CHAPTER - II

CHAPTER - II

2.1 In this chapter I have tried to place Virginia Woolf in the context of the period she wrote in. If we have to understand Virginia Woolf as a critic we have to first of all understand her age, and the characteristics of her age.

The year 1900 was the year of transition. There was change on all levels. Also there was a philosophical shift in man's concept of himself and reality. Between 1902 and 1914, the economic prosperity of England increased by leaps and bounds, and it came to be regarded as politically the most stable and militarily the mightiest nation in Europe. There was also a decline in the religious sense of life or one can say the decay of spiritual values. Materialism was the supreme God, which was present in its manifested forms like capitalism and imperialism. However, serious writers like Mrs. Woolf, Eliot and Huxley accepted the challenge of the new age, and contrary to the age, they emphasised upon spirit and encouraged people to reject materialism. The individual revolution also had reached its highest point. Money and not human affections, came to determine the human relationships. The prestige and greatness of a man depended upon his wealth and riches and not upon the qualities of his mind and heart.

This was made more clear after the First World War. There were changes on all levels. There was a philosophical shift in man's concept of himself and reality.

After the first world war great changes were seen in literature. Various trends, movements and experiments started.

As the English novel grew up in the Edwardian period it depended on society, and on public agreement about what, among the multifarious details of daily life, was worth picking out as significant. What was significant was what altered a social relationship - love and marriage, quarrelling and reconciliation, gain or loss of money or of social status. One could criticize society. One could explore the relation between gentility and morality, as Thackery did or the effect of industrial society on private character as Dickens did or investigate the possibilities of self-knowledge and vocation in a context of society at work, as George Eliot did, but in every case the plot would be carried forward by public symbols. And in every case society is there, to be taken account of and accepted as a basic fact about human life even when the author wishes to alter it or attack the marriage as the accepted resolution of a situation involving the love of two people of opposite sex, becomes the appropriate symbol of the happy ending where two such persons are concerned. Edwardian novels were essentially "novels of ideas"

including in its scope a free discussion of all kinds of ideas like scientific, social, political, industrial and so forth.

Mrs. Woolf explained her own theory in her famous essay "Modern Fiction" in the **Common Reader** (1) The distinctive quality of the novelist, she says, is permanent interest in "Character in Itself". "I believe that all novels deal with character, and that it is to express character - not to preach doctrines, sing songs or celebrate the glories of British Empire - that the form of the novel, so clumsy, so verbose and undramatic, so very elastic and alive, has been evolved." Thus did she express her concern with character, and of her method she wrote : "Let us record the atoms as they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness?" ("Modern Fiction", I, 1925, pp.190).

The essay "Modern Fiction" is largely taken up with destructive criticism of the Edwardians.

"Materialists ... they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body... they write of unimportant things.... they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial at the transitory appear the true and the enduring. Life escapes H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett;"

> look within and life, it seems is very far from being "like this". Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions-trivial, fantastic, evanescent or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old... Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end ("Modern Fiction", 1925, pp.189).

"This may be inadequate psychology says", Frank W. Bradbrook (Sharma, 1977, pp. 130). It may involve a too passive conception of perception, but it describes what life meant for Virginia Woolf, and it made necessary the creation of new techniques and methods like stream of consciousness technique and impressionism. Fiction, for Virginia Woolf, was a re-creation of the complexities of experience. Just as life was a most subtle and complicated succession of experience, so fiction must be infinitely adaptable and supple in order to catch the 'tones', the light and shade of experience. The art of the novelist was similar to that of the painter, and painting for Virginia Woolf did not mean the Dutch School, who were admired by George Eliot, but Roger Fry and the Post-Impressionists, Van Gogh rather than Van Cycles, Cezanne, Ganguin,

and Matisse. There were various 'phrases' of fiction and different types of novelists, equivalent to the different schools of painting, and the task of the modern novelist was to make use of whatever was of value in the past. Virginia Woolf, thus remains one of those who seek to give to the English novel a new direction, a new form as well as a new 'spiritual' awareness.

The twentieth century opened a new phase in the realm of traditional fiction. She was one of the pioneering writers in the stream of consciousness technique.

The stream of consciousness method is the impressionist method. The idea of this method was first given by the philosopher William James in 1814 and was further popularized in his "Principles of psychology in 1890". "Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. The significance, the value of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it. Consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits.. It is nothing jointed.... it flows. Let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life."

Some modern novelists who consciously employed the stream of consciousness technique were Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce and others. Among them the major exponent of the stream of conscious novel

is Virginia Woolf. "This new form verbalises the stream of memories, experiences, contacts and imagination which run below the conscious thought and which bear a direct relation to external facts." This new form gives a total view of man, his mind and his emotions. She depicts the real life of the moment, the response of individual to the impressions. Her novels do not have chronclogical stories. They have plots. She provides plot to illumine the mind. She records not events but moments. In her essay "Modern Fiction" she expresses her view of life (1925, pp. 189). "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged, life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelop surrounding as from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with a little mixture of the alien and external as possible. She deals with the process of recording the impressions, "as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall" she felt this method is deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people say, but what they have unsaid, not only what they are, but what life is. For the same reason she can be called as an impressionistic also, which again deals with the mental life of the chief character rather than on the reality around him. Here the natural objects are described as they first strike the age of a character.

