's cogitating and trying to understand the world, and so doing he seems blind to the things around him. Mr Ramsay says to his wife, "There wasn't the slightest possible chance that they could go *To the Lighthouse* tomorrow, Mr Ramsay snapped out irascibly. How did he know? She asked. The wind often changed. The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women's minds enraged him. He had ridden through the valley of death, been shattered and shivered; and now, she flew in the face of facts, made his children hope what was utterly out of the question, in effect, and told lies. He stamped his foot on the stone step. "Damn you," he said. But what had she said? (*To the Lighthouse*: 6) Mr Ramsay can't fill someone with false hope. But Mrs Ramsay was thinking how could he so brutally step on somebody's hope? And she acquiesces; she bends her head, says, 'let this mad, monster of knowledge rage on.' (*To the Lighthouse*: 6) This is the dynamic of this novel.

Another character Mr Tansley is a lower class person as he always reminds the reader. "I am from the lower classes. I don't have all the advantages that these Ramsay children have... I had to work my way up". In England at the time this novel was written, social class was much more visible, and for Tansley, it means, he has to work for a living. He doesn't have an independent income as Ramsay family has. An independent income is what sets somebody else free. The character Tansley is here to identify as a figure who juxtaposes within the contradiction of knowledge and intimacy projecting the social reality. In Virginia Woolf's England people from the upper classes have an income independent of their labour. This goes back right to the aristocracy that aristocrats don't have to work for their income and their income comes to them without labour what it means to be a noble. And by the time the beginning of the 20th century, people who have independent incomes have a certain freedom. Tansley isn't like that. Tansley is the guy who says, "I work for everything, I struggle for everything. I'm the guy, I have a shoulder, there's a chip on it for a good reason because I know what I have to do to support myself." He is a student of Mister Ramsay. He wants to be a philosopher to

understand 'the things'. Mr Tansley is not privileged enough to have enough leisure time. During the Pandemic time, working-class people from third world countries have the same fate as Tansley. If society shut down of all kinds productive activities, the people who really suffer are the daily breadwinners. Tansley reminds the underprivileged section of all the time who belongs to the lowest ladder of the social hierarchy. Tansley's quest for knowledge symbolises the subaltern quest to become part of the social dynamics and to understand how things function within so to come out of this long prevailing sufferings.

Tansley is a person whose intelligence shows him why other people believe in false premises. He's a sceptic, probably an atheist. Ramsay Kids call him the atheist because, for them, he is then an enlightenment figure. When atheism and enlightenment go together, they're like milk and cookie. So Tansley is an enlightenment figure not as vainglorious, imposing as Mr Ramsay but the person who shows foolishness to believe some ideal hope. He doesn't believe in anything and this is what philosophy in education produced in a certain kind of person, Woolf thinks, incapacity for belief which is a terrible mood.

The other key person in the novel is Lily Briscoe, the artist. Lily is a painter and she is often the voice of Virginia Woolf in the novel. Lily wants to do her art. She doesn't want to have to please people. She wants to make her art. She is trying to get it right. And getting it right for her as a painter means finding the proper relation, the proper distance to the object or to the thing that she's trying to depict and that is an important facet of why Virginia Woolf makes her artist, Lily a painter, is because so much about a painter is finding the appropriate distance. Lily is always trying to find what the appropriate distance is, that for Virginia Woolf is a powerful metaphor. How does one connect to other people? Does anyone want to just merge and become another? That could be disastrous. Virginia Woolf wanted a solution to this by procuring intimacy without losing one's identity. How does one find the right place in relation to other people and about other objects? That's the painterly problem for Lily and is the humane problem for Virginia Woolf.

'How do we touch other people, sealed as we are?' This is the phrase of Virginia Woolf's, in the novel. Mrs Ramsay tries to get at what is real by connecting to it, by enfolding other things in what's called in the novel 'a web of love'; it was love that brought people together. It's this web of love that connects one with the other. Not a logical deduction, but an intimacy born of affection and art. So Virginia Woolf has characters in *To the Lighthouse* that are shaken by this question of what is real; whether it's in the case of Mr Ramsay's Scepticism about objects or Mrs

Ramsay's sceptical musing, the scepticism of other minds. This pursuit of connection is opposed to 'knowledge'.

CONCLUSION

Lily says, at the end of the novel, what is the meaning of life? The great revelation had never come, instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark. James and his sister are in the boat with their father going out *To the Lighthouse* finally. They're filled with hatred for their father but they also have this experience of love. They know he's tyrannical and a caricature of a man in many respects but he is their father. They can't help but feel the pull of love towards him, and James reflects, things are never just one thing. The lighthouse isn't just one thing. The lighthouse is both just a mere lighthouse and it's also a symbol. His father is a tyrant and he was also his daddy and also the man that loved his mother. Things are never one thing, an important conclusion at the end of the novel. Lily realizes that the quest for absolute is futile as an artist. Her quest is to grasp the little illuminations as matches struck in the dark. Not the grand epiphany, but the intimacy with the ordinary. It's just a small match in the dark and just some connections and feelings of intimacy that is precious. It is good in itself as G.E Moore pointed out. Virginia Woolf was not looking for some ultimate foundation but looking for a genuine connection through a feeling that could be articulated through intimacy. Not deduced, not explained, but felt, powerfully, that's what has to hold on to after time passes, after catastrophe; those little matches of connection. There may be solution for the pandemic in the form of vaccination, but there is no solution for pandemic created new normal life as there is no reverting back as the society 'progress'. It's futile to hope some ultimate solution for all these unprecedented catastrophes rather human can rely on those little connections. This philosophical notion of the 'really real' is important as the public normality of our 21st century urban, cosmopolitan and consumer lifestyle which have been disrupted with the pandemic curfew where most of the people are confined to their houses, the underlying gendered, racialised and classed structural inequalities and violence have been kept in place.

REFERENCES

- [1] Auerbach, E., & Said, E. W. (2003). *Mimesis: The representation of reality in Western literature*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- [2] Moore, G. E. (1959). *Philosophical papers*. London: Allen and Unwin.

- [3] Moore, G. E. (1903). *Principia ethica*. Cambridge: At the University Press.
- [4] Roy, A. (2020). "Pandemic is a Portal," in *Financial Times*, www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca
- [5] Russell, Bertrand. (1975). *My philosophical development*. London : Unwin Books.
- [6] Vieten, U. M. (2020). The "New Normal" and "Pandemic Populism": The COVID-19 Crisis and Anti-Hygienic Mobilisation of the Far-Right. *Social Sciences*, 9(9), 165. doi:10.3390/socsci9090165
- [7] Woolf, V. (1988). *To the lighthouse*. London: Marshall Cavendish.
- [8] Zizek, S. (2020). *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World*. OR Books.