The Life And Death Of Harriett Frean And To The Lighthouse: The Role Of Women In Puritan Victorian Society

The domesticity in which women are found has a significant impact on their marginalisation both from a social and intellectual point of view. The puritan Victorian society and the inbuilt imposition of man's authority conflicted with the postwar modern changes which were inflitrating. We see this kind of effect which Woolf draw out of Lily's artistic pursuit when compared to Mrs. Ramsay's and compared to the other men like Mr. Ramsay, Mr. Tansley and even Mr. Bankes, because they have a profession. In fact we have Mrs. Ramsay not wanting to 'feel finer than her husband'. She preferred knowing that Mr. Ramsay always was more important than her and that what she contributed to the world was trivial.

In Sinclair's novel we can also see this move towards a modernist individualist approach when Robin's niece tells Harriett that she would marry the man she likes despite hurting a close friend. Nevertheless she continued living with her parents and not venturing towards independence. Together with her parents she preferred to immerse in the safety of the comfort she was used to reading Dante and other books. This life moved her towards a certain boredom later on feeling content with staying at home with Maggie as if it was an extention of herself.

Allison Pease considered boredom in the light of the context that in England betwewn 1900 and 1940, the odds she highlighted were that readers would encounter a bored woman.

She convincingly demonstrates that boredom is one way to critically access experiences of femininity in the early part of the last century. Boredom, according to Pease, "is a problem of meaning. The bored subject cannot make or does not find his or her situation meaningful . . . [it is] experienced as an irritating emptiness" (4). Pease uses the alternate sense of the verb "to bore" to present women's ennui as a process of hol- lowing out in which the protagonist loses selfhood. She draws on Heidegger's three forms of boredom: first, being "bored by something," second, being "bored with something," and third, experiencing profound boredom "as the indifference enveloping beings as a whole".

Pease suggests that Sinclair critiques triumphalist male-authored stories of the New Woman, since the social and political reality of the feminine situation was still far from that ideal in the early twentieth century. In her reading, Sinclair is not ultimately hopeless about the social situation of women because her protagonists are relieved of their monotony through experiencing "moments of ecstatic vision". Their utopic, transient inner life is recompense for a willfully passive outward existence. The fleeting nature of their moments of clarity expresses both the impossibility of their present situation and the pressing need for change.

The marginality or centrality of the spinster's position within the family and the domestic space can be illuminated by the concept of 'conservative modernity', which is evident in the contradictory ideologies of home and womanliness in women's inter-war writing. In her discussion of the 'feminine middlebrow', Nicola Humble has shown how popular domestic novels mainly by women published between the 1920s and the 1950s, read alongside

cookbooks and new magazines such as Good Housekeeping (1922), ‘worked through the middle-class woman’s anxieties about her new responsibility for domestic labour, and helped to redefine domesticity as stylish’.

Being a spinster, such women remained isolated if not for some women friends. They were seen as beyond recovery from a sexual point of view. As if they are not sexual beings similar to men.

The spinster was then defined by lack, and many feminist writers chose to address the potential problem of her childlessness by refuting claims of her ‘incompleteness’, often by stressing her successful entry into politics or war work. Debates about married women’s work, raising the issue of ‘the double life, the double strain’ of juggling work and motherhood.

Man thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. ‘The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,’ said Aristotle; ‘we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.’ The woman hence becomes an object or an accessory. There is importance given to the role of the woman who married or has children but that is were her definition as a woman stops. Her identity extend from domesticity and becomes an object to man.

“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;” – Mrs Ramsay’s thoughts Part 1, Chapter 1.

Sinclair perhaps is pessimistic about the emptiness of the spinster’s existence once her relationship with the parents and later with the widowed parent is removed. Harriett secretly indulges in popular fiction as she did not want to read heavy subjects which move dissatisfies education and female friendship since she used to discuss weightier issues with her friend. Sinclair ironically remarks to the reader that ‘a novelist . . . had no right to be obscure, or depressing, or to add needless unpleasantness to the unpleasantness that had to be’ (p. 114), metafictionally commenting on her own privileging of the unpleasant obscurity of the bored spinster’s story over ‘frivolous’ heterosexual romances.

Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man.’ And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential.

According to critics the reason for this marginality, repression, lack of possibility and being objectified, is that women lack concrete means for organising themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat.

They are not even promiscuously herded together in the way that creates community feeling among the American Negroes, the ghetto Jews, the workers of Saint-Denis, or the factory hands of Renault. They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men – fathers or husbands – more firmly than

they are to other women. If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women.

Even if the opposition between modernity and convention can be mapped onto the urban–rural divide, the spinster heroine necessarily remains within the stultifying rural space in order to be trapped within convention, with restricted access to the urban where abnormality might be rewarded.

It is a repressed and competitive situation in which women find themselves as they are trapped into men's ideological sphere which is trapped in the dominant male discourse and lose their identity.

As women characters, the narrative is not a traditional one and due to their reflective heightened awareness, their identity and reality is indeterminite and unfinished in relation to a carying and complex modern experience. In addition, to demonstrate the underlying currents, the narratives make use of different symbols, such as the Window as title for the first part of To the Lighthouse and then having Lily painting Mrs. Ramsay, James and XXX composing a traingular effect almost a religious one. Other symbols include the sea and the Lighthouse which convey the continuouos rhythm of the characters' emotive life. In The Life and Death of Harriett Frean, there is the rose compion flower and Maggie's chubby baby who then died. This private symbolism may not totally be in a typical realist novel but in a way associated with other ideas as something in their vision. A vision of the reality behind the symbols. So facts and imagination are merged by means of images and symbols.

Both Woolf and Sinclair wrote as Imagists, and embraced the new form of writing the narrative which gives the latter a poetic force and draws a connection and continuity between the past to the future. The narratives despite being built on contexts which the authors were living and dealing with, they are able to challenge the preconceived notions and ideas which readers would have been holding. The symbol of the sea and the lighthouse was endearing and beautiful to Mrs Ramsay 'which seemed... to be running away into some moon country' could have been linked to the eventual return to the heavy jargon used by her husband. Through these symbolic associations Mrs Ramsay gains psychological freedom and feminises the moon cuntry, uninhabted by men with female qualities.

Yet in the sea/waves there is comfort and chaos, in the lighthouse a darkness and light – mystical impressions that are linked with the emotions of the characters. Woolf through the use of the lighthouse when it is lit, and the moving waves, reveals her modernist perception of identity as fluid. She constracts a view of narrative that rejects fixity and solidity as in Edwardian fiction. Mrs Ramsay identifies with the light and thinks that "when life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless" – the mind is allowed to wander freely/ in freedom. So the beam of light enters her consciousness and makes her feel gret joy and spiritual uplift.

Even William Bankes looks at the sand dunes and thinks of his dwindling relationship with Mr Ramsay especially after the latter's marriage, 'the pulp had gone out of their friendship', yet his affection for Ramsay had not diminished. Through Woolf's writing she depicts Mr. Ramsay as despite being an intellectual and well-educated, he is limited, blind/unaware and narrow-minded towards others. Woolf uses Mr Ramsay to represent her sense of the tyranny and egotism of the modern masculine culture and allows the reader to appreciate the difficulties

which this culture produces for people, particularly for women. The commanding and controlling attitude Ramsay adopts, makes James hate him for his ‘exactness’.