

# Male Assertive Strategies in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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## **Abstract**

*This paper is concerned with the various ways by which man ensures the demonstration of his manhood as superior to the woman. It stresses on the fact that man's belief in his superiority is for the most part made into codes of behaviour and laws, which are culturally and legally enforced. In this article, we address male assertion in terms of the structures and social constructs that have ensured its continuity. We consider male dispositions, social constructs and cultural paradigms at the service of male dominance and female subservience, as depicted in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. We hold that male assertion is engrained into the fabric and functioning of the society, and is perpetrated through education, gender roles, impartial opportunities, and other predefining disposition. In *To the Lighthouse*, male postures, attitudes and verbal expressions ensure that the man asserts himself. Furthermore, the love and marriage institutions are meant to serve the male. On the other hand, the woman is made to understand that all she needs to do is to be beautiful, take care of the house, cater for the children, and serve the male. The educational system is meant for the male child in the main, because it prepares him for leading-social responsibility. These ensure that the man asserts himself perennially, from generation to generation, despite the changing times.*

## **Key Words:**

*Male Assertion, Auto-elevation, Assertive Strategies, Education, Love and Marriage.*

## **Introduction**

*The Merriam Webster's Dictionary Online* holds that assertion "consists in insistent and positive affirming, maintaining, or defending (as of a right or attribute); a declaration that something is the case." Essentially, "to assert oneself is to strongly affirm one's rights or position" (Carole Mafotsing, 7). Tessa Pfafman, in her article titled "Assertiveness", purports that: "Assertiveness involves expressing ideas, feelings, and boundaries while respecting others' rights, maintaining positive effect in the receiver, and considering potential consequences of the expression. It includes both positive and negative expressions and seeks to achieve personal and/or instrumental goals" (1). To Pfafman, assertiveness is first and foremost all about a person's freedom of expression of his ideas, feelings and rights.

Male assertiveness, therefore, consists in the man behaving confidently, authoritatively, assuming a number of rights over the woman, mainly on the basis of his being male. It consists in availing recognition, honour and respect, because one is male, and not female. Assertion goes along with synonyms such as, "affirmation, asseveration, avouchment, avowal, claim, declaration, insistence, profession, and protestation".

Male assertion strategies, as used in this paper, consist in carefully planning, establishing methods, and cleverly devising or employing plans or stratagems to ensure that the man takes pride of place in relation to the woman. It may be called the road map or game plan

to ensure that the male is in authority, and enforces that position over time. In *To the Lighthouse*, a number of these strategies consist in male auto-elevation, assuming dominant physical postures, attitudes and verbal expressions. It also consists in laying down principles and laws in marriage that ensure that women remain marginal, serve only within the domestic sphere, consider themselves inferior to the other sex, labour to be beautiful, and find it a privilege to serve the men. These issues are developed in what follows.

### **Male Auto-elevation**

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mr Ramsay has actually set himself into a kind of god, over his wife and the rest of his family, and all the female folk. He thinks that “if his little finger ached the whole world must come to an end” (39). The only reason to think of himself in this light is because he is male, not female. Furthermore, Mr Ramsay out-rightly asks to be admired and flattered. It seems very much a right to him such that at some moment, “an enormous need urged him, without being conscious what it was, to approach any woman, to force them, he did not care how, his need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy” (127). Male assertion thrives on this kind of thinking, which establishes the male in authority, seemingly indispensable to the existence of the whole world.

The attitudes of Mr Ramsay and the impressions that he leaves behind him reveal his godlike thoughts of himself. The following passage depicts the situation very clearly: “He rose and stood in the bow of the boat, very straight and tall, for all the world, James thought, as if he were saying, There is no God,” and Cam thought, as if he were leaping into space, and they both rose to follow him as he sprang, lightly like a young man, holding his parcel, on to the rock” (174). It is important to note that to Mr Ramsay, there is no god besides him. He thinks of himself in this way and expects to be viewed and treated in a way that befits his thoughts of himself. By posture and attitude, he commands a following, and Cam and James actually do so.

In the novel, Mr Ramsay’s reign is aimed at winning from his wife, children and dependents, the respect that is due to a god. He makes Mrs Ramsay to think as follows:

Universities and people wanting him, lectures and books and their being of the highest importance—all that she did not doubt for a moment; but it was their relation, and his coming to her like that, openly, so that anyone could see, that discomposed her; for then people said he depended on her, when they must know that of the two he was infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in comparison with what he gave, negligible. But then again, it was the other thing too—not being able to tell him the truth, being afraid, for instance, about the greenhouse roof and the expense it would be, fifty pounds perhaps to mend it; and then about his books, to be afraid that he might guess, what she a little suspected, that his last book was not quite his best book (she gathered that from William Bankes); and then to hide small daily things, and the children seeing it, and the burden it laid on them—all this diminished the

entire joy, the pure joy, of the two notes sounding together, and let the sound die on her ear now with a dismal flatness. (34)

