

The Crack of Order: Sonic Politics and the Poetics of Resistance in *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract: Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogic theory, this paper explores the deep interaction between the order of sound and patriarchal politics in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. In the novel, the hegemonic voice, represented by Mr. Ramsay, constructs a hierarchical auditory order through philosophical discourse and social ritual, thereby permeating the domestic sphere with imperial logic. Conversely, female experience, natural rhythms, and marginal whispers continuously undermine this order, creating internal fissures within the text. Ultimately, through a polyphonic listening and an aesthetic reconstruction of reconciliation, the novel demonstrates a possibility of transcending singular authority and accommodating the coexistence of differences. This study attempts to reveal that Woolf not only deconstructs the patriarchal order through sonic narration but also, in her formal innovations, explores a poetic path of resistance oriented toward dialogue and coexistence.

Keywords: *To the Lighthouse*; Dialogic Theory; Sound; Resistance.

1. Introduction

The British author Virginia Woolf is a seminal figure in twentieth-century modernist literature, renowned for her profound exploration of stream-of-consciousness narration and female experience. Her masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse*, presents a complex dialogue between time, memory, and artistic creation through its depiction of domestic life interwoven with natural imagery. The operation and maintenance of power structures within the novel—whether domestic patriarchy or implicit colonial rationality—are fundamentally articulated through an order of sound that dictates “who speaks, how they speak, and who is heard”. This paper, grounded in dialogic theory, will focus on the multifaceted dimensions of sound in the novel as a vehicle of power, a tool of resistance, and a medium of ethics. It will analyze the construction, collapse, and reconstruction of the sonic order within the context of imperial patriarchy, aiming to illuminate Woolf's profound meditation on power relations, the equality of subjects, and human coexistence.

Central to Bakhtin's dialogic theory is the emphasis on the inherently dialogic nature of language: “Language exists only in the dialogic communication between users” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 25)[1]. Meaning, therefore, is not generated monopolistically by a single subject but is dynamically constructed through the collision, exchange, and response of diverse voices. Bakhtin explicitly opposes monologic hegemonic discourse, arguing that “monologic thought... does not admit the existence of another's truth.” Authentic dialogism advocates for the equal coexistence of multiple voices and promotes mutual understanding and spiritual communion through responsive interaction (Bakhtin, *Poetics* 341)[2]. The concept of “polyphony” is particularly crucial here; it refers to the coexistence of “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” that together constitute a field of meaning without an absolute dominant discourse (Bakhtin, *Problems* 29)[1]. This perspective resonates profoundly with the dynamic evolution of the sonic order in *To the Lighthouse*. Accordingly, this paper will use this as a point of entry to analyze the construction of

hegemonic sound, the paths of resistive voices, and how polyphonic dialogue operates on the textual level to achieve an aesthetic dissolution of imperial- patriarchal logic.

Scholarly research on *To the Lighthouse* has produced a rich and diverse body of work. Many scholars focus on the novel's feminist perspective. For instance, Wang Wen et al. (2009)[3] examine the feminine expression of reason and emotion through the lens of feminist literary criticism. Brenda Silver analyzes the portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay from the perspective of mother-daughter relationships, arguing that she continues to influence female politics and life (Silver)[4]. Other scholars concentrate on the novel's stream-of-consciousness technique, exploring how Woolf expresses her characters' inner worlds through narrative strategies (e.g., Li Sen; Zuo Lu)[5][6]. Some also investigate the novel's themes, such as Rong Xinfang and Zhang Shimin's[7] analysis of the symbolic significance of Mrs. Ramsay and the lighthouse. However, existing studies often prioritize visual and narrative aspects; only a few engage with sonic elements. Yu Li, for example, analyzes the transmission of female voices from a feminist perspective. Yet, few scholars have systematically situated sound within a “power- resistance” framework. Therefore, this paper aims to build on existing scholarship by systematically analyzing the construction, collapse, and reconstruction of the sonic order in the novel, thereby offering a new critical perspective for understanding the ethics of resistance in modernist literature through sound.

