

**Chapter - V**  
**Conclusion**

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### CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have attempted to present a summary of my study of Winifred Holtby's novel *South Riding*. This study was carried out in the framework of gynocritical line of inquiry. Winifred Holtby, one of the most neglected British women writers of the inter-war period, was selected for this study with a particular intention in my mind. She is one of the writers who came to light when the Virago publication published her novels as a part of their plan to bring to light women writers in the past who were ignored by the main-stream literary tradition. My intention was not to argue for giving Holtby a place in the main-stream establishment. Rather than arguing that she needs to be placed in the tradition alongwith Virginia Woolf and others. I wanted to see for myself, what kind of role Winifred Holtby created through her novels, what thematic strains are found to weave the texture of her novels, what kind of world she dealt with and what her perception of gender relation were.

Holtby was a prolific writer of the inter-war period, i.e. 1919 to 1940. She wrote novels, short stories, journalistic works and a critical work. Her novels especially *South Riding*, has been described as 'social problem novel'. She was writing in a period, in which the

suffragist movement i.e. women's movement for right of vote alongwith other rights was strong. The social-political life of Britain also was in turmoil. Holtby was often found to have been criticised severely by critics and women writers like Virginia Woolf. Yet, Holtby's choice by Virago, certainly meant that she was a feminist writer in her own right. This made me select Holtby as a writer worth a critical inquiry. Therefore, I decided to study *South Riding* which is described as a 'social problem novel'.

The study is concerned with Holtby as a feminist writer and seeks to explore the thematic world of *South Riding*. The gynocritical framework, actually requires us to study a woman writer in respect to narrative form, language, thematic structure, images and perception of man-woman relationship, produced by women. What I decided to do after reviewing feminist literary critical theories was to limit my inquiry to a study of Holtby's representation of women in the public and the private domains as that is the primary division between men and women as imposed by traditional patriarchal society.

Holtby's *South Riding* is replete with innumerable social, political, cultural references in her work. She was in a sense popular novelist, yet her writing, I found reflect serious thinking about women's identity, experiences and predicaments in the post-war period. The British society was undergoing significant changes as



far as women were concerned. War had changed the traditional division of role between men and women. Because of a large number of men going out for the war, women had to come out and shoulder responsibility in social sphere. The great recession and economic depression had affected employment severely. Industrialization and urbanization<sup>had</sup> resulted in impoverishment of already poor families. Women had to earn their livelihood, sustain their families. The traditional family structure of the middle and upper classes was also affected and women could no more remain in their houses but had to be independent. Yet, the patriarchal biases, which the traditional family structure induce in the society did not allow these women to lead easy lives. Women had to struggle in order to gain themselves a space in the public and the private domains, as traditional roles were being re-written. Spinsterhood i.e. a large number of unmarried women, was a serious social reality, in the contemporary British society.

It is this reality that *South Riding* represents. The story of *South Riding* revolves around characters who represent forces of corruption and strength, morality and selfishness, urban and rural communities. The crisis of<sup>the</sup> novel develops on two levels – the public world of the local governing council, and the private worlds of Sarah, Mrs. Beddows, Carne and several others. But both are inextricably linked up with each other.

When a woman tries to enter the public sphere, she has to suffer a lot. The quest for freedom and independence and the cost it entails, is a major theme of *South Riding*. Winifred Holtby illustrates this with <sup>the</sup> example of Sarah Burton and Mrs. Beddows. Holtby clearly chose to situate her novel in two areas – girls' school and local government where women did have some power and autonomy in the inter-war period. Sarah Burton is the headmistress of Kiplington High School for girls and Mrs. Beddows is the first woman Alderman on the South Riding County Council. The representation of women in *South Riding* is marked by problems associated with women's entrance into the public sphere. So women are becoming subjects who have the ability to change the world around them.

