

Chapter - I
Introduction And General Outline
Of The Study

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SECTION – I

INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this dissertation, I propose to explore into Winifred Holtby's fictional world from the feminist perspective. I have chosen to study her last fictional work, *South Riding*, for the purpose of this dissertation.

Winifred Holtby was one of the British women writers of inter-war period i.e. 1919 to 1940. This was also a period of a strong women's movement, known as the suffraget movement which demanded right of vote for women, alongwith other rights. She wrote novels, poems and journalistic articles. Holtby wrote during the historical moment when it was becoming clear that voting rights for women would not necessarily create a society in which men and women were treated equally. She described herself as one of the 'equality feminists'. Holtby gives the impression that she is an 'equality feminist' not because she wanted to be, but because she had to be, when she wrote for the Yorkshire Post : "I am a feminist because I dislike everything that feminist implies. I desire an end of the whole business, the demands for equality, the suggestion of sex warfare, the very name of feminist. I want to do work in which my

real interest lies the study of inter-race relationships, the writing of novels and so forth. But while inequality exists, while injustice is done and opportunity denied to the great majority of women, with the motto 'equality first'. While talking about Winifred Holtby, Vera Brittain states that :

"Her feminist opinions knew no bitterness. Since they had not originated in any sense of grievance. Never having found it a disadvantage to be a woman, she brought to the service of women ideas which were positive and constructive for most of her short life, she seems to have taken it for granted that women and men were to be treated equally."

(Brittain, 1940, P. 134)

In the second section of the first Chapter I will discuss British writers of inter-war period, as it is necessary to understand the whole scenario of that period while assessing Holtby. Holtby was not only a writer but also an activist in the women's movement. In reply to her mother, she wrote in her letter :

"What is my ambition and dream? ... I want there to be no more wars; I want people to recognise the human claims of Negroes and Jews and women and all oppressed and humiliated creatures; I want a sort of bloodless revolution to come to break down our snobberies and money standard and limited vulgarities. And I would like to be used as one of the instruments by which these things are done."

In this section an attempt will also be made to place Winifred Holtby in the tradition of British women writers and evaluate her as a critic of contemporary British society.

In the second section of the first Chapter, I will present the biographical sketch of Winifred Holtby which will prove that what she lived in her life has been reflected in her novels. Hence, the quest for freedom and independence and the cost entailed for it, is the theme of all her novels. Winifred Holtby's feminism, pacifism and socialism, her anti-racist campaigns and her intense commitment to the idea of woman citizenship in the years after 1918, made her an index of many of the progressive movements during inter-war period. As Winifred Holtby was a feminist writer and she worked for programmes and activities concerning women, I would like to carry out my study from a feminist perspective.

One of the aims of feminist literary criticism is to find out the literary history of neglected women writers and Winifred Holtby is one of them. She was ignored by the main stream literary tradition. But in 1998, Virago Press republished her books. Virago is the first British Feminist Press. They published modern classics list in 1978 with the aim of demonstrating the existence of a female tradition in literature. As part of this strategy, they published Winifred Holtby's *South Riding*. Winifred Holtby was a prolific writer who wrote novels, short stories as well as journalistic articles and critical



It has been argued that her novels deal with the problem of women's life in the then contemporary Britain. My study will concentrate on *South Riding* and explore the problematique that is central to her fictional world.

For this purpose, I propose to take a review of feminist literary criticism in the second chapter. It will be helpful to evolve a methodology for the analysis of the novel *South Riding*.

The study will focus upon various aspects of her fictional world. Aspects such as treatment of man-woman relationship, concept of love and romance and perception of institutions such as marriage and family have been chosen by me to understand her feminist ideology. I have also attempted to discuss her perception of various social issues like local government, education, local politics and how women were involving themselves in this power structure and how Winifred Holtby puts before us a role model of a successful woman.

Winifred Holtby was a prolific writer and her life is interesting from a researcher's point of view. What she wrote in her novel was actually lived by her. Her perception of the world was based on her personal experiences. It is because of all these concerns that I have chosen to explore into the fictional world of Winifred Holtby.

