



## VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*: THE PSYCHIC DEATH OF MRS. RAMSAY

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### Abstract:

*Virginia Woolf paints the character of Mrs. Ramsay by making her alive through the memories of her mother, Julia Prinsep Stephen. Mrs. Ramsay's character can be excogitated if it is analyzed through the Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Karen Horney. The study examines the character of Mrs. Ramsay and how she has undertaken her voyage despite having all the neurotic conflicts towards her self-realization. The study also intends to explore how she died a psychic death on her way toward self-realization.*

**Keywords:** Neurotic Conflicts, Contradictory Shoulds, Idealized-Self, Self-Realization, Psychic Death

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### I INTRODUCTION:

Virginia Woolf adopts an experimental approach in her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by recapitulating the memories of her neurotic parents as they are having troubled relationships with each other. Woolf, unconsciously, gives expression to her emotional and philosophical understandings. Being neurotic herself, she gives an outlet to her unresolved repressed inner conflicts in her novel writing. She paints the character of Mrs. Ramsay against the blur memories



of her mother, Julia Prinsep Stephen. Rita Terezinha Schmidt aptly captures Woolf's idea of life and its artistic representation in the form of novel writing. She says that

*For her, life was not only the concrete, the visible, the audible, and the credible; it was both the inner and the outer, the objective and the subjective, the conscious and the unconscious, fact and vision, experience and what lay beyond experience. (95)*

With this approach Woolf unleashes her inner rifts of herself and her troubled parents. She wants to understand her inner self and the selves of others through self-analysis. C Pala Mull opines that Woolf attempts "to negotiate her relationships with her parents and herself" (149). She also puts forward that an "autobiographical novel is a transformation of lived experience into fictionalized discourse and frequently involves introspective work geared towards self-analysis (149).

This study intends to explore the psychological journey undertaken by Mrs. Ramsay and how her "energies driving towards self-realization are shifted to the aim of actualizing" her "idealized-self" from the perspective of Karen Horney's Psychoanalytical Social Theory (Horney 24). This study aims at self-analysis of Mrs. Ramsay's character.

This research study will provide insight into the psychological composition and inner conflicts of Mrs. Ramsay and will make the readers respond and analyze their selves to survive life which is a challenge in itself. Virginia Woolf writes intending to understand the human unconscious.

This study follows a qualitative and inductive approach to textual analysis of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Karen Horney's Psychoanalytical Social Theory. This textual analysis will also analyze how Mrs. Ramsay's character has conceptualized it.

Virginia Woolf adopts the approach of indirect interior monologue in her novel writing with the purpose to strip the characters' psychological, emotional, and behavioral attributes. A. J Khan aptly states that *To the Lighthouse* is a psychological understanding of characters' inner mental processes. In the novel, *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf involves the characters in psychological interaction to bring their "unconscious on the surface" (Khan 40). Thomas Scheff praises Woolf's psychoanalytic and artistic skills and states that she is "consciously attempting to describe inner reality, as much as a scientist as an artist" of her characters (07). A.J Khan further adds that in her novel, Woolf reveals the "mental process, psychological reaction and various other psychoanalytical explorations" of her different characters depicted through the stream of consciousness (Khan 43).

## II ANALYSIS:

Mrs. Ramsay remains active in the 'Window' part of the novel. It is Mrs. Ramsay who brings the other characters together. Unconsciously, she is serving the needs of others by giving them her



psychic energies. The novel opens with her soothing remarks contrary to what is said by Mr. Ramsay to her son, James when he expresses his wish of going to the Lighthouse. James is not pleased with the pessimistic remarks of his father. Mrs. Ramsay feels the urgency to reconcile the contrary emotions of both father and son by standing in between them offering a shield to her child. Regardless of the weather conditions, she behaves under the dictates of her inner composition. She “tends to appease” her son by reassuring him that it will be fine tomorrow (Horney 66). When her behavior is analyzed from the perspective of Karen Horney’s Psychoanalytical Social Theory, it becomes evident that under the sway of her inner claims, she wants to become the “ultimate of helpfulness” and “love” in the eyes of her son (Horney 220). According to Horney’s theory, she is feeding her idealized image which is having all the “lovable qualities” (Horney 222). She wins the joy of her son and fulfills her own needs “to be liked, wanted and loved” (Horney 51). Her inner dictates make her “sensitive to the needs” of her son.

A person cannot serve two masters at a time. To make her son happy she earns the unhappiness of her husband in the form of ridicule which is agonizing in itself. When it is viewed through Horney’s theory, it is revealed that “any criticism, rejection or desertion is a terrifying danger” for Mrs. Ramsay (Horney 54). She will do her utmost effort to get back the regard of her husband to ward off the feelings of discontentment. In this way, Mrs. Ramsay is using her psychic energies to feed her idealized –image and the other characters who surround her.

