

Lily Briscoe: A Victim Feminist or a Feminist Radical?

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Abstract

*One of the most innovative female personages by the well-known British feminist thinker and novelist, Virginia Woolf, is Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily could be taken as the most contemplative and sophisticated character since she mirrors both Woolf's mental turbulences within masculine environments and indicates particular Woolfean feminist concerns in terms of sexual identity. *To the Lighthouse* centres on Lily Briscoe depicting her as a canon of bipolar confusion; she desires a rationally heterosexual love internally, while she is unavoidably restricted by a masculine world in which patriarchal prejudiced forces veer her central attention away toward a dark doubt: one could be her face as a radical feminist and the other one a victim feminist. This article, with regard to Camile Paglia, the American activist and feminist scholar, assumes that neither radically modern feminism which tends to alienate women from men due to masculine cruelty nor victim feminism, introduced and elaborated by Paglia, would develop a realistically prudent human society, but a coalition of both men and women devoid of any male or female sexual dominance would lead to a more rationally well-made society formation.*

Key Words: *patriarchy; victim feminism; sexual superiority; Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse**

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Introduction:

Modern feminism is of crucial importance since it is intended to enhance women's life styles in terms of modern society they encounter in recent times. Besides, feminism is regarded as a humanitarian foundation which has attempted to improve women's social situations. However, the battle has not been limited to social studies since modern feminism could be followed in women's economical, sexual, psychological and all different personal concerns. Indeed, when one follows feminism up to modern times, one may recognize various

movements deriving from this foundation some of which could be considered to be too radical or rather prejudiced.

Modern feminism is normally expected to help women around the world to feel better about themselves and their society and to lead them towards the best quality of life in rational society, while some modern feminist scholars seem to have deviated from the path to a biased same-sex pattern stressing misandry. If such tendencies are taken seriously during recent years, feminism must have mostly lead women away from a normal and constructive society inclusive of both men and women. If modern separatist feminism neglects the important role of mutual relationships concerning both men's and women's instincts as well as their social needs, serious harm would result to the basis of family, marriage, motherhood and many other natural constructive concepts of human life. Nonetheless, one should also bear in mind that radical feminism arises in response to masculine restrictions in society. Consequently, patriarchal and masculine superiorities must be overcome if a rational human society is to flourish.

Method

One may not find what Mary Wollstonecraft founded in the late 18th century in England as social-political feminism which could be similar to the notions of modern feminism. Although the traditional response to modern feminism has been a rather ignorant view in recent years, this paper intends to consider the notorious aspects feminism triggered through women and men's personal and social lives concerning separatism and anti-heterosexual tendencies. Accordingly, Third-wave feminism critics have come across two major divisions about how modern feminism could solve inescapable biological feminine features as importantly as their social and political rights lately: power feminism led by writers such as Heywood, Drake and Walker which is assumed to provoke a rather prejudiced foundation, whereas the other division - victim feminism - is considered to be the one which develops the idea of women's freedom in case they rationalise the current prejudiced circumstances. Some of these Victim Feminism scholars include Camile Paglia, Katie Roiphe and Rene Denfield (Tong, *Feminist Thought* 355).

Camile Paglia, who can be viewed as the pioneer figure of victim feminism and the most popular forerunner of the movement in opposition to radical feminism thinkers, maintains that radical feminists, who persist on a self-controlling feminine community free of opposite sex, have consciously disregarded what women think of themselves and their sporadic personal as well as their social needs (Paglia, *Sexual Personage. Art and Decadence from Nafertiti to Emily Dickinson* 56). Applying victim feminism attitudes studied by Paglia, this article aims at clarifying the drawbacks modern feminism has provoked in recent years within both women's social etiquettes and personal life styles in terms of separatism as one of the resolutions that modern feminism stresses. Such notoriety is precisely studied in this

article from victim feminism looking glass which intends to clarify many dualities observed in modern feminists' conceptions.

Understanding the limitations modern feminism causes in women's lives concerning heterosexual relationships which could never be neglected through social pipelines, one may gain a broader view over how victim feminism recommends women think rationally. This could be practical if they obtain a more comprehensible achievement as soon as they reach a proper solution to overcome the current suppressing circumstances of masculine codes.

