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IMPERIALISM AND THE DOMESTIC FRONT: IN LIGHT OF *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

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British Imperialism drew its sap and energy from the domestic front, the British homes. Ethnographic studies will point out how the Empire that depended on soft power and not only military force took its homes to be bastions where the imperial character and ideals were built and consolidated. Homes were not only where the Children of the Empire were raised but also where the values of domination and the imperial imagination were engendered. In other words, the British homes played a crucial role both in the heart of Empire and on the ‘fringes’ where Imperialism had planted itself. The British home not only lent tacit support to the project of Imperialism but actually participated in the service of the Empire. The domestic front offered patronage to Imperialism even if the mission of such homes was to ostensibly create civilization, or make civilization possible.

The early and mid-Victorian years were when British power and confidence in its strength reached its peak. Political

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and cultural historians have pointed out that such confidence and power was reflected in cultural forms and expressions including literature produced during this time. Founding an Empire does not only entail political activism but it also entails a certain imagination. Through fictional and non-fictional narratives a certain imagination and a certain gaze, a recognized set of rights and obligations, values and dispensations were circulated. The abiding need for imperialism to be permanent and provide stability required that imperialism circulated not only a certain kind of imagination but also made available ideologically-charged cultural narratives so that the Empire seemed unifying and natural. Thus, the work of imperialism insinuated itself in the fiction that was written and in turn, fiction canonized the imperialist enterprise. These narratives would be male-generated with the male protagonist taking on adventurous albeit chauvinistic enterprises to open new vistas and profit from epical opportunities. The emergence of fiction hand in hand with colonialism and the rise in confidence of the Empire have been commented on by many: Eagleton in the ‘Rise of English’ and Azim in *The Colonial Rise of the Novels* for instance. Brantlinger points out:

“In the early and mid-Victorian periods, imperialism could almost be taken for granted. In British literature from about 1830 down to the 1870s, “domestic realism” dominates and the “colonies” enter the picture mainly as backdrops or destinations. But after the 1870s, the imperialist adventure romance – *King Solomon’s Mines* for example, or *Treasure Island* – emerges as a self-conscious genre, at the very moment when the British Empire seemed to be reaching its zenith...”(16)

The imperialistic and colonial project, even though male-driven depended on delineation of a cohesive notion of Self.

The empire's narratives explored the idea of a unified Self while negotiating with realities of gender and class. This meant that the Self that imperialism had created had to confront the problematic differences that gender and class created. The problem in most cases was solved by having both the (white) women and the (white) poor being co-opted into the imperial narrative not as disparate but as acquiescing components. Imperialism is not only a 'male drama'¹ as there was a concerted effort, a united front aiding and abetting the imperial project. In fact, imperialism cannot be understood without recognizing the complicity of the seemingly innocuous involvement of family and society. In the imperial narrative the domestic sphere is not apolitical, rather it is a site where the imperial Self is constituted. The Self in turn goes out into the wide world to civilize the colonized.

The fiction of adventure (often simply a euphemism for colonialism) and the fiction of domestic realism were issuing from the same fount. Both genres drew historical context, social aspiration and imaginative temper from contemporary discourses on Empire and the colonial enterprise. Bringing material reality or adventurism into the demure domain of domestic fiction may not have been as radical as it is made out to be. It would have been perfectly natural for the colonial purpose and imperial intent to want the Colonizer or Imperialist and his family to be on the same page—drawing enthusiasm, literary enjoyment and moral force from texts that calibrated between the rough world of politics and the subtle world of fiction. Brantlinger points out:

“imperialism influences the whole tradition of “serious” domestic realism as well as the tradition of the adventure tale. Adventure and domesticity, romance and realism are seemingly opposite poles of a single system of discourse. In

the middle of the most serious domestic concerns, often in the most unlikely texts, the Empire may intrude as at least a shadowy realm of escape, renewal, banishment, or return for characters who for one reason or another need to enter or exit from scenes of domestic conflict and complexity.”(8)