2. The Construction of Sonic Order: Hegemony, Ritual, and Discipline

In Woolf's narrative world, sound is not merely a sensory symbol but also a central site of power operation. The domestic and social spaces depicted in the first section of *To the Lighthouse*, “The Window,” essentially construct a rigorous sonic order. Mr. Ramsay's philosophical monologues, Charles Tansley's colonialist discourse, and the social rituals at the dinner table intertwine to build a hegemonic acoustic system rooted in male rationality and imperial logic. Through the monopoly of authoritative

declarations, the discipline of social settings, and the infiltration of ideology, this sonic order marginalizes dissenting voices, ensuring the stability of both patriarchy and imperial order. This chapter will deconstruct the mechanisms by which this sonic order is built, revealing how hegemony exerts implicit control over individual consciousness and social relations through linguistic violence and ritualistic resonance.

2.1. The Monologue of Authority: The Concert of Philosophical Discourse and Colonial Rationality

In the soundscape of *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay's voice constitutes a quintessential monologic acoustic system. Centered on a "single consciousness" and resistant to dialogism, this system pursues discursive finality and closure. As a philosopher, he consistently assumes the posture of a "declarer of truth"; his words are not merely descriptions of the external world but operate as a mechanism of truth-production. At the novel's outset, when James eagerly anticipates the trip to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay's pronouncement, "But it won't be fine," shatters the child's dream with the authority of truth. He firmly believes that "life is difficult; facts won't yield to anything," and habitually imposes his grand narratives—such as "The very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare"—upon others' expectations (Woolf 2).[8] The essence of this discursive violence lies in elevating personal judgment to a universal law, thereby achieving the discipline of others' wills. His claim that he "never told a lie, never said a thing that wasn't true, never minced matters for the sake of any human soul" (2)[8] presents a truth-discourse that, while ostensibly exclusive, actually serves to maintain his own hegemonic position, turning the domestic space into a stage for his philosophical assertions.

Charles Tansley, as Mr. Ramsay's follower, perfectly replicates the dual logic of colonialism and male chauvinism. He repeatedly insists that the "wind was due west" and would prevent the next day's trip, thereby reinforcing the male definition of reality by cloaking Mr. Ramsay's judgment in scientific discourse (2)[8]. Simultaneously, his speech is imbued with a colonial sense of superiority. His discussions with Mr. Ramsay about "Treaties... the partition of India, the government of India, finance"(46) demonstrate a profound disregard for marginalized populations. When facing women and children, he assumes the mantle of an "academic authority," pontificating about "his dissertation... a fellowship" (5) and erecting communication barriers with specialized jargon. More oppressive is his dismissal of heterogeneous discourse: "Whenever they talked about something interesting—people, music, history, anything—Charles Tansley would interrupt... he would make himself out worse than he was, to wound them" (6). This is essentially a male-centric suppression of pluralistic voices and a micro-practice of colonial rationality in daily life. His declarations that "women can't paint, women can't write" (46) and his pride in being "a self-made man" (88) explicitly bind gender oppression to intellectual monopoly, reinforcing male intellectual hegemony by negating female creative capacity. These two pronouncements complement each other: the former consolidates male knowledge and power by stripping women of their creative agency; the latter instills a colonial-capitalist narrative of individual conquest of social status, implicitly endorsing and aspiring to climb existing

hierarchical orders.

More notably, Tansley's voice exhibits a "monophonic" quality—what Bakhtin terms "monologic utterance," which lacks internal dialogism (Bakhtin, *Problems* 131)[1]. Tansley's self-centered narration, "He shouted that they must wait while he told them how he had been in the lighthouse with his uncle in a storm"(89)[8], is a typical monologic performance that expects no response and acknowledges no other perspective. Its function is not communication but proclamation and positioning—as if to state, "No one seemed to realize that fact; but the fact would be known one day" (88). His language aims to suppress other voices and establish his own dominance within the sonic order.

2.2. The Theatre of Ritual: Power Resonance in Social Settings

In Bakhtinian theory, the dinner scene ideally represents a potential space for carnivalesque dialogue—a place where different voices meet equally and hierarchies are temporarily suspended. However, in the Ramsay household, dinner is transformed into a site of disciplinary conversation. It is a rigidly hierarchical, ritualized occasion, contrasting sharply with the egalitarian and subversive nature of carnival. Mr. Ramsay's seating position carries symbolic weight in Bakhtin's chronotopic analysis: he sits at the end of the table, "huddled up, frowning"(80)[8]. This spatial position corresponds to his discursive position—he is the center of meaning production, and others are its recipients. Mrs. Ramsay's role is interpreted as a coordinator of "ritualistic speech." She must "make it all come together... to make the party go on" (80)[8], but this coordination is not genuine dialogic creation; it is what Bakhtin calls "ceremonial dialogue"—a stereotyped verbal exchange that avoids substantive issues. When she asks William Bankes, "Did you see your letters?" (81), it is not a genuine inquiry but part of the social ritual. She must mediate between her husband's philosophical monologues, Tansley's epigonic utterances, and the children's ironic heteroglossia, but her goal is to eliminate heteroglossia and restore harmony, not to initiate dialogue.