Discussion

It is interesting enough to see how women themselves rated modern feminism or tentatively post-modern feminism during recent years: a 1989 survey by Time - CNN Yankelovich - reflected a 77% agreement among women claiming improvement in women's life styles since the beginning of social-economical feminism. Also, according to a Time survey on 4 December 1989, it was announced that 82% of women strongly agreed with the current progressive improvement of their personal lives due to what feminism was contributing. On the other hand, it was in middle the 1990s that the British NOP declared only about 9% of the studied women between 18-34 preferred to call themselves feminists and planned to support the movement publicly; only 33% of the surveyed women through CNN Yankelovich poll preferred to possess the title *feminist* (Somerville, *Feminism and the Family: Politics and society in the UK and USA* 227).

Indeed, the most important neglected concept through feminism in recent years could be the notion of separation which modern feminism has been spreading within society: the separation of women from their own original identities concealed in a layer of misandry. That is how Rene Denfeld asserts that the fresh innovative feminism has lost many of its young partisans as the New Victorian movement faded away; since Denfeld claims such a dramatic loss has happened to 20th century modern feminism, one could call this 'Neo-Victorianism' (Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* 19).

Interestingly enough, feminism potential candidates have frequently complained about the looking glass modern feminism has taken about women's identities; they occasionally criticise modern feminists' attitudes as the ones which tend to proclaim a typically different prescriptive pattern for women - either indoors or outdoors - that seems rather separating and denying several feminine instinctive and enjoyable tendencies (Robbins, *Snowed Up: A Mistletoe Story": Feminist Approaches, Literary Theories: A Case Study in Critical Performance*. 8). Furthermore, due to a recent integrity of feminism and same-sex relationships - occasionally confused with each other - throughout the universal press and media, it looks as if feminism has been transformed into an unavailable metaphor projecting extremism and misandry as a broad fundamental mainstream (Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* 14).

But is it how Virginia Woolf's feministic notions worked also? Is this all about the mental collapse of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* in terms of social interactions? Elaine Showalter in her *A Literature of Their Own* categorises feminism movement according to her own historical tendencies: the feminine phase (1840-1880), the feminist phase (1880-1920), and the female phase (1970-present) in which one may find some of the main women writers of the time (Bressler, *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* 175).

Woolf's Lily Briscoe is located in a tremendous vacancy since she is a non-classified female personage regarding Showalter's enumeration above. And that is approximately justified by Lily's internal doubts concerning her own feminine essences imposed by masculine environment suppression. Lily could be a semi-modern personage who has partially skipped the feminist phase, while she has not reached the last phase yet. It seems as if Virginia Woolf has truly recognised such suspension through the post-war period, time of modernity, or an exclusive distinct gap in which she and her woman characters have fallen into.

Furthermore, although Lily's (Woolf's) interactions seem to discard the masculine model of questing romance through her language and contemplation, she does not seem to find herself a feminist. Even if she feels assaulted by patriarchal norms she is bound by, she rejects the word feminist. "It was too difficult to know quite what one meant about all this" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 138). Or "Oh! But she was not a feminist! That was a silly thing to say" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 139). Christine Froula in her *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde*, remarks that the way Lily applies the word "one" in the above quotation from the novel reveals the truth that Lily does not intend to stress sexual distinctions as she contemplates the illusive turbulences in her mind beyond sexuality (Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde* 89). Likewise, Allie Glenny asserts that what Lily does in *To the Lighthouse* is filling gaps between her and other close characters like Mrs. Ramsay in the way that she has left no space and time to herself to fill in. (Glenny, *Ravenous Identity: Eating and Eating Distress in the Life and Work of Virginia Woolf* 137).