In the passage above, Mr Ramsay draws his importance from the fact that Universities and people wanted him, his lectures and his books because these were of the highest importance. Furthermore, “He must be assured that he too lived in the heart of life; was needed; not only here, but all over the world” (32-33). Mrs Ramsay thinks that everyone must know that, “of the two he was infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in comparison with what he gave, negligible.” It is hard to find by what grounds her social role was inferior to Mr Ramsay’s, but that is what she thinks. She would rather not talk about the disconcerting poverty, the failure of some of his books, and other daily failings of Mr Ramsay. Overall, the family is unhappy, and husband and wife are unable to work together efficiently. Being so imperfect, limited and frail, a sense of frustration has made company with him in command. He cannot command spontaneous obedience and loyalty from the woman, so he sets up a system of laws, regulations and ideologies to help him maintain his god-forsaken reign of dominance over the woman and children.

### **Postures, Attitudes and Verbal Expressions**

In *To the Lighthouse*, male physical postures and the way they express themselves are important in the game of self-assertion. Mr Ramsay adopts dominant postures which of necessity affect his wife, children and other women around him. James observes a situation between his mother and father as follows:

There was a flash of blue, he remembered, and then somebody sitting with him laughed, surrendered, and he was very angry. It must have been his mother, he thought, sitting on a low chair, with his father standing over her. He began to search among the infinite series of impressions which time had laid down, leaf upon leaf, fold upon fold softly, incessantly upon his brain; among scents, sounds; voices, harsh, hollow, sweet; and lights passing, and brooms tapping; and the wash and hush of the sea, how a man had marched up and down and stopped dead, upright, over them. (141-142)

In the passage above, James cynically says, “It must have been his mother, he thought, sitting on a low chair, with his father standing over her.” Mr Ramsay is “standing”, while the wife’s is “sitting on a low chair.” Remarkably, when he stands, he does so over her. His posture is intimidating, subjugating, domineering, overbearing and the like. In the same passage above, the effect of his posture produces a cowering effect in Mrs Ramsay and the others. The thoughts that cross Mr Ramsay’s mind end with, “how a man had marched up and down and stopped dead, upright, over them.” The man in question marches up and down, dies in action, and even while dead, remains, “upright, over them.” Furthermore, the male, from this posture, probes into the infinite series of impressions; perhaps those created by his dominant position, both physical and psychological.

In another report, “Mr Ramsay stopped dead in his pacing in front of her, and some curious shock passed through her and seemed to rock her in profound agitation on its breast when stopping there he stood over her, and looked down at her” (167). Like the

man in the previous quotation, Mr Ramsay also strides up to Mrs Ramsay, for quite no other reason than to impress his superiority on her. Virginia Woolf says, "he stood over her, and looked down at her" and that action produces an agitation which runs through Mrs Ramsay's breast. Through his postures and the way he looks at others, Mr Ramsay transmits the message of his superiority and dominance.

Mr Ramsay's postures and attitudes are some of the power plays of patriarchy in *To the Lighthouse*. They browbeat mother and children into submission. Woolf describes the effects of one of such situations as follows:

But his son hated him. He hated him for coming up to them, for stopping and looking down on them; he hated him for interrupting them; he hated him for the exaltation and sublimity of his gestures; for the magnificence of his head; for his exactingness and egotism (for there he stood, commanding them to attend to him) but most of all he hated the twang and twitter of his father's emotion which, vibrating round them, disturbed the perfect simplicity and good sense of his relations with his mother. By looking fixedly at the page, he hoped to make him move on;... But, no. Nothing would make Mr Ramsay move on. There he stood, demanding sympathy. (32)

Firstly, Mr Ramsay comes up to mother and son, breaking into their quiet moments of study. He exalts himself, adopts imposing postures, boasts about his intelligence, makes authoritative demands, and appeals for attention. James complains of the twang and twitter of his father's emotion, which, vibrating around them, disturb the perfect simplicity and good sense of his relations with his mother. While this may also be an expression of the Oedipus complex in him, it expresses the oppressive feelings created by his father's masculine postures and aura.

Charles Tansley, another assertive male, has his room situated above the others. From the superior position of his room, he seems to be living above everyone else. Furthermore, his attitude towards women is quite condescending. He thinks that women can neither write nor paint: "women can't write, women can't paint" (166); "and there was Mr Tansley whispering in her ear, "Women can't paint, women can't write..."(41); "Women can't write, women can't paint" (72); "'women ', he sneered at women, "can't paint, can't write"(76); "Can't paint, can't write"(134); "Charles Tansley used to say that, she remembered, women can't paint, can't write" (134). The number of times the supposed inability of women in the arts is sung to them, is meant to keep them out of that sphere. It is a male attempt at brainwashing the other gender, and speaking them out of the arts, because they are inferior. In agreement with the on-going, Anne E. Fernald informs that social and political systems have often forced women to use pseudonyms and conceal their identities, in the production of art (557).

