

CHAPTER - I

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf is one of most well-known writers of the twentieth century fiction. She has often been credited with having given the modern British novel a new dimension of experimentation. Yet her prolific critical writing has often remained outside the perview of critical attention. As Sharma argues (1977, P.11), it has been neglected for a long time. As a student of literature, I got interested in Virginia Woolf and her writing. It has been said rather negatively, that she nowhere altered the face of criticism, as she did the face of the novel. Yet there also have been critics like Dickinson who called her the “finest of living critics” (Sharma, 1977, P.111). It was such conflicting views on Virginia Woolf as a critic that interested me in her critical writing.

*use of passive voice
desirable*

In this dissertation, I have endeavoured to study Virginia Woolf's critical writing which she produced during forty years (1902-1942) of her life. I have set her in the midst of the critical clamour of the age; then I have attempted to build up, by analysis and collation, whatever theory about the nature of the creative and literary excellence can be found in her critical writing. I intend to see if this theory has any relation to her critical principles and to assess the general validity of her critical tenets. Finally I have tried to arrive at a tentative estimate of Virginia

Woolf as a practising critic and finally to place her in the tradition of twentieth century criticism.

1.2 BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Virginia Stephen was born in London on January 26, 1882 at Hyde Park Gate, Kensington to Julia and Leslie Stephen. Her father was Sir Leslie Stephen, an acclaimed intellectual of the Cambridge environment. She was one of the younger children of a distinguished literary family. Leslie Stephen was the author of critical biographical, philosophical essays and the friend of scholars and men of letters during the brilliant period of English Literature. The Stephen family in their London house must have resembled the Ramsays in **To The Lighthouse** with the older and younger boys and girls.

Virginia Woolf in her fiction and her Diary, seems very much at ease with young people of both sexes. The tie with her sister Vanessa was very close and with her brother Thoby, whose sudden death at the age of twenty five during a holiday in Greece in 1906, had a profound effect upon her work. The sudden extinction of promise is the story of Rachel in the **Voyage Out**, of Jacob in **Jacob's Room**, and of Perceval in **The Waves**.

Leslie Stephen was fifty years old when Virginia was born and the great days of his life were over. He would take his dog and his daughter out for a walk into Kensington Gardens. The habit of walking through the Parks and squares and streets of London, established thus early with her father remained one of the most persistent of Virginia's occupations, fruitful of ideas for her work, of background for her novels, and the subject of one of her most charming essays, *The Haunted House*.

Virginia in her memoirs stresses the atmosphere of freedom in their family life - 'the right to think one's own thoughts and to follow one's own pursuits, and choose one's own profession. He did not like to see women smoke, but the freedom his daughter had in other ways was worth thousands of cigarettes.

Virginia was thirteen when she lost her mother Julia, which was the first of the losses that affected her deeply. Her half sister Stella took the charge of the household till Venessa Stephen was old enough. Stella was married later and died very soon. How Virginia was affected at the moment, she recalls in her Diary soon after the death of Roger Fry. She came to regard life as an arbitrary trickster.

During these years, just before and after the turn of the century, the young men of the family and their friends were studying at Cambridge. Virginia, whose health did not permit her to take of the

conventional schooling, was educated at home, learning among other things Greek with a teacher, Janet case.

After Sir Leslie Stephen's death in 1964 Venessa and Virginia, Thoby and Adrian, rented a house in Bloomsbury Square, a literary district which later became famous as the locale of the Bloomsbury Group, a literary club founded by Virginia Woolf. Toby died in 1906. Venessa married Clive Bell in 1907 and the Bells took over the Gordon Square house, Adrian and Virginia moved to nearby Fitzoy square. During this period Virginia had chosen writing as her occupation and Venessa, painting.

Leonard Woolf married Virginia in 1912. Though a student of history he was also interested in literature and encouraged Virginia Woolf to write to satisfy her desire to explore her mind in solitude to commune with others Virginia Woolf was by nature shy, aloof and inwardly fierce. In 1917 Virginia Woolf founded the Hogarth Press with her husband.

On March 28, 1941 Virginia was drowned in the river Ouse near Lewes in Surren when she was fifty nine years of age. The coroner returned the verdict of suicide. This unfortunate end of a brilliant literary career is attributed to Schizophrenia, a kind of mental breakdown.

1.3 INTRODUCTION TO HER NOVELS

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is one of the leading twentieth century British novelists who pioneered the modern trends in novel writing. She has contributed handsomely to the revolution in the concept of novelistic structure in our time both as a theorist and a practitioner of this literary genre. When she started her career as a writer of Fiction in the revolutionary days of World War-I she began with a unique advantage. She had the benefit of first hand knowledge through discussion, imitation, suggestion and friendly criticism of the elite in the Field such as E. M. Forster, Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy and a large number of others, including such great names as Conard and D.H. Lawrence James Joyce, Hardy, Henry James and George Meredith.

