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Evaluating the character of Mr. Ramsay's in Virginia Woolf's "To the lighthouse" (1927)

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Abstract

In Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay is an important character. While going through the novel, it is important to understand various dimensions of each and every character and comprehend the message which the author tries to convey to the readers. In this novel, the author highlights the character of Mr. Ramsay as a husband and a father of eight. He is shown as a husband who abuses his wife and at the same time keeps on discouraging and psychologically abusing his children's to the extent that he makes them to hate him. At the same time Mr. Ramsay has the other aspect of love and compassion for his family as well.

The paper is an attempt to evaluate the character of Mr. Ramsay so as to understand his character in an efficient manner.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay, cognitive reality

Introduction

Mr. Ramsay represents objective reality in the novel, *To the Lighthouse*. He looks at life from a different point of view i.e., from a linear scale where as the reality can be seen all the way through physical eye. According to Mr. Ramsay, the reality of facts and solid objects is actually the truth. His firm belief solely in visible objects frustrates him and in this way, there develops in him a hostile attitude towards things and people. Whenever Lily thinks about Mr. Ramsay's occupation she imagines a 'scrubbed kitchen table' (TTL, 38). The metaphor used in the novel in the form of the 'kitchen table' represents the superficial mannerism which Mr. Ramsay believes in. He is highly educated and highly qualified but at the same time he is blind and narrow towards others as well. Moreover, kitchen table corresponds to dry and barren intellectual effort on part of Mr. Ramsay lacking the feelings of sympathy and passions. Being a symbol of inadequacy vis-a-vis human relations, this approach deprived him of scholarly success in his life. Kitchen table, in itself, has no meaning unless some meaning is 'invested in it' (Ettinger, 10). This also represents sham values prevalent in a society. The use of imagery provides physical objects with symbolic significance. In the very third paragraph of the novel, the attitude of Mr. Ramsay is revealed to the reader clearly. He appears to be a perfect person having absolute ideals but at the same time such ideas are devoid of human decency. He irritates his son James who in turn "harbours thoughts had there been an ace handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him" (TTL, 10). Andrew while informing Lily about Mr. Ramsay's books reveals that these voluminous books are regarding subject, object and about the notion of reality. He says, 'think of a kitchen table when you are not there' (TTL, 38). He compares and attaches notion of reality to external objects. For him, the 'kitchen table' gives some impression of patriarchal power and authority and this symbol of masculine integrity is based on absolute and solid foundational principles. Mr. Ramsay is part and parcel of this system wherein patriarchy is prevalent and has significant contribution to this system by writing a book on philosophy at an early 'age of twenty five' (Roe, 61).

Additionally, philosophy, being related to the intelligible knowledge and values, is incompatible with the practical life. A cognitive approach, in its totality, to reality impedes the individual's psychic growth as is clearly evident from James' flow of mind. He always nurtures grudge against his father due to the fact that Mr. Ramsay treats him like a grown up man and does not pay any attention to the fact that a child is like a tabula rasa without any

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prior knowledge of absolute norms. He fails to perceive that the requirements of James are not the same as those of adults. Children, at the tender age, need attention and when the same is denied, their personality becomes a balanced one. They do not bother about anything including culture, customs, values and traditions. In the same way, domestic environment is indispensable for the simulation of human spirits far this provides energy and harmony. Whenever Mr. Ramsay is closer to the state of futility or when his equilibrium gets lost, the institution of family is the lone source from where he gets the necessary support and energy. Family is important for him because when he faces any sort of problems concerning rational journey, at that time, it is the family that sympathizes with him. Family serves as a centripetal force that refreshes him for next philosophical adventure.

Mr. Ramsay is constantly under 'some secret conceit at the accuracy of his judgment' (TTL, 10) in the sense that he can never deviate from truth which is reality in front of him. His staunch adherence to truth made him not to pay any attention to the feelings of other mortals and this attitude made him tyrannical, hostile, and unjust. Mr. Ramsay came to the conclusion that the inevitable truth of life is that it is useless and worthless. In spite of the fact that life is difficult, facts are uncompromising but if an individual responds to the problems in an accommodative way, the intensity of the difficulties of life will be minimised and he will be in a position to face the dilemma with perseverance. In order to face the challenges and difficulties of life, Courage, truth and power are the powerful weapons with which we can find best possible solutions. Such powerful tools will not be helpful when there is utter disregard for the feelings of others as is the case in Mr. Ramsay when he wants to be authoritative and suppressive so far as his wife and children and this attitude gives rise to disagreements and hence chaos and instability in the house. So much is his disregarding attitude towards the feelings of others that he even extremely dislikes Mrs. Ramsay's consoling attitude towards James. He becomes very shot-tempered when someone goes against his will. His situations is worse that he gets angry, outrageous and ill-tempered just because Mrs. Ramsay has given James a hope that it might be fine tomorrow. He regards any deviation from the solid reality as folly:

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? Simply that it might be fine tomorrow. So it might (TTL, 50).

In the same way, there is a universal life spirit that enlivens and energizes us all when he comes out of the notion of false persona. Mr. Ramsay is condescending in his false persona and he is dissatisfied due to the fact that he sees life from a different point of view namely the phenomenal reality; which evaluates life from absolute scale. He can be identified with consciousness, the visible world. He continuously puts the house in disequilibrium which otherwise is in harmonious relations existing among Mrs. Ramsay and her children. This imbalance is created because of his egotistical and high-handed attitude. He totally relies on faculties of his splendid mind in the pursuit of truth

without taking into account others. According to Mrs. Ramsay; 'To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other peoples' feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally was to her such an outrage of human decency...' (TTL, 51).

Mr. Ramsay always distinguishes himself, from that of others, by his scientific way of thinking. He insists to his house members that the weather would be bad in some time and it would not be possible and suitable to carry out trip to the lighthouse. He is so mechanical and logical in his thinking and this is the reason that he misses the beauty of common objects. Ironically, because of these reasons he moves away from the ultimate aim of philosophy; the pursuit of truth. He tries to perceive reality through cognition and in this way pursues his end in a wrong way. Cognitive approach distorts and divides reality into moments, periods and psychic states and hence, this process works mechanically and is inclined towards the objective and material world. Beyond the solids the intellect gets puzzled and in this way can't follow the natural course. Its sole function lies in assisting life but not to comprehend it.

As a result, Mr. Ramsay entertains himself by reading the story of Hume who is stuck in a bog for the reason that it bears some metaphorical relation to his own intellectual quandary. In order to arrive at the notion of reality, both the approaches; cognitive and intuitive are required while in the case of Mr. Ramsay, the equilibrium is missing. He searches out for the truth without taking human nature into consideration. In this entire process, he relies entirely on his reasoning power and thus becomes erroneous. He misunderstands life and can't create harmony in it. He gives emphasis on the importance of logic while altogether ignores the intuitive response to reality. Intellect is inclined towards matter and remains in itself while instinct steps out towards life and gets "absorbed in the utilization of inert matter" (Amjad, 121).

Similarly, the ordered letters of alphabet suggest static keys of a keyboard and in this way reveal the mechanical quality of Mr. Ramsay's splendid mind. He considers himself as a polar explorer who attempts to understand the farther thinking but, the moment he takes hold 'the lizard's eye flicked again' he stumbles down. He tries to arrive at the limits of thoughts by deliberation on his alphabetic campaign. Mr. Ramsay's yearning to attain 'Z' is his symbolic alphabet and its prospect he visualises as achieving fulfilment in his career. Sometimes, Mr. Ramsay's thinking is disturbed by his wife and son even though he keeps himself busy in his philosophical pursuits without paying any attention to their disturbances. The manner he contemplates about his mind is very interesting. He compares his mind with a keyboard of piano.

It was splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q (TTL, 53).

Mr. Ramsay worked tirelessly so as to provide security to his family. But, the moment he vainly speculates about getting immortal fame, his logical mind does not support him. He analyses the unproductiveness of life, when he will be forgotten after his death and no one will remember him say after two thousand years. He has achieved the heights of knowledge to the extent that he is able to see the near waste

of time and the 'perishing of stars' (TTL, 56). Cairns installed after his death will not make any difference to him. His philosophical pursuits have brought him almost to the state of disintegration. He is not able to comprehend what to do. In such a state of disequilibrium, he needs encouragement and sympathy from someone so as to assure him of his philosophical worth and the fruits thereof. It does not provide solution to human problems.