The above is not without effect because Lily Briscoe who takes the challenge to do some painting has to constantly fight with this prejudice. Rather than face up to the challenging responsibility of painting, she has to first fight off the idea that she is doing something women were never supposed to do. She becomes antagonistic and somewhat a man-hater. For example, while painting, "She fetched herself a chair. She pitched her

easel with her precise old-maidish movements on the edge of the lawn, not too close to Mr Carmichael” (124). Although she needs the company of the male poet, she dares not come very close. This eventually affects her opinion of herself. When Mr Ramsay shows interest, she says, “who am not a woman, but a peevish, ill-tempered, dried-up old maid, presumably” (127). Elsewhere, she is referred to as follows: “She remained a skimpy old maid, holding a paint-brush” (152). She thinks negatively of herself, refuses to show emotions, and refuses to marry. Supposed because of this negative self-image, some antagonism develops between Lily Briscoe and Mr Tansley as expressed below:

She had gone one day into a Hall and heard him [Tansley] speaking during the war. He was denouncing something; he was condemning somebody. He was preaching brotherly love. And all she felt was how could he love his kind who did not know one picture from another, who had stood behind her smoking shag (‘fivepence an ounce, Miss Briscoe’) and making it his business to tell her women can’t write, women can’t paint, not so much that he believed it, as that for some odd reason he wished it? (166)

Whatever else Tansley does is flawed by his condescending attitude towards women and their ability for the arts. Lily Briscoe finds fault with Charles Tansley’s preaching on love and asks, “how could he love his kind who did not know one picture from another”? Conscious of his own weaknesses, Charles Tansley’s assertion becomes abusive. When Lily Briscoe corners him, he reacts as follows:

Mr Tansley raised a hammer: swung it high in air; but realising, as it descended, that he could not smite that butterfly with such an instrument as this, said only that he had never been sick in his life. But in that one sentence lay compact, like gunpowder, that his grandfather was a fisherman; his father a chemist; that he had worked his way up entirely himself; that he was proud of it; that he was Charles Tansley—a fact that nobody there seemed to realise; but one of these days every single person would know it. He scowled ahead of him. He could almost pity these mild cultivated people, who would be blown sky high, like bales of wool and barrels of apples, one of these days by the gunpowder that was in him. (76)

The male assertive position in the passage above turns into abusiveness and intimidation. The images of the hammer and gunpowder suggest aggression and brutality. When these seem inappropriate, even to Charles Tansley, he reclines to boasting about his grandfather who was a fisherman, his father, who was a chemist, and of himself because he had worked himself up to something by himself. At another moment, Charles Tansley says, “But he was not going to be made a fool of by women, so he turned deliberately in his chair and looked out of the window and said, all in a jerk, very rudely, it would be too rough for her tomorrow. She would be sick” (72). The on-going suggests that he considers women as inferior to him, and generally to men, by all regards. Even when he is a dependent visitor at the Ramsay’s, he still maintains an air of superiority to Mrs Ramsay and the Ramsay girls.

## The Love and Marriage Institution

Other ways in which men assert themselves vis-à-vis the woman is in the marriage institution. It is critically important to patriarchy that when a woman marries, she loses her surname and picks up the husband's name, and that by rule. First, she bears the father's name, and then, the husband's name. Therefore, naming in marriage is by practice and law, patrilineal. According to the *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, a name is "a word or phrase that constitutes the distinctive designation of a person or thing." From this definition, losing one's name is tantamount to losing one's "distinctive designation"—one's identity. All through the novel, Mr Ramsay's wife is known as Mrs Ramsay and nothing about what she was called before marriage is ever mentioned. It is probable that by getting married, she has not only lost her name, but her identity too. She has, in a way, been absorbed into the man, so that she has no identity of her own without the man. Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast also exist in *To the Lighthouse* by their husbands' names alone. The naming system is a very subtle tool, at the disposal of the man, not only to assert himself over the woman, but also over the children. Bearing a man's name in a patriarchal system is akin to accepting dominance from the one whose name one bears. There is a sense in which taking to the name of one's husband expresses the unity and oneness entered into through marriage. However, men think that such unity and oneness can only be entered into by the two taking to the man's name and not that of the woman's.