The mechanism of assent at the dinner table is crucial for the perpetuation of this sonic order. The children mock Tansley—"Atheist," they called him, "the little atheist"—but under Mrs. Ramsay's "severe" gaze (3)[8], they learn surface-level compliance. Nancy, Prue, Rose, and others "lifted their heads from their plates, and only inwardly conceived some rebellious thought" (4)[8]. The children's reactions embody the split between internalized polyphony and externalized monophony. Internally, they imagine "a more vigorous life; not always caring for men and women" (4), but externally they remain silent or compliant. This split exemplifies Bakhtin's analysis of double-voiced discourse: a word that exhibits a double orientation—both toward the referential object of speech and toward another's word (Bakhtin, *Problems* 110)[1]. A single utterance contains both the voice of authority and the individual's resistance. When Mr. Ramsay "sat upright, his little blue eyes fixed on the horizon" (6), reciting maxims about life's hardship, Tansley's nodding agreement and Mrs. Ramsay's silence constitute a conspiracy of voices. This conspiracy not only confirms Mr. Ramsay's authority but elevates his personal philosophy to the universal ethic of the family and civilization itself.

Furthermore, the dinner table hosts "pseudo-dialogues"—discourses that possess the outward form of dialogue but lack its true spirit. Tansley's sycophantic behavior is a case in point:

he inwardly criticizes “all that nonsense” (82) [8] while outwardly agreeing, a split that reveals a “masked language”—speaking through a mask to conceal one's true voice. In the monologic sonic order, assent is not dialogue but an imitative reproduction of authoritative discourse. More subtle is the “assent” of body language. When Mr. Ramsay shows displeasure, “everyone could see that he was in a temper” (92)[8]; the family's collective response—silence, changing the subject (“to light the candles”)—effectively defaults to and reinforces his privileged right to dominate the space with his mood. Lily is forced to engage in conversation with Tansley “to mitigate the pain of the moment” (93)[8], representing a disciplining of rebellious impulses. These collective bodily responses constitute a form of “non-verbal dialogue,” but here it functions as a unidirectional response to authority, lacking genuine dialogic exchange. These micro-interactions collectively produce and solidify an ideology: Mr. Ramsay's mood and authority are the center of the domestic soundscape, and all other voices must adjust, placate, or avoid around him. This ritualized sonic politics allows the hierarchical logic of empire to be naturalized and reproduced in daily life.

3. The Collapse of Sonic Order: Cracks, Heteroglossia, and Dissolution

In Bakhtin's theoretical framework, dialogism is the essential nature of language; any monologic order will inevitably encounter dialogic permeation and subversion. Therefore, this chapter will focus on moments in *To the Lighthouse* when characters break through the control of the monologic sonic order—when authoritative discourse cracks, when marginal voices find channels of expression, and when daily rituals are interrupted by carnivalesque instants. It will analyze how Mrs. Ramsay's window-gazing creates a Bakhtinian “space of intimate dialogue” where she can engage in genuine dialogue with herself, with nature, and with memory; how Lily Briscoe's stream of consciousness demonstrates the resistance of Bakhtin's “internally persuasive discourse” against “authoritative discourse”; and how the intrusion of natural sounds constitutes a challenge from “heteroglossia” against “standard language.” These dialogic infiltrations not only weaken the stability of the monologic order but also create conditions for the emergence of a polyphonic “harmony.”