Similarly, Mr. Ramsay has a firm belief in the factual reality or the horizontal continuum of time. His marvellous mind is able to work on things that are linked with the clock time or intellectual knowledge. Like the keyboard of piano, the intellectual knowledge is logically arranged but having a unique and varied flow of rhythm out of the alphabetical keyboard of piano. Beyond the superficial world intellect cannot move. It does not refine the personality of its possessor as is evident from the characters of Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley. Although they are highly educated in the novel as compared to other characters yet they are victims of superficial mannerism which keeps them away from the beauty of life. Mr. Ramsay is aware of the fact that he cannot have knowledge of all things in one go. In spite of his scholarly approach, he gets upset at times and also gets stuck in his philosophical journey while arriving at the reality of life. Mr. Ramsay wants an everlasting fame for himself that is why; he does not accept the transitory nature of life. He is not able to catch the pattern that lies behind the objects because;

He had not genius; he laid no claim to that: but he had or might have had the power to repeat every letter of the alphabet from A to Z accurately in order. Meanwhile, he stuck at Q. On, then, on to, R. Feeling that would not have disgraced a leader who, now that the snow has begun to fall and the mountain top is covered in mist, knows that he must lay himself down and die before morning comes, stole upon him, paling the colour of his eyes, giving him, even in the two minutes of his turn on the terrace, the bleached look of withered old age. Yet he would not die lying down; he would find some crag of rock, and there his eyes fixed on the storm, trying to the end to pierce the darkness, he would die standing. He would never reach R[eality] (Bourner, 62).

Though, Mr. Ramsay happens to be distinguished metaphysician because of his knowledge of philosophy and philosophers of his age but he terms this knowledge as nonsense. He comes to realize that major part of wisdom was not accessible to the intellect. Knowledge, in any way, is not limited to 'Q' which stands for intellectual quest. It is just like a piano which is separated into different tunes. Intellectual knowledge may fetch fame but such fame is temporary in nature. This fame is also subject to mutability. Intellectual knowledge has no bearing on the personality of the possessor because the more one advances, the more one is confused. Mr. Ramsay has become more selfish and impervious to beauty and appreciations of the things around by the intellectual knowledge. Additionally, he is blind and deaf to others. Mr. Ramsay observes the whole knowledge in one leap by using his linear logic. Lily has high regards for Mr. Ramsay and considers him as the epitome of wisdom. On the other hand, when she observes Mr. Ramsay closely, he appears to be selfish and without any human sympathy (Amjad, 127).

Likewise, Mr. Ramsay's profound wish is to know all the facts of life and by doing that he wants to dominate others through his knowledge while after reaching to the ultimate

point i.e. Z. His fragmentary and unstable state of mind is depicted by the division of knowledge into alphabets. He lacks integrated view of life and reality and in this way he is unable to articulate himself through his linear logic. He is the organizer of the lost "expedition" (TTL, 55) and in this process loses his race. Beneath the objects of nature, he is not able to comprehend any pattern that exists. It is due to this fact that he always formulates rational explanations to comprehend life in a rational manner and thus misses the best out of it. In fact, he has only one presumed judgment about life which he compares to the likes of the layers of a stem where every layer reveals about the age of a tree. But, he is not recalling the fact that life is an amalgamation of both temporal and permanent aspects of reality. As life moves on a linear direction so it cannot be reverted back. Time passed can never be recalled back to the life except the recorded moments of history only. But this too illustrates the factual reality which in turn misses the essence of things. For example, it is impossible to judge a human being merely on the basis through appearances because appearances are deceptive and can mislead us. Our whims, desires, and sensibilities belong to both aspects of reality; temporal and permanent. In this way, our life will be more balanced if we consider both aspects as necessary ingredients of life. Life does not move and evolve logically.

Therefore, Mr. Ramsay must develop a different approach to life that is intuitive and mystic approach. With the help of these approaches, he will be able to enjoy the reality of life. Intellectual quest can not reveal true nature of reality. Mr. Ramsay's approach is a utilitarian in nature. He evaluates the noticeable benefits of material objects and comes to realize that, in reality, he lacks genius in true sense in order to claim accuracy over all knowledge. Reality cannot be reached at in its absolute sense. For him, there is a need to develop an intuitive response so that his splendid mind may come out of the limits of philosophy in order to observe that all the objects of nature are linked through specific pattern. In his case, Mrs. Ramsay can educate him, in every possible way, the true meaning of existence. Both the ordinary as well as common things have their own importance in life. Every single moment is important in the life of an individual where as Mr. Ramsay totally ignores the same in the case of ordinary things.