When it comes to marriage, Lily Briscoe says, "She need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle. Such was the complexity of things" (84). To Lily Briscoe, marriage is degradation, a dilution, so she need not experience it. The institution of marriage is viewed here in terms of the fact that as it stands, as culturally practiced, the woman loses her identity and occupies a peripheral status. While this is a personal opinion for Lily Briscoe, she observes, while living with the Ramsays, that there are two sides to the situation of the woman in marriage. This makes her "to 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" (84). Love, which leads to marriage, is a positive feeling. But the marriage, traditionally envisaged, is problematic to the woman. She expresses the ambiguity of love and marriage as follows:

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 a beach; also it is the stupidest, the most barbaric of human passions, and turns a nice young man with a profile like a gem's (Paul's was exquisite) into a bully with a crowbar (he was swaggering, he was insolent) in the Mile End Road. 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 people out of ten they would say they wanted nothing but this—love; while the women, judging from her own experience, would all the time be feeling, This is

not what we want; there is nothing more tedious, puerile, and inhumane than this; yet it is also beautiful and necessary. (84)

To Lily Briscoe, love and marriage possess equivocal qualities. Love as a feeling, is so beautiful and exciting, such that she may go out of her way to watch it happen. She considers public attitude and concludes that over ninety per cent of the people are positive towards love. However, she points to the fact that female experience of love is by and large painful – “while the women, judging from her own experience, would all the time be feeling, This is not what we want; there is nothing more tedious, puerile, and inhumane than this; yet it is also beautiful and necessary.” While love and marriage are beautiful and necessary, patriarchal pre-set rules make it un-comely for women.

Consequently, Lily Briscoe thinks that the feeling of love is the stupidest and the most barbaric of human passions. Stupidest and barbaric because it is capable of turning a nice young man with a profile like a gem's into a bully with a crowbar. She is particularly referring to Paul, who, in the marriage relationship with Minta, turns out to be boastful and insolent. When the love relationship between Paul Rayley and Minta Doyley is at the level of love, it is admirable. But when they marry and take roles as husband and wife, the relationship becomes conflict-ridden. After the marriage, Lily Briscoe reports as follows about Paul Rayley; “She heard the roar and the crackle. ... And the roar and the crackle repelled her with fear and disgust, as if while she saw its splendour and power she saw too how it fed on the treasure of the house, greedily, disgustingly, and she loathed it” (146-147). Only after this does Paul begin to frequent coffee-houses and play chess, as a reaction to Minta’s insubordination. What the men call insubordination is “when a woman lives the life she aspires” without “fear from society, trauma from childhood days, and violence from past memories and present social encounters” (Sally Karmi, 34), like Minta.

In terms of marriage, men have, from time immemorial, gotten married to women far younger than them. The large age gap that often exists between the husband and wife is representative of an experience gap, to the advantage of the man. The older the man, the more experienced and wiser he becomes, and the younger the woman, the lesser her experience and knowledge of the issues of life. When the two are paired, the man generally becomes the leader in almost everything. The deliberate choice of a younger woman for a marriage partner is a means of ensuring the man’s superiority. This is what happens in *To the Lighthouse* between Mr and Mrs Ramsay. Mrs Ramsay’s age is given in the first part of the novel as fifty. In the third part which comes after ten years, Mr Ramsay is seventy one. Taking into account the ten years gap, Mr Ramsay must have been sixty one when his wife was fifty. This represents an age difference of eleven years. This, in part, explains why Mr Ramsay has the upper hand in almost everything in relation to Mrs Ramsay. Lily Briscoe refers to Mr Ramsay as a very old man, but never does so for Mrs Ramsay. For example: “Where are they now?” Lily thought, looking out to sea. Where was he, that very old man who had gone past her silently, holding a brown paper parcel under his arm? The boat was in the middle of the bay” (153). She refers to him as the very old man.

In the marriage between Mr and Mrs Ramsay, the difference in academic levels is critically important, to Mr Ramsay’s advantage. It is possible that Mr Ramsay chose Mrs

Ramsay as wife with the aim of maintaining an academic gap between them that places him at the top. This is seen in the fact that “there was nobody whom Mrs Ramsay revered as she did her husband because universities and people wanted him for his books and lectures. He received tributes from Swansea, Cardiff, Exeter, Southampton, Kidderminster, Oxford, Cambridge” (38). Academically, he is a hero to his wife and has all academic issues at his command.

Mr Ramsay is a philosopher and a committed intellectual, whereas Mrs Ramsay is, “not clever, not book-learned at all” (98). Her academic situation is depicted in the citation that follows:

But she was becoming conscious of her husband looking at her. He was smiling at her, quizzically, as if he were ridiculing her gently for being asleep in broad daylight, but at the same time he was thinking, Go on reading. You don't look sad now, he thought. And he wondered what she was reading, and exaggerated her ignorance, her simplicity, for he liked to think that she was not clever, not book-learned at all. He wondered if she understood what she was reading. Probably not, he thought. She was astonishingly beautiful. Her beauty seemed to him, if that were possible, to increase (97-98).