SECTION – II

BRITISH WRITERS OF INTER-WAR PERIOD

INTRODUCTION

In the last section I charted the outline of my study. As it was said in the last section, Winifred Holtby was the writer of the inter-war period, so I think it is requisite to look at the socio-political situation of that period and its effect on the contemporary writers. I will also try to analyze the similarities and differences between the other writers and Winifred Holtby. It will help me to contextualize Winifred Holtby and her writing in the scenario of inter-war period.

The contemporary social conditions of inter-war period were that of the devastation, disillusion and despair experienced with first world war. Winifred Holtby's novels are a reflection of contemporary social condition of inter-war period. Winifred Holtby was herself involved in various progressive movements. She was also enrolled in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in London on 27th July 1918. She worked there as forewoman equivalent to a non-commissioned officer in the army. Winifred can be called as an index for changing social, political, literary conditions. It will be useful for me to review British novelists and especially women novelists of her time. The review is intended to

examine the socio-political and cultural background of inter-war period and various novelists of that period.

The inter-war period from 1920-1940 was completely overshadowed by the two world wars. There were after-effects of the first and fear for the second. This made the early thirties a period of great distress. "The immediate post-war mood of desperate gaiety and determined frivolity gave way to doubt, uncertainty of aim and a deeper self questioning on ethical, social and political problems" (Albert, 1979, P. 508). This spirit was reflected in its literature novel, drama, poetry and miscellaneous prose. All these forms reflected the perplexity and uncertainty of aim. In this period, there was dominance of the novel and drama forms. A natural corollary of the quest for new values and for a new vital tradition was the desire for new forms and methods of presentation and in all the major literary genres the age produced revolutionary developments.

According to Albert Edward, the disillusionment, cynicism, despair and bewilderment in face of the crumbling of established moral values, which characterize the post-war world were clearly seen in the novel as form. The novel was combined with the elasticity of its form and content, inclined the inter-war generation to look to the novel for an interpretation of contemporary scene. Of the serious novelists like Henry James, James Joyce attempted to

establish new values to replace the old, others were content to portray the complexities of inter-war life with no attempt at deeper purpose. A third group, which includes some of the most important writers of the period, found itself driven by this lack of generally accepted values to focus attention on the impact of life on the individual consciousness. Character, rather than action, ~~is~~ the interest of this group. In the work of this group an interpretation of life is often implicit.

The master of the pre-war novelists was Henry James and of the inter-war years the most significant writer was James Joyce. A comparison of their works may help bring out the essential features of the novel during this period. Basically, the movement was away from the controlled, finished, artistic form used by James to a novel altogether more loose, more fluid and less coherent, though nonetheless aware of its artistic methods. Impressionism gave place to an expressionistic technique, by which the novelist sought to present, not the outward appearance, but what he conceived to be the inner realities of life. the presentation of the 'stream of consciousness', the use of interior monologue, the detailed tracing of the freakish associations, of ideas and an allusive style were the chief weapons of the novelist to write from within the mind of his character. Because of these techniques subjective novel was developed. Discontinuity of time and a complex and



progression based on the inter- weaving of recurrent motifs, replaced the simple chronological development of plot which in its traditional sense, disappears almost entirely. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Aldos Huxley experimented in this way.

Marian Shaw tried to reconsider the definition of 'women's writing in the 1930s; Shaw observes that :

“recent feminist criticism and the recuperative publishing activity accompanying it, has tended to concentrate on those novelists who chose experimentalism and who were most obviously the new feminist of the literary world of the war and inter-war years: Woolf, Sinclair, Richardson, Lehmann, Rhys, for example.”

(Shaw: 1986, P.179)

In contrast to this tradition of women's writing, Shaw examines those writers who 'adhered more or less to the realist traditions of documentary verisimilitude', writers frequently considered 'conservative' who often choose the epic form of the awesomely researched historical novel as their arena. It is vital, she argues, to resist the temptation to pronounce one branch of women's writing radical and another reactionary purely on the basis of formal consideration. Shaw's work on Winifred Holtby and Alison Light's rehabilitation of writers such as Agatha Christie and Daphne Du Maurier are crucial interventions in the 1930s debate, challenging the still widely held assumption that Virginia Woolf was the only British woman writer of the inter-war years.

