

CHAPTER - IV

CONCLUSION

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In this final concluding chapter, I intend to present a summary of my findings on Virginia Woolf as a critic. As mentioned earlier, I began with an interest in her critical output precisely because she has not been rated very highly as a critic by various critics. In an essay on Virginia Woolf as critic, Louis Kronenberger writes that she “nowhere altered the face of criticism, as she did the face of the novel,” (*The Republic of Letters; Essays on Various Writers*) “She was not a systematic critic”, as David Daiches and others have said (David Daiches, *Virginia Woolf*) she did not have a system; only a sensibility. Such negative view of some critics led me to this study of Virginia Woolf as a critic.

During the course of my reading, I discovered that Virginia Woolf was a critic who had produced prolific criticism. She mainly wrote for journals. Her career as a critic started with reviews and essays which she produced for these journals. She began writing in the year 1902 and her critical essays were published for the first time as **Common Reader** First Series (1925) and later **Common Reader** Second Series (1932) and her final critical writing was in form of two books viz. **A Room of One's Own** (1929) and **Three Guineas** (1938). For this study I chose to concentrate on these three books because I could not undertake to study all her critical writing in the brief span of my dissertation. Hence my

attempt has been to arrive at the major critical themes that occur in these works and try to arrive at a statement of the theoretical pre-occupations of Virginia Woolf.

I have presented below a brief summary of my study. Virginia Woolf wrote on various writers, novels, historical periods and literary genres as well as ideological issues. As she was essentially writing for journals in her initial period, her criticism in the first is not very formalised and does not lend itself easily to systematic theoretical positions. In her earlier period she essentially presents herself as an impressionistic critic who wrote on various topics as they came, and therefore her critical comments in her earlier writings are rather cryptic sometimes incidental, yet they reflect deep sensibility.

Among her initial critical writing her criticism of Edwardian novelists, whom she calls materialists reflects one of her theoretical preoccupations and that is related to the way she views the relationship between the writers and historical processes. According to Virginia Woolf Edwardians were materialists because their novels were full of all kinds of experiences like scientific, social, political, industrial etc. She also accused the modern novelists for not caring for the spirit or life of a man. Her belief was that the novelist must 'expose himself to life' and get detached from it' (**Granite and Rainbow**). This showed the sense

of tradition which Virginia Woolf followed. She challenged the new age, emphasised upon spirit and encouraged people to reject gross materialism of the Edwardians who held that the prestige and greatness of a man depended upon the wealth and riches and not upon the qualities of the mind and heart. This became more clear after the first world war. There was a philosophical shift in man's concept of himself and reality.

In her stream of conscious technique we see how she puts the impressions which falls upon the mind in a very realistic manner. This form gave 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. She followed this method because she felt this method was deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people said, but what they have unsaid too. She was also called an impressionist, where the natural objects were described as they first struck the eye of a character.

The values of the Bloomsbury group, of which Virginia Woolf was an associate member helped her to grow as an independent thinker and writer. Though others followed these literary forms, she was still ahead of them. In this phase the other theoretical issues that occupied her thinking were the functions of criticism. She argued that the function of criticism should not give a verdict on a book, but to interpret the book for the readers in terms of its genere, its feelings. Her criticism was

basically intuitive and inspiring because she argues that basically the function of criticism is never to discourage but to interpret the writers preoccupations as they have been produced in a particular form. A critic she argued should never write with destructive intentions. In these ways she was not really concerned so much with methods of criticism and interpretations of text. She argued that a critic should not merely present an analysis of linguistic content but emotions within the work. And that is why she was basically concerned with understanding and enjoyment of book. Placing the critic in the role of common reader she, inspite of her distrust of laying down methods did evolve a methodology of analysis. The critic, like the common reader takes up his impressions of the book and then assembles all his critical faculties and places the book in history of letters. Thus she was casting about a form of criticism which involved a blend of two processes the intuitive understanding and trained sensibility. And in a sense she also expected the writer to be in the same role.

Inspite of influences she received from impressionism however, she can be compared with both Mathew Arnold and T.S. Eliot rather than Walter Pater and I. A. Richards. Basically for her the task of a critic is like, is to mould the taste of the readers and in this she was closer to the Arnoldian type of criticism rather than criticism of Art for

Art's sake type. She wrote on novels, critical book, travelogue, memoirs, biographies etc. and she argued that the critic needs a balance of creativity and analytical ability. Because she believed for serious critical activity there has to be a lively dialogue between the writer and the public.

She was also preoccupied with the question of form in her review of Lubbock's **Craft of Fiction** and in her article 'How should one read a book?' and essay on 'Re-reading novels' she argued that form had an emotional rather than visual pattern. This definition of form is close to the definition of form as aesthetic emotion. She insisted that in a perfect novel there is perfect fusion between form and content. She was concerned with intuitive evolution of form which is where she was different from the new critics and formalists like I.A. Richards.