Mr Ramsay finds some pleasure in the fact that his wife is not clever, not book-learned, ignorant, and may not understand much of what she reads. He further says, “women are always like that; the vagueness of their minds is hopeless; it was a thing he had never been able to understand; but so it was. It had been so with her—his wife. They could not keep anything clearly fixed in their minds. ... moreover, did he not rather like this vagueness in women?” (140). Why would he like it, but for the fact that it feeds his sense of superiority over the other sex? Mrs Ramsay equally celebrates “the greatness of man's intellect, even in its decay, the subjection of all wives” (9). As already hinted, she understands that the greatness of the man's mind imposed the subjection of all wives. The conscious choice of less educated women for wives, as a matter of rule, ensures that in most couples the man has the upper hand. As Mr Ramsay says, “They [women] did nothing but talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat. It was the women's fault. Women made civilization impossible with all their "charm," all their silliness” (72). Mrs Ramsay is said to actually think that, “Books grew of themselves. She never had time to read them. Alas! even the books that had been given her and inscribed by the hand of the poet himself” (23). Stereotypically, the women are tagged foolish, dull, and good only for eating and profitless talking. All the men require of the women is physical beauty, and charm. It is said of Mrs Ramsay, “She bore about with her, she could not help knowing it, the torch of her beauty; she carried it erect into any room that she entered; and after all, veil it as she might, and shrink from the monotony of bearing that it imposed on her, her beauty was apparent”(35). In a nutshell, the men prefer beautiful unschooled wives, so they may assert themselves over these.

### **Authoritative Male Utterance**

In *To the Lighthouse*, male utterance is characteristically authoritative, commanding, and spoken with a high degree of cocksureness. Its tone and exactingness carry with them a

compelling force. For example, Mr Ramsay speaks thus; "But it won't be fine tomorrow" (9), "James will have to write his dissertation one of these days" (49); "Someone had blundered!" (21). Charles Tansley on his part speaks alike: "They'll be no landing at the lighthouse tomorrow" (12), "The women bored one so, he would say" (75), "women can't paint, women can't write" (48), "it would be too rough for her tomorrow. She would be sick." (72). This way of speaking is emphatic and comes with a sense of finality. It leaves no room for discussion or for the woman's opinion. It is despotic and the only response is submission and obedience.

The sense of finality in male utterance has the effect on the woman in that it makes her own speech to be apologetic, unconvincing, and full of suggestions, subjectivity and polite questions. Mrs Ramsay provides very good examples of such utterances; "Would it bore you to come with me Mr Tansley?"(14), "Going indoors Mr Carmichael?"(34), "...But it may be fine I expect" (11), "yes...if it is fine tomorrow" (8); "And even if it isn't fine tomorrow, it will be another day" (23), "I am going to the town. Shall I get you stamps, paper, tobacco?" (35), "When would those children come? When would they all be off?" (126). A sense of inferiority and self-doubt is discernable in Mrs Ramsay's utterances. From this position, she more readily lets her husband have his desired way. She dares not speak straight to Mr Carmichael, Charles Tansley, or Mr Bankes.

Furthermore, the remarks that the men in *To the Lighthouse* make to the women are intentionally mortifying. Of Mr Ramsay it is said; "The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women's minds enraged him" (28). Mr Ramsay "liked men to work like that, and women to keep house, and sit beside sleeping children indoors" (138); and "He thought, women are always like that; the vagueness of their minds is hopeless; it was a thing he had never been able to understand; but so it was" (140). Mr Tansley on his part thinks that women; "never got anything worth having from one year's end to another. They did nothing but talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat" (72), "For he was not going to talk the sort of rot these condescended to by these silly women" (72), "Women can't write, women can't paint" (72), and "The women bored one so, he would say"(75).

The above is certainly prejudicial, and biased. But is also a socially dominant discourse in the world of *To the Lighthouse*. It culturally positions women at a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the men. Male discourse, negative and untrue as it may be, nonetheless impacts on the image of the woman. It is certainly for a purpose; to paint the male as better than the woman. It suggests that only the men do think rationally, logically and can make good use of their time and means. Otherwise stated, the men are useful but the women are useless. This is a very important male assertive strategy.

In diverse ways, the woman in *To the Lighthouse* is called foolish, irrational, vague of mind, lazy and unproductive. The natural reaction to such thinking and speech is that the woman soon believes herself to be dull and booby. With time she begins to see herself in this way, having internalized what has been said of her. Psychologically, she is defeated and feels useless. Mrs Ramsay, "often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions" (28). After Mr Ramsay's ridicule to Cam's ignorance, she withdraws to herself irrespective of his later attempts to "make her smile" at him. Cam is still young

and without knowledge of many things. She still has a lot to learn as opposed to her mother who is already half a century old. However, the ignorance of Cam is made to reflect her mother's and that of all women. Mr Ramsay declares; "Women are always like that", and should be accepted as they are and be told that they are such.