In the sphere of social ideas, feminism developed so vigourously that every chain which had fettered women was suddenly snapped, and they became at one blow electors to parliament and eligible for it, nearly every career reserved for men was opened to them.

H. G. Wells John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy more or less conformed to the tradition in form, though they differed widely in content and themes. In the traditional novels the story element is predominant. Woolf departed from the traditional novel form in significant ways.

Virginia Woolf, at the start of her career, became heir to this tradition and wrote her first two novels in this spirit. The novels like **Voyage Out** and **Night and Day** were written in the tradition of Henry Fielding, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy. But her later novels like **To The Lighthouse**, **Waves** and **Jacob's Room** represent her attempts at reorganising the novel form itself.

Virginia Woolf gave the twentieth century art, especially novel "a new dimension". She was of the opinion that if the character had changed the form of the novel also should be changed. To depict the transition from the old to the new, from a stable world dealing in absolutes to our committed to the present moment of feeling, she felt the

writer must renounce his old methods and former tools. In her essay on "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (**Collected Essays**, Vol. I, pp.330) she affirmed that the Edwardian novelists had made use of "tools and established conventions which do their business; and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools death." The consequence of this belief was her continuous experiments with the form of the novel. She felt that as a novelist her business cannot be only to communicate human experience but to record what life felt like to living beings. She was not satisfied with the record of a single mind, she wanted to communicate the impression made by one individual upon others and to reveal human personality, partly through its own self-consciousness and partly through the picture projected try it upon other minds ("Modern Fiction", I, pp.200). With the changed view man was seen to be a complex of personalities consisting of separate states of awareness. This changed view offered the novelist areas of experimentation. To depict the complexity of emotions and experience, became the main current in modern literature. According to Virginia Woolf (In her essay "Modern Fiction", 1925) she says, "The novel is not a form which you see, but emotion which you feel." She adopted the new form because she felt that the old forms of literature were inadequate to express this complexity of emotions. The modern novelist

has been faced by two major problems, one moral and one psychological. The moral one concerns the freedom for herself implied freedom for others to make judgement: "I'm to write what I like; and they're to say what they like." It was her association with the Bloomsburry circle that saved her, as a critic, from getting into Laurention rages or from insuing pontifical statements.

The Bloomsburry atmosphere had a formative influence on her growth as a writer. Yet to think that it imposed upon Virginia Woolf any rigid doctrine or set attitudes would be to misunderstand both the nature of the group and her mind. The Bloomsburry group was no mutual admiration society. By being sharply critical of each other they helped each member in his growth as an independent thinker and writer.

2.2 VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE BLOOMSBURRY GROUP

The name Bloomsburry Group was given to a number of English writers and artists who frequently met between about 1907 and 1930 at the houses of Clive and Venessa Bell and of Veanessa's brother and sister Adrian and Virginia Stephen (later Virginia Woolf) in the Bloomsburry district of London, near the British museum. The group of writers and artists that included in addition to Roger Fry, Duncan Grant,

Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, J.M. Keynes, Desmond Mac Carthy and rather on the fringe E.M. Foster. In a younger generation their tradition is carried on by Mr. Cyril Connolly, Mr. V.S. Pritchett and Mr. Edwin Muir.

Nearly all the "Bloomsburry's", many of them at one time or another had flats in that agreeable district of London, called Bloomsburry. The Bloomsburry flourished soon after the death of Queen Victoria until the second world war. They were all followers of the Cambridge philosopher, G.E. Moore, who taught them the importance of good and pleasant states of feeling in the individual human life and they discussed artistic and philosophical questions in a spirit of honest agnosticism. In all of them, therefore, there is a passionate striving towards charity, good-will and understanding and towards a perception of the passing but real beauty of the world. The good is to be found in individual experience and though men and women are mortal, the good is not less real. Most of them had been "apostles", i.e. members of the "society", a select semisecret university club for the discussion of serious questions, founded at Cambridge.

Bloomsburry cannot be called a movement or a cult for it was more of a spirit, a state of mind. Quentin Bell considers it as something "almost impalpable, almost indefinable." In a derogatory sense, the

Bloomsburry group came to convey a high brow sentiment. As members of this group never tried to seek publicity or "provide a spectacle", the legends around it continued to grow, making

> What had initially been useful as a quick, rough and ready term of classification to the journalists... into a very real obstacle of labour of the literary and historical biographer. (Lytton Strachey, II, 411)

Virginia Woolf in association with Bloomsburry group, her mind found new subjects and directions. The freedom and stimulus of the Bloomsburry group encouraged every artist to create, as Roger Fry vouched, "his own method of expression in his medium". It was this atmosphere of give-and-take, of unfettered enquiry that gave Virginia Woolf the impetus to free thinking. Later on it emboldened her to assert: "I write what I like writing and there's an end on it." (Quentin Bell, **Bloomsburry**, pp.49) This nature of consciousness, and its relation to time. Modern psychology has made it increasingly difficult for the novelist to think of consciousness as moving in a straight chronological line from one point to the next. He tends rather to see it as altogether fluid, existing simultaneously at several different levels. And this is what Virginia Woolf did. Comparing this with the Edwardians and the

victorians one can say that the modern novelists has rejected the irrelevances of the victorians and their moralisings.