3.1. Private Breakthroughs: Female Experience and the Resistance of Stream of Consciousness

When the Ramsay family's sonic order attempts to subsume all experience into the monologic framework of authority, the female characters launch a silent yet potent resistance by carving out private sonic spaces. Mrs. Ramsay's moments of gazing out the window at the rooks exemplify this internal dialogue: “She looked out to the window which was a constant source of amusement—the rooks, making up their minds which branch to settle on” (77)[8]. Her solitude at the window constitutes a temporary escape from the public soundscape. Here, she is no longer a mediator, comforter, or performer, but reverts to her “real self, a wedge-shaped core of darkness.” This experience is not entirely silent but is interwoven with the flash of the lighthouse, the rhythm of the waves, and her internal monologue. She “felt her real self,” a

self that “was free to wander, to explore, to be at large, when life sank down for a moment, one's consciousness was immense”(60)[8]. This voice is introspective, fluid, and non-linear, starkly contrasting with Mr. Ramsay's judgmental discourse.

Although monologic discourse seeks to suppress dialogue, Bakhtin notes that all utterances inevitably contain “the echo of another's word” (Bakhtin, *Novel* 355)[9]. Even Mr. Ramsay's imperative language contains traces of dialogue: “No going to the Lighthouse tomorrow” (12)[8] appears as a monologic pronouncement, yet it is a response to James's desire—it already exists within a dialogic chain. Mrs. Ramsay's internal conflict during the dinner party similarly displays what Bakhtin calls “double-voicedness”: “She could not understand how she could have any feeling for this man, how she could love him” (80)[8]. This self-doubting voice internally contains a dialogue between two voices: the voice of social expectation (should love her husband) and the voice of genuine feeling (lack of affection). This inner dialogue is seen as a fundamental form of dialogism, which cannot be entirely eradicated even in the most oppressive monologic environments. Additionally, the sound of the waves, as a natural polyphonic backdrop, constantly interferes with the disciplinary conversations in the novel. For Mrs. Ramsay, the sounds of conversation from outside the window, “that varied pitch,” often comforted her, “the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach” echoing like the words of an old lullaby, “supporting her.” Yet once the conversation ceased, it would beat “like a drum of the dead, the rhythm of life” (12)[8]. With its cyclicity, uncontrollability, and non-semantic nature, this natural sound offers an acoustic reference of otherness to the closed semantic system at the dinner table. The intrusion of such natural sounds has important dialogic significance—it reminds one that any artificial discursive order is temporary, local, and surpassable.

Furthermore, Bakhtin's concept of “heteroglossia” refers to the mixture and conflict of various social consciousnesses, worldviews, and values within social language (Bakhtin, *Epic* 88-124)[10]. Lily Briscoe's stream of consciousness is a vivid presentation of this “heteroglossia” at the individual psychological level. Observing Mrs. Ramsay's pity for Banks, she wonders: “Why was she so sorry for him? ... He was not in the least pitiable. ... She thought, yes, I must move the tree a little to the left, then the ugly mass would be broken up. That was the problem that had been troubling me. She picked up the salt cellar... to remind her to move the tree” (82)[8]. This detail embodies Bakhtin's notion of the interplay between “inner dialogue” and “external dialogue”. Superficially, she participates in social conversation (external), but internally, she is engaged in artistic thought (internal). This stream of consciousness reveals a struggle between two types of discourse: “authoritative discourse” (Tansley's “women can't paint”) and “internally persuasive discourse” (her own artistic conviction). Through this persistent inner dialogue, the control of authoritative discourse is gradually weakened. Her inner language constantly echoes the voices of social authority (particularly male discourse), but she responds to, questions, and reconstructs them in her own way.

3.2. Marginal Narratives: The Resistance of Natural Rhythms and Faint Signals

Alongside resistance from the center, natural and marginal voices persistently work to dismantle the artificially

constructed order. Natural time, with its eternal, non-human cyclical rhythms, stands in opposition to the linear, goal-oriented imperial temporality (e.g., “going to the Lighthouse”) represented by Mr. Ramsay. In the novel’s second section, “Time Passes,” Mrs. Ramsay dies, and the house is abandoned. Natural sounds constitute a heteroglossic intrusion into the human order: “In a chaos, only the thunder rolling and the lightning flashing... let the wind blow; let the poppies sow themselves; let the carnations and the cabbages mate freely. Let the swallows nest in the drawing-room; let the thistles push through the tiles; let the butterflies sun themselves on the faded chintz of the armchairs” (130; 134)[8]. Non-human voices ascend—wind, plants, and animals become dominant, while human voices temporarily recede. Cyclical time reasserts itself; the cycles of natural growth, reproduction, and decay replace human linearity. This chaotic yet vibrant process of proliferation contrasts sharply with the order, planning, and decay of human society.

