

CHAPTER - III

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3.1 IDEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN HER CRITICAL WRITING

In this chapter I have tried to concentrate on the critical perspective which has developed out of Woolf's preoccupation with women and the production of literature. She wrote during a period in which the women's movement for the right of vote was very strong. It is through her books viz. **A Room of One's Own** and **Three Guineas** that these preoccupations are reflected. Hence in this chapter I have made a modest attempt to explore the ideological moorings of her feminist thinking in her critical views.

From the dictionary one can say that the body of doctrine, myth, tradition and symbol that represents the beliefs and attitudes of an individual, group, class, etc. is generally known as ideology. ("Dictionary of Literary Terms") Ideology is usually applied to a political or cultural plan, such as that of democracy, or fascism or expressionism, alongwith methods for putting it into operation. The basic beliefs points of view, and life experiences of an author form a part of his ideology and thus shape his literary products.

According to Michele Barrette; "ideology" is "a generic term for the processes by which meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced and transformed. Since meaning is negotiated primarily through means of

communication and signification, it is possible to suggest that cultural production provides an important site for the construction of ideological processes. Thus... literature can usefully be analysed as a paradigm case of ideology in particular social formation.” (Mitchel Barrett)

One of the major ideological trends that is reflected in Virginia Woolf’s critical writing is her preoccupation with women and production of literature and styles of writing. She wrote during a time when the Suffragist Movement was gaining momentum. Writers like Shaw were openly discussing and supporting women’s rights and movements.

It was because Mrs. Woolf believed that the struggle for the emancipation of women was not yet over that she defended the various organizations which had helped them win some of their basic rights. The Suffragist Movement she considered responsible for “one of the greatest political changes” of her period. It had actually levelled the artificial barriers between the status of the two sexes. But women now needed a different crusade. They required “like Antigone; not to break the laws, but to find the law,” (**Three Guineas**, pp. 302) the law that would give them the scope for achievement. Most of other feminist writers (Rose Macaulay, May Scinclair, Elizabeth Bowen and Dorothy Richardson and some of the important writers) were content to terminate the struggle

with the achievement of political equality. But Mrs. Woolf's continuous preoccupation with the problems of her sex, made her probe deeper into the matter. Consequently her suggestion that women should form themselves into a society of "outsiders" (in **Three Guineas**) and "blind themselves into a society to obtain full knowledge of professional practices... and to practice their profession experimentally, in the interests of research and for love of the work itself" (**Three Guineas**, pp.204) which alone could give them scope to develop their innate faculties and earn them "the right to an independent opinion", makes her feminism very different from that of others. Mrs. Woolf firmly believed that a woman, (or a man for that matter), required a certain "unity of mind", a fusion of her entire faculties before anything significant could be achieved. Failure to achieve the fusion resulted invariably in frustration. The women writers had been mostly condemned to this sense of frustration because of the prudent social conditions which deprived them of those harmonious surroundings essential to a maturing writer.

As a feminist, Virginia Woolf, had found a place in the canon but only after the radical, political edge of their work had been blunted. Clearly feminists works such as **A Room Of One's Own**, 1929 and **Three Guineas**, 1938 rarely feature in critical discussions, though her experiment with the stream of consciousness technique are well known.

A survey of critical assessments gives us an idea of the sexual imagery in "To the Lighthouse" which is a new feminist approach by Woolf. The relationship between her and Mrs. Ramsay reveals a range of opinion for one extreme of sexual politics to the other. Even allowing for the fact that "To the Lighthouse" is one of the symbolically richest and therefore most widely interpretable of Woolf's works, the discrepancies in critical response to the Ramsays are puzzling.

3.2 In this context, it would be interesting to discuss Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous mind. "If one is a man," Woolf writes, "still the woman part of the brain must have effect, and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her." Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said in his book "Biographia Literaria" that a great mind is androgynous (S.T. Coleridge, **Biographia Literaria**, London, 1817; 1962, I, pp.202). It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. This is essentially what Jung was saying ("A Room with a View", **TLS**; pp.362) when he described the integrated psyche as the one which hold animus and anima in balance on the razor's edge of consciousness, bringing the powers of the libido into full creative play. Our analysis to date of Woolf's concept of androgynosity has tended to over look the way in which she uses concrete images to express exactly what she means by the integrated psyche "having intercourse with the

man in her". We have been perhaps awaiting the demise of psychoanalytical myopia concerning the process of the female psyche as well as the discovery of the limitations of traditional male and female stereo types in order for as to be able to focus more clearly on what Woolf was doing in her use of sexual imagery in her novels.