Virginia Woolf was extremely dissatisfied with the work of the great masters of the modern English novel, H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy. She accuses them of having cared for the body but not for the spirit. "They tell us about every button on a suit tailored in Bond street, but nothing about the yearnings and cravings of the spirit of man". Thus "Virginia Woolf believed that the novelist must expose himself to life and get detatched from it." (**Granite and Rainbow**)

Though they discussed this refined and difficult but by no means sentimental philosophy, what gave the work of this group its own dignity and pathos. They accepted the death of the individual as a final death and yet it was in the experience of the individual that they looked for what values there were in life. This gave them a rigorous and stringent attitude towards all kinds of stupidity, unnecessary, failure, and general sloppiness in human living.

Most of these writers perhaps, all of them were humanitarian in their social attitudes. Their humanitarianism did not spring, however from any self-identification with the struggling and suffering masses of the people but rather from an impatience with what seemed to them

irrational and untidy and destructive in ordinary life. Their pity was real but a little cold.

They had certain blind-spots too. The Bloomsburry group suffered like any other school of writers from a tendency towards mutual admiration that was merely a form of 'narcissism'. These intellectuals who changed their habits, ideas and acquaintances so often, and engaged in so many chattering speculations, that they had little time to inquire into the sources of each other's identity, or their own. Being an active member, rather a founder, of the Bloomsburry Mrs. Woolf possessed all the merits and faults common to this group.

2.3 VIRGINIA WOOLF'S GENERAL CRITICAL VIEWS

After this introductory section, I have presented below the study of major themes that occur in Virginia Woolf's critical writing. In the earlier chapter I have given the classification of her essays and I would like to divide them into two phases. The early phase or the first phase will deal with her early writings that is from the year 1902 to 1932 and the second phase will deal with the writings from the year 1932 to 1942. I have suggested this classification because most of her writing was Journalistic and since I had to identify the main critical themes, this division was thought to be more conducive for that purpose.

First of all I would like to define the term criticism. Entymologically, the word criticism means 'Judgement on works of literature'. In other words, literary criticism is the play of the mind on a work of literature and it consists in asking and answering rational questions about literature.

In the first phase we see that she has contributed her articles to many periodicals and also daily papers.

I would like to discuss first what critical activity meant for some of the critics. I would like to compare Virginia Woolf with Mathew Arnold and T.S. Eliot at a later stage as I discuss her views.

In 1917 Virginia Woolf wrote in her "**Ideal Republic of Letters**" that though critical activity often seemed to lapse into a creative attempt, criticism was not the recreation of a work of art (Sharma, 1977, pp.89). The process of recreation that a critic goes through is very different from the process which created the original work. Distinguishing between the critical and the creative activity, she notes in her "Essay on Criticism" that : "Criticism is largely the interpretation of art. The process of recreation that a critic goes through is very different from the process which created the original work, and she finds it difficult to see how a work which contains the "Elements of interpretation can be a work of art in the sense in which a poem is a work of art". Virginia Woolf makes

clear when she says that in interpreting a writer, we frame tools which spring directly from our impression of the work itself : to feel is the first step in criticism but to know why one feels is of great importance too. Discrimination develops only when the critic begins to explain his responses. From these explanations he infers certain critical principles. But if her generalizations are to be infallible they must be drawn from the study and comparison of the classics that survived the vagaries of literary fashions and tastes. A critic thus groomed will have a set of standards in his mind 'unconfuse and unlowered, though kept in the background, unless the merit of the work makes open references to it worthwhile. such training and deliberate preparation is necessary for a professional, public critic who would help the cause of letters.

It would be interesting to compare Woolf's views with that of Mathew Arnold to show how she differed from him. For Arnold, a critic of literature was inevitably interwined with social criticism. Arnold's criticism is Socio-Ethical criticism as it throws light on Arnold's view of poetry, as a means of culture. For Arnold, it is the critic who "discovers" the ideas, he who propagates them, and nothing remains for the literary genius but to walk in and undertake the grand work of, "Synthesis and exposition". He defined criticism as "the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science to see the object

as in itself it really is." (in **The Function of Criticism at the Present Time**) Arnold comes before his readers as a critic of society as well as a critic of literature, and in both these fields he sheds a new light and opens new avenues and channels for his followers like T.S. Eliot.

Eliot's views on criticism derive from his views on art and tradition. He defines (in the **Function of Criticism**) criticism as, "the commentation and exposition of works of art by means of written words", criticism can never be an autotelic activity, because criticism is always about something. Art, as critics like Mathew Arnold point out, may have some other ends e.g. moral religious, cultural, but art need not be aware of these ends, rather it performs its function better by being indifferent to such ends. But criticism always has one and only one definite end, and that end is, "elucidation of work of art and the correction of taste". In this essay, "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956), he further explains the aim of criticism as "the promotion of understanding and enjoyment of literature." ("The Frontiers of Criticism", 1956, pp.9)

2.4 THE THEMES IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S CRITICISM IN THE COMMON READER

As has already been stated earlier, Virginia Woolf looked upon criticism as on essentially interpretive activity. Her views on the function

of the critic which I have discussed at a later stage in this chapter abundantly reflect this position and in this she was distinctly different from her contemporaries. Another important general principle was that for Virginia Woolf, criticism was not the rececreatin of a work of art.