Moreover, the resistance of marginal voices warrants attention. The poet Augustus Carmichael adopts a posture of distance from the social soundscape. His use of opium and translation of poetry, maintaining a state of “grey-green drowsiness,” constitutes an alternative position within the sonic order: “She admired him, sitting there so quietly drinking his soup... if he wanted soup, he asked for more, and cared not a fig for anyone’s ridicule or anger” (93)[8]. He does not participate in the Ramsays’ discursive game nor seeks its recognition; this complete exteriority makes him a marginal resistor of the monologic system. His resistance strategy is one of “presence without participation”—physically present in the social space, yet maintaining an independent voice. This posture manifests as selective vocalization—speaking only when necessary; autonomous rhythmic pacing, unbound by the rapid tempo of social dialogue; and skillful use of silence, transforming it into a space for contemplation. Carmichael’s poetic creation itself is a practice of marginal voice. His habit of “lying on the grass all day, as if he were composing his verses” (93) contrasts with Mr. Ramsay’s upright, walking posture, symbolizing a different mode of cognition and creation.

Often overlooked, the intermittent voices of the servant class constitute an underlying stratum of sound. Most servants in the novel are voiceless (in terms of discourse). Their silence reveals another dimension of social heteroglossia: those voices excluded from “legitimate discourse” are not absent but persist as a subtext. For example, Mary’s whisper about the “beautiful mountains” (25)[8], the sounds of Mildred in the kitchen, and the gardener Kennedy’s lazy resistance—these constitute a foundational acoustic stratum. Mrs. McNab’s humming is particularly symbolic: “She hummed, as she wiped the looking-glass, and glanced at her own figure, which she saw reflected there, a sound came from her lips—perhaps it was some song she had heard on the stage twenty years ago” (127)[8]. She positions herself simultaneously as observing subject and observed object, breaking with solemn self-identification. This self-dialogic posture parallels Mrs. Ramsay’s self-doubt in an interesting way: the lower classes gain freedom through parody, while the middle class falls into confusion through introspection. Servants’ voices are unofficial discourse; they are rarely formally recorded but permeate the living space materially: the clatter of cutlery, sweeping sounds, the creaking of doors. These sounds constitute the “sonic foundation” of the household, unconsciously supporting the entire sound edifice.

4. The Reconstruction of Sonic Ethics: Art, Voyage, and Polyphony

Central to Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony is the author’s renunciation of monopolizing characters’ consciousness, allowing for “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Bakhtin, Text 29)[11]. This chapter will argue that *To the Lighthouse* enacts a transition from monologue to polyphony. The voyage scene is not merely a geographical movement but a reorganization of dialogic relations—in the confined space of the boat, Mr. Ramsay is compelled to transform from monologist to dialogic participant. Lily’s painting process is not only artistic creation but a training in polyphonic listening. The final arrival at the lighthouse signifies an acceptance of multiple truths. More importantly, this chapter will analyze how the novel, through a Bakhtinian “carnavalesque conciliation”—not a harmony that erases differences, but a dynamic balance that acknowledges them—envisions a new sonic ethics. This ethics does not pursue an ultimate truth but cherishes the dialogic process itself; it does not attempt to unify voices but allows diverse voices to coexist while maintaining their distinctive characteristics.

4.1. The Genealogical Shift of Listening: From Hegemonic Hearing to Dialogic Coexistence

True dialogue requires participants to abandon the position of “monopolizing truth.” In the voyage scene, Mr. Ramsay’s transformation is precisely a process of this abandonment. He waits for Lily to speak first: “There was a terrible silence... They looked at the sea” (146)[8]. This silence has a positive, dialogic significance: it is not a monologic silence of authority (demanding interpretation), but a dialogic, open silence (prepared to listen). On the boat, he cannot control the environmental sounds; the overwhelming presence of the waves forces him to shift from “speaking subject” to “listening subject”: “The sea laughed, and the boat was still, and the sun shone” (156)[8]. This positional shift has profound ethical implications: he begins to experience that the other’s voice is not an object to be conquered or responded to but a background to be accepted. Simultaneously, the silence of James and Cam is no longer interpreted as submission or rebellion but is increasingly perceived as the boundary of their independent voices. Mr. Ramsay begins to recognize that his children’s silence is not empty compliance but an expression of complete subjectivity: “They must come; they must follow him. They must carry the brown paper parcels. But they walked on, silently, vowing a great pact to resist tyranny to the death” (157)[8]. The children’s silence contains complete subjectivity and a complex inner world, forcing him to adjust his acoustic posture.