Her critical writing reflected her attempts to explore the relationship between education and poverty. Virginia Woolf might not have been what Dr. Daiches calls a "systematic critic," (David Daiches, **Virginia Woolf**, 1942, pp.132) but she was "systematic" in her search for any material available which would throw light on the reasons for the paucity of women writers and the generally backward position of women in society. She had reviewed almost the entire social and literary history of England in her critical writings and had arrived at certain conclusions poverty and ignorance, she surmised, were closely connected, whereas education and economic independence were largely responsible for intellectual maturity of any kind. The history of women writers, she discovered, was the history of feminine emancipation. Her conclusive arguments became weighty enough to warrant two complete books **A Room of One's own** and **Three Gunieas** relating in detail the problems confronting her sex down the ages. Mrs. Woolf presented much more than percepts and platitudes regarding women and their place in society.

Most of the critics, however, because of the predominantly feminist note of these books, have tried to brush them aside “as the mere tirade of an overheated brain,” (Clive Bell, **Old Friends**, “Virginia Woolf”, 1956, pp.102) as Clive Bell says as “unreasonable”. But these two books (**A Room of One’s Own** and **Three Guineas**) form too valuable a part of her writings to be so contemptuously and lightly brushed aside. Besides they have a critical fervour and wholeness seldom found outside the writings of a novelist. They reveal not only her strong sense of Justice and a consequent desire to portray the truth, but highlight the focal points of women’s struggle to win for themselves various fundamental rights.

3.3 Here it would be instructive to discuss the theme of women and production of literature in her critical writing. Virginia Woolf had to pursue her search well into the seventeenth century before she discovered in the “Duchess of Newcastle” (1624-1674) in the **Common Reader** an instance of a woman capable of intellectual communication. Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, was certainly not a writer of any great standing or merit. Though “her poems, her plays, her philosophies, her orations, her discourses - all those folios and quartos in which she protested, her real life was enshrined - moulder in the gloom

of public libraries” her chief merit lay in variously overcoming the belief that writing was an act unbecoming her sex.

While the impressive range of the Duchess of New-castle’s writings is well brought out, Mrs. Woolf at no time is concerned with their literary or critical merit. She was more taken up by the somewhat incongruous literary style that the Duchess adopted to give vent to her many sided nature. “She similized, energetically, incongruously, eternally; the sea became a meadow, the sailors shephards, the mast a maypole. The fly was the bird of summer, trees were senators, houses ships, and even the fairies, whom she loved better than any earthly thing, except the Duke, are changed to blunt atoms and sharp atoms, and take part in some of those horrible manoeuvres in which she delighted to marshall the universe.” (**Common Reader**, I series)

Virginia Woolf’s interest in the Duchess arose not only because of the latter’s gifted mind, but because of her unorthodox upbringing which gave her the liberty to gratify her taste for reading and writing. This enabled the Duchess to formulate her “philosophies” no matter how illogical, diffused and wild they were. It is the “erratic and lovable personality” of the woman who flew from “subject to subject,” never bothering to pause, or to correct, or to feel diffident about her ignorance, or conscious of her sex, that Virginia Woolf celebrates, as volume after

volume is finished by the remarkable Duchess, in spite of censorious objections levelled at her, not only by the men, but also by those of her own sex.

“Sure the poor woman is little distracted, she could never be so ridiculous else to venture writing books and in verse too,” (Dorothy Osborne’s Letters, **The Common Reader**, II, 1933, pp.60) Dorothy Osborne remarked at the publication of one of the Duchess’s books. She admitted her own reluctance to be ever reduced to this distraction: If I could not sleep this fortnight I should not come to that.”