Virginia Woolf was also an aesthete apart from being a critic. She is by far the most satisfying of aesthetes. She was not the first of course. It is even possible that literary historians of the future will see her primarily as the culmination of the nineties, and that movement of which Walter Pater was the high priest in England. Certainly there is a great deal in common between him and her. Like her, Pater (Das and Mohanty, **Literary Criticism**, 1985, pp.117) regarded life as a succession of contemplative moments to be filled with as rich a content as possible; like her he directed our ages to look first and everywhere for what stimulates the sense of beauty. But inspite of this, in fact he looked for aesthetic satisfaction only in a very limited area of experience; the beautiful for him was mostly found in museums. Walter Pater possessed what so many of his followers and imitators lacked, a scrupulousness, an authentic note, an instinct for true civilization, not merely a polished and precious grace. (**Literary Criticism**, 1985, pp.118) Because he feared narrowness. Pater never really 'spoke out', unwilling perhaps to define his views on the relation between art and life. He was conscious how

easily his ideas could become degraded and vulgarized. But some of Pater's immediate disciples lacked his scrupulous and intellectual interpretation of his ideas and some of the notorious critical extravagances of the Nineties were unfairly fathered upon Pater. Oscar Wilde's witty preface to **The Picture of Dorian Gray** is a kind of caricature of the critical contribution of the aesthetic movement :

> The artist is the creator of beautiful things... the critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impressions of beautiful things... No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style... All art is quite useless.

This exaggeration of Pater's kind of sensibility and the degeneration of his faith in the civilizing influence of 'the love of art for its own sake' into the illogical catchphrase 'art for art's sake' has perhaps discredited impressionistic criticism. Yet much of the best criticism of the 20th century has been deeply influenced by the increase of sensitivity and alertness which it brought about. In this I. A Richards (**Practical Criticism**, 1929, pp.149) was one of the New critics who stressed on close textual and verbal study of a poem. His study of words as means of communication and his stress on their four-fold meaning and on the way in which meaning is determined by rhythm and metre, are

original and striking, and have gone a long way towards England and America. He had been a constant source of inspiration of the new critics. However, Virginia Woolf's criticism does not seem to hold close ties with this textual criticism known as "new critical thinking". She, in the **Common Reader** studied the Greek, the Elizabethan and the Russian points of view. In her earlier writings there is some preoccupation with various national literatures. Her survey of national literatures as well as her evaluation and authors also reflects how her point of orientation was her contemporary ethos. Her involvement was not only with the authors but, in a sense, with the historic relations they had with the past traditions of various literatures.

Virginia Woolf grew out of the critical reviewing period and matured as a critic. She began to see that no enduring critical opinion could be formulated only on the basis of personal first reactions. with her interest in criticism deepening she did not want to write more fiction. As Virginia Woolf's critical thinking grew more complex she put forth different functions to the reviewer and to the critic.

2.4.1 "**Reviewing** may be one of the functions of ctiticism" she said. But the way a reviewer gives his opinion of a book "that has been published two days perhaps, with the shell still sticking to its head" is not a very laudable exercise of responsible intellect. The reviewer is not

only "hampered, distracted and prejudiced" in his doing so, but also the review he writes "increases self consciousness and diminishes strength". ("The Captain's Death Bed", **Collected Essays**, II, pp.214) The function of criticism for Virginia Woolf, then is not to give an immediate verdict on a book as a reviewer often does. Sometimes even without going through the whole length of the book. Criticism which is fearless and disinterested is more valuable for the writer.

2.4.2 **Evaluating a book** : is another function of criticism. The critic has to decide what the most salient points of the book he has just read are. He must also be able to "distinguish accurately to what kind they belong", and then hold them against whatever model is chosen for comparison "to bring out their deficiency or their adequacy". ("An Essay in Criticism", **Collected Essays** II, 255) Being conscious that each literary genere excels in its own way, Virginia Woolf does not want criticism to be carried on as a blindman's buff, holding a lyric bed, say because it lacks the regularity of a heroic couplet. Virginia Woolf would want her critic first "to distinguish accurately to what kind" the book belongs, and then to compare it with the greatest of the kind. Of course, the critic is not to require the new prices to conform to the established masterpieces of its kind. He has only to compare their features in order to estimate the value of the newly arrived. In any case criticism should

not consist in judging a book only severely. It is not, nor ought it to be, literary mayhem. There should be some warmth of feeling and sympathy in the critic before he can yield himself to the value and influence of a book. It was the lack of these qualities in the gowned critic that turned Virginia Woolf against the "academic machine". That was one reason if we are to trust Quentin Bell's information, why she called Middleton Murry the president and oracle of the underworld. (Quentin Bell, II, pp.50) By intuitive and "inspiring" criticism Virginia Woolf complies that species of persuasive and provocative analysis that provides an incentive to the reader to read further and more deeply. Intelligent criticism, as she writes in her diary, never discourages. (**A Writers Diary**, pp.20)

