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**RESEARCH PAPER**

# Servant Issue in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse:* A Journey From Marginalization to Inclusion

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**ABSTRACT**

This study engages itself with an important social matter that gained intensity in the 1920s: servant issue, and reconsiders the interrelations between masters and the servants. Through exposing the kitchen and domestic labor, Woolf criticizes the social system constructed on the basis of one class exploiting the other. To battle with the hierarchical relationship between servants and masters, Woolf betrays a consciousness of more equality in class relations, which is generally juxtaposed and interlocked with gender equality in her texts. This study is rereading of the domestic party scenes in view of the emphatic moment of the cook's spatial transgression from the kitchen to the drawing room, at which Woolf scrutinizes what has been hidden from the architecture of the Victorian private life.

| Keywords | Domestic Labor, Servant Issue, To The Lighthouse, Victorian Private Life, Virginia Woolf |
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## Introduction

One of the crucial issues the English society encountered as it moved towards the twentieth century was the "servant problem". Before 1914 sufficient number of people sought employment in the domestic service, but by the 1920s, servants had become scarce in middle-class homes in England. Momsen mentions that "After the Second World War, the live-in servants disappeared from most middle-class homes" (Momsen, 1999, p.3).

Such scarcity resulted partially from the opening-up of other job opportunities, as the live-in service "appealed less and less to younger women who, as the 20s wore on, increasingly had other options: clerical, shop or factory work" (Light, 2007, p. 178-79). It should come as no surprise that the Victorian domesticity that relied heavily on intensive labour of the lower orders was seriously challenged, which in turn caused transformation in the domestic role of middle-class married women or new relations between employer and employee.

*To the Lighthouse* contains Woolf's contemplation on the "servant issue". The domestic servants and domestic labour haunt the narrative of this novel. It is Mildred who spends three days preparing Mrs. Ramsay's celebrated *Boeuf en Daube* which

brings her dinner party to the triumphant moment. And the cleaning woman, Mrs. McNab, whose labour maintains the empty house while the Mrs. Ramsays are away, is ascribed to an independent narrative space in "Time Passes" of *To the Lighthouse*. This study is going to deal with the process by which Woolf picks domestic servants from periphery and makes them occupy a central place in the domestic setting of the twentieth century homes in Britain.

**Literature Review**

Woolf's novels have abundant parties of various kinds. Christopher Ames is the famous critic who has put forward the connection between parties and the modern literature. "In The Life of the Party: The Festive Vision in Modern Fiction, Ames brings fore, —the importance of parties to the novel" (Ames, 1991, p.299). Another writer speaks "her parties in certain settings contribute as the representative of "the social realities of her time" and "modernist narratives" (Ahmad, D.S. et al, 2020, p.386). And in the parties an important role is played by the servants which are a big social reality as a class.

One relevant work is "*Space and Gender in Woolf's Night and Day: The Sociocultural Implications of the Drawing Room as an Emblem of the Victorian Gender Roles*" (Mahmood, I.M et al, 2021, p.72-80). This study revolves around Virginia Woolf's portrayal of the outside world for an understanding of the political and social realities of her time. The drawing room setting is considered as an important factor for portrayal of gender based domestic politics in the start of the 20th century. However, the current study does not deal with drawing room, rather kitchen and servants while bringing fore the idea of love for all humanity including servants.

Another relevant article is "Realistic Rendering of Self-conscious Thought in A. S. Byatt's Possession: The Presentation of Victorian versus Contemporary Ideas of Man, Faith and Love" (Ahmad, 2021, 87-99).In this article the writer argues that the modern literary thoughts differ in nature from the ideas incarnated in Victorians i.e. George Eliot's fiction. A. S. Byatt represents the universal ideas of man, faith and love. The present study expands these ideas for servants in the domestic setting.

Michael Tratner, maintains that *To the Lighthouse* is a product of Woolf's struggle "to turn instead to thinking about vast collective entities such as classes, genders, and cultures" (Tratner, 1995, p. 49).This research work does not mainly deal with gender issue ,however brings into focus the class of servants and a new culture where servants are not just subordinates but equal stakeholders of domestic setup under a changing social scenario of twentieth century-an issue ignored in the research works on *To The Lighthouse*.

**Theoretical Framework**

According to Hermann Muthesius, in the beginning, kitchen "was a separate building" (Muthesius, 1979, p. 25) and the servants "were restricted to certain rooms" (Horn, 2001,p. 12). In other words, the ideal servant would remain a silent, invisible presence in the house. The 1920s marked a transitional age in the English society between the labour-intensive Victorian domesticity and the modern, servant-free household. With the increasing scarcity of domestic servants in the 1920s, the location of kitchen was subjected to transformation. The kitchen evolved from the nineteenth-

century subsidiary domestic space hidden from the front view to the centre of home as it is today. (Freeman,2004, p.47)

In her 1924 essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", she instances a Georgian cook who engages a spatial transgression from the basement kitchen to the drawing room to illustrate her most celebrated declaration that "in or about December 1910 human character changed"(Woolf,1924,p.2). Woolf particularly bases her claim on the "character of one's cook": That a cook is able to leave the dank basement and roam into the drawing room suggests a change of the spatial code in the English house. And, such a shift changed the "social relations of hierarchy and authority". The domestic servants were still a necessary presence in the modern household, but they could never be treated in the same way as they had been in the Victorian house.