Lily who could mirror Woolf indeed (Simpson, *Gifts, Markets and Economics of Desire in Virginia Woolf* 107), is engulfed in an extremely masculine community since she observes Mr. Ramsay and his other friends and colleagues during her stay in Ramsays' summer house. Charles Tansley is the one who mocks the idea of women painting and appreciating poetry (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 79). And Lily, who is logically discarded from all natural bonds, expected to form a relationship with opposite sex, is drastically suppressed:

Lily Briscoe went on putting away her brushes, looking up, looking down. Looking up, there he was - Mr. Ramsay - advancing towards them, swinging, careless, oblivious, remote. A bit of a hypocrite? She repeated. Oh no - the most sincere of men., the truest (here he was), the best; but

looking down, she thought, he is absorbed in himself, he is tyrannical, he is unjust; and kept looking down, purposely, for only so could she keep steady, staying with the Ramsays. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 34)

What is Lily really scared of? Although she keeps appreciating her solitude and brushes up her lack of any serious relationship, she must have felt how she is drawn cautiously to think of the men around her as she unconsciously thinks of the way Mr. Ramsay could be. That is, if she is deeply woven in myriads of flames of masculine suppression, she never lets herself get trapped by it. But one may not deny that she is stuck in flashes if not flames in few sections of the novel: she goes out with William Bankes passionately as if she is in deep love with him; she even makes others like Mrs. Ramsay think they would marry soon exactly similar to Minta and Paul.

Simone de Beauvoir asserts men have always seemed to form an ideally prefabricated woman in history to which they could refer to, not the woman that could have been, but the one that should have been (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 97). Similarly, Lily is akin to such women, she holds a significant candle though - a candle in the wind that has enlightened her, a candle that has allowed her to realise how Mrs. Ramsay has been shaped as an *angel in the house*. Although Lily seems to be the woman who appears to neglect original feminine tendencies like heterosexual emotions and marriage, she barely feels the femininity inside her:

She felt herself transfixed by the intensity of her perception; it was his severity; his goodness. I respect you (she addressed him silently) in every atom; you are not vain; are the finest human being that I know; you have neither wife nor child (without any sexual feeling, she longed to cherish that loneliness), you live for science (involuntary, sections of potatoes rose before her eyes); praise would be an insult to you; generous, pure-hearted, heroic man! (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 18)

Christina Forula argues that Lily's quest beyond its (accidental) feminine origins to universality, for neither the difference of such an existence impels it nor the adventures of loss and creativity. She maintains that Lily forgets traditional Madonnas to paint from life (Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde* 154), while the above excerpt is one of the scarcest parts of the novel in which Lily shouts her silent and extreme private love to William Bankes in her mind. She definitely intends to like him and appreciates how different he is from other patriarchal men around her and how he could be cherished without any masculine prejudices.

Lily occasionally enjoys being with William Bankes, but she is turbulently suspicious of such emotions. Susan Bolotin could be taken as the first feminist thinker who revealed her concern and its consequent drawback in her revolutionary article *Voices from a Post-Feminist Generation* (Somerville, *Feminism and the Family: Politics and society in the UK and USA* 229). Bolotin expressed her huge concern regarding how modern feminism had been neglected in many young women's attitudes. She strongly condemned the Second-wave feminism scholars who attempted to block major feminine passions in women gradually instead of encouraging constructive equal declaration of women's rights. Consequently, there is no wonder that Woolf's Lily, who is located on the verge of modern feminism development in early 20th century, is victimised by such so-called revolting views.

Lily's dramatic confusion lasts until the final page in which the novel comes to a close where she decides to put an end to the final part of her painting. She has not fulfilled her doubtful visionary process of observation from her womanly perspective all the years since she went to the summer house; she has not satisfactorily quenched her slightly feminine desires either as the narrator (Lily) murmurs to the reader "how she stood here painting, had never married, not even William Bankes" (Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* 130).

It should be noted that as Jane Buxton asserts majority of modern feminists' disappointment and what is observed as the consequences of their action in terms of aggression or misandry derive from men's massive stability in terms of social mannerism and personal etiquette (Buxton, *Ending the mother War: Starting the Workplace Revolution* 96). Therefore, Lily who finally decides to stand and complete her painting although she feels distraught due to her masculine companionship, surprisingly to the reader, gets thrilled by Mr. Ramsay and his children's arrival to the lighthouse in the end. Lily seems to have been psychologically enthusiastic regarding this replacement in the end:

'He has landed,' she said aloud. 'It's finished.' Then, surging up, puffing slightly, old Mr. Charmichael stood beside her, looking like an old pagan god, shaggy, with weeds in his hair and the trident in his hand. He stood by her on the edge of the lawn swaying a little in his bulk, and said, shading his eyes with his hands: 'They will have landed.' and she felt she had been right. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 154)

