



Nature of Narrative in *To The Lighthouse*

Bishnu Prasad Pokharel

Lecturer, Nepal Sanskrit University, Nepal

Abstract

This article analyses *To the Lighthouse* in the light of probing the psychology of Ramsay family. To probe the psychology of the family Virginia Woolf has used stream of consciousness technique under which thoughts, memories, expectations and feelings have random association. Sometimes the consciousness of Mr. Ramsay is shifted to the consciousness of James Ramsay, then moves to the consciousness of Mrs Ramsay and Lily. The consciousness of these characters has been amalgamated without showing the sense of change in the view. The main objective of the writer is not to allow the readers to identify the way there is the shift in perspective. This is so because there has to be the follow of thought without any disturbances due to the consciousness of clock time and visible shift in perspective. Rather than giving visible social life view she has given importance to the psychological landscape. Having three parts with distinct three different aspects the novel does not give importance to the outside world rather values the world within. Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay, James, Lily and Charles Tansley are the major characters of this novel. Mr. Ramsay is a self-dramatizing domestic tyrant, who lacks love and affection needed in the family. He fails to internalize the psychology of the children and wife. This is so because he gives importance to down to earth harsh reality. However his wife does have the ability to win the love and affection of the family. The children including James Ramsay find solace only in her. This indicate that his wife Mrs. Ramsey is a psychologist.

Keywords: consciousness, experimentation, narrative, psychology, probe

Introduction

Virginia Woolf is one of the leading English novelists of the twentieth century. She had the courage to break free from tradition, and then to give a new direction, a new form and a new spiritual awareness, to the English novel. Virginia Woolf's novels present the balance of stream of consciousness technique. She has successfully created form on the chaos inherent in the novels of subjectivity. David Daiches says, "In *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf takes a group of characters on holiday... to help her to arrange the characters into symbolic relations with each other and to the landscape" (1160). *To the Lighthouse* published in 1927 is her seminal text that contains the experimentation of narrative technique so as to probe the psychology of the family members. Gilbert Phelps categorizes her in the light of modern style, "D.H. Lawrence's revolt against 'the old skin and grief form of the English novel, Virginia Woolf's reaction against the materialism of writer's like Arnold Bennet and H.G. Wells, and James Joyce's linguistic and narrative innovations, had all seemed to be pointing in the direction of greater experimentation and a break-up of the fictional moulds" (414). Woolf has been popular for her style of presentation. John Mullan traces the use of the stream of consciousness technique. Traces of the stream of consciousness can be found in many contemporary novels. Yet Woolf does something stranger than follow of the thought process of her central character (249). He further analyses the novel in the vein of psychological probing, "Comparable, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* sometimes employs paragraphs that, in closely printed

paperback editions, are two or three pages long. In the stream of one of her characters' thought, reveries unspool, unbroken by any conventional requirements of units of meaning". (226). The popularity of the novel rests on critical evaluation as W.H. Hudson gives the assertive remarks saying that "Woolf used prose for poetic material" (215). According to Guerin *et al.*, women's silences can also be the resistance to discourse "Examples might be Emily Dickinson's 'slant truth' or inner dialogue of such quiet characters as Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre or Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe" (197). The novel epitomizes bringing an analytical sense of form to the urgent chaos of personality. The chaos of the family is brought to the forefront through multiple narratives. In the words of Rob Pope, "Modernists in English include such figures as Joyce, Woolf, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Carlos William Carlos, Stevens and Beckett. All of these writers developed strategies of non- realist representation involving collage, montage, pastiche, stream of consciousness, multiple points of view.... (128). The mother understands the feeling of the children and deals as they demand but the father fails to understand the psychology of family and friends and creates terror in the family. It is so because Virginia Woolf believes that males fail to probe the psychology as Harry Blamires opines, "Virginia Woolf distrusted the masculine world of practical action and commercialized fiction that flattered its superficialities" (448). Critics have valued the use of interior monologue as an experimental means of presenting ideas but her purpose of using this technique is to externalize the family psychology. Without this technique all the characters are

unlikely to assert what they feel. Domestic psychology of a family has been highlighted through the voice of all the characters. Within this vein the father fails to understand the psychology of other members of his family. This is known through his own voice and the voice of other characters.

