



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Maternal Presence Against Paternal Authority: Parental Roles In *To The Lighthouse*

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Abstract

This paper examines Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as a critique of patriarchal constructions of parenthood, foregrounding the tension between maternal presence and paternal authority. Through the figures of Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf interrogates the Victorian ideals of fatherhood as intellectual dominance and motherhood as selfless nurturing. Drawing on feminist criticism, particularly the works of Rachel Bowlby, Nancy Paxton, and Kate Millett, the analysis demonstrates how Woolf exposes the psychological and emotional costs of these rigid roles. While Mrs. Ramsay embodies the silenced, sacrificial "angel in the house," her interior monologues reveal suppressed desires for autonomy. Conversely, Mr. Ramsay's authority, rooted in intellectual validation, underscores the insecurities of patriarchal power. By juxtaposing these parental figures, Woolf destabilizes gender binaries and suggests that true authority emerges not from dominance but from emotional resonance, creativity, and interdependence.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; *To the Lighthouse*; maternal presence; paternal authority; gender ideology; patriarchy; emotional labour; feminist criticism; Victorian family.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf was born in the year 1882 to Sir Leslie Stephen, a prominent Victorian author and intellectual. She grew up in a household that embodied the patriarchal values of the late Victorian era. Her father, a highly respected figure in intellectual circles, held strong authority over the family. He was a dominating force, both emotionally and intellectually, in Woolf's life, and his early death in 1904 had an acute impact on her. Woolf's father, although affectionate, often represented the rigid gender roles of the time, where men held dominion over public life and intellectual pursuits, while women were expected to remain in the private, domestic sphere. This tension between male authority and female autonomy is a central theme in Woolf's work, and it becomes particularly apparent in *To the Lighthouse*, where the figure of Mr. Ramsay serves as an embodiment of patriarchal authority.

In the Victorian era, fatherhood was typically associated with authority, rationality, and moral guidance. Fathers were viewed as the moral and intellectual leaders of the family, responsible for providing for their children and guiding them through life. This model of fatherhood often relegated mothers to the domestic sphere, emphasizing their nurturing roles but limiting their influence in the public and intellectual domains. Victorian society was steeped in patriarchal values that placed men in positions of power both at home and in society. Woolf's exploration of paternal authority in *To the Lighthouse* reflects her critique of these rigid

gender roles, particularly through the character of Mr. Ramsay, who embodies the Victorian ideal of fatherhood: a figure whose intellectual pursuits and need for validation clash with the emotional and nurturing needs of his children.

Woolf's personal experiences deeply inform her portrayal of family life in *To the Lighthouse*. The novel, while fictional, is rich with autobiographical elements, particularly in its depiction of parental figures. Mr. Ramsay, the father in the novel, closely mirrors Woolf's own father, Sir Leslie Stephen, in his intellectualism, authority, and sometimes overwhelming presence in the household. Similarly, the character of Mrs. Ramsay reflects aspects of Woolf's own mother, Julia Stephen, who was known for her nurturing and selfless qualities. Woolf's exploration of these parental figures in the novel allows her to examine the psychological effects of these contrasting roles, especially the way they shape the identities of children, particularly daughters. Through the character of Lily Briscoe, an artist in the novel, Woolf weaves a narrative of struggle against patriarchal expectations, as Lily seeks to reconcile her desire for artistic autonomy with the emotional legacy of her upbringing. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf presents a fine balance between the roles of motherhood and fatherhood, not only in terms of their respective social significance but also in their emotional and psychological implications. Mrs. Ramsay embodies the traditional ideals of motherhood: compassion, self-sacrifice, and emotional depth. Her role as the mother is central to the narrative, and her ability to nurture her children is juxtaposed against the authoritative, intellectual stance of Mr. Ramsay. The tension between these two parental roles reflects a larger societal debate about the value of maternal love and care versus the intellectual and rational pursuits represented by fatherhood. In the novel, maternal presence is often associated with emotional stability and the ability to shape the future, while paternal authority is linked with intellectual ambition and societal influence.

Aims and objectives

This paper aims to explore Virginia Woolf's critique of traditional gender roles in *To the Lighthouse*, focusing on the tension between maternal presence and paternal authority. The main objective of this paper is to examine how Virginia Woolf critiques the rigid gender norms of her time through the contrasting figures of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and to analyze how Woolf challenges the idea of the "ideal mother" and the "ideal father" in the context of patriarchal society, focusing on the ways these roles limit both personal autonomy and emotional fulfilment. Another objective of this paper is to discuss how Woolf presents the limitations and contradictions inherent in traditional gender roles, especially concerning intellectual and emotional labour within family life.

Hypothesis

The central hypothesis of this analysis is that Virginia Woolf uses *To the Lighthouse* to critique the societal expectations placed on maternal and paternal roles, illustrating how these roles, while deeply influential, ultimately stifle personal fulfilment and emotional connection. Through Mrs. Ramsay's interior monologues and the tension between her maternal duties and personal desires, Woolf reveals the psychological cost of self-sacrifice and the limitations of gendered identity in a patriarchal society.