She was also concerned with exploring into the nature of reading process which formed another theme in her critical practice. For her what mattered was not the end but the manner of reading and here again she advised the reader to go in for pure and disinterested reading. It is hers that she is similar to Mathew Arnold. She argued that disinterested criticism could create current of true and fresh ideas. She condemned the conventional notion of approaching a book with other than hedonistic motives. She refers disinterestedness as a condition of aesthetic

experience. For her it is important as a critic to understand the writers perspective. And that is like stepping into the authors shoes to expand the readers outlook. In other words, to understand the form of emotion the aesthetic structure of the text, the writers personality leaving aside all prejudices is for her the proper critical activity, otherwise we can have only milk and watery criticism. Therefore, a good reader has to be imaginative. To make a judgement upon any critical work involves like Wordsworth's 'Recollecting emotions in tranquility'. She also tries to give importance to historical placement of the writer. Her consideration of various historical periods in literature is important in this perspective. She gave suggestions for evolving yard-stick which took into account the value of writers in the past. Hence in several critical essays (especially Jane Austen, Paradise Lost, Defoe) she evolved certain literary values that she derived from her reading of various classics in different historical periods. The authors capacity to reach truth were keeping away ceremonies and convictions and their Androgynous mind are some of the critical values that she has in her mind. In short her critical writing in the **Common Reader** reflects her definition of functions of criticism. Her interest in historical periods and the significance in assessing individual authors and her commitment to train the reader.

In the III Chapter I have dealt with some of the ideological trend in her critical writing. She was very much aware of the oppression of women and the resistance of the established literary tradition in allowing women to have a place of their own in this tradition. Hence in **Three Guineas** she argued that women have a right to an independent opinion. Her concept of Androgynous mind was very important in her critical writing. In her later phase, however, it is not clear why this has not been transparently reflected in her earlier criticism. May be the reason was she was not a very systematic critic as David Daiches said. In her books **A Room of One's Own** and **Three Guineas** she dealt with lack of economic independence of women and argued that most of the women writers tried to imitate men. The theme of women and production of literature and the relationship between gender and writing styles urged her to search past centuries with a critical search light. She was taken up by the literary styles of women writers and contrasted them with styles of men. She argued that women were denied the chance to participate in the literary discourse. Her comments on the art of letter writing of women shows her historical sense as she tries to examine the development of form of literature from the gender perspective. Her comments on Dorothy Richardson's letters reveal this historical insight.

She was also concerned with differential use of language by men and women and in her **A Room of One's Own** she argued that the 19th century sentence was not useful for women's use. Her comments on Jane Austen, Bronte and Eliot underlines the preoccupation at later stage. She made a very important point about language, form and their relationship to women's problems. Her criticism seems to reflect deliberate and conscious attempts to evolve female aesthetics.

To sum up, it is true that Virginia Woolf is not a very systematic critic, yet she is concerned with evolving methods of reading and her criticism does reflect her awareness of historical functions of critic. There is a sense of unbroken past behind her critical judgement and seems to form a critical perspective which is akin to Arnold and Eliot's theory of tradition. She was essentially rooted in the modern age but not a prisoner to it as her criticism was an attempt to make a sense of her contemporary location and there is a sense of cultural continuity in her criticism.

She also tried to evolve certain values according to which the author could be rated. Her denunciation of Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy because they sort to make the trivial and transitory as the true and enduring. She believed that the materialism of Bennett and Galsworthy did not reflect a full sense of life. her sense of history is

reflected in her comments on Greek dramatists and the Russian novelists. These were the values with which she consistently sort in various authors. This is the design in her criticism. Her earlier criticism is different from her later criticism in the way ideological issues are taken up. But she is far from being a casual critic or an impressionist or as merely as an aesthete. She received influences from all of these and sort to combine them with her own informal methodology. She embedded her critical writing in the social milieu of the works and that is what differentiates her with contemporary new criticism. This is not to say of course that there are no formalistic concerns.

At this stage I must state the shortcomings of this study. Most of the discussion in this dissertation is based on her three books. But I discovered later on that the three books chosen by me were not adequate to work out a theory of criticism in Woolf. I discovered that, to do this minute study is required of not only her critical works but also of her novels. Also more detailed analysis of individual essays themselves was needed however constraints of time and space did not allow me to do a thorough study of these. Here I would like to suggest some of the possible areas for further research.

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It would be interesting to explore into her creative and critical practice that is the link between her critical method and creative method, her themes and preoccupations in both her novels and criticism. More adequate use may be made of her Dairies, Letters and Biographies to work out the interrelation between her critical and creative writing.