Sara Mills however, looks at the domestic sphere's engagement with imperialism and colonialism from a different perspective. In 'Post-colonial Feminist Theory' she states, “British women were part of and removed from the power structures of colonialism” (Mills, 105). I posit that while colonial imperialism may seem to be predominantly seen as an adventure, a venturing out into the great dangerous outdoors and wild frontiers, basically a male territory—it was also about civilizing the remote and bringing home the exotic. In this sense, the homes or sphere of the women were not really 'removed from the power structures' as Mills implies -- the white woman did indeed enjoy the fruits of colonialism and had a tacit role in the colonial realm. McClintock suggests correctly that “Gender dynamics was from the outset, fundamental to the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise”. (qtd in Mills 102)

Even though domestic fiction was meant to remain sanitized from the perils of colonial history and pressures of an imperial desire-- in actuality, domestic fiction has always been seduced by the exotic and adventurous. For domestic fiction, empire or colonialism is merely a given. Its gaze is on the Otherness that colonialism facilitates. The staid evenness of domestic life is lubricated and vitalized by the spectacle of colonialism taking place in geographically and culturally remote places. “Throughout the history of the imperializing West, domesticity seeks and finds its antithesis in adventure, in charismatic quests and voyages that both disrupt and

rejuvenate.” (Brantlinger, 10) The monochromatic world of domestic realism would allow itself to not only appropriate colours and textures of a strange world of adventure but it would also not question the violence or menace that such adventures pertained. The domestic fiction often provided a visual and emotion-free scroll of the colonized world, the savage existence, the pity of human condition, the odd perversity of life. Depictions like this found in domestic fiction provide a colonial subtext, no matter how muted or how concealed. Brantlinger writes pointedly, “The casualness with which it enters those stories suggests how thoroughly the imperial context could be taken for granted.” (8)

One cannot underestimate the effect that the fiction of adventure had in colouring the imagination of the readers, filling their minds with wonderment at the capacity of Englishman, the challenges posed by the heathen world, the lure of profit and riches these dark fringes had. The fiction of adventure brought into the drawing room the exotic and fabulous, the peril and lure of a virgin world being masterfully subdued by the Englishman. With the fiction came Ideology, an intricate intimacy with things that the domestic spheres were beginning to be privy to. The fiction of adventure and fiction of domestic realism are not separate but inter-connected or inter-dependant. “The Empire emerges as something more than a casual background in that quietest of domestic stories.” (Brantlinger, 9) Brantlinger points out that, “These apparently antithetical genres do not have separate histories, but influence and interpenetrate each other in countless ways from the Renaissance forward.” (10)

Domestic fictions were often overtly imperialistic, while remaining respectably domestic. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf

explores the Edwardian sensibility corporealizing adventure and realism, romance and drudgery, stability and evanescence. She pits an imperialist sense of service against the “vanishing of frontiers” and “diminishing of heroism” which Brantlinger writes had to be reckoned with as the British confidence began to waver and modern warfare began to change the face of Europe. Modernists like Conrad, according to Brantlinger, felt that the world was collapsing into “a bland, not quite honourable” domesticity as modern life had made the “epic life” impossible (15). However, Woolf is a modernist with a difference. She is not an advocate of imperialism. However, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf exudes a strong sense of dislocation as the colonial’s sense of ease began to disperse. Woolf in this novel did not set out to critique imperialism or conversely, make an elegy on its decay. She shows the domestic front linked to the imperial agenda in an intimate way and depicts an English family caught in a particular cusp of time when the hitherto unquestioned stability of the Empire seemed likely to vanish and the fiction of adventure was to be recast as fiction in search of meaning.

Empire’s Work in the Domestic Realm

Domestic fiction refers to notions of national character and addresses the way families as institutions worked to produce sturdy administrators and exemplary civilians. The essential Englishness was a set of carefully constructed and deliberately orchestrated set of values covering all facets of life from clothing, hygiene, health, leisure, habits, reading, breeding, socialization, individualism to morals. British family was essentially schooled in a certain class value. Mothers so intently planted “white middle class” or “nice” values that what was taught around the hearth of English homes would actually

become the spirit that fuelled the Empire. House-keeping and child-rearing amounted to an ideological operation so that the British home became simultaneously a symbol of white superiority and goodness.