Lily does not only deny male companionship at the moment of consummation, but also she welcomes the approval of his arrival. That the boat reaches the lighthouse counts as the only moment at which the reader hears Lily shouting out of excitement. That is, she always used to think or merely speak quietly to others through the novel, while in the last section of the third part, one can hear her loud expression of excitement following the consummating arrival. Similarly, Eric Steinberg praises Woolf's effective use of Phallic and fertility symbolism in *To the Lighthouse* (Winston, *Woolf's To the Lighthouse* 81). It seems

as if Lily ends up making love with the lighthouse (phallus emblem) which could be taken as the eventual result of her gentle flirtation through all parts of the novel. It is as if Lily has consummated her unrequited love not with men, but with the lighthouse by means of an illusion, an unknown sense of sacrifice and a gloomy self-effacing loss.

Conclusion

Nineteenth-century radical feminism launched a very sporadic movement to modify majority of economic, political and social rules that had been established by masculine constitutions. Likewise, feminism was meant to nourish women socially as well as personally, while it seems to have been trapped in broad modern policies which tended to magnify women and men's differences on the one hand and strengthening attitudes concerning women's implied dependence on men - who have all suppressed women as their victims in history - on the other: a so-called feminine freedom in modern times.

For instance, that women are allowed to justify and play their victim role in case of rape could be both significant on the one hand and it may be considered to be decelerating on the other. It makes no sense to sit still and victimise ourselves doing nothing to fight cruelty effectively. To Camile Paglia, this could be nothing but an unconscious requirement for the revival of patriarchal system (Paglia, *Sex, Art and American Culture* 66). This article assumes that such extremism could be precisely the propaganda radical feminists have been spreading in its modern sense. Modern radical feminists, who condemn any kind of masculine trace through women's lives, have been attempting to shape women as eternal victims of patriarchal societies and this has been the absolute discrimination primary feminist scholars aimed to eliminate (Staggenborg *Gender, Family and Social Movements* 26).

On the one hand, Paglia asserts that feminism allowed women to feel themselves fortunate to resist masculine yardsticks within the society and also apply their unique sense of sexuality opposing patriarchal principals (Paglia, *Sex, Art and American Culture* 86). On the other hand, she stresses that this sense of freedom in terms of rebellion provoked serious risks as well: risks concerning the attitudes toward heterosexual marriage, motherhood and the foundation of family formation shaped as complexes with no certain answer in women's modern life styles.

In the same manner, Woolf has obliged herself to expose Lily Briscoe to a shelter of modernism in terms of feministic ideologies devoid of the fact that this shelter lacks what Lily could feel inside her; such a remarkable deprivation could be easily traced in Lily when she thinks about Paul and Minta's romantic strolls on the beach. "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" (Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* 102). Here, the reader encounters with the core of Lily's chaotic

mental dualism concerning heterosexual emotionality from her view point on the newly engaged couple.

From another point of view, Virginia Woolf pictures Lily as an independent figure who enjoys spending time by her own painting, reading poetry and secluding more than socialising, especially as an empowered weapon against men. But it could be asserted that such seclusions provoke doubts in her head through the novel whether she knows what she desires or even if what she yearns for. All such so-called modern traits observed in Lily mingled with an unwanted misandry developing through her existence, turn her into a suspicious lonely woman who is both scared of her masculine boundaries and is in favour of her own pure independence in spite of her natural desire for heterosexual passions.

Accordingly, Lily Biscoe, as one of the most biographically feminine personages among Virginia Woolf's novels, could be regarded as both a radical and a victim feminist figure since she is sacrificed by a rigid patriarchal community bound by aggressive radical feminist ideologies which have sustained her floating survival through a sea of suspicion and dualism, a sea of suspicion that keeps asking her who a woman is and what a woman should be. Consequently, Lily does not seem to swim consciously ashore, she merely veers away floating through the waves provoked both by massive masculine norms and also by radical separatist codes of feminism stressing misandry as a means of resistance, while the most available log to save Lily from such wild waters is what a rational and constructive feminist etiquette could allocate, an etiquette which is exempted from any misandry and misogyny.

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