Mr Ramsay actually acts in the sense of the preceding sentence. He mockingly reproaches himself for being angry with Cam, because it was no use. On the contrary, "did he not like this vagueness in women? It was part of their extraordinary charm". When a liability becomes a charm – "pleasing quality or feature," it may never be done away with. There is hardly a better way of eternally eliminating the woman from the use of her brain.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the recurring use of "women can't paint, women can't write" amounts to brainwashing them. It is probably to ensure that no woman should entertain any thoughts of writing or painting. Consequently, Lily Briscoe's choice and commitment to paint are regarded as unconventional and cross-gender in role. Charles Tansley does everything within his reach to discourage her. While she is painting, Tansley would come close enough and whisper into her ears that she ought not to do what is meant only for the men. This partly accounts for the levity with which Lily Briscoe takes her painting in the first part of the novel. Virginia Woolf says, "Here was Lily, at forty-four, wasting her time, unable to do a thing, standing there, playing at painting, playing at the one thing one did not play at ...."(126). She only completes her painting, ten years after, in the third part of the novel, where Charles Tansley is absent, and when Mr Ramsay has taken the journey to the lighthouse.

## Beauty and Child Caring

Another thing for which a woman should be contented is her beauty. She is made to understand and to accept that her beauty is everything for her. William Butler Yeats puts it more beautifully in his poem, "Adam's Curse", when he says, "To be born woman is to know-Although they do not talk of it at school-That we must labour to be beautiful..." Every night, Mrs Ramsay holds a, "little ceremony of choosing jewels" (68). In this ceremony, most of her girls take part; "They had all the trays of her jewel-case open. The gold necklace, which was Italian, or the opal necklace, which uncle James had bought her from India; or should she wear her amethysts? 'Choose, dearests, choose,' hoping that they would make haste" (76). From childhood, the Ramsay girls are already taught to give special attention to their physical outlook. For Mrs Ramsay, the "labour to be beautiful" has become a hobby. This is done partly to satisfy the vanities of Mr Ramsay who sees virtually nothing else in Mrs Ramsay, beyond her beauty. In like manner, Charles Tansley finds it a pleasure to walk by Mrs Ramsay because of her beauty – "Charles Tansley felt an extraordinary pride; felt the wind and the cyclamen and the violets for he was walking

with a beautiful woman” (12). To Charles Tansley, apart from her beauty, Mrs Ramsay amounts to little else.

The above is strategically important in laying the groundwork for male assertion. This is because, while Mrs Ramsay spends every night choosing jewels, and being pre-occupied with how to appear at her best for dinner, Mr Ramsay is reading and writing his books; Carmichael is reading and writing his poetry; Mr Bankes is doing his chemistry; and Mr Tansley works on his dissertation. The male insistence on the need for the woman to be beautiful and her labours to be it, ensure that she has little or no time to be anything else. While the woman is labouring to be beautiful, the other activities are left to the men who excel in these and maintain an upper hand on the overall. The business of beauty places the woman in the periphery of life, or for male entertainment. She is good, mainly for the man’s pleasure, when he is resting from the more important things of life.

Mrs Ramsay’s world is literally the world of children. From dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn, she is pre-occupied with their food, clothing and general welfare. If they should play till late at the seashore, she is the one to worry about them. When they cannot sleep because of a skull in the room, she is the one to mask it and lure them to sleep. By the time breakfast is over, she must be planning for lunch and then supper. This is a sure way of eliminating her from any outdoor activities that carry a pride of place in society.

The large number of children is implicitly a calculated strategy to make the woman exclusively into a mother, and be preoccupied only with the home. Mrs Ramsay has to take care of eight children, with no one to help her in the task. Virginia Woolf reports that the Ramsays, “lived in a welter of children” (19); “The house seemed full of children” (42), and “They came to her, naturally, since she was a woman, all day long with this and that; one wanting this, another that; the children were growing up” (28). They come to her because she is a woman, because patriarchy has established that the caring for children is the woman’s responsibility. In this particular case, “the Ramsays were not rich and [it] was a wonder how they managed to contrive it all. Eight children! To feed eight children on philosophy!” (25). The task of motherhood in the Ramsay home is a daunting one, coupled with the lack of sufficient means. To take care of eight children without the means can be a trauma. She is bound to be constantly under financial and material stress. With that happening, she may never look beyond her home.

Mrs Ramsay has no time and no opportunities by which to make money. She has simply been given responsibilities without the means to finance them herself. She must depend on her husband, having depended earlier on her father. In this way, the financial domain has been kept under male monopoly. How the finances are run is in accordance with the man’s will. Mr Ramsay does not give a helping hand to Mrs Ramsay in the practical running of the house. He is satisfied at the level of paying the bills. Shopping and the welfare of the children are not his concern. He has his profession and books to read and makes sure that he is too occupied with these, to have time for anything else. Even the teaching of James, which is an academic exercise; (his domain), is left to Mrs Ramsay. Consequently, she is overloaded with work, which wears her down physically – she dies after the first evening of the ten year story of *To the Lighthouse*.