Lily Briscoe’s painting process, in turn, demonstrates a new mode of listening, a quintessential “polyphonic” creation. When she concentrates on her painting: “She was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness of outer things, her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr. Carmichael was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, names, sayings, memories, ideas, like a fountain, spraying over the glaring, hideously difficult white space” (154)[8]. This creative state aligns with Bakhtin’s description of polyphonic thought, where multiple consciousnesses “combine on equal terms within the unity of an event,” yet each retains its

independence. In Lily's mind, the voices of Mrs. Ramsay, Tansley, memories of the beach, and artistic theories coexist, forming a multi-voiced dialogue.

Crucially, Lily's creative process in the third section embodies Bakhtin's aesthetics of "unfinalizability." She loosens her tense senses, and usually, in such moments, "the great question, which had never been answered, would suddenly come upon her—What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years" (155)[8]. Bakhtin argues that dialogue possesses unfinalizability and inconclusiveness. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he writes, "As long as a person is alive, he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, has not yet said his ultimate word" (77). Thus, the core of the polyphonic novel lies in "posing a problem rather than solving it." Lily's creation embodies this problem-consciousness; she does not seek a final answer but keeps the question open.

Finally, the decision to go to the lighthouse and the subsequent voyage transform the boat's cabin into a polyphonic acoustic space. The interweaving of wave sounds, sail sounds, human voices, and silence forms a multi-voiced chorus. In this juxtaposition of multiple sound sources, no single voice can claim a privileged position, forcing everyone to develop the auditory capacity to process multiple sounds simultaneously, placing all voices in a relationship of equal dialogue. James, at the helm, listens with focused attention: "...he had to look at the sail. If the sail flapped, or the boat slowed down, Mr. Ramsay would say sharply, 'Look out! Look out!'" (158)[8]. He must listen simultaneously to his father's voice, the wind, the sail, and the sea. This multiple listening forces him to develop a layered structure of attention, capable of flexibly shifting between different acoustic levels. Cam's observations and Mr. Ramsay's silence further contribute to constructing a three-dimensional acoustic space—one that seeks not harmonious unity but the coexistence of differences.

4.2. The Ethical Reconstruction of Arrival: Lighthouse Voyage and Polyphonic Reconciliation

What most profoundly disrupts the established sonic order are birth and death as points of silent explosion. Mrs. Ramsay's death possesses profound dialogic significance: "One morning, Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along the passage, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay had died the night before, and no one was there to meet him" (125)[8]. In this scene, the rupture of dialogue is dramatized: outstretched arms await a response, but the response will never come. Correspondingly, Prue's death is presented through the lens of "another's discourse": "Prue Ramsay died that summer in childbirth. It was a tragedy, people said; they said, everything had promised so well" (129)[8]. The phrase "people said" exemplifies Bakhtin's analysis of "the refraction of another's discourse"—significant events are narrated through the mediation of social discourse; the banal comment that "everything had promised so well" contrasts sharply with the brutality of death, revealing the inadequacy of social language to address traumatic experience.

While death may signify the end of "dialogue" in reality, in literature, it can reflect on the essence of dialogue by depicting this termination. Therefore, although Mrs. Ramsay, the family's core, has passed away, the story does not cease. The characters' eventual arrival at the lighthouse in the latter half of the novel should not be interpreted as an end point but

rather as a new beginning for dialogue. This voyage is not merely a spatial movement but a reconstruction of the sonic order. In the confined space of the boat, the power of sound is physically reshaped: the vastness of the waves dwarfs human voices, and the father's commands lose their absolute authority. The physical sensations of the voyage—tossing, wind, sun—create a shared perceptual basis for everyone. The enforced proximity allows them to hear subtle sounds usually ignored (breathing, rustling of clothes), which quietly alters the components of dialogue.