The large establishments of the Victorian age in which distinctions between servants and family were spatially defined and were thus kept apart were no longer a common practice in Woolf's time. What took their places were smaller households with a cook or a cook and a maid employed to tend to the family. (Giles, 2004, p. 67) In such "modern" households that began to catch on in the 1920s, the demarcated relations between employer and employee were hard to maintain. Under such circumstances, the contact between mistress and maid became increasingly intimate. Servants wished to be recognized as individuals who worked alongside the mistress instead of working beneath her.

It discussed that in representing Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party, Woolf not only focuses on the "party poetics" of the hostess – the skills she has in organizing the social occasion and in combining a great variety of guests, but also brings out the domestic labour that underlies such social and artistic creation. This way, Woolf's concern with the changing social relations and a change in hierarchy in domestic sphere between master and servant is significantly noted and brought to fore.

**Discussion**

Mrs. Ramsay, in *To The Lighthouse*, is blessed with domestic and social skills; she is enthusiastic about giving parties; and she is both idealized and criticized within the text. Mrs. Ramsay is more pinned down by domesticities, having eight children and a demanding husband to tend to. In this sense, Mrs. Ramsay is cast more in light of the Victorian zeitgeist that defined woman as nurturer as well as mother and wife. McGee has noticed that "*To the Lighthouse* is perhaps the best literary evocation of women's work" (McGee, 2001, p. 37). Mrs. Ramsay is meant to be a perfect incarnation of the Victorian ideology of home and femininity. By taking issue with such a Victorian matron, Woolf proceeds to explore the interconnections between domesticity, artistic creativity and social change in the changing world in this novel.

The novel has three sections: The Windows, Time Passes and To the Lighthouse. "The Windows", situated in a holiday house in pre-war years, recreates the Victorian domestic life centring on the conflicts in the lives of Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay, and their eight children. Occupying nearly two thirds of the whole novel, this section culminates in a dinner party that celebrates an engagement Paul and Minta, two of the Ramsays' guests. Mrs. Ramsay's dinner meets with resistance at first. William Bankes, who has refused Mrs. Ramsay's invitation several times, does not like family life and prefers to eat alone in his own room, finding the dinner "a

terrible waste of time" at the beginning (Woolf,1927,p. 134). Charles Tansley, a young man who advocates boundaries of gender roles and tells Lily that "women can't paint, women can't write", is critical about the conversations at the table, which strike him as insincere. Lily Briscoe does not wish to place herself in the situation when she is forced to abide by the code of behavior which dictates that a woman should go to the help of the young man to release his uneasiness and discomfort in any social occasions. To these people who remain single, Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party is more like a social ritual that aims to integrate the individuals who exist outside the system of domestic life.

However, Woolf does not plunge her reader into the mire of the gender war. The dinner table is not only a social space produced by the women conforming to the conventions and men asserting themselves, it is also one created by a dynamic of the mistress and the servants. Though no kitchen perspective is provided, Woolf exposes the servant labour through moments of interruption at the dinner table, which has so far unfortunately escaped critical attention. This moment is particularly presented through one of the guests, William Bankes, who finds it annoying to have his conversations with Mrs. Ramsay constantly interrupted by her issuing orders to her maid. As the dinner starts, Mrs. Ramsay is talking with Mr. Bankes about some family they both know of, but they are interrupted briefly by her saying to the maid "Yes, take it away" (Woolf,1927,p. 131). Goldman has noticed that "The Window" starts with Mrs. Ramsay's saying "Yes" to mollify her son and ends with her unspoken "Yes" to her husband, maintaining that Mrs. Ramsay's "Yes" "is deployed as an affirmation of patriarchal matrimony at every turn" (Goldman,2008,p. 61). However, Goldman leaves out the "Yes" which Mrs. Ramsay says to her servant during the middle of the dinner. Moreover this polite conversation recalls an article (Mahmood, M, I et al., 2020, p.871-881) where the writers have explored most preferred polite linguistic strategies while interacting with the people of lower class.