As already mentioned, the children and house-keeping exclude Mrs Ramsay from any social ambitions and activities, even if she wanted to. She actually has social ambitions, as expressed below:

It was more true about hospitals and drains and the dairy. About things like that she did feel passionately, and would, if she had the chance, have liked to take people by the scruff of their necks and make them see. No hospital on the whole island. It was a disgrace. Milk delivered at your door in London positively brown with dirt. It should be made illegal. A model dairy and a hospital up here—those two things she would have liked to do, herself. But how? With all these children? When they were older, then perhaps she would have time; when they were all at school. (48)

The social amenities leave a lot to be desired. There is a great lack in hospitals, the drainage system is poor, and the dairy industry is unhygienic. According to her, the existing structures need to be banned because they are rather a shame, and destructive to the general public. Mrs Ramsay feels a passion for these and wants to personally do something about it. But she has one obstacle, the children. Her only hope for such social actions is when they are grown older and gone away from home. But by then, she would have lost a lot of opportunities, grown older and tired. In her particular situation, she dies earlier than she had imagined.

We can, therefore, safely say that in assigning the woman to take care of the children, and ensuring that these children are numerous enough to fully occupy her, the man may fully assert himself in the other spheres of life. Furthermore, having been told that her most important responsibility was to be beautiful and must labour at it, the woman is left with little time and energy to compete with the man in other areas of life.

### **Education: Mainly for Male Children**

In the Ramsay home, formal education is reserved for the male children. The girls are spared all that formal education has to offer them. The academic policy is conditioned to favour the one gender and discriminate against the other. *To the Lighthouse* opens with Mrs Ramsay reading to James and this practice goes on till Mrs Ramsay's death. While James is still undertaking his informal education, there are already plans by his father as to when he will write his dissertations. Later on, in the story, Mr Ramsay's one worry is how Andrew could be induced to work harder, so as to possibly win a scholarship. His future is already being planned for, academically, and he is being helped to move towards it. Though lazy, he is likely to achieve academically more than if he would have been left alone as the girls.

On the other hand, no plans for formal education are distinctively made for any of the Ramsay girls. There is no incentive to make any of them work towards a scholarship or write a dissertation. From childhood, they have been eliminated from the possibility of making an academic career. Virginia Woolf affirms, "From adolescence they are prepared for their future bondage by being kept at home, deprived from privileges of education

reserved for men and trained exclusively for the roles of wife and mother to which they are to be confined for life” [Qtd in Jean Guignet, 171]. This is true to what happens in *To the Lighthouse*. Prue Ramsay is very soon given in marriage in accordance with the wishes of her parents. Mrs Ramsay makes it a point of duty to see to it that Minta Doyle is married. She also wishes that Lily Briscoe should marry. For her, there could be no disputing that, “an unmarried woman has missed the best of life” (42). Deprived of education and given into marriage, the woman remains in the background of key social issues, in which case the man takes the lead.

## Women: Meant to Serve Men

The social setup in *To the Lighthouse* is such that the woman must do everything within her reach to relieve and comfort the man, irrespective of who the man is. To be male is to deserve female assistance in case of need. In the novel, during the dinner party at the Ramsay home, Charles Tansley is in great need to assert himself. The Narrative runs as follows:

He felt extremely, even physically, uncomfortable. He wanted somebody to give him a chance of asserting himself. He wanted it so urgently that he fidgeted in his chair, looked at this person, then at that person, tried to break into their talk, opened his mouth and shut it again. They were talking about the fishing industry. Why did no one ask him his opinion? What did they know about the fishing industry? (75)

In the passage above, Charles Tansley is feeling very uncomfortable and wants someone to give him a chance to assert himself. He wants to be given an opportunity to express himself because he thinks that Mr Ramsay and the others, discussing about the fishing industry, actually know nothing about the subject. He wants to speak at all costs, and becomes restless. All the others, except Lily Briscoe, do not seem to notice his need, so no one gives him the opportunity to express himself. Under normal circumstances, and by right, Lily Briscoe should help him assert himself. Below is her reaction to such need:

There is a code of behaviour, she knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behoves the woman, whatever her own occupation might be, to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself; as indeed it is their duty, she reflected, in her old maidenly fairness, to help us, suppose the Tube were to burst into flames. Then, she thought, I should certainly expect Mr Tansley to get me out. But how would it be, she thought, if neither of us did either of these things? So she sat there smiling. (76)

What a woman should do, when a man is in need to assert himself has been made into a code of conduct. It suffices for the person in need to be a man, and the woman, whoever she is, whatever her own condition, is obliged to do something about it. The purpose of her help is for the young man to expose and relieve his thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, and assert himself. This code of behaviour either assumes that women have no thigh

bones, ribs and vanities to be relieved of, or supposes that they do not have such needs, or that their need for relief is secondary.