Colonial pamphlets and advertisements, particularly of the Great Exhibition, were used specifically to ensure that family life and homes in the colonies could replicate what was followed back at home. These pamphlets disseminated information and illustrations on how the white were expected to conduct their lives covering everything from housekeeping to social etiquette so that the British would not forget their national character, nor adopt the savage ways of the natives. Standards were set and enforced so that the houses were run according to English values and differences. The English home with its furniture, silverware, carpets, curtains and fabrics as well as the maternal presence played a concrete role in the Empire; they symbolized the values and characteristics that would not only assure national standards but also the spirit of Empire.

The domestic front ultimately produced the English gentleman. This breed was to be different both from the poor masses who at home led a brutish existence and the natives abroad who were orientalized as being racially and culturally inferior to the Britons. The English gentleman was formulated as the ‘antidote’ to the dangers of social unrest, class warfare and the ‘corrosive effects’ of democratization at the home-front while also being the ‘face’ of the Empire and its “conservative fantasies”(Brantlinger, 3). Rosenberg points out that the British public school system served “as the breeding ground of this culture” by emphasizing “a sense of competition, leadership, and hero-worship, qualities that prepared the students for the

role as defenders of the Empire” (Rosenberg). Martin Green posits in *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* that the adventure tales that “England told itself as it went to sleep at night” charged England with the energy “to go into the world and explore, conquer and rule” (qtd. in Brantlinger, 7).

It goes without saying that empires would put a certain emphasis on their own value systems. Brantlinger points out that even though the Empire works through military conquests and economic exploitation – it embodies at the same time a “highly idealistic but nonetheless authoritarian scheme of cultural domination.” (Brantlinger, 2) The chivalry of romances came to be neatly tied in with the chauvinism of political domination and cultural hegemony of the Empire. The domestic front played a part in fostering ‘conservative political values’ as much as it enabled the spurring of “missionary zeal”, humanitarian duty and a “service ideal” (Brantlinger, 2) so that the prevailing system seemed less exploitative and more benign. The uncomfortable business of sustaining empire rested on creating in the youth a firmness of character and a sense of chivalry, a code of conduct and a material pragmatism which is different from the blunt bread and butter question Joseph Chamberlain advocated.²

It would do to remember that the idea of the inevitability of empire was pretty pervasive in enlightened circles. Brantlinger states that from 1815 onwards Carlyle, Wordsworth, Dickens and many others would agree with Coleridge who believed that “Colonization is not only a manifest expedient, but an imperative duty of Great Britain. God seems to hold out his finger to us over the sea.” (Brantlinger, 5) This imperative required that the Britons acquired physical and moral

characteristics bred and honed at home and at school. The purpose was to

“promote the idea of heroism, through the study of ancient Greek and Latin, both languages of former great empires, through romantic notions of knights in shining armor riding into battle, through nineteenth century romantic poetry, and through writers [like Rudyard Kipling] who glorified the Empire”(Rosenberg).

There were three strains that are worth noticing with regard to the notion of national character. Firstly, encouragement was given to enlightened humanitarianism as it conformed to the rubric of ‘English virtue’. Secondly, there was a fear that the national character was becoming weak and timid, ridden with guilt and laced with doubt. The third strain was that of adopting a more aggressive scheme that acknowledged, indeed advocated, brutality as a necessity for civilisation.³

Toward the end of the century, the war correspondent George W. Stevens found that he had to talk down “the new humanitarianism” and defend “brutality” as the only course of action: “we became an imperial race by dealing necessary pain to other men...Civilisation is making it too easy to live... A wiser humanitarianism would make it easy for the lower quality of life to die. It sounds brutal, but why not? We have let brutality die out too much” (Brantlinger 2-3)

In the remaining part of this essay, I examine how the ‘home’ as in Virginia Woolf’s 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* projected the contact ground between colonial leisure and imperial practicalities. Throughout the Edwardian era there was a frenetic sense that the high adventure that the Empire had been consumed by might very well be coming to an end and the aftermath would be of self-doubt and panic, but also a sobering sort of humility and new humanitarianism. *To the Lighthouse* suggestively examines the blooming and wilting of the bounty

brought on by the imperial enterprise. The narrative revolves around the Ramsay family spending a beguiling summer in a decaying vacation home in Skye. Against this backdrop, Woolf shows a landscape complete with sea and lighthouse, and evokes these as the wild hinterland, the fantastic space of desire interfaced with the safe parameters of ‘home’. Within this frame she makes an estimate of the work that was seen being done within the confines of a home so that the needs of the Empire were served. *To the Lighthouse* looks at Imperialism not only as an adventure to be contrasted or incorporated with the domestic realism but also examines the ‘practical ends’ that the domestic sphere performed for the Empire. Woolf looks at the life and leisure, the culture and civilized preoccupations that colonialism made possible.