It is nonetheless difficult to deny that the air of the 1930s was thick with a sense of uncertainty. What was also uncertain was the status of women's writing within a literary establishment that consciously privileged masculine experience. In the introduction to her collection of women's writing from the second world war, Jenny Hartley quotes Cyril Connolly's rejection of 'domestic experience':

"We take the line that experiences connected with the blitz, the shopping queues, the home front, deserted wives, deceived husbands, broken homes, dull jobs, bad schools, group squabbles, are so much a picture of our ordinary lives that unless the workmanship is outstanding we are prejudiced against them."

(Hartley, 1994, P.8)

War is marked by radical changes in the familiar demarcations of role and place. Value systems are not so much revised as reallocated, and the boundaries of 'masculine' and 'feminine' behavior are redrawn in accordance with the needs of the moment, thus as the home front became fit for heroes, so it also became fit for print.

This transition becomes all the more remarkable when viewed from the 1930s, a decade in which the domestic was the object of unprecedented revulsion and ridicule. According to Gill Plain,

“In spite of their strongly contrasting literary political allegiances, the writers of the inter-war period are linked by profound concerns with questions of gender and power. Their novels may utilize very different techniques to explore the prospect of war, but within all these pre-war texts and within those of the wartime ‘storm’ there exists a story which cannot be told.”

(Plain, 1986, P.17)

Thus the climate of 1930s was a curious conglomeration of opposites and its literature was both of peace and war. The writers used various techniques. Various new subjects were introduced in the literature. Winifred Holtby was writing in this period. She was a journalist as well. She wrote about her experiences in the inter-war period. *South Riding* tells us about many subjects like local governing bodies and their politics, education, birth control, unemployment, relief for the poor, landed commercial interests, the care of the insane, local authority building programs, local authority reform, the single woman- all these issues Holtby had written about as a journalist now come together remarkably as a “fiction about a community, a regional tale, a social problem novel of wider significance.” (Shaw, 2000, P.237)

Winifred Holtby was a writer of the turbulent inter-war period. Her novels may be described as social documents as one finds innumerable social, political, cultural references in her works. What is significant about her is that though she was in a sense a popular

novelist, her writing does reflect serious thinking about woman's identity, experiences and predicaments. Most of her novels are about women who dared to dream differently. At the same time, her novels cannot be dismissed as merely 'popular' novels or as novels of social documentation. One can feel that while using the form of a popular 'social' novel, Holtby was trying to experiment with the technique and form of novel. In order to understand Holtby as a novelist, it was found essential to first explore into her thematic world and then look at the ways in which she sought to experiment with the techniques of popular novel.

SECTION - III

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF WINIFRED HOLTBY

In the last section a review of British writers of the inter-war period was presented. Now it is essential to point out the relationship between Holtby's life and her writing to examine how women writers transformed their reality into fictional worlds. Understanding of Winifred Holtby's life-span is important because it will be helpful to understand her writing. In *South Riding* she talks about many aspects of life like local government, education, poverty, women's problem, problem of spinsters, corruption in housing plans, man-woman relationship, marriage etc. Then the question arises how she found it possible to write about all ~~that~~ matters. One possible answer lies in the life she lived and hence it is necessary to take a short review of her biographical details.

On the 23rd June 1898, Winifred Holtby was born at Rudston House in the Yorkshire village of Rudston. Winifred was the youngest daughter of Alice and David Holtby. Her father owned a large farm in Rudston, six miles from Bridlington. There he bought Rudstone house. The Holtby family was known as one of the rising prosperous families. Winifred describes the countryside round Rudston as 'great undulating worlds, golden in harvest, chequered in spring with brown plough-land, bluish-green of turnips and the

vivid emerald of winter wheat. Here and there on the slopes are scattered copses, sheltering the fold yards and gardens of outlying farms. It is one of the richest agricultural areas in England.' (Shaw, 2000, P. 14)

Imaginatively, Winifred Holtby returns to this landscape in her writing but intellectually her response to rural life was unsentimental and practical:

"Almost every villager who has had the chance has done what I have done about the countryside –escape from it at the first opportunity. [It] was not a place in which the poor or moderately well off, the eager and ambitious and intelligent could find life preferable to the life of the towns."