Lily Briscoe, however, is not the type to do such things and so she leaves the self-asserting man in his need. Later on, Mrs Ramsay, the more traditional of the women in the text realises Charles Tansley's need and mindful of the existing social code, tells Lily Briscoe, "Unless you apply some balm to the anguish of this hour and say something nice to that young man there, life will run upon the rocks—indeed I hear the grating and the growling at this minute" (76). She says this over and over to Lily Briscoe, in language spoken and unspoken – "when Mrs Ramsay said all this, as the glance in her eyes said it, of course for the hundred and fiftieth time Lily Briscoe had to renounce the experiment—what happens if one is not nice to that young man there—and be nice" (76). Mrs Ramsay has internalized this code of behaviour and practices it without question. We are told that she protected all the men as a matter of duty for some reasons:

Indeed, she had the whole of the other sex under her protection; for reasons she could not explain, for their chivalry and valour, for the fact that they negotiated treaties, ruled India, controlled finance; finally for an attitude towards herself which no woman could fail to feel or to find agreeable, something trustful, childlike, reverential; which an old woman could take from a young man without loss of dignity, and woe betide the girl—pray Heaven it was none of her daughters!—who did not feel the worth of it, and all that it implied, to the marrow of her bones! (6)

In the quotation above, Mrs Ramsay honours men and keeps codes to that effect, "for reasons she could not explain." It has become a matter of culture, and she serves the men as a way of life. The code has been thought out, written and enforced on her. She simply obeys, without questioning the reasons and the motives of its making. Obviously, she has not been part of the team that made the code. The exclusion of the woman from the making of social and cultural codes and laws is probably aimed at putting into place a system that is basically phallogocentric.

The responsibility of the woman to be at the service of the man, whenever he wants to assert himself, is based on the fact that the man's social responsibility is more important. We are told that the man is chivalrous, has valour, negotiates treaties, rules other lands and controls finance. These give him the right to be served by all women. This code places the woman ultimately at the giving end and the man at the receiving end. It ensures that whatever generative power the woman receives is passed over to the man. This is seen in Mr Ramsay's relationship with his wife. Lily Briscoe says of Mr Ramsay, "That man...never gave; that man took. She, on the other hand, would be forced to give. Mrs Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died – and had left all this" (126).

Mrs Ramsay, "would be forced to give", whether or not she understands or agrees with the code. The fact of being forced to give reveals a situation of male tyranny and dictatorship. It is also a system of female exploitation by a stingy set of men, who never gave, but always took. Mr Ramsay is in constant demand for praise, compliments and sympathy, but refuses to give any such to any woman. Mrs Ramsay has given all that she

has, and having nothing to live on, crowns it all by giving away her life. *To the Lighthouse* presents a system where one receives in order to live on, and the other gives away, even of her life. This is probably meant to ensure the continuity of the one sex at the expense of the other.

Furthermore, the woman exists in the world of *To the Lighthouse* in a state of subservience to the man. She is the man's possession for comfort and pleasure. Her importance is dependent on how successfully she gives these values to her husband. Ann Ronchetti rightly holds that, "Mrs. Ramsay's energy is devoted to easing the difficulties in the lives of her husband and children, and nurturing her husband's pathetically insecure ego" (65). The parenthetical announcement of Mrs Ramsay's death bespeaks the place, in terms of importance, that she has been accorded in her milieu. The announcement of her death reads thus: "[Mr Ramsay, stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty]" (105). It is worth noting that Mrs Ramsay is mentioned in relation to Mr Ramsay, and that she comes in through a subordinate clause which is meant to carry secondary information. Evidently, the primary concern of this passage is Mr Ramsay's commitment to his books. There is no hint from this passage that Mr Ramsay has lost someone dear to him. Moreover, this experience of his takes place in his first night alone after her death. Perhaps the loss of a precious book would have moved him – not the loss of a wife. In this first night after his wife's death, Mr Ramsay is said to have stretched out his arms, but "they remained empty." The sentence, "They remained empty" lays emphasis not on Mrs Ramsay's loss of her life but on Mr Ramsay's loss of comfort and warmth. Male chauvinism is basically concerned with the well-being of the man, whatever it may cost the other sex. It is interesting, however, that is the practice of the above that makes a man "worthy of being called a man" (Etriyanto Arman Rizkan, 139).

## Conclusion

From the discussions above, it is evident that male assertion in *To the Lighthouse* is a well-thought-out system, made into law, into social conduct, and enforced by the men, along with a number of culturally streamlined women. In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf exposes the physical, mental, cultural and social structures that ensure male assertion. Its perpetuity is ensured and enforced by socially established ways of life, so that irrespective of the changing situations of life, it is always maintained from generation to generation that the man is the leader, the more powerful, and that the woman was meant to obey, follow and serve the man. It is a novel wherein Woolf explores the social and psychological structures that ensure and enhance male dominance in society. The novel explores the bedrock of patriarchy and explains its perpetration as embedded in the very fabric of society.

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