To the lighthouse: Structural synopsis

The novel has been structured in three parts. The first part has got the dominating psychological probing of James Ramsay. The personality, nature and character of Mr. Ramsay has been Mrs. Ramsay has been highlighted through the voice of James, Lily Briscoe, Charles Tansley and other guests. All these characters perceive major characters with varied perspectives. They have one common view that Mr. Ramsay lacks affection that the head of the family needed. The second part memory operates in the mind of minor character Mrs. Mc Nab. The readers visualize Mrs. Ramsay and other characters through her eyes. Her judgment seems to be slightly away from those who are the insiders. The third part is significant as it is the last part of the novel. Through this part the clear picture of Mrs. Ramsay is seen through the memory of Lily Briscoe. Right from the beginning to the end of the novel, Mrs Ramsay holds the central position. She does so not only during her life but also after her death. The final part has shown the victory of psychological time over clock time. The author has woven the characters through their psychological probing. The organization of the novel rests on the one character's view about another highlighting one another's personality.

Narrative technique

Narrative is a term that has been derived from the French word "Narratif" and refers to spoken and written account of connected sequential events. The requirements of narrative are a narrator, a story and events. When all these elements are put together, it becomes a narrative story. Some tellers are present and quite intrusive while others are enigmatic and distant. There must be a narrator though he seems to be invisible in the story.

Michael J. Toolan defines narrative as "a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events" (7). Robert Schols and Kellog highlight the importance of story and story teller, "By narrative we mean all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics; the presence of a story and story teller" (4). First person and third person narrative are the major narrative techniques. However during the twentieth century a group of novelists used stream of consciousness technique and multiple narratives so as to present the free flow of thought. Stream of consciousness technique freely uses interior monologue of the characters without having any disturbances of the external factors. There is association of thought only in the underlying sense of the word. The reality is transparently visible as characters are not aware of the social constraints.

The flow of thought cannot be bound in the access of time. In this technique, the past merges into the present and gets faded into the future. As far as the concept of time is concerned, there is no fixed line that divides present, past and future rather there is intermingling of time and space.

Narrative technique in *To the Lighthouse*

The main concern of Virginia Woolf is not simply tell the story as the 18th and 19th century novelists did Her concern was to probe the psychology and record the life of people as they are. Character's consciousness without being identified with one consciousness is the major issue of Woolf.

The diverse reactions of the characters have been merged so as to create the complete reaction of the readers. Consequently the novel happens to be coherent whole. Once Mrs Ramsay assures James about visiting the Lighthouse saying "Yes, of course, if it is fine tomorrow" the boy feels "extraordinary joy"(3). However the negative presentation of his father, "it wont be fine" creates anger which has been probed through the visualization of the invisible. James is extremely angry. His anger has been externalized through the expression, "had there been an axe handy, a poker, Orany weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him". This is significant part that highlights the psychology of the significant character James. However Mrs Ramsay presents the positive thought through the lines, "I expect it will be fine"(4). Habib says, "Indeed the reality explored in Woolf's novels is largely that of the internal psychology of given characters as this interacts with the external world as well as reality of their relationship with one another" (627).

Sometimes the psychology of James while at other the psychology of Mrs Ramsay has been the issue of narrative concern. However the readers get the psychology through one another's vision. There is only change of characters not the follow of thought. Despite the lack of outwardly visible coherence of thought there is the echo of thought in one another. The repeated assertion of Mr Ramsay "No going to the Lighthouse" and Mrs Ramsay's thought "Odious little man, thought Mrs Ramsay, why go on saying that?" (13) Here lies the ability of the writer to shift the perspective from one character to the next. due to the change in the perspective Woolf has become an icon of experimental technique. The mind functions as the landscape where the thoughts of the characters assimilate without creating the borderline between the world within and the world outside. The world within is the mind that crosses the borderline of social reality and dives into the depth of psychological reality.

Mrs Ramsay's stream of consciousness is visible in the following line, "What was she dreaming about, Mrs Ramsay wondered, seeing her engrossed, as she stood there, with some thought of her own" (48). Mrs Ramsay's consciousness here moves upon Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley. Her wish is to see her married life. Then and there the narration shifted to James, "Oh, but she never wated James to grow a day older or Cam either"(51). The change of perspective is the main crux of this novel. Not only Mrs Ramsay but also other characters as well shift in perspectives. This is the way Woolf gains experimentation of technique. Stream of consciousness technique has been used when Prue has told her that Nancy has gone with Minta and Paul, "Mrs Ramsay wondered, standing still to let her clasp the necklace she had chosen, divining, through her own past, some deep, some buried, some quite speechless feeling that one had for one's mother at Rose's age" (71). Here her vision of the past has been merged into the present. Thinking about necklace and then moving into the past dissolving the past in the present is found here. The buried thought come as she holds necklace. The interior