The novel frames the time before and after the First World War and speaks of the tide of changes that followed. Like most domestic fiction the house in *To The Lighthouse* is as important as its inhabitants. The slow decay and the gradual erosion of the core of the Ramsay house represents the *zeitgeist* that Woolf and many others like her were interested in. Through the apparent material solidity of the home-life of the Ramsays and the acceptance that the summers the Ramsays enjoyed on the Isle of Skye had neared an end, Woolf renders an ineluctable colonial reverie that was simultaneously being recalled and allowed to dissolve.

To The Lighthouse is a narrative about an enigmatic brink: of Mrs. Ramsay still presiding over, of the children still not ready for their world, the guests of the house still lingering, the picture only tentatively over. At the end of the novel there is still a poise, a pause and a tentative, but nonetheless noble sense of purpose. The novel is divided into three unequal parts: ‘The

Window', 'Time Passes' and 'The Lighthouse'. In the first section, Mr. Ramsay destroys the excitement of his children who are looking forward to an expedition to the lighthouse based on his estimate that the weather will not allow for it. On the other hand, Mrs. Ramsay busies herself preparing goods to be taken charitably to the inhabitants of the Lighthouse, who she believes, lead a desolate life. The whole section is about rearing children, building careers, finding a vocation—with the vortex always being Mrs. Ramsay. She builds and administers a safe home and a sanctimonious zone of comfort and stability. The desperate lives of the unmarried, the poor, the unmoored are charted as the *extremities* that Mrs. Ramsay hopes to keep her family protected from. Mr. Ramsay and the house guests alike admire Mrs. Ramsay for her beauty and her influence. Bradshaw points to the inscriptions ('For her whose wishes must be obeyed' and "The happier Helen of our days") written on books given to Mrs. Ramsay:

The first inscription is an allusion to Ayesha, the beautiful and imperious queen of an African tribe whose head-turning allure proves almost fatal to the English-men who came across her in Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), just as Mrs. Ramsay has been accused of 'wishing to dominate, wishing to interfere, making people do what she wished' (40), of being 'tyrannical, domineering, masterful' (50). (Bradshaw, xviii)

Mrs. Ramsay is not only an imposing matriarch-- she is the spirit of the house, by extension of the empire at large. As wife and mother, Mrs. Ramsay is the embodiment of the 'domestic angel' trope but in her nurturance, Woolf locates a strained but nonetheless persistent effort by a noble creature to provide sustenance to the Empire. Mrs. Ramsay is not merely a fictional

character, she is a prototype, a thinly veiled representation of Woolf's own mother Julia Stephan and many of their generation.⁴

The context to Mrs. Ramsay and Julia Stephan's works of charity and social benevolence lies in the moral obligation the Victorians felt and had let become institutionalized. Dealing with poverty had become an insistent issue on which depended the wholesomeness of the Empire. As Bradshaw points out, the Social Question of how to best deal with the "intractable problem of the poor" was discussed and analyzed at length, so much so that a Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress had been formulated to explore the issue between 1905 and 1909. He further points out:

"while there is absolutely no reason to suppose that Mrs Ramsay does not genuinely agonize over 'the eternal problems: suffering, death; the poor' (51) as she visits the infirm and the destitute 'weekly, daily {on the island}...or in London' (11)... *To the Lighthouse* exposes the insufficiency of her kind of individualistic, Victorian-style philanthropy and sees it as part of the 'vast and benevolent lethargy of well-wishing' (12) in which the whole leisured class are sunk." (Bradshaw, xviii)

A benevolent hype and a sense of despair (as the intractable problems of poverty and unease continued to linger) became the hallmarks of this period. Woolf had told Vita Sakville-West that the novel was being written at a time when the country seemed to be paralyzed by "violence and class strife" (Bradshaw,xxxvii) brought on by the Strike of May 1926. Woolf was not only worried that class strife might reach unpleasant proportions – but there was also skepticism that social reconciliation could at all be achieved. Philanthropy, the kind practiced by Julia Stevens or Mrs. Ramsay seemed like an

obsolete form of apology, that would not be able to address the root of the problem.