2.4.3 **To craft the tools of a critic** is also one of the functions of criticism. For Virginia Woolf "to feel is the first step in criticism but to know why one feels is of great importance too" is the tool of a critic. ("On Re-reading Novels", **Collected Essays**, II, pp.126) But for Eliot comparison and analysis are the chief tools of a critic. Because comparison and analysis can be possible only when the critic knows the fact about the works which are to be compared and analysed. However, the method of comparison and analysis, even when used unjudiciously is preferable to 'interpretation' in the conventional sense.

2.4.4 **Another theme in Virginia Woolf's writing is the qualities of a good critic.** Virginia Woolf's complaint against a critic was that he got entangled in categorising literature into water tight compartments, whereas it is difficult to strictly label a work "romantic or realistic". According to Sharma (1977), she cannot even see how the organism whose life is made up of parts can be taken to pieces, and "those pieces can be numbered, divided and subdivided, and given their order of precedence like the internal organs of a frog."(Sharma, 1977, pp.101) It is incidentally, not a little prophetic that she used the image of dissection to describe the activities of the up and coming criticism. Virginia Woolf's indifference to reviewer critics, after an understanding of literature as she had she could not bring herself to believe that "a book demolished is a milestone passed". It needs sensitive and constant effort and toil to understand a book. If a critic is interested merely in tackling a book, "the circle of illumination will, we fear, grow fainter and further his horizon."("Anatomy of Criticism", **Collected Essays**, II, pp.138-140) This principled aversion to labels and methods, one is inclined to believe, may account, at least in part, for the apparent simplicity of Virginia Woolf's critical nomenclature. Her discussion reflected little patience with judgements and technical jargon of reviewers who took

airs of the priests of literary mystery. Her critical language is refreshingly without too much of opaque jargon.

Virginia Woolf denied herself "the glory that belongs to tackle this job smoothly", she argued that a critic must not get lost in the maze of methods. If critic fastens his attention on facts that were not part of the writer's consciousness when he composed the work, then criticism misses the "centre" and goes wide off the mark. "Meaning, she felt, could not be derived by pinning down words."(Mathew Arnold, **Selected Poetry and Prose**, 1965, pp.50) Her criticism reflects her opinion that a critic should not merely present an analysis of linguistic content alone but also of the emotions that pulsate within the work. The question of literary form, thus was resolved not a question of mere form but of certain emotions placed in right relation to each other. Criticism, like modern fiction, had to make a fresh start. "Were I another person", she wrote, "I would say to myself, please write criticism, biography; invent a new form for both". This criticism she felt, would be able to pierce the surface of narrative and reach the depths of meaning, and communicate to its reader the power, the uniqueness and the significance of each work. In its expression the criticism will have to be creative to break through the prison of factual reporting. It would be interesting to study Virginia Woolf's views in comparison with T.S. Eliot. He argues

that the quality which an ideal critic must have is a highly developed sense of fact which is a rare gift. It is not frequently met with, and it is very slow to develop. Eliot's use of the term 'fact' also involved the critic's knowledge of social facts. The critic is a literary representative and most significant is his sense of the tradition into which the literary text is placed and the relation between them.

Virginia Woolf is essentially concerned with the understanding and enjoyment of a book. Her attitude towards the academic critics is sometimes querulous and it is based on the notion that they are men essentially in persuit of learning, who presume to pronounce judgement on a work without endeavouring to understand what the writer wanted to convey. In their practice, she had found justification for her disdain for the professional critic. For Virginia Woolf the ideal critic - was the "common reader". Her reader is one who has incorporated the qualities of her common reader. Virginia Woolf would then grant the professional critic the license to practice the art of criticism. This is interesting because it reflects the methodology which Virgina Woolf expects the critic to follow while studying a literary text, though with different aims.

It is clear that for Virgina Woolf the common reader and the ideal critic follow the same procedure in approaching a book, even though

they have different aims. With the common reader, the activity may cease after he has read the book and derived his pleasure out of it. With the critic, however, the real job begins where the reader leaves off. After the reading is over, he has to assemble all his critical faculties and venture forth. His comments upon a book will determine its place in the history of letters and they too will provide proper guidance for readers who are too lazy to make up their own minds. For Virgina Woolf then, the critic has to play a role in moulding the taste of the readers.

It is here that Virgina Woolf can be again compared with Matthew Arnold as he was also preoccupied with the problem of the literary taste and the building up of 'Culture'.