Mrs. Ramsay does not stop here but she extends her feelings of “goodness, generosity” and “sympathy” to those who live there in the lighthouse (Horney 222). She thinks about the ailing son of the lighthouse keeper. She shows her concerns about the different aspects of their lives and thinks that how they are “shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn” (Woolf 05). Her inner dictates make her behave and think that way.

She brings up her children the way she is and would make them end up like her. Horney gives the reasons for such a personality type as Mrs. Ramsay. Horney says that her “salvation lies in others” (Horney 226). She extends the sphere of her sympathetic feeling to others as it gives her the most needed “feeling of being accepted, approved of, needed, wanted, liked, loved, and appreciated” (Horney 226).

Ramsay’s children find Charles Tansley disagreeable and start ribbing him. Charles Tansley, for reasons of his own, is not liked by Ramsay’s children. At this, Mrs. Ramsay cannot prevent herself from reproaching her children for such behavior. In the context of Horney’s theory, Mrs. Ramsay behaves because it is contrary to her idealized–image “to criticize, to reproach or to accuse” others (Horney 219). She tries “to avoid friction” as she has a “taboo on aggression” sort of compulsive demand (Horney 272, 278). It is against her idealized –image of her ‘self’ to have “black looks”



and “quarrels” or to bear any consciously “sustained hostility” against anyone (Horney 51, 219). Although Charles Tansley deserves to be treated that way as it is perceived by Ramsay’s children. Mrs. Ramsay takes it upon herself “to appease and smooth the things over” (Horney 222). She does it for her own sake under the demand of her compulsive claims.

Once while going to market with Charles Tansley, Mrs. Ramsay out of her compulsive sense of belonging approaches and repeatedly asks Mr. Carmichael “if he wanted anything. ‘Stamps, writing-paper, tobacco?’” but he says to her that he does not want anything (Woolf 09). Unconsciously, he refuses to give Mrs. Ramsay the most needed feelings of human intimacy. She becomes discouraged and then in the market, she sympathizes with a one-armed man. She says that “It was terribly dangerous work for a one-armed man, . . . , to stand on top of a ladder like that—his left arm had been cut off in a reaping machine two years ago” (Woolf 10). Mrs. Ramsay mis-channelizes her constructive energies toward others instead of using them for her growth toward self-realization.

Mrs. Ramsay thinks about “the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea” and it arises a thought process in her mind (Woolf 16). She thinks that how the island is eaten away by the sea. Unconsciously, she formulates this analogy which stands unfeigned to the relationship of her husband towards her and her children. The domineering attitude of her husband saps the psychic energies of Mrs. Ramsay and her children like a sea that erodes, engulfs, and causes the destruction of the island. Mr. Ramsay is asking for sympathy now and then and Mrs. Ramsay will have to give what he wants at the expense of her self.

Mrs. Ramsay is meticulously careful even about trivial things. She does it unconsciously without being realized that she is serving the needs and demands of her idealized-image. She confesses that “Alas! Even the books that had been given her and inscribed by the hand of the poet himself: For her whose wishes must be obeyed” (Woolf 26, 27). She cannot read and enjoy a book if it is not done for someone else either to obey them or to make them, please. If this behavioral attribute is viewed from Horney’s theory perspective; it is understood that she despises traces of “selfishness: doing anything that is just for herself. She is often capable of enjoying many things but it would be selfish to enjoy them alone” (Horney 218). This approach towards life makes her life impoverished<sup>1</sup>.

On another occasion, she finds tears in the eyes of Marie; her maidservant as her father is dying of throat cancer. This sight arises in her feelings of empathy and it would have stirred up any human being but her feelings are compulsive in origin. Her inner dictates make her so. In her idealized-image, she “should be the ultimate of helpfulness, considerateness and sympathy” (Horney 220).

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<sup>1</sup> Neglects all that could make life worth living.



Being moving towards personality type, she needs the compulsive urge to be protected by others. In the case of her maidservant, she gives vent to her compulsive urge in her feelings and says that “her father was dying there ... He was leaving them fatherless” (Woolf 27).

According to Horney, when the neurotic compares his real-self<sup>2</sup> with his idealized-self<sup>3</sup>, he is left with despised-self, which takes the form self-hate and results into self-rage and self-contempt. To neurotic “the glorified self becomes not only a phantom to be pursued; it also becomes a measuring rod with which to measure his actual being. And this actual being is such an embarrassing sight when viewed from the perspective of a godlike perfection that he cannot but despise it” (Horney 110). Mrs. Ramsay wastes her constructive energies to actualize her idealized-image. According to Horney, it cannot be actualized. Mrs. Ramsay falls short and she despises her real-self. Horney further adds that the neurotic despises “Sometimes everything: her human limitations; her body, its appearance, and functioning; the faculties of her mind, and any activity” (Horney 137). Mrs. Ramsay acts accordingly and she directs her constructive energies to useless pursuits. In this way, she wastes her psychic energies.

Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay have a thorny relationship. Mr. Ramsay stands opposite as far as his inner composition is concerned to his wife Mrs. Ramsay. To Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay is a deity- a supernatural being who is worshipped by her. He is controlling all aspects of her life. He has debilitating effects on her. It is due to the psychic compositions of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay is the personification of an aggressive Personality type and Mrs. Ramsay submits herself as a helpless creature before him. Mrs. Ramsay has fixed herself upon Mr. Ramsay and she feels his unconscious omnipresence around herself. She molds herself according to his needs and wishes. She cannot feel her ‘self’. She loses the depth of her feelings and emotions. According to Horney’s theory, “she tends to subordinate herself to others to be dependent upon them, to appease them” (Horney 258). This approach causes her psychic illness in the form of “morbid dependency” (Horney 258). Mr. Ramsay feeds on her psychic energies.

This morbid dependency not only hampers her psychic growth towards her self-realization but also misdirects her constructive energies to actualize her idealized-self. The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay involves such intricacies. “He needs to master; she needs to surrender” (Horney 248). He becomes demanding and she is complying with his needs and demands. Lily reprimands her that “Mrs. Ramsay gave him what he asked too easily” (Woolf 44).

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<sup>2</sup> The clarity and depth of his own feelings, thoughts, wishes, interests; the ability to tap his own resources, the strength of his will power; the special capacities or gifts he may have; the faculty to express himself, and to relate himself to others with his spontaneous feelings.

<sup>3</sup> The premise on which they operate is that nothing should be, or is, impossible for oneself.



At times, Mrs. Ramsay becomes fed up and she confesses that “she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions”. She draws this analogy of her life and a sponge because she feels that she nestles the doubts, apprehensions, uncertainties, and fears of others. She readily gives others what they ask for. “She tries automatically to live up to the expectations of others, or what she believes to be their expectations often to the extent of losing sight of her feelings” (Horney 51).

Mrs. Ramsay is harsh upon herself. She measures herself against the yardstick of her idealized-self now and then. She falls bitterly short and belittles herself for that. In Horney’s theory context, in her idealized-self, “there are taboos on all that is presumptuous, selfish, and aggressive. The scope covered by the taboos, they constitute a crippling check on the person’s expansion, her capacity for fighting and for defending herself, her self-interest on anything that might accrue to her growth or her self-esteem. The taboos and self-minimizing constitute a shrinking process that artificially reduces her stature” (Horney 219). Once she compares herself to her husband and she says that “there was nobody she revered more. She was not good enough to tie his shoe strings” (Woolf 31, 32).

Mrs. Ramsay feels and describes the phenomenon of Mr. Ramsay’s asking for sympathy. It is not the sympathy but the whole psychic construction and drainage of his compulsive demands upon Mrs. Ramsay. She acknowledges that “the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare” (Woolf 36). Unconsciously, she gives expression to her feeling and emotions that whenever Mr. Ramsay would ask for sympathy it is a painful process. She says that Mr. Ramsay will inject his male fatal sterility like a beak of brass, barren and bare. Then he sucks her psychic energies. It is always a painful and difficult process for her to give him what he asks for. From the perspective of Horney’s theory, she “molds herself into something she is not” (Horney 159). This process afflicts psychic pain in Mrs. Ramsay and leads to unconscious psychic disturbances. Horney believes that the neurotic is “driven instead being the driver” of her life. This is what happens to Mrs. Ramsay which is caused and triggered by Mr. Ramsay.

Mrs. Ramsay admits that it comes easier for him to ask what he wants as compared to her. She keeps her feelings and emotions to herself and she never expresses herself. She represses her feelings and emotions. She says that “he wanted something-wanted the thing she always found it so difficult to give him” (Woolf 115). Mrs. Ramsay communicates the most difficult things with ease but she cannot do so out of her inner composition. “He found talking so much easier than she did. He could say things-she never could” (Woolf 115). If she fails to fulfill his expectations and demands, he will readily accuse her. “A heartless woman he called her (Woolf 115). She beats herself down, her needs and desires to actualize her idealized-self and to fulfill the demands of her





husband which he puts on her for reasons of his own. She cuts herself with the razor edge sword of anxiety caused by her inner conflicts and shoulds<sup>4</sup>.