For the Victorians the alternative was to look towards another discourse, that of Imperialism. It provided the fantasy of adventure, it would be a measure to diffuse class strife and at the same time ensure the practical aspects of a comfortable existence. Imperialism for the era became a discourse that tackled discontent and made culture less divisive and take on a more unified front. Brantlinger writes,

“John Macenzie has noted a gradual shift in the themes of nineteenth century British culture away from domestic class conflict toward racial and international conflict that suggests how imperialism functioned as an ideological safety valve, seeking to deflect working-class radicalism into non-critical paths while preserving fantasies of aristocratic authority.”(3)

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay is seen as the imperial matriarch. Seated in “a wicker armchair in the drawing-room window she wore to Lily’s eyes, an august shape, the shape of a dome” (*To The Lighthouse*, 44). The correlation intended is made more explicit in an earlier mention where Woolf has Mrs. Ramsay stand against the picture of Queen Victoria wearing a blue ribbon of the Garter (*To The Lighthouse* 15). She not only looks august, imposing and singular—her devotion to her family and friends is also seen as some form of benediction. She rules over them so that they will learn to become rulers, she guides them so that they will civilize others, she nurtures so that the Empire’s men and women will become worthy of their missions.⁵

The power of Mrs. Ramsay, (even though she is not known by her Christian name) rests on her fecundity, her capacity to give, to shape and hold. By perking up her husband Mr.

Ramsay’s confidence in himself and soothing his jitters concerning his professional immortality, by nurturing the children and paving their entry into the adult world, by almost coercing house-guests Minta and Lily into acknowledging that marriage is the only career a woman should pursue, Mrs. Ramsay weaves for herself a web of loyalty and control. She represents the civilization that makes imperialism possible. She devotes herself to the graceful if dominating ‘acts of giving’. Spreading civilization and endorsing a veneration for the national ideals served as the dual need that the Imperial home addressed. “Her shawl was but one of the ‘thin veils of civilization’ (29). Woolf brings in Mrs. Ramsay’s emerald green shawl and the Indian jewels she wears at dinner-time not only as merchandise enjoyed by an imperial world but also highlights through these items the domestic enclosures imperialism could reach with impunity. Bradshaw points out that the flora and fauna Mrs. Ramsay planted

would have originally arrived in England as ‘bulbs’ (56) or ‘seeds (115) from the far corners of the Empire (South Africa, New Zealand) and beyond, and their appearance on Skye is probably yet another way in which Woolf marks the territorial reach of the Empire and its homogenization of cultural and geographical difference...Woolf’s principal aim in this novel was not to achieve ‘remoteness from the world’ but to critique the Empire’s coercive domestication of the remote. (Bradshaw,xxxiii)

In this narrative, the children are portrayed as the Children of the Empire. The sons are to be administrators or soldiers, the daughters are to be wives and mothers. His mother imagines James ‘all red and ermine on the Bench or directing a stern and momentous enterprise in some crisis of public affairs’(7). Gayatri Spivak suggests that the story of imperialism,

understood as England's "social mission," was a "crucial part of the cultural representation of the nation to the English". The children choose the jewels Mrs. Ramsay will wear for dinner, they are regaled by the stories she reads them, when the young ones are unable to fall asleep troubled by the shadow the boar's head mounted on the wall leaves on the nursery wall, Mrs. Ramsay covers the monstrosity with her shawl. Imperialism has always been veiled by the civilizing missions carried on by mothers, within nursery rooms and library rooms. The homes have indeed been impalpably engaged in sanitizing what was unpalatable or raw ideologically in Imperialism; so impalpable was the 'thin veil of civilization' that the homes lent, that it has gone without notice.