Arnold too makes an exacting demand on the critic. He says the critic must know the best that is known and thought in the world : 'in the world and not merely in his own country or in one or two countries. And he must know the best not in literature alone, but in other subjects as well.' (Mathew Arnold, **The Complete Prose Works**, 4 Vols. 1960-1964, pp.90)

Virginia Woolf was casting about for a form of criticism that would be a blend of two processes - the intuitive understanding of a common reader and the trained sensibility of a critic. Criticism would then become a composite of the common reader's point of view and the

well-trained critic's sensibility. At another level, it would merge with creative activity itself : for as Virginia Woolf believes, "a writer more than any artist, needs to be a critic." ("An Essay in Criticism", **Collected Essays**, II, pp.255) Like all other resolved contrarities in life, the one between criticism and creativity had to be balanced. In an ideal state of syntheses, the writer-critic will be able to judge the article in the making. He will become a taste setter for those who read as well as for those who write.

2.4.5 **Distinction between written and spoken criticism** : this was yet one more theme that was reflected in Virginia Woolf's writing. Reviewing Bennett's books (1917), Virginia Woolf distinguished between criticism that is written and criticism that is spoken. She approved spoken criticism as a viable activity. The critic who is more bothered about the grammar and the logic takes away dash and sincerity from criticism. In an ideal social condition, the function of private criticism like that of the public, is to help the writer improve his writing. The private voice would command attention only if there is a well-knit community of minds and if the voices is honest, straight forward and sincere. Even when she was herself established as a critic she showed her respect for the criticism which is "flashed out on the spur of the moment by people passing who have not time to finish their sentences"

("Modern Fiction", I, pp.189) The description of the live critical activity that flourishes in drawing rooms may sound like a reminiscence of Bloomsburry group. Because one of the activities of this Bloomsburry group was that, the intellects would get together just like in the coffee houses and discussed and criticised directly the new developments in literature and society. This holds the key to Virginia Woolf's belief that for a serious creative activity there has to be a lively dialogue between the writer and his intelligent public.

2.4.6 **Significance of form :** The concern for the reader as critic leads inevitably to a discussion of form, though Mrs. Woolf seems to avoid the dichotomous monster by approaching it from the point of view of the reader than the writer. In her essay "On Re-reading Novels", Mrs. Woolf got at the question of form by way of Percy Lubbock's **The Craft of Fiction** (1925). Reviewing the book when it appeared, she believed it was a step in the direction of a serious aesthetic for the novel, though she disagreed with his visual conception of form. In "How should one Read A book?", Mrs. Woolf insisted that reading was a more complex process than seeing. In the essay "On Re-reading Novels" she clarified her point by discussing form as an emotional rather than a visual pattern. To better understand Mrs. Woolf's definition of form and her insistence on that definition, it would be instructive to see the connection between

Mrs. Woolf's aesthetic and the theories of her Bloomsbury friends, the art critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry.

Clive Bell had formulated his celebrated phrase, 'significant form', in 1914, in a book entitled **Art**; though Roger Fry had suggested a similar idea in 1909, in **An Essay in Aesthetics** (1957). Both critics base their conception of significant form on the so-called 'aesthetic emotion' which works of art are capable of transmitting. And this emotion is a response to a significant pattern of relations, the form of the work, which is in turn the perfect and complete expression of an idea, an emotion, a 'vision of reality', as Mrs. Woolf would say, in the mind of the artist.

Turning again to Mrs. Woolf's essay "On Re-reading Novels', with Bell and Fry in the background, we can understand Mrs. Woolf's insistence on the emotional significance of form. If her account of the critical and creative process is true, there is no possibility, she would maintain, of establishing the classic dichotomy of form and content. Only the imperfect works, she insists, allow us to separate the two. In a great novel, there is a perfect fusion that leaves no 'Slip or chink'; nothing is left, in fact, but the form of the work entire in the mind. In answer to Lubbock, she repeats : "There is vision and expression. The two blend so perfectly that when Mr. Lubbock asks us to test the form

with our eyes we see nothing at all. But we feel with singular satisfaction, and since all our feelings are in keeping, they form a whole which remains in our minds as the book itself." ("On Re-reading Novels", **Collected Essays**, II, pp.129) This thinking about the intuitive evolution of form, indeed, signals how she was different from the New Critics and formalists like I.A. Richards. Her critical belief that form and content are mutually defining needs to be explored further in relation to her own novels.

Now, after discussing Virginia Woolf's critical themes in her first phase, I will now discuss the major critical themes of the II phase.

2.4.7 **The nature of reading process :** This is also a theme of Virginia Woolf's critical writing. For Virginia Woolf the reading process itself is a significant activity, reading is a pursuit that is its own reward as, for Moore, "the proper appreciation of a beautiful object is a good thing in itself." ("How Should One Read a Book?", **Collected Essays**, II, pp.2) In reading Plato, for instance, even if her reader does not learn more from Plato, he may come to love "knowledge" better. So that for her, "what matters is not so much the end we reach as our manner of reaching it." It is not always with a desire to learn that a reader approaches a book. Virginia Woolf advises her reader not to go in pursuit of learning for -

> "to read on a system, to become a specialist or an authority is very apt to kill what it suits us to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading." ("How Should One Read a Book?", pp.9)

Virginia Woolf's insistence on "disinterestedness" in reading again reminds us of Mathew Arnold's famous antidote to the English man's gross practicalism; the disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects, for its own sake." He held that "criticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of this very quality." (Mathew Arnold, **The Function of Criticism at the Present Time**, pp.148-150) And criticism is disinterested when it keeps aloof from what is called "the practical view of things" by "resolutely following the law of its nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches." In this way, he argued, criticism can create a current of true and fresh ideas animating and nourishing the creative power" in the highest degree. By doing disinterested reading the reader not only stays the confining effect of a specialised approach but also freely participates in the best that literature has to offer. So although she preferred reading as an end in itself, Virginia Woolf did not rule out reading as a means to an end. "We read", she believed, "to refresh and exercise our own webs of imagination."("How Should One Read a Book?", II, pp.2) Reading, then leads a person to derive some understanding of life; for instance, when

we read the classics "some consecration descends upon us from their hands" and we feel and understand life more deeply than before.