Literature Review

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* has long been studied as a reflection of the complexities of gender roles and family dynamics in early 20th-century society. Critics have frequently examined how Woolf critiques traditional gender expectations, particularly the contrasting roles of mothers and fathers, and how these roles shape both individual identities and family relationships. Rachel Bowlby in her seminal work, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians* (1984) examines how Woolf's portrayal of family life subverts traditional Victorian ideals of fatherhood and motherhood. She argues that Woolf critiques the patriarchy, embodied by Mr. Ramsay, whose intellectual authority and need for validation overshadow his familial relationships, particularly with his children. Mr. Ramsay's emotional detachment, contrasted with Mrs. Ramsay's deep emotional investment in her children, reflects the Victorian division between public (male) and private (female) spheres. Bowlby contends that Woolf's treatment of Mr. Ramsay emphasizes the limitations of patriarchal authority, which is

often unyielding, isolated, and detached from the emotional needs of the family. Another essay Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant (1993), by Nancy Paxton focuses on the ways Woolf critiques the idealization of motherhood. Paxton argues that Mrs. Ramsay, while embodying the selfless, nurturing role of the “ideal mother,” is a deeply conflicted character. Her maternal sacrifice comes at the cost of her personal desires, which are rarely acknowledged or fulfilled. Paxton suggests that Woolf uses Mrs. Ramsay’s character to explore the emotional toll of motherhood and how societal expectations of women to be self-sacrificing contribute to the erasure of their individual identities. This critique of the maternal ideal connects to Woolf’s broader feminist concerns about the limitations of prescribed gender roles and the suppression of women’s autonomy.

Research Methodology

The research methodology of this paper is both analytical and descriptive. This paper follows both the primary and secondary sources while formulating this study. Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* serves as the primary source, while the secondary sources are E-resources, online articles, journals and so on.

Analysis

In the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods, when Woolf was writing, motherhood was idealized as a woman's highest calling. Society expected women to embrace their roles as mothers as part of a broader, rigid patriarchal structure that confined women to the private, domestic sphere. The concept of the "angel in the house," as Woolf herself described in her essay *A Room of One's Own*, was an idealization of self-sacrificial motherhood, a role that demanded a woman to be nurturing, selfless, and devoted entirely to the needs of her family. This role left little room for personal aspirations or individual autonomy, and any deviation from this expectation was often viewed as abnormal or selfish.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf introduces the figure of Mrs. Ramsay as a quintessentially maternal character. She is constantly tending to the emotional needs of her family, particularly her children, while also fulfilling the roles of wife and hostess. Her existence is marked by self-sacrifice, and her identity is often tied to her ability to care for others, especially her husband, Mr. Ramsay, whose intellectual needs overshadow the emotional dynamics of the family. The novel consistently portrays Mrs. Ramsay in the role of the selfless mother, but it does so with a subtle critique of how this role constrains her own desires and potential.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf critiques the domesticity that confines women to the private, nurturing sphere, preventing them from achieving intellectual or artistic freedom. Woolf writes, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” Here, Woolf asserts that women’s creative and intellectual potential is stifled by the demands of family and domesticity. This idea resonates with the depiction of Mrs. Ramsay, whose life is consumed by the needs of others she is often described as embodying the ideal mother, selflessly giving without seeking anything in return.

One of the most striking moments in *To the Lighthouse* occurs during a scene where Mrs. Ramsay reflects her role:

“She was always the one to give, always the one to give” (Woolf 60).

This moment highlights her awareness of her own sacrifice, yet her self-sacrifice is portrayed as a necessity within the traditional structure of motherhood. Mrs. Ramsay is constantly giving, whether it be her time, her emotions, or her intellectual energy. This is aligned with the Victorian ideals of motherhood that dictated women were primarily caregivers, whose personal desires were secondary to the welfare of their families.

In stark contrast, Mr. Ramsay’s authority is not rooted in emotional engagement but in intellectual dominance. His role as the patriarch is marked by his need for validation, his intellectual pursuits, and his emotional detachment. When he says to his children, “I am the greatest man who has ever lived,” the statement highlights his intellectual insecurity and need for recognition. His dominance in the household stems from his intellectual achievements, which he uses to assert power over his wife and children. The patriarchal structure that elevates intellectual authority over emotional labour is precisely what Woolf critiques. Mr. Ramsay,

despite being an intellectual giant, remains emotionally distant and insecure, creating an environment where emotional needs, like those of Mrs. Ramsay, are sidelined.

Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics*, argues that patriarchy establishes intellectual and social hierarchies that elevate masculine traits—rationality, intellect, and dominating while denigrating feminine traits like emotional nurturing and care. Millett's feminist critique helps us understand Mr. Ramsay's insecurity within the patriarchal structure. Though intellectually dominant, he is emotionally insecure, always seeking affirmation of his intellectual superiority. His insecurity is marked by constant self-doubt and need for validation from others, particularly his family, even though his role as a father and husband requires emotional presence.

The imbalance between Mrs. Ramsay's emotional nurturing and Mr. Ramsay's intellectual dominance reflects a critique of how patriarchal systems elevate male intellect while rendering the emotional labour of women invisible. Mrs. Ramsay's role in the family, as well as the way her emotional labour is undervalued, associates with Woolf's criticism of women's relegation to domestic roles in *A Room of One's Own*. In this way, Woolf challenges the boundaries imposed on women by showing how maternal sacrifice is neither natural nor fulfilling but a socially constructed identity designed to keep women in subjugation.

The tension between emotional security and intellectual insecurity is most evident in the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, but it also manifests in the way both parents' roles shape the lives of their children. Mr. Ramsay's intellectual insecurity creates an emotionally hostile atmosphere for the children, especially for his sons, who feel compelled to meet their father's intellectual standards. The pressure to live up to Mr. Ramsay's intellectual dominance is a central theme in the novel, stresses how the intellectual hierarchy within the family influences the emotional development of the children.

Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, provides emotional security, but this comes at the cost of her own personal desires and potential. As a mother, her primary concern is the emotional well-being of her children, but she also feels the weight of being trapped within her role. Her interior monologues reveal her frustrations with the limitations of her maternal role, which are never fully addressed or resolved. One striking line from Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts is:

"If only I had time... to think... to write... to be alone with myself"(Woolf 82).

This line reflects her awareness of her own desires and the way those desires are constantly suppressed by the demands of her role as a mother and wife. Her yearning for independence and self-expression is never realized because she is expected to fulfill the role of self-sacrificing mother. Woolf's use of interior monologues in this way not only gives voice to Mrs. Ramsay's suppressed desires but also critiques the broader societal expectation that women, especially mothers, must prioritize the needs of others over their own.

Millett's analysis in *Sexual Politics* suggests that the emotional dependency created by patriarchal family structures forces women into positions of subordination, where their intellectual and personal needs are overshadowed by their roles as wives and mothers. In the case of Mrs. Ramsay, her personal desires are sacrificed to the overwhelming needs of her family. Woolf thus critiques the emotional labour expected of women within such a structure, while also highlighting the intellectual insecurity fostered by patriarchy. Mrs. Ramsay's emotional intelligence is stifled by the very system that values male intellectual dominance above female emotional labour.

One of the most poignant aspects of Mrs. Ramsay's character in *To the Lighthouse* is her silencing. While she is portrayed as a central figure in the family, it is not her voice that is heard in the narrative but rather the voices of her children and husband. Woolf's narrative technique of using interior monologues gives us insight into Mrs. Ramsay's inner world, yet she is often silenced by the demands of her role as a mother. As a result, her desires and aspirations are suppressed, and her voice is marginalized within the family dynamic. This silencing reflects the larger societal pattern of women's voices being excluded from intellectual and public discourse. Mrs. Ramsay's silencing is also an effect of patriarchal norms, as described by Millett in *Sexual Politics*. According to Millett, women's roles have been constructed to serve men's intellectual and social needs, relegating them to secondary, supporting roles. Mrs. Ramsay's intellectual and emotional potential is

continuously suppressed in service of her family, mirroring the way that women's voices and identities are subordinated to patriarchal values. Her silence in the novel reflects Millett's critique of the way patriarchy uses women's maternal roles to suppress their agency. Her ever-sacrificing nature has been reflected in the scene:

“she had been sitting loosely, folding her son in her room, braced herself, and, half turning, seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating (quietly though she sat, taking up her stocking again), and into this delicious fecundity, this foundation and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare” (Woolf 36).

Despite her physical absence after her death, Mrs. Ramsay continues to play a central role in the family's emotional landscape. Her memory lingers, especially in the minds of her children, particularly Lily Briscoe, who reflects on her relationship with Mrs. Ramsay and struggles with the expectations placed upon her as both an artist and a woman. Lily's attempt to paint the lighthouse in the final section of the novel can be seen as a form of self-assertion, a reclaiming of her voice and identity in the face of the maternal legacy left by Mrs. Ramsay. Woolf's exploration of memory, how the past lingers and shapes the present, is tied to the conflict between temporal and timeless values. Mrs. Ramsay's memory embodies the timeless, idealized values of motherhood, selflessness, and emotional security. However, as the children grow older and attempt to assert their own identities, they must confront the expectations that were placed upon them by their mother's legacy. This tension between the temporal (the present, personal growth) and the timeless (the legacy of motherhood) reflects the emotional and intellectual struggles that the children face in reconciling their own identities with the legacy of maternal sacrifice.

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