In 1925 she published **Mrs. Dalloway**, (Jean Guiget, P.53) which according to some, is her best creation which achieves a higher level of refinement in the use of stream of consciousness technique.

To The Lighthouse, almost unanimously considered as her best creation, was published in 1927, followed by **Orlando** in 1928 and **The Waves** in 1931.

To The Lighthouse is divided into three parts. The Window, Time passes and The Lighthouse. The first part is concerned with the

events of one evening and night and the third part with the event of one morning and ten years later. It is of course necessary to note here that in the *Lighthouse* Mrs. Woolf takes the stream of consciousness technique to its highest level of refinement.

Chronologically **Orlando** comes after **To The Lighthouse** as epoch making pieces of literary criticism on the theory of the novel. The early novels of Virginia Woolf were quite traditional.

Virginia Woolf's first novel was published in 1915 under the title **The Voyage Out**. It was completely traditional in form. Her second novel was published in 1919 under the title **Night and Day**. It had also traditional form but in certain passages and incidents in this novel, Virginia Woolf used symbolism and poetic technique which she used in her later novels. **Jacob's Room** came in 1922 and **Mrs. Dalloway** in 1925.

In **Jacob's Room** Virginia Woolf experimented with the basic attributes of stream of consciousness technique of narration. She narrates in a discontinuous and indirect manner the story of life and death of Jacob Flanders.

Orlando was published in 1928. **Orlando** is a fantasy revealing the use of Bergsonian concepts of time, memory and flux. In **Orlando**

Virginia Woolf traces the physical and literary ancestors of her friend - Victoria Sackville Hert, from late Elizabethan times to the present. In **Orlando**, there is forward and backward movement in time, there is inconsistent working of memory. There are insights into the problem of personality and stream of consciousness under currents. The height of fantasy is reached when Orlando gets transformed into a woman.

In 1931 Virginia Woolf published **The Waves**. In this novel she confined herself more exclusively than in any other, to recording the stream of consciousness.

The Years appeared in 1937 Mrs. Woolf wrote a more expansive novel combining her own method with elements of traditional narrative.

In 1941 came her last novel **Between the Acts**. In this novel the action, as in **Mrs. Dalloway** occurs on a single day but extended time is suggested by the staging of village pageant - recording English history.

98/ While the reader is also kept aware of the haunting presence of the menacing movement in history when war was impending.

1.4 JUSTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC

Virginia Woolf's novels fascinated me ever since I studied them in my college days. She is unique with regard to her technique, style and

her use of language. Her novels give an internal view of human beings; their mind and their emotions.

Virginia Woolf was not only a novelist but also a critic. I was keen on knowing where she stood in the history of twentieth century criticism.

When I took up this study I found that this area was rather neglected. There have been a number of studies of her critical writing. Among full length studies of Virginia Woolf, one has to admit the importance of atleast three : Dorothy Brewster's "**Virginia Woolf (1963)**", Jean Guiget's "**Virginia Woolf and Her Works (1965)**" and Herbert Marder's "**Feminism and Art (1968)**". These writers have focused much on her total achievement rather than her criticism. Among the other important studies are "A comparative study of Virginia Woolf and B.S. Mardhekar with reference to the stream of Consciousness Technique used in their novels" by A.F Patil (1988) "A stylistic analysis of Virginia Woolf's **To The Lighthouse**" by Miss K.V. Wadkar (1993) "Structure in the novels of Virginia Woolf" by D.V. Togale (1972) and "Virginia Woolf as a Feminist" by Anita S. Kumar (1996). They have worked mainly on her literary works, though her critical essays were well known. A number of articles have, indeed, concentrated on Virginia Woolf's critical biases and status. One among them is Mark

Goldman who has tried to emphasize some aspect of Virginia Woolf's literary criticism. But, as was to be expected, within the limitations of an article, none has built up a complete critical theory which would at once fit her critical pronouncements and be verified by the nature of her own creative work. The present study is just a very modest step in that direction.

As I read her novels I found that her view of the world is anything but simplistic. "She considers life to have myriad forms and each form to have, potentially, multiple facets. If in her novels, she juxtaposes life and death, sanity and insanity, love and hatred, the comic and the tragic, and the physical and the psychological, it is because she believes that no one episode, or experience, no single tone or stance ever exhausts the whole range of human existence. Life has a rich density, layer upon layer and, as such, mere scratchings at the surface cannot be treated as cross-sections of reality. This was her view of life" (Quoted by Quentin Bell, 1972, pp. 50-51). After reading her novels the interest in reading criticism arose in me. I read her **Common Reader** where I saw that she wanted the common reader to learn how to read a book intelligently and sensitively, which in turn led me to read her other essays.