monologue of Lily has been presented so as to weave her thought too, "Lily thought; it was one of those misjudgments of hers...He has his work, Lily aid to herself. She remembered all of sudden as if she had found a treasurer, that she had her work"(74).Her shift in thought is seen about thinking of William Bank and then suddenly changes to the thought of painting. This is the technique that creates the identity of Woolf. Lily starts to resume her work. In the mean time Mrs Ramsay offers the dish which Bankes admires. However immediately after that Mrs Ramsay thinks of Mr. Ramsay, "her husband was in great spirits tonight, and wishing, she supposed, to make it all right with old" and listens music of the people, "The words sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves" (97). The conversation of the characters has been woven together creating the blurring line of time present and time past. Woolf through Mrs Ramsay again uses stream of consciousness technique, "What had happened, she wondered, as she took up her knitting, since she had seen him alone? She remembered dressing, and seeing the moon; Andrew holding his plate too high at dinner" (107). Her shift in narrative perspective from one incident to the next is continuously visible.

One of the significant aspects of the novel is the death of Mrs Ramsay which has been presented abruptly without giving much importance, "[Mr. ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arm out, but, Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arm out. They remained empty]" (115). Death of Mrs Ramsay has been deliberately distanced and it is only the reported death though she dominated the novel living at the centre of attention. Same was the case about the death about Prue Ramsay. Lily Briscoe's stream of thought is found highlighting her feeling about Mr Ramsay, "That man, she thought, her anger rising in her, never gave; that man took. She, on the other hand, would be forced to give" (134). Though Ramsay seems to demand sympathy from her, she ignores simply because she finds him intolerable. She thinks of Mrs. Ramsay remembering how she spread happiness in the family. Here Lily blurs the demarcation line between present and the past. Her desire to live both in the past and the present violates the clock time. Time past merges into the time present and gets faded in the future. All the characters have been scattered here and there but Mrs. Ramsay till her life made them together through love and care. Moreover she understood the psychology of the rest of the characters. At the ending part of the novel once again the technique of narration counts much, "So it was like that, James thought, the Lighthouse one had seen across the bay all these years; it was a dark tower on a bare rock" (181). The ultimate wish of Mrs Ramsay to let her son be there at the light house gets fulfilled. Human beings fail to communicate. This is the reason why people develop anger and hatred. So they fail to feel fresh. Woolf employed the narrative technique through which communication in silence is possible. Interior monologue of the character is the means to give outlet. Thus, the only means of communication is the critical view of one character to other character. Self willed and egocentric nature creates chaos in the family in the modern. Woolf through stream of consciousness

not only weaves the characters who are in isolation but also hints the technique of giving outlet to the hidden feelings. Mrs Ramsay acts as a catylist so as to weave the life of people together. Understanding the psychology of characters she dives into the depth and binds them. All the people gathered at Ramsay's house including Ramsay's children and friends have been revealed in the light of their relation to Mrs Ramsay. A large variety of people assembled there cling to her for solace. Form has been provided to the formless and order has been maintained to the chaos. Therefore the action moves from one mind of the character to that of the next. The technique freely allows all the characters to say what they feel to say. Organic whole of the novel rests on this technique adopted by the writer. Woolf has successfully created form and order using the experimental mode of narrative technique. Selection of the subject matter and ordering of the material has created artistic integrity.

Conclusion

The novel is popular because the writer goes beyond the appearance of the character and pinpoints the psychology of the character digging beneath the surface highlighting what one feels for others. To do so, Woolf employs stream of consciousness technique so that every character may express the feeling dismantling the social barriers. Mrs Ramsay, James Ramsay and Lily Briscoe are the major figures who have used interior monologue to portray the nature and character of most of the characters. Among all the characters Mr. Ramsay shows his brutal nature precisely because he fails to probe the psychology of the children because of which James expresses his willingness to murder the father. The only character Mrs. Ramsay is able to probe the feeling of her children. The way the domestic psychology is narrated through the multiple perspectives of the characters is very significant about the novel. Woolf has created psychological atmosphere mainly to become thoroughly involved with the characters and their actions.

References

1. Daiches, David. *A Critical History of English Literature*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Limited, 1996, 4.
2. Guerin, Wilfred L, et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. 4th Ed. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.
3. Habib MAR. *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to the Present*. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
4. Hudson WH. *An Outline of English Literature*. Delhi: AITBS, 2001.
5. Mullan, John. *How Novels Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
6. Phelps, Gilbert. *The Post War English Novel*. The Pelican Guide to English Literature. Ed.by Boris Ford. London Penguin Books, 1995, 8.
7. Pope, Rob. *The English Studies Book*. London and New York: Routledge, Schols R, Kellog R. *The Nature of Narrative*. New York: Oxford UP, 1966. Toolan, Michael J *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985-1998.
8. Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. London: Robin

Books, 2013.