But Virginia Woolf points out that women, had advanced to the stage of writing letters. With great ingenuity and intrepidity they hit upon a medium of expression which need not be denied them as it could be “carried on at odd moments... among a thousand interruptions, without exciting comment...” (**The Common Reader**, II, pp.61) The writer of letters, besides, needed neither privacy nor economic independence, both of which, Virginia Woolf reminds us, the women of the period were denied. So, in their letter, at last, “the silence is broken... for the first time in English literature we hear men and women talking together over the fire.” (**The Common Reader**, II, pp.60)

In spite of its many drawbacks, the art of letter writing gave women a chance to express themselves without fear of “unsexing”

themselves. Thus an almost new form of literature came into existence and women could contribute to its development without undue exposure or display of vulgar pride. Dorothy Osborne's letter, writes Virginia Woolf, "make us feel that we have our seat in the depths of Dorothy's mind, at the heart of the pageant which unfolds itself page by page as we read" (Dorothy Osborne's Letters, **The Common Reader**, II, 1933, pp. 62) although, here again, we feel that Mrs. Woolf takes more cognizance of Dorothy Osborne as a woman than as a gifted literary writer. Her temperament, her humour, her intense love for Sir William Temple, the womanly virtues of her time-- these are all conveyed with subtle but compassionate irony till the complete portrait is arrived at. Virginia Woolf primarily viewed the letters, the diaries and journals, all that was jotted down and scribbled by women, as the first faint stirrings of the feminine sensibility. She was trying to discover, as it were, not only why women had not written earlier, but at exactly at what moment in history they underwent the process of transformation and emerged as writers of account in their own right. So she studies the letters of Dorothy Osborne "as she filled her great sheets by her father's bed or by the chimney-corners" recording the events of the time "gravely yet playfully, formally yet with intimacy, to a public of one..." (Dorothy Osborne's Letters, **The Common Reader**, II, 1933, pp. 61)

It is not that Mrs. Woolf intended to write a history of women writers and yet she is almost the only writer of the twentieth century from whose critical writings accrues a vast fund of material which is absolutely indispensable in determining the social position of women during the last three hundred years. She searched through their obscure lives and brought out the subtler lights of their intelligence throwing into relief their fortuitous sufferings and reluctant rebellions. With great ingenuity and intrepidity she digs out characters like Lactitia Pilkington ("Lactitia Pilkington", **The Common Reader**, I, pp.160-167, 1712-1759) whose only attraction could be her femininity and whose memoirs are "so imbibed with the old tradition of her sex that she wrote, as ladies talked to give pleasure." Yet Lactitia Pilkington, according to Mrs. Woolf, is almost a landmark in the feminine fight for academic independence. Deserted by her husband, this great-granddaughter of the Earl of Killmallock, in order to earn her living, "set up, as her advertisement had it, to write letters upon any subject, except the law, for twelve pence ready money, and not trust given." This Mrs. Pilkington makes history and becomes the first instance of a woman writer utilising the craft of letter writing for making a living.

The fact that Mrs. Pilkington steadily descended in social scale "till she ended in prison for her debts, does not much bother Virginia

Woolf. Nor is she much concerned about the shifts and shades of an adventurous career.” What impresses the writer of **The Common Reader** is Lactitia Pilkington’s inordinate passion for scribbling verses and an incredible hunger for reading books” (“Lactitia Pilkington”, **The Common Reader**, I, pp.164) and the fact that her language was corrected by no less a person than the “great Dr. Swift”.

3.4 After discussing women and production of literature I would now like to discuss the concept of “style” in Virginia Woolf’s writing because this would help us to understand how she herself wrote as a woman. So first I would like to draw attention to her own style of writing and then discuss how she looked at the language of men and women writers from a general perspective. This would also help us to explore into the links between Virginia Woolf as a women writer and as a critic. “If Virginia Woolf belonged to an age of poetry she would have been a great poet.” (Varshney R.L., **The Common Reader**, pp. 61) As a prose writer too she belongs to the tradition of those who have enriched English literature by writing poetic prose. She is however, a poet without the proper apparatus and equipment of a poet. Her work has the form and substance of lyrical poetry, who but a poet could have written these passages! :

Life is a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.

And in the following passages she is describing the birds responding to the morning light in a garden :

“Perhaps it was a snail shell, rising in the grass like a grey cathedral’s swelling building burnt with dark rings and shadowed green by the grass or perhaps they saw the splendour of the flowers making alight of flowing purple over the beds, through which dark tunnels of purple shade were driven between the stalks.”

--- The Waves

Mr. El Albert writes, “As might be expected of one of her background and artistic gifts, Virginia Woolf is a prose writer of genius. It is in her prose style that her poetic qualities are most clearly seen. It has all the poise and charm of the cultured woman and conscious artist. She uses words with a keen sense of their rhythmic and musical potentialities; her style is richly figurative. *The Waves*, is the best example of this, and the precision of her images is in keeping with the accuracy and delicacy of her character analysis.” (Varshney R.L. **The Common Reader**, pp.13) Her prose is excellent, it is rather ‘like a beautiful dress on a spiritual form’. Her style is so enchanting and magical that even the strangest things can happen without seeming unnatural. hers are the poetically stylized dialogues.