1.5 CLASSIFICATION OF HER ESSAYS

About 1902 she (Quentin Bell, **Virginia Woolf**, I, pp.79) was introduced to the editor of **The Speaker** and a year or two later to the editor of the **Times Literary Supplement** to which she was to be a life-long contributor. Her articles are a life long contribution to be found in thirty two other periodicals and a couple of daily papers, among which the most important are **The New Statesman**, **The Criterion**, **A Writer's Diary**, **The Nation and Antheneum**, **The New Republic**, **The Yale Review** and **The New Statesman and Nation**.

As Sharma argues, (1977, P.111) Virginia Woolf's critical essays can be divided into five broad categories. First, the ones that she wrote as reviews at the request of editors for various periodicals. **The Elizabethan Lumber Room**, **On Rereading Meredith**, **The Art of Fiction**, etc. belong to this category. Then there are essays where she aimed at recreating for the reader an age, a period, or the portrait of a writer. Here we could place essays like **The Pastons and Chaucer**, **The Strange Elizabethans** and **Sterns**, etc. Thirdly, the essays which span the works of a writer and which aim at acquainting the reader with the total achievement of that writer or writers. Essays like **Defoe**, **Phases of Fiction**, **Robinson Crusoe**, **The Novels of E.M. Foster**, **The Novels of Turgenev**, belong to this group. Fourthly there are essays like **Modern**

Fiction, Mr. Bernett and Mrs. Brown, The Narrow Bridge of Art, The Leaning Tower, etc. which initiate a debate on certain prevailing literary tendencies, and summarize her views on these. The fifth category consists of all the critical concepts. It includes essays like **Letter to a Young Poet, How Should One Read a Book?** and **On Not Knowing Greek**, etc.

Her essays were published in volumes. During her life time she published two volumes of collected essays **The Common Reader**, first series in 1925 and **The Common Reader** second series 1932. Most of the essays appearing in these two collections are derived from reviews which she had done for the **Times Literary Supplement** and other periodicals. **The Death of the Moth** (1942) was posthumously published by her husband Leonard Woolf.

Later a further collection of essays appeared - **The Movement** and in 1950, yet another, **The Captain's Death Bed** was also published. However, bibliographical researches reveals a considerable number of unrepublished essays and reviews, many of which were written prior to Virginia Woolf's marriage. **Granite and Rainbow** (1958) contained a selection of some of the best peices. In 1966-67 all the essays contained in these six volumes were republished in four volumes and collected essays. Her strongly expressed opinions on the Feminist movement and

the feminist problems of her time were only found in her non-fiction books like **A Room One's Own** and **Three Guineas**. For this study, I have tried to concentrate on the **Common Reader**, **A Room of One's Own** and **Three Guineas**. My attempt is to identify the major themes that emerge out of her critical writings, and then see if any common thread can be seen binding them. I have, thus, tried to isolate the major themes as statements of her preoccupation as a critic. Given below is the chapter scheme of my study.

1.6 CHAPTER SCHEME

In the present Chapter I have presented a general outline of my study and a brief biographical sketch of Virginia Woolf alongwith the classification of her essays. Chapter-II discusses the major themes in the **Common Reader**. Chapter-III presents the Ideological Trends in Virginia Woolf's Critical Thinking, as reflected in her **A Room of One's Own** and **Three Guineas**. Chapter-IV presents the conclusion derived from the study reported in the earlier chapters, alongwith a statement of the shortcomings of study after which areas of further research are proposed.

1.7 METHODOLOGY

In the absence of any formal autobiography of Virginia Woolf, I have taken her Diary and letters as evidence of her consciously held

critical beliefs, where her novels have seemed to yield statements that are in line with her non-fictional disposition, they have been called to corroborate the latter. I have also used Prof. Bell's definitive biography of Virginia Woolf because he had access to the unpublished Diaries and letters because Woolf was his aunt. I have also depended on tools of practical criticism and stylistic analysis.

I have collated her critical pronouncements chronologically. In her career of writing critical essays she first of all wrote reviews for various periodicals, and later she aimed at recreating for the reader an age, a period, or the portrait of a writer. Here I have presented the critics of Edwardian era, transition age and then modernism. How was Virginia Woolf different from the critics of her times? How did her theories differ from the other critics? What were the issues she raised in her critical writings? I have also tried to bring out the theory which emerge out of her views on language, literature, form, criticism etc. I have also discussed the ideological trends in her critical thinking. Here I have tried to discuss issues like women and production of literature, also the suffragist movement alongwith her feminist views etc. In the final chapter, I have tried to state the conclusions derived from my study.