In favour of pure and disinterested reading, Virginia Woolf rejected the conventional notion of approaching a book with other than hedonistic motives. She argued that a specialist reads on principles and judges on theories. He sees in a book what he can, and not what it has. A later-day critic, Helen Gardner (1959) takes the same stance when she refers to "disinterestedness" as the condition of aesthetic experience. In commanding "pure and disinterested reading", Virginia Woolf was stating one of the principles of her literary criticism as seen in the earlier section.

According to Virginia Woolf, "Pure and relaxed reading gives the readers an absolute delight."("How Should One Read a Book?", II, pp.29) But this aesthetic experience is possible only when the reader approaches the book without any prejudices.

Virginia Woolf would not be satisfied with the reader's personal point of view, no matter how well cultivated, as the sole guide to the meaning of a work. This is suggested by her frequent insistence that the reader must learn to master the writer's "perspective". She advises her reader "to become the writer's fellow worker and accomplice." All preconceptions are to be vanished. This task, she realizes, is not an easy

one. But, no matter how formidable it appears, the reader should try to enter the writer's point of view. Until one knows how the novelists orders his world, the ornaments of that world which the critics press upon us, the adventures of the writer "are superfluous possessions of which we can make no use." The reader, in order to understand the writer's viewpoint, climbs upon his shoulder, as it were, and gazes through his eyes until he has completely comprehended the writer's design. "A great writer" says Virginia Woolf "inflicts his own perspective upon us ("Robinson Crusoe", **Collected Essays**, II, pp.54). If it does not dawn upon us, we ought to look for it for the sake of total comprehension.

One way in which a critic could expand the outlook of the reader was to try to step into the author's shoes for a while. Virginia Woolf implied that a resilence of mind could be developed by discipline. Though Virginia Woolf does not state it in so many words, the discipline that she wants her reader to acquire is what T.S. Eliot's critic endeavours to achieve by trying to "discipline his personal prejudices and crankstares to which we are all subject." ("Robinson Crusoe", **Collected Essays**, II, 1923) Virginia Woolf is aware of the need in a reader for an outlook wider than what his own eyes can reach. This rejection of a confining vision is what marks out her common reader as an uncommon

one and places him in the company of sophisticated critics. To derive the total meaning from a book, the reader has to go hand in hand with the writer. In the absence of this alliance, Virginia Woolf is convinced, one can have only "milk and watery criticism." (Sharma, 1977, pp.174) If the reader is to see things as the author saw, then he must not dictate to his author but try to become him. Once the reader has assimilated the writer's point of view, the book no longer remains the form which he sees; it becomes the emotion he feels. This emotion may not be stated anywhere but, as in poetry, is suggested and brought slowly, "by repeated images before us until it stays in all its complexity complete." A reading may be accompanied by a stirring of emotions. But even though a gathering of some emotion may be part of the initial experience of a book, Virginia would not recommend its uncritical acceptance by the reader as its final value. He must possess the ability to discriminate, "to test it and riddle it with questions. If nothing survives, well and good; toss it into the waste-paper basket and have done with it ("On Re-reading Novels", **Collected Essays**, II, pp.126). If after skeptical testing, the emotion still stays with the reader, then he can put some value on this emotion and place the book among the treasures of the universe.

But generally, the process of understanding a book is as unconscious as it is complex. The moment we go to a new book, we

have entered a new territory and surrendered ourselves to a new atmosphere once there, "the first process is to receive impressions", one does not have to be completely passive, totally at the mercy of haphazardous impressions. One must receive them "with the utmost understanding". A good reader has to be "capable not only of great fineness of perception, but a great boldness of imagination." (On Re-reading Novels) Yet to understand merely the words of the book is only half the process of reading. To get the "whole pleasure from a book", we must "pass judgement upon these multitudinous impressions we must make of these fleeting shapes one that is hard and lasting." ("How Should One Read A Book", **Collected Essays**, II, pp.5) It is well to remind ourselves that Virginia Woolf enjoined a similar duty upon the writer. The novelist, according to her, had to search through his fleeting impressions till he found a shape that would hold and organise the shower of atoms. This reminds us of Wordsworth's "emotions recollected in tranquility" where he says that "it is recollection in tranquility which enables the poet to see into the heart of things and communicate the very soul, or essence of an experience, to his readers." (**Romantic Criticism**, William Wordsworth, pp.15) He also says good poetry is never an immediate expression of powerful emotions. A good poet must meditate and ponder over them long and deeply. The novelist

should be lucky enough that the structure of his novel will be able to correspond the shape of his vision. Now, in wrestling with the book, the reader tries to capture the shape of the book, and through it, the form of the author's inspiration for the book. It is as important for the reader to visualize the "figure in the carpet" as it is central for the writer to create one there.