Given that the smooth conversations between the hostess and guests are a significant sign of the successful party, these moments of interruption bear exploration. As a matter of fact, being discomfited by Mrs. Ramsay's conversation with her maid, Mr. Bankes further trivializes domesticity by mentally comparing it with work: "[h]ow trifling it all is, how boring it all is … compared with the other thing—work" (Woolf,1927,p. 134). Such trivialization or dissatisfaction apparently poses a major threat to the success of Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party, or, her domestic creativity. As a societal hostess, Mrs. Ramsay is familiar with the social code that governs the dinner table, so is Woolf, the writer. Mrs. Ramsay's act of saying "Yes" to her servant at the expense of her continuous conversation with her guest acknowledges the labour of the maid and more significantly, highlights her role in creating this social space of the dinner table. Through Bankes, Woolf invokes the old dialectical opposition between domesticity and work or creativity. Meanwhile, Woolf's bringing servant labour into focus through such moment of interruption, constitutes her new and changed aesthetics.

It is the celebrated Boeuf en Daube – a combination of Mrs. Ramsay's grandmother's recipe and the cook's labour – that comes to rescue, turning Mrs. Ramsay's dinner into an everlasting memory of the characters in the novel and becomes one of the most impressive party scenes in modernist literature. E. M. Forster lavishes his compliment on Woolf's deployment of food in her novels, instancing in particular "the great dish of the Boeuf en Daube" (Forster, 1942, p. 25). Forster notices

that the dinner is endowed with "affection and poetry and loveliness" (ibid, 25), the qualities which can only be presented through describing the real food. According to Forster, Woolf knew how to provide food both in fiction and in her home, instead of merely "a statement beneath a dish-cover" (ibid, 26). Here, Forster, consciously or unconsciously, suggests that domesticity is intimately related to novel-writing. The fact that the dinner exhales "affection and poetry and loveliness" has moved the fictional meal partially beyond the realm of domesticity, and is elevated to the realm of artistic creation.

In a similar vein, the fruit bowl arranged by Rose is aestheticized. Being brought into focus by the lighting of all the candles, the dish of fruit, a composite of grapes and pears, not only triggers Mrs. Ramsay's imagination but also nourishes Augustus Carmichael, a poet who eventually gains fame when he reappears in the last section of the novel. Mrs. Ramsay is glad to find that "Augustus too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit" (Woolf, 1927, p. 146). Thus, Mrs. Ramsay realizes that "looking together united them" (ibid, 146). Once again, the hostess is linked with the artist (poet). When all the candles are lit, the dinner table undergoes substantial changes. The order and dryness inside, represented by the light, throws the darkness and uncertainty in the external world into relief. This realization transforms the guests as well as the hostess.

Woolf has the Boeuf en Daube brought to the table in a most symbolic way. Instead of having it presented on the table mysteriously, Woolf chooses to dramatize its entrance with another important "creation" of Mrs. Ramsay's – the engagement of Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley, who are late for dinner. It is right at the moment when Mrs. Ramsay is waiting anxiously and expectantly for their return that Minta and Paul, and "a maid carrying a great dish in her hands came in together" (Woolf, 1927, p. 147-8).

Such juxtaposition of the engagement and the great dish deserves further consideration. This engagement is largely Mrs. Ramsay's making. She encourages Paul to propose to Minta. Steve Ellis contends that Woolf projects the Victorian past onto the love between Minta and Paul, or "a romance lacking in modernity" (Ellis, 2007, p. 83). However, this romance staged in the first section, is coupled with a heavy sense of loss. Upon their engagement, Minta symbolically loses her grandmother's brooch, "the sole ornament she possesses" (Woolf, 1927, p. 116). This sense of loss results from the fact that Minta, who seems "to be afraid of nothing – except bulls" (Woolf, 1927, p. 113), is robbed of an alternative way of life though she has demonstrated anti-domestic signs, and is integrated into the system of domestic life represented by Mrs. Ramsay, who says repeatedly in the novel that "people must marry; people must have children" (Woolf, 1927, p. 93). In a similar vein, the dish, which means to be a celebration of the occasion, represents another form of integration, the integration of the servant labour into the maintenance of the middle-class domestic system. By foregrounding the moment at which the maid brings the dish to the table, Woolf lays bare the servant labour in domestic creativity and demyths the English dinner table. Furthermore, the cooperation between the hostess and the cook is made distinct here. Mrs. Ramsay remembers the labour of the cook as Marther takes off the cover: "The cook had spent three days over that dish. And she must take great care" (Woolf, 1927, p. 151). It is only through Mrs. Ramsay who stands

at the pivot of domesticity that domestic labour acquires its significance and is elevated to the aesthetic level.