Virginia Woolf is concerned in the first place to display life as an aspect and function of the mind because we have to include the emotional and spiritual, the irrational as well as the rational elements in the human personality, and in the second place to destroy or to transcend, which for her purposes is the same thing the dividing line, the horizon of vision, experience and understanding. And therefore she evolves for the fulfilment of her purpose her own literary technique, for hers is 'a very peculiar, a very individual style'.

In her early works, her style is experimental, with the ebullience and extravagance and imperfection that often attends upon the first practice of a new idea. The balance has not yet been struck. The allusive and evasive quality of its opening is maintained and intensified in her early works.

Mrs. Woolf's words are very near to poetry. Her metaphors stay in the reader's mind long after her purpose in making them has been forgotten. The images which her metaphors evokes are often more vivid and startling than the metaphors of normal prose. "His slippers were incredibly shabby, like boats burnt to the water's rim" (**Jacob's Room**) "A great brush swept smooth across his mind" (**Mrs. Dalloway**), "Like the pulse of a perfect heart, life struck straight through the streets" (**Mrs. Dalloway**) "The lamps of London uphold the dark as upon the points of

burning baynets” (**Jacob’s Room**) “Her sympathy seemed to fly back into her face, like a bramble sprung” (**To The Lighthouse**).

‘These are not the metaphors of prose, even of romantic prose. In the first place they are not all metaphors from the visible world, or even the possible world. They are often collections of ideas made by that transmutations of the laws of association and reality which is normally possible only to the genius of poetry. The reality is exclusively of the imagination (R.L. Chambers, **The Novels of Virginia Woolf**, pp. 137).

Her figurative style, her expansion of metaphor, her use and enlargement of simile are clearly visible in her essays. Speaking about Mr. Joyce’s spiritualism she speaks poetically - “he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickering of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain”, (“Modern Fiction”, **The Common Reader**, First series P.191). In “The Modern Essay” she speaks about style ... “to write like oneself and call it not writing is a much harder exercise in style than to write like Addison and call it writing well”. (**The Common Reader**, First series, P.273).

She favours simplicity and naturalness and clarity in style. She herself recommends it in “Modern Fiction”, “Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers, that brings us closer to the novelist’s intention if we are readers”.

she does not like affectation and mannerism. That is why she denounces Mr. Belloc's style. "It comes to us not with the natural richness of the speaking voice, but strained and thin and full of mannerisms and affectations like the voice of a man shouting through a megaphone to a crowd on a windy day." ("The Modern Essay", **The Common Reader**, First series, P.277).

3.5 Virginia Woolf's concept of Women's economic dependency on men was another matter, which according to Mrs. Woolf was responsible for the sad state in which women found themselves. Miss Davies, Miss Garrett and Miss Smith were champions of women in this fight of women for economic independence. They wanted women educated and trained for employment. In their battle for university education for women, they were amply supported by Lady Augusta, (Virginia Woolf, **Two Women**, *The Moment and Other Essays*, pp.159-164) otherwise a hot-house product of the aristocracy. Thus two women -- Emily Davies and Lady Augusta -- so completely different in their ways of life, join in hands to fight for one of the basic rights of their sex, appealed to Virginia Woolf's imagination, who visualized in their combined virtues of courage and charm the perfect product of her sex. Mrs. Woolf hardly concerns herself with portraying any major events out of the biographies of either Lady Austa Stanley or Miss Davies, or

discuss their individual merit. Her purpose is served when she has pointed instead the major achievements of these women which was their endeavour to provide better education for their sex. What is clearly revealed in this essay and implicit throughout most of her other essays, is a creation of a social history of feminine emancipation. She maintains a balance which conveys the creative tension of her subjects, their emotional responses and impressions, and the milieu in which these writers lived, the legal and the social restrictions under which they laboured.