"Yet it is not by storming with weapons of criticism or techniques of speed-reading that one will secure the shimmering figure behind the fabric of words." Indeed, conscious processes are of little avail in this quest. Her advice is that the reader should wait for the dust of reading to settle; for the conflict and the questioning to die down before passing a judgement because the art of reading is also a critical matter as Virginia Woolf demonstrates in the essay concluding the second **Common Reader** "How Should one Read A Book" when the writer waits upon his experience, the unconscious, that has been active, throws up an inspired image or an illuminating idea that may organize the entire experience into a meaningful pattern; and "then suddenly without our willing it.... the book will return but differently". It is the culture of the mind according to me that helps the reader in his personal confrontation with books. For her then, criticism becomes some kind of intuitive act. Yet she does not reject the importance of training.

What does help the reader's capacity is first the cultivation of feeling; for first we learn through feeling. But as time goes on perhaps we can train our taste; perhaps we can make it submit to some control. The best way to train our taste, according to her, to first to acquaint ourselves with whatever is of "seems to be the best of its kind". As the reader connects, compares and makes his own deductions, he will begin to formulate rules that "bring order into the readers perception". ("How Should One Read a Book?", **Collected Essays**, II, p.9) The ideal reader will thus, not inherit rules, but discover them.

When the reader has acquired a set of values, he can, and must, discriminate between the "significance" of one kind of literary experience and another. In commending this process of selecting the abiding emotion, and rejecting the tenuous and the ephemeral created, generally try verbiage, Virginia Woolf is asking her reader to wield the tools of comparison and analysis for moral discriminations. The very fact that she does not let her reader, armed with common sense and taste, accept and stop at emotion, but desires him to go ahead and compare a book as we compare "building with building" establishes that as of a perfect critic, she requires the common reader to be independent both of his own prejudices and the author's seductions.

For Virginia Woolf reading of classics, stands as a yardstick, against which she measures the work of her contemporaries. We need, she writes, "all our knowledge of the old writers in order to follow what the new writers are attempting." This belief of hers in the classics as a criterion of excellence and judgement seems to reiterate Arnold's position where he said that "to discover what poetry belongs to the class of great poetry one must have always in one's mind lines and expression of great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Virginia Woolf advises her reader to keep the classic in mind so that he may develop both a clear literary perspective and a finer literary discrimination. By consorting with the minds of the very first order his response will be enriched and his tastes developed.

2.4.8 **Views on literature and function of literature** : Mrs. Woolf's father Leslie Stephen was a solid and reliable critic, genuine and honest, and original. Virginia Woolf had inherited his talents in addition to her mother's. She had the magic wand of a born creator, which Leslie Stephen lacked. (Quentin Bell, **Virginia Woolf**, II, pp.50)

Unlike her father, who believed that literature is "a combination of raw materials which are all to be found in the dictionary", Virginia Woolf thinks that words flutter and agitate and live in the mind. Books for Woolf light up many windows from where we can watch "the famous

dead.... and fancy sometimes that we are very close and can surprise their secrets". (Quentin Bell) Literature for her was not only a mode of enlightenment about the past or about human emotions and dilemmas, but also something that gave incentive to the creative urge in us.

Leslie Stephen considered literature "one function of the social organism." For Woolf literature was not essentially a social document; she rejected social history as a clue to the meaning or value of a work. Neither for delight and pleasure, nor for literary judgement do we have to go to a biographer or a historian. What a book can yield can be found only in the book. In this insistence and in her understanding of what a book may offer an unprofessional reader, she was not without her following among even academic critics.

It is for such enrichment and enlargement that Virginia Woolf's **Common Reader** turns to literature. She argued, for example, in her essay that "How should one read a book?" "The impact of poetry, is so hard and direct that for a moment there is no other sensation except that of the poem itself." The impact of reading poetry as a form of literature not only creates new states of being but also reorganizes our rather diffused self. This experience of the poem is productive of other "echoes and reflections" than the ones we normally live with. It is noteworthy that, although the psychological effect of a poem is stated so poetically,

her finding that reading good poems may alter one's psychological make-up.

Considering essays as another form of literature, Mrs. Woolf justifies her own achievement and technique as well as those of others, in "How it strikes a contemporary", she inspires the moderns to write classics like those of bygone ages. Virginia Woolf feels that the modern age is rich enough in thought, science and industry, yet in literature it is poorer than the eras of great literary activity, she urges to the critics to take a wider, a less personal view of modern literature. At the same time she appeals to the creators to create masterpieces which can survive posterity. Her essays therefore are the quintessence of her philosophy, purpose, method and judgement. In her view, "there is no room for the impurities of literature in an essay. Somehow or other, by dint of labour or bounty of nature or both combined, the essay must be pure- pure like water or pure like wine, but pure from dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous matter."("The Modern Essay")