However, the significance of the servant figures in *To the Lighthouse* lies far beyond their role in creating the beautiful unity Mrs. Ramay values most in giving the dinner party. As Tratner has observed, in *To the Lighthouse*, "a change of psychology, a change of literary form, and a change of historical era are all invoked by the emergence into the text of working-class women of marginal ethnicity" (Tratner,1995,p. 52). In "Time Passes", Woolf represents the consciousness of a working-class woman, Mrs. McNab, by locating her against the house left empty by the Ramsays. If, as McGee points out, the centrality of the dinner and the hostess is expressed through the architectural emphasis on the centrality of the dining-room in "The Windows" (McGee, 2001,p.139) and the space of the kitchen is only brought into being by the penetration of smell and the frequent interruptions the movements of the maids cause to the conversations, then in 'Time Passes', Woolf not only lays bare the servant labour that maintains the house and the family life, but also allows Mrs. McNab, the cleaner, a narrative space of her own, ascribing her the agency for domestic and social changes.

Mrs. McNab has been interpreted variously. Michael Tratner recognizes Woolf's celebration of labour, but admits that Mrs. McNab and her friend, Mrs. Bast, "do not bring any original vision of their own into the novel" and their labour is apropriated to help release the inner vision of Lily or to facilitate her artistic creation (Tratner, 2001, p.58). What is emphasized in these contentions is the instrumental role servants usually perform in English literature.

"Time Passes", Pamela L. Caughie notices, "is not simply a ten-year gap in time separating past and present, the disintegration before ever-new orders" (Caughie,1992, p. 312). Caughie argues from a postmodern perspective, this section "is less a transition to a new order than a problematizing disruption in the family-romance narrative constructed in parts 1 and 3, revealing what this modern narrative cannot account for" (ibid,312). Tratner also notes, Woolf accentuates in this section "a breakdown of barriers between social groups" (Tratner,2001,p.53), as the working-class women who are hidden behind the kitchen door in "The Windows", Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast are free to enter the rooms from which they have been barred in the first section. In other words, they represent what has been left out in Mrs. Ramsay's party in the first section.

In "Time Passes", Woolf discloses the interrelations between servants and the household. According to William R. Handley, Woolf begins to unhinge the domestic economy she has framed in the first section. Through rendering the house empty, Woolf allows us to see more clearly the constructedness of the class stratifications in the household.(Handley,1994,p.15-41 )Mrs. McNab is presented as the agency of domestic as well as social transformation. There is no doubt that her labour not only rescues the house from decaying, but bear witness to the changes that eventually allow Lily to finish her painting and to remain unmarried in the last section of the novel. This is borne out through the spatial reconfiguration in the "Time Passes."When one of Mrs. Ramsay's daughters writes to ask to see the house was ready, Woolf represents the working of servants Mrs McNab and Mrs. Bast in these words:

some rusty *laborious birth* seemed to be taking place, as the women, stooping, rising, groaning, singing, slaped and slammed, upstairs now, now down in the cellars. Oh, they said, the work! (Woolf, 1927, p. 209)

Here Woolf associates domestic laobur with act of creation that restores life and vitality to the decayed house. Through such detailed descriptions of their work, Woolf pays a tribute to the working class, whose existence is structurally hidden in the Victorian house.

Meanwhile, they take control over the space: they drink tea in the bedroom sometimes, or in the study (Woolf, 1927, p. 210), recalling the past, which includes not only the Ramsays, but also Mildred the cook, whose name they often confuse with Marian. Given that the spatial transgression in Woolf's work often indicates a shift in relations, the shift of space control indicates a shift in class relations: the relations between masters and servants she claims as having hapened in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown". Thus 'Time Passes' represents the transitional period from the Victorian household to the modernist household. In this sense, Woolf continues to apropriate the servant figures as a symbol of social transformation.

It comes as no surprise that the last section of the novel, "The Lighthouse", finds the house and the family considerably altered, in the architecture among others. The spatial divisions are less rigid: The dining room is no longer the centre of the house; instead, the guests help themselves with their breakfast in the kitchen. At first, everyone seems to be at a loss with the absence of Mrs. Ramsay: Lily does not know whether she should go to the kitchen to fetch another cup of coffee; Cam and James are not ready for their expedition to the lighthouse; Nancy has forgotten to order the sandwiches. Without Mrs. Ramsay, it has become a house full of "unrelated passions" (Woolf, 1927, p. 221). But it is in such a house released from the matriarchal control that Lily finishes her painting and Mr. Ramsay and his children accomplish their trip to the lighthouse.

**Conclusion**

What this study has highlighted is that the "servant issue" stood at the centre of domestic transformation in the early half of the twentieth century, impacting on the hierarchical relationship between master and servant. Thus this novel *To The Lighthouse* has moved servants from marginalized status to ma central position in the domestic setup of twentieth century British homes. Thus from the servants' point of view this study is about their movement from marginalization to inclusion .The novel points out that the Victorian servants are still a necessary existence in the house in modern times however the relation of master and servant are changed in the changing social circumstances. Woolf bodies forth the change of domestic sphere and undercuts the identity of the mistress in the changed social order of 20th century. Furthermore, bringing the servants into narrative symbolizes Woolf's literary innovation in characterization.

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