To The Lighthouse is not the only work in which Woolf confronts her positions regarding imperialism. Though critics have pointed to "instances of ambivalence in Woolf's position toward imperialism", Rosenberg maintains that Virginia Woolf, in her prose writing, "remained an opponent to British expansion and subject domination". Rosenberg cites *Three Guineas* as a text where Woolf draws "parallels between British patriarchy and imperialism with German fascism". In "Mr. Kipling's Notebook" (1920) Woolf reviews Rudyard Kipling's *Letters of Travel, 1892-1913*. In it she criticizes Kipling's travels for trying to display the 'splendours' of the Empire in order to "induce" young men to sacrifice their lives for the benefit of the Empire. Rosenberg states that Woolf identified in these texts a desire to promote and advertise the imperial enterprise, to publicize "a sense of adventure" that Woolf calls "unreadable" "raw material" fueling the Imperial project (*Essays*, 239). From the late nineteenth century onwards, writers felt driven solely towards an enticing world of the adventure and concomitantly making indispensable the

valorization of the hero bearing qualities of "self-reliance, and ruggedness". This kind of rhetoric was "understood (implicitly) to answer the political needs of imperialist nations and their ruling classes" (Green, 82)

Woolf takes a fresh look at the child's enthusiasm for adventure exemplified by James Ramsay's eagerness to go to the Lighthouse. It evokes incipiently the quest of a Child of the Empire. Woolf also examines the lives of the Ramsay children from a more prosaic domestic angle. For the children, the summers they spent on the Isle of Skye are a period of bliss, satisfying in the way the mother protected, the father provided and the Empire enabled them to enjoy a decent life. The first section of the novel examines child rearing but also examines the connections between the child and the Empire beyond. Bradshaw is right to point out that the scene where Mrs. Ramsay watches her son James colouring or cutting pictures from the Army and Navy catalogues is significant in that it gives us an indication of the linkages Woolf makes between the child at play and the brusque realities of Empire.⁶

Both Ramsay and his wife are attentive about parenting. Mr. Ramsay is frequently upsetting his children by appearing too inflexible but a scene where he tickles his child's calf with a blade of grass, the satisfaction he gained watching James listening to stories read to him by his mother indicate that Ramsay too was aware that the children embodied his continuity in the face of failure and extinction. The children get moulded on their mother's stories as well as the father's books, the wellbeing coming off a sprawling summer house spilling over with guests, but Woolf also portrays how the war gave the children a view of civilization that is quite removed from what their parents had.

Mr. Ramsay as a scholar is tormented by self-doubt and an apprehension that his reputation will not endure, that he has not been able to leave behind a concrete legacy. What these torments bring out are the age's concerns. The question of civilization was pertinent because on the one hand, the Empire had generated a certain confidence but on the other hand, there were misgivings of what their civilization had achieved if it were based on tyranny and oppression.

In this intellectual milieu, the operating binaries were: master and servant, ruler and subordinate, subject and object. It is not surprising that Mr. Ramsay's son Andrew explains that his father's books were about "Subject and Object and the nature of reality" (*To the Lighthouse*, 22). Lily exclaims in bewilderment at this description of Ramsay's philosophical work and she tries to fathom what Andrew meant. Andrew in reply suggests that she ought to visualize a kitchen table. Thus he attaches the elitist world of the philosophers to the humdrum one of the kitchen—furthermore, Woolf also attests that the novelty of Ramsay's subject of study depends on the comfortable life he enjoys as a representative of a system that allows Ramsays to write their great books and servants to ensure that other things operate smoothly. The class that 'works and the class that enjoys its freedom and 'leisure' are juxtaposed in an inevitable manner. The housekeeper Mrs. McNab has an unenviable life: "It was not easy or snug this world she had known for close on seventy years" (*To the Lighthouse*, 107)

Even as change and uncertainty loom, the inmates of the summer house are painting, dressing up for dinner, reading their fairytales and the classics. In 'Time Passes' the lamps are extinguished one by one in the house except for the one lit by a

guest of the Ramsays while he reads his Virgil before going to sleep. Uncertainty produced by the War and the mutability of Life create a mosaic of wariness and dread. Woolf writes in a series of parentheses that Mrs. Ramsay had died suddenly, her daughter Prue had died in a childbirth complication, the young Andrew Ramsay had been a war casualty in France. The house empties itself of its inmates, the house slowly corroding seems to throw up questions: "Will you fade? Will you perish"? (*To The Lighthouse*, 106). At the other end of this civil leisure and mild panic are inscrutable darkness and the desolation of an unkempt paradise:

The place was gone to rack and ruin. Only the Lighthouse beam entered the rooms for a moment, sent its sudden stare over bed and wall in the darkness of winter, looked with equanimity at the thistle and the swallow, the rat and the straw. Nothing now withstood them; nothing said no to them. Let the wind blow; let poppy seed itself and the carnation mate with the cabbage. Let the swallow build in the drawing-room, and the thistle thrust aside the tiles, and the butterfly sun itself on the faded chintz of the armchairs. Let the broken glass and the chins lie out on the lawn and be tangled over with the grass and wild berries. (*To The Lighthouse*, 113)

The answer to the questions ("Will you fade? Will you perish"?) was 'we remain'. Such acknowledgement takes on "the air of pure integrity" (*To The Lighthouse*, 106) even if there is very little left that can make for optimism. Mrs. McNab is left in charge taking care of the desolate Ramsay summer house withering and bereft of its inmates and vitality. This part closes with the end of the First World War and a note of resignation in the air. Bradshaw writes:

"The Ramsays and their generation worry about the quality of their work and the legacy they will leave behind. The self-

doubt is not only personal but one that may be attributable to the *zeitgeist*. Whether Mr. Ramsay succeeds or Mrs. Ramsay has fulfilled her role or Charles Tansley has done well or Lily has been able to finish her painting create a stark and raw tension that does not lift. It corresponds to the anxiety of failure but also to the loss of vision. *To the Lighthouse* is about the crisis of faith (in the adults) and a crushing of innocence as the heirs, the Ramsay children can no longer feel bewitched by the romance of Empire. (Bradshaw,xxxiv)

In the third section ‘The Lighthouse’, the family or what is left of the Ramsay family is seen attempting a trip to the Lighthouse. The act seems aimless, chaotic and even unreal since Mrs. Ramsay, Prue and Andrew had died. But the journey is undertaken, because Mr. Ramsay insists it be so.

He liked that men should labour and sweat on the windy beach at night, pitting muscle and brain against the waves and the wind; he liked men to work like that, and women to keep house, and sit beside sleeping children indoors, while men were drowned, out there is a storm. (*To The Lighthouse* 136).

The novel ends with Mrs. Ramsay’s children Cam and James making another trip to the Lighthouse and vowing to resist tyranny even as they follow their father carrying parcels for the men in the Lighthouse. Lily Briscoe, the painter is received as a guest again. This time she finishes her painting. The long overdue completion is seen by Bradshaw as being the result of an ”epiphany”. Corresponding to Cam’s and James’s resolve, Lily draws the line finishing her painting, having reached “an almost utopian glimpse of a world based on outreach, sympathy, and the elimination of misery.” (Bradshaw, xxxviii)

Death, disease and change shape the *fin de siecle* Woolf portrays in *To the Lighthouse*. Bradshaw sees portrayed in the novel the “more malign aspects of Victorianism” (xxiv). Prevalent among Victorians was a morbid fear of sickness. In *To the Lighthouse* this fear intrudes in the concrete shape of contracting tuberculosis from the damp in the Ramsay home to more nebulous fears of dissolution and extinction. The Victorian unease Woolf portrays is latched to an imperial utopia. Like the summer house which is at once a tranquil retreat and exposed to the encroaching sea and relentless rot, the Victorian minds too flitted between an imperial fantasy and a philosophical angst. The Ramsays are as cogs in the wheels of the imperial establishment, even when they try to redeem their involvement by resorting to philosophy, philanthropy and public service. The Ramsay home emblemizes all at once the bounties, decay and changes that Woolf saw the Victorians encounter. For the Victorians the change not only implied the disappearance of the known but also the emergence of an alien world that seemed kinder, gentler, more humanitarian in all respects but felt alien nonetheless.

For Woolf, this ambivalence about the waning of the imperial world was of critical importance. She does not intend to disguise the ambivalences or explain the shifting meanings, nor codify the values imperialism excited. In her text, she shows the sensations, memories, impressions of those evanescent things that linger a while or perish slowly. Rosenberg suggests that it was crucial that Woolf’s text made space for “ambiguities, multiple meanings, and perhaps even contradictions”. The image of stability we are given conveyed through the Ramsay’s home-life and their values is at the same time complemented with the image of the vanishing of these

stabilities and these values in the face of the modern world. The new polymorphic design is in accordance with “Woolf’s literary and philosophic values.”⁷

Frederic Jameson also suggests that modernism is not:

a way of avoiding social content...but rather of managing and containing it, secluding it out of sight in the very form itself, by means of specific techniques of framing and displacement which can be identified with some precision (138).