Moreover, Mr. Ramsay articulated melancholic things as well and this is the result of his endeavour to catch reality solely via language. He tries to transfix his feelings through the use of words which in reality are an imperfect medium. Reality cannot be conveyed through symbols because of the fact that the symbols have no fixed meanings and fluctuates accordingly from culture to culture. On a similar note, every individual has his own peculiar set of experiences which differs from others. When Mr. Ramsay attempts to know about consciousness of people by way of listening to the words they speak, he is not able to gain awareness because he only comes to know the surface meaning and not the intended meaning of the speaker. Language is the by-product of the culture and in this way is not an independent entity and is always subservient to social norms. The words which Mr. Ramsay speaks remind us of the fact that they convey meanings shaped by culture and individual history. Words act as the only means through which human consciousness can be reached at. In order to understand Mr. Ramsay, one needs to understand the words he brings into play. Even in an intimate relationship of long durations, it is

not possible to have full grasp of individual's inner self. People even do not have information about themselves. In this way, Mr. Ramsay's effort in pursuit of reality is not in the right direction which subsequently turns him to sadness and life remains an empty dream for him.

Mr. Ramsay has his own eccentricities as he is not satisfied in his life and is deeply interested in the question of what makes a personality perfect. In this way, one lifetime is not enough for him to arrive at such perfection. Beneath Mr. Ramsay's personality, there lies a deep failure to accept the transitory nature of life. This is the sole reason which creates the impression of unreality about him. He leads an artificial life of mannerism instead of living a natural life. He becomes a victim to his redeemed sense of egotism that in a way shadows his inner notion of reality. He does not have 'moments of being'. In chapter eight of the *Window*, he reflects on the progress of civilization, since the time of Pharaohs till date, and the overall improvement in the standard of life of a common man. In the same way, when Mr. Ramsay comes out of the false society and enters into the lap of Mother Nature, he sheds his false persona which the so-called civilization has compelled him to wear with the passage of time. He, all of a sudden, comes out of all the superfluities attached with the life when he stands on the spit of land beneath the bay. In this state of starkness, he does not lose anything with related to the intensity of his mind. This moment enables him to realize:

The dark face of human ignorance, how we know nothing and the sea eats away the ground we stand on—that was his fate, his gift. But having thrown away, when he dismounted, all gestures and fripperies, all trophies of nuts and roses, and shrunk so that not only fame but even his own name was forgotten by him, he kept even in that desolation a vigilance which spared no phantom and luxuriated in no vision and it was in this guise that he inspired in William Bankes...and in Charles Tansley ...and his wife now, when she looked up and saw him standing at the edge of the lawn, profoundly, reverence, and pity, and gratitude too, as a stake driven into the bed of channel upon which the gulls perch and the waves beat inspires in merry boat-loads a feeling of gratitude for the duty it is taking upon itself of marking the channel out there in the floods alone (TTL, 69).

Conclusion

In the novel, Mr. Ramsay, in many dimensions, stands as Mrs. Ramsay's opposite. On the one hand she acts patiently, kindly, and diplomatically toward other family members, while on the other hand Mr. Ramsay tends to be short-tempered, selfish, and rude towards others. In this regard Virginia Woolf succinctly describes him as "lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one", which invokes both his physical presence and puts forward the sharpness (and violence) of his personality traits. Mr. Ramsay, an accomplished metaphysician who made an invaluable contribution to his field as a young man, bears out his wife's philosophy regarding gender: men, burdened by the importance of their own work, need to seek out the comforts and assurances of women. Through the length and breadth of the novel, Mr. Ramsay pleads his wife and even his guests for sympathy. At the same time, Mr. Ramsay is uncertain about the fate of his work and its legacy and his insecurity manifests itself either as a weapon or a weakness. His keen understanding in the inevitability of death prompts him to hold high the hopes of young James and at the same

time bully Mrs. Ramsay into speak out her love for him. This hyper-sensitivity of Mr. Ramsay also compels him to meet head-on with his own mortality and face the likely possibility that he, like the forgotten books and plates that litter the second part of the novel, might sink into nothingness.

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