The autobiography of Ellen Terry is reviewed from the same point of view that Virginia Woolf had brought to the character sketches of women (important to the extent of their furthering the cause of women and their struggle for emancipation). Ellen Terry, the housewife or mother, has little fascination or charm for Mrs Woolf. But she celebrates the writer in the actress : "It never struck her, (Ellen Terry) humble as she was, and obsessed by her lack of book learning, that she was among other things, a writer. Virginia Woolf goes a little further and emphasizes that "... this mutable woman, all instinct, sympathy and sensation, is as painstaking a student and as careful of the dignity of her art as Flaubert himself." It was as if Virginia Woolf wanted to bring sharply into focus the amount of incessant toil and ruthless hard work

women were capable of, once their genius had a chance of developing along the right lines.

Virginia Woolf's views on the language used by men and women are very interesting in this context. **A Room Of One's Own** (Virginia Woolf, **A Room of One's Own**, 1929, pp. 115-117) stands testimony to her efforts to explore the relationship between language and gender. She argued in **A Room Of One's Own** that the sentence as it was written in the beginning of the nineteenth century was unsuitable for women's use. Because it was too long involved full of comment clauses and subordinate clauses. She argued that Johnson and Gibbon fashioned language which was unsuitable for a women's use. For example Charlotte Bronte, she argued with all her splendid gift for prose stumbled and fell with a clumsy weapon in her hand and even George Eliot, according to her, committed atrocities with it. For her, only Jane Austen crafted a separate sentence and devised a perfectly natural shapely sentences proper for her own use (Raman Selden, **The Theory of Criticism**, 1988, pp.532).

For her, freedom and fullness of expression are of the essence of the art. But women had never been part of tradition of writers. And therefore she argued women had inadequate tools for writing. Since the tradition of writers has been dominated by men they have devised

language out of their own needs for their own use. And therefore it was not just language but even the forms of literature she argued did not suit women as they suited men.

Here Virginia Woolf seems to make a very important comment on novel form and the gender of the writer. She argued that all other forms except for novel were old and therefore women found it hard to use these forms to express their own experiences which were necessarily with the confines of the home. But she seems to differentiate the novel form "as young enough to be soft" for women. Here Virginia Woolf seems to make a very important point not merely about the linguistic tools that men and women device, but seems to investigate, though rather generally, into this problem of tradition of forms and the women's problem. She argued that the novel was most pliable of all forms and she thought that women probably could craft their own form if they wrote novels. It would be extremely interesting to examine Virginia Woolf's own experimentation with the novel form and her consciousness as a woman furious against the injustice meted out to women in her contemporary society. She was it is very clearly seen agitated at the question of the various forms of literature and of women's writing. She held that the physical conditions in which women and men write, differed vastly from each other. Women had the responsibility to look

after the home in which they had no room of their own whereas the men always had economic freedom, economic rights, freedom of movement which allowed them more creative freedom than was available for the women to have. She did not really elaborate on these views but she opened up the question of female language and nature of genres.

Elaine Showalter has argued that Virginia Woolf created a deliberate female aesthetic, along with Dorothy Richardson and Katherine Mansfield. (Elaine Showalter, **A Literature Of Their Own**, 1977, pp.103). According to her “Virginia Woolf transformed the feminist code of self sacrifice into an annihilation of a narrative self and applied the cultural analysis of the feminists towards sentences and structures of language in the novel.”

In a sense androgyny was the sexual ethic of the Bloomsbury. It was also an important concept of this period. It is worth questioning whether writing novels as Showalter seems to claim, provided an escape to Woolf and others from the confrontation with the body. This is however not the area which I have immediately chosen to comment on as it required a detailed analysis of Virginia Woolf's fiction, her views on women and her experiences and perception of the life of women within the modern society. Hence this could be taken up as an area of further research. Yet the very concept of androgynous nature of men and

women and nature of creativity seem to occupy a significant place in Virginia Woolf's thinking about literary forms and literary language.

In a sense Virginia Woolf may be called a precursor of feminist literary criticism which blossomed during the sixties in America and Britain. And her criticism of Bronte sisters, George Eliot and Jane Austen provides interesting insights into the nature of the writing process for women and evolution of literary forms. In this respect she seems to occupy a unique place in the tradition of Twentieth Century criticism. No other critic either from the Edwardian era or among the modern scholars seems to feel the problems of women writers with the same intensity as Virginia Woolf. She does not seem to write only as a woman. In the sense she was able to obliterate her personality as a woman and seems to transcend the limitations of her contemporaries who are generally not so very conscious about the kinds of questions Virginia Woolf seems to be raising.

In this chapter I have tried to explore into Virginia Woolf's preoccupation with the ideology of women's oppression and the production of literature.