Previously at home, Mr. Ramsay's voice dominated absolutely; on the boat, his words are diluted by the sound of waves, and his authority is challenged by natural forces. James, who "hated his father," must share this confined space, and this enforced proximity compels both parties to set aside prejudices and begin attempting to listen to each other's silences and faint expressions (144)[8]. Mr. Ramsay no longer insists on others agreeing with him; instead, he asks Cam, "Which is East, which is West?"—though still patronizing, this shows a willingness to communicate (148)[8]. This acoustic change brought about by spatial restructuring shifts power relations from one-way domination to two-way negotiation, providing a physical prerequisite for reconciliation. Cam's observation also reveals the transformation of the sonic order: "She sat among the calm, determined people, not knowing how to answer her father about the dog, not knowing how to resist his appeal—forgive me, be kind to me" (162)[8]. She faces not a simple choice between obedience and rebellion but seeks her own vocal position within a complex sonic order. This complexity itself has ethical value: it breaks the binary logic of either/or, allowing dialogue to persist within tension.

Although the voyage to the lighthouse ends, the sound of the waves persists, symbolizing the eternal coexistence of memory, absence, understanding, and misunderstanding. The reconciliation between Mr. Ramsay and James is not a complete dissolution of conflict but a mutual tolerance after acknowledging differences. Lily's painting "would never be hung" (139)[8], yet in its creation, it achieves a reconciliation between self and world. The Rayleys' marriage, though imperfect, finds a new rhythm of coexistence in "making the best of it" (154)[8]—this imperfect relationship embodies polyphonic ethics. Mrs. Ramsay's absence does not cause the complete collapse of the sonic order but instead provides space for the emergence of multiple voices; her memory becomes a medium for dialogue among different subjects rather than a source of authority. This state of "unfinished completion" rejects a closed, harmonious ending and acknowledges the complexity and openness of the sonic order. The democratization of the lighthouse's meaning marks an important shift from authoritative definition to subjective interpretation. Different characters' varied interpretations of the lighthouse—James's "end of a childhood obsession," Mr. Ramsay's "some sort of consolation," Lily's "compositional element" in her painting—constitute a polyphony of interpretation. This polyphony refuses to monologically elevate any single interpretation to the status of sole truth, allowing multiple meanings to coexist in dialogue. The lighthouse becomes a "dialogic symbol"—each subject gains the right to interpret the object, and the lighthouse is no longer a singular symbol but a vessel for multiple meanings.

At the novel's end, "You could hear the waves breaking, the spray falling, the waves roaring, as they rolled in and broke upon the rocks, as if they were a herd of wild beasts,

unbridled, forever playing and gambolling” (200)[8]. This is not a closed reconciliation but an open continuity—where memory, absence, understanding, and misunderstanding coexist in an eternal cyclical rhythm. This “harmony containing cracks” is the core of polyphonic ethics..

5. Conclusion

Viewed through the lens of Bakhtinian theory, *To the Lighthouse* emerges as a profound experiment in polyphonic fiction. Woolf not only depicts the micro-mechanisms of sonic politics but also, through the novel’s form itself, practices a dialogic poetics of resistance. The novel breaks with the monologic narration of traditional realist fiction, employing techniques such as stream of consciousness, multiple perspectives, and temporal leaps to grant equal expressive rights to different consciousnesses. Mr. Ramsay’s philosophical meditations, Mrs. Ramsay’s emotional fluctuations, Lily’s aesthetic explorations, and James’s sensory experiences—these different ways of knowing the world are not integrated into a single authoritative perspective but retain their respective integrity and independence. Simultaneously, the novel constructs a multi-layered system of sonic dialogue: at the macro level, dialogue between imperial discourse and local experience; at the meso level, dialogue between different generations, genders, and classes within the family; at the micro level, dialogue among the multiple inner voices of each subject. These dialogues are not linear debates but three-dimensional, interwoven, and mutually permeating.

Finally, the novel points toward an ethical posture of listening. For Bakhtin, the core of dialogue is “respect for and the will to respond to the other’s voice.” The tragedy in *To the Lighthouse* lies in the fact that many characters fail to truly hear each other during their lifetimes; however, the novel’s hope resides in the fact that, through the mediated dialogue of art, memory, and nature, different voices ultimately find a way to coexist in polyphonic time and space.

Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* can thus be understood as a metaphor for a dialogic universe: a universe with no final reconciliation, only ongoing dialogue; no unified truth, only multiple realities; no closed ending, only open unfinalizability. This is the profound resonance between Bakhtin’s dialogic philosophy and Woolf’s modernist poetics—in a fragmented world, we rebuild the ethical basis of meaning by holding fast

to the possibility of dialogue.

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