The end of *South Riding* is not concerned with idealized and romantic union between Sarah and Carne but recognition of warmth and affection between two women. Unlike traditional novel where a woman must die in order to reunite the two lovers, in *South Riding*, it is the man who dies in order to allow two women to become reconciled in both public and private spheres.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter I have attempted to view, her ideological perception and representation of women in private domain of family and home and inter-personal relationships. While examining

Winifred Holtby's attitude towards some of the issues in women's life like marriage, family and other related areas, we find that she tried to examine these as they existed in contemporary life. In the period in which Holtby was writing, the whole issue of whether or not a woman should marry was being widely re-evaluated. Marriage was not taken for granted as ideal for women by feminists. But in popular ideology, marriage was a safe haven for women. In Holtby's *South Riding* 'marriage' is examined through its desirability, its structure, its basis and its future. According to Holtby career and public world should be understood as an important alternative to marriage and motherhood.

Holtby questions through her critical representation of marriage institution, the importance of private sphere in women's life. For her marriage becomes, a place where woman is treated as private property by husband. In all the different families that she portrays, not a single one has real understanding and love between the men and women. Men either try to buy women's surrender with money, or some other social role. The women surrender to men because they are so subjugated that real love is not simply possible within marriage. This does not mean that Holtby is discarding the institution of marriage but what she means to demonstrate through her depiction of marriages, is that the institution of marriage is based

on inequality. She had claimed, "while inequality exists, while injustice is done and opportunities denied to great majority of women, I shall have to be a feminist with motto, 'equality first'."

*South Riding* presents women who try to break the oppressive bonds of marriage. Most of them suffer a fate which is disease (Mrs. Sawdon), madness (Mrs. Murial Carne) or death (Mrs. Holly). Break down of communication, loss of mental ability and multiple childbirths all waste women's lives in marriage. One can see that spinsterhood is seen by Holtby as the alternative to such marriages. This does not mean that Holtby is averse to sex. She is not prudish. She does not believe that extra-marital sex or free sex between men and women is a taboo. This is illustrated by the three love-affairs of the protagonist, Sarah Burton. But she seems to believe that if marriage suppresses women so much, it is better not to get married at all. If Mrs. Beddows is a first generation woman who resigned herself to tyranny of marriage, she nonetheless makes successful effort to establish herself as a successful social worker in the public domain. She represents the older generation of women who accepted the older forms like family. But Sarah is the 'New woman'. She represents the new generation of women in the inter-war period, who refused to be cowed down by the oppressive, patriarchal, social norms.

It is in this sense, that Holtby creates new role models and alternative visions for the women. Sarah Burton and Lydia Holly are examples of women who have begun to explore new horizons and this ideological perception and intention has also had an impact on the form of the novel. It is true that Holtby makes use of established stereotypes as far as popular novel is concerned. For example, Robert Carne as the dark, powerful, attractive man of few words can easily be taken as hero of any popular novel. Yet the way, Sarah and Robert's relation develops, illustrates how Holtby breaks with convention of the happy ending. Lack of sexual fulfillment, discarding marriage as the ultimate solution, the death of the hero and women coming together to shoulder the responsibility of the civic life can be seen as some of the ways in which Holtby changes the form of the popular novel. Therefore, *South Riding* may be looked upon as a novel which challenges the popular, patriarchal stereotypes of men and women in literature. What Holtby achieved was that, she created women characters with firm feminist sensibility and who dared to change the world around them through their active subjectivity. In spite of the rambling narrative, the innumerable characters and details and sometimes tedious descriptions of proceedings and routine matters, *South Riding* gives us an acute perception of Holtby's feminist visions.



At this state, I must confess that my study has several shortcomings. I have not been able to analyse several of her narrative techniques, her language; I also have not been able to locate *South riding* in the inter-war British society more thoroughly. It would have been illuminating to compare Holtby's vision in *South Riding* with her perception in her other novels. However, constraints of space and time have not allowed me to take up these issues. It would also be exciting to compare Winifred Holtby with other women writers such as Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, Agatha Christie, Rhys, in order to see, what kind of tradition they formed and what kind of feminist visions they provide with a critique of the society. This would be a good area for future research.