Her husband, inner conflicts, shoulds, compulsive claims, and demands become the source of emotional distress and haunts her. All these causes push her to utter hopelessness. To actualize her idealized-image becomes a devil's pact to her. All these sources engage her constructive psychic energies which can be used for inner growth. Mr. Ramsay loses Mrs. Ramsay rather than he and her inner conflicts, shoulds, compulsive claims, and demands slay her mercilessly. "Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty". (Woolf 121)

It becomes unbearable for her if she fails to fulfill the demands of her idealized-image. Horney in her theory depicts the emotionally stressful condition of the moving towards personality type that in case of any mishaps or lagging from the glorified image of herself, she would "lose herself in all kinds of feelings: in a 'sea of tears'; in ecstatic feelings about nature; in wallowing in guilt-feelings". (Horney 240)

Ramsay's relationship can be understood if it is viewed and analyzed from the perspective of Horney's Psychoanalytical Social Theory. According to the theory, Mr. Ramsay is "the expansive type" and Mrs. Ramsay is "the self-effacing type" (Horney 246). Horney thinks that the kind of relationship that exists between them is having devastating effects on both of them. She says that there exists "the less fortunate relations, in which the partners torment each other and in which the dependent partner is in danger of destroying himself, slowly and painfully" (Horney 243). In this relationship, Mrs. Ramsay is the morbid dependent partner.

Mrs. Ramsay's self-esteem depends upon her husband. According to Horney's theory, in a personality type like Mrs. Ramsay, "the partner becomes the sole center of her existence. Everything revolves around him. Her mood depends upon whether his attitude toward her is more positive or negative" (Horney 247). She has been through emotional distress due to her husband. Due to her inner composition, she develops "one fear-that of antagonizing and losing" the sole center of her existence. In Horney's opinion, this kind of approach makes Mrs. Ramsay "naturally suffer most" (Horney 248). The most ravaging effect of it would be that Mrs. Ramsay will "lose roots and become more and more impoverished" (Horney 248). The personality type Mr. Ramsay has saps the soul of Mrs. Ramsay.

Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay frustrates each other as both of them endeavor to actualize the doctrines of their respective idealized-self. Horney in her theory aptly depicts the relationship between such personality types as she says that "there is always some cat-and-mouse play of attracting and

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repulsing, binding and withdrawing” (Horney 249). They chase down each other without being realized the unconscious reasons for their inner conflicts and compulsive claims and demands.

Horney in her theory not only gives the reason but also describes the way how the expansive personality type frustrates the self-effacing personality type. According to Horney’s theory, Mr. Ramsay makes “her feel unwelcome and unwanted, withdrawing physically or psychically. The most harmful and, for her, least tangible part is his pervasive attitude of disregard and contempt”. (Horney 250)

On part of Mr. Ramsay, he does it for the satisfaction of the compulsive demands of his idealized-image. Horney in her theory puts forward the reasons why and for why the moving against personality type behaves in that way towards moving towards personality type. According to Horney, Mr. Ramsay unconsciously causes distress in Mrs. Ramsay for “his need for active externalization of his self-hate, he is fault finding and derogatory”. (Horney 250)

Mrs. Ramsay’s life falls apart due to these inner rifts and conflicts. A stage comes in Horney’s opinion in her life where the moving towards enters into a street with a dead end or point of no return. That point is the stage of utter hopelessness which is like a whirlpool and it drowns the person. From the perspective of Horney’s theory, Mrs. Ramsay “is actually at the point where it becomes a proposition of sink or swim” (Horney 256). Horney concludes that such a person “may contemplate suicide, threaten it, and attempt it, do it. He may fall ill and succumb to his illness” (Horney 257).

It does not mean that the natural outcome of the matrimonial alliance between the moving against and moving towards will be psychic death but it is Mrs. Ramsay who drags herself toward psychic death. Her death is psychic death because “she loses faith in herself and her development as a human being; she tends to give up” (Horney 184, 185). According to Horney’s Psychoanalytic Social Theory, the “consequences” are “grave enough to be called a psychic death”. (Horney 184, 185)

### **III CONCLUSION:**

Mrs. Ramsay has undertaken her voyage through the sea of her inner conflicts carrying the excruciating liability of her idealized-image towards the Lighthouse of her self-realization. But instead of reaching, she drowns herself by losing faith in herself and her capacities. Mr. Ramsay demoralizing and shattering part cannot be brushed aside. Mrs. Ramsay suffers a painful psychic death due to her inner conflicts, compulsive claims, unjustified and unconditioned neurotic needs and demands of her idealized-self, her contradictory shoulds, and the opposing expansive personality type of her husband, Mr. Ramsay. All these fatal causes slay her painfully and mercilessly. Although she died Mrs. Ramsay has the credit of kindling the natural urge in other





characters by bringing them together in the Isles of Sky under her straddle. She makes herself eternal by living in the memories of others or through the preserving arts of others.



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