Though there is no direct critique or direct endorsement, in *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf seems to see Imperialism as a complexly entwined, fragmented and ambivalent narrative as she proceeded to examine the structures, signs and symbolisms responsible both for the creation and dispersion of what ultimately constitutes a ‘national identity’.

Conclusion

The quiet intrusion of the Empire into the Ramsays’ lives and their summer home has the quality of a reverie and that of an edgy premonition—in the second and third part of the novel there is a voluble sense that something had indubitably changed. Characters in the novel frequently refer to a “blunder”. The choice of word is crucial, as it marks doing something involuntarily, almost ignorantly and then there is post-hoc a realization that the act or the complicity on their part was unforgivable. Though the Ramsays’ lives are tied to the imperial project, there is a sense that they are aware that there has been a blunder. This sense of committing a blunder cannot be said to be the stuff of elegy-- it is a commentary on human frailty and folly. *To the Lighthouse* is based on enlightened humility, not an apology. The movement from providing service to the empire to making vows to resisting tyranny is a vital turn that Woolf has portrayed in this novel. What Woolf achieves is

important-- she transposes the ‘service’ offered by the domestic sphere for the benefit of the Empire with a new sort of ‘service’ that will resist those who dominate over others. The novel’s chief preoccupation is to show that the domestic sphere both *houses* and is *haunted* by the palpability of Imperialism.

References

1. Elleke Boehmer sees “nationalism as a male drama”. (Qtd. In Silva, 22-23)
2. Chamberlain posits: “My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e. in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population....The Empire, as I have always said is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists” (Brantlinger, 4)
3. Brantlinger writes that following confidence and free-trade that marked the 1850s and 60s there was an era of “defensiveness, self-doubt, worries” about “character”, “fitness”, national efficiency” and the threat of decadence. Samuel Hynes had also suggested that “the idea of decline and fall haunted imaginations of the time” (Brantlinger 1)
4. “All the qualities Woolf most admired in her mother are embodied in Mrs. Ramsay: her beauty, her lovingness, her tender solicitude for those in her care, her concern for the poor and the disadvantaged in her community, her ‘delicious fecundity’ (33). But Woolf also explores Julia Stephen’s limitations in this novel, especially her conventionality, her anti-feminism, her dubious concept of charity, her imperiousness, and her imperialism.” (Bradshaw,xvii)
5. One of the apparently elusive reasons why Mrs. Ramsay has ‘the whole of the other sex under protection’ is that they ‘ruled India’

(9) and this throws an interesting light on her indulgent attitude to the elderly Carmichael. Carmichael was a civil servant in India as a young man and expressed a willingness to teach the Ramsay boys Persian or Hindustanee (12). ..Mrs Ramsay wonders the use of that, Carmichael says; if her boys decided that ruling India was the career they wished to follow, knowing Hindustanee would give them a head start. (Bradshaw,xxxiv)

6. "The Army and Navy Stores was set up by military officers in 1871, had an exclusively Establishment clientele, and was an indispensable resource to those engaged in the running and manning the Empire at its zenith. To patronize it, therefore, was to play a minor but unequivocal role in the imperial apparatus, and so what might seem to be a merely disarming and introductory scene is in fact loaded with less innocuous ideological ballast...The Army and Navy catalogue brought home to the far corners of the Empire and just by having it in the Skye house we are told a great deal about the Ramsays' attitudes and social status and are reminded, perhaps, of the way the Hanoverian forces on Skye and throughout Scotland also needed to be provisioned in the eighteenth century." (Bradshaw, xxxii-iii)
7. What Rosenberg says about Woolf's 1931 novel *The Waves* holds true about *To the Lighthouse* too: The demand to pin the text down to a strict imperialist reading, let alone an anti-imperialist reading, closes off just those questions which *The Waves* leaves open. There is no overt or monolithic "political opinion" in *The Waves*, but rather a subtle exploration of connections and references that move in and out of the imperialist critique. (Rosenberg)

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