(Shaw, 2000, P. 16)

The Holtbys were well off and life at Rudston house seems to have offered Winifred as a child an ideal mixture of secure comfort and practical freedom. It is therefore easy to see why Winifred later would be surprised at the need for feminism. David Holtby managed the farm himself and Mrs. Holtby managed the house-hold which is the working center of the farms. There was less demarcation between the world of women and that of men than would have been the case of urban middle-class family. Winifred didn't have a brother and neither her mother nor her father were inclined to curb her exuberance. Winifred ran about on the farm 'like a boy.' (Shaw,

2000, P. 16). She was later to write that she could also 'make my own clothes, speak in Hyde park, ride and dance.' (Shaw, 2000, P. 16).

Her relationship with her father's workers and their families taught her social awareness and gratitude. In Christmas her parents used to give food to poor people and servants. Alice Holtby, mother of Winifred was the most important of the several strong women in Winifred's life. From a quiet humble background, Alice Holtby became a woman of importance. She was elected in 1923 on the East Riding county council and in 1934 became the first woman alderman. Winifred was quite opposite to her elder sister Grace. Grace was pretty, Winifred was a thin, physically timid girl.

The early education of Winifred and Grace was at home with a governess, Miss Maude Nudd. One of Winifred's earliest known attempts at writing poetry was at the age of eight. In 1909 Winifred was sent to Queen Margaret's School in Scarborough, where she wrote for school magazine. A literate child, she loved to read Shakespeare, Dickens and Bronte in 1911. While Christmas shopping in Hull with her school matron, she saw in a book-seller's window a display of 'elegant little pink and pale-green gift books' entitled *My Garden and other poems*, by Winifred Holtby. It was Alice Holtby's Christmas gift to Winifred. Winifred was ecstatic:

"I have known since then countless moments of pleasure, several of rapture and a few of pride but as I walked back to school with my first published work I knew dazzling an ecstasy of achievement that nothing experienced since has ever approached it."

Alice Holtby could not disguise her pleasure and pride in her daughter's achievement:

"The twenty-five poems contained in this little book are the spontaneous outbursts of one of nature's youngest songsters."

Winifred continued writing poetry all her life and none of it ever really became more than poesy, but in the context of her life much of it is expressive and moving. The significance of *My Garden and Other Poems* lies rather in its indication of literary aspiration by Alice Holtby on Winifred's behalf, an uncommon ambition in a Yorkshire farmer's wife of the period, even a prosperous one.

When war broke out in 1914, Winifred was still at school but in December 1914, when Scarborough came under fire from two German warships, she wrote a letter to a friend about her experiences and it was the clarity of her writing that encouraged the local paper to publish the letter in full in Jan. 1915. She was to draw later on this experience for her 1924 novel *The Crowded Street*.

She passed the entrance exam for Somerville College, but left in early 1918 to join the Women's Army Artillery corps. In 1919,

she returned to Oxford to finish her studies. She read for degree in modern history and graduated in 1921. It was at Oxford that Winifred met a fellow student, Vera Brittain, who was to become her lifelong friend. After graduation they took a six-week holiday in Europe, before starting their individual literary careers. Winifred and Vera's relationship can be described as Vera said, "an association that in thirteen years has never been broken and never spoilt, and today remains an intimate as ever." (Shaw, 2000, P. 102)

Vera Brittain wrote the *Testament of Friendship* with all the memories of Winifred; it was published in 1940. After graduating, Winifred and Vera had become friends and living companions from 1923. One more important influence on Winifred was that of Harry Pearson. Winifred's relationship with Harry began in childhood when he came to play at her father's farm. It seems to have been subject of expectation, particularly from his family, that they would marry. But instead, in 1920, Harry left for Nova Scotia and on the boat going out there he became engaged to a young woman pianist. Harry's engagement was short-lived but its effect on Winifred was cautionary. Harry could never quite be trusted again. Her reaction was given to Vera Brittain in a letter, which Vera quotes in *Testament of Friendship*,

“He was right –he had perfect right to love whom he liked. I set myself at work to leave him perfectly free from the first moment I knew he loved me.”

During last two years of Winifred’s life, she and Harry seemed to draw closer together. In April 1934, she wrote to Vera:

“I love every tone of his voice, every movement of his hands. And I wouldn’t not love him for anything. But it is, I suppose, a humiliating and ridiculous situation for a woman of my age, intelligence and interest.”

(11 April, 1934, Hull)

In Yorkshire there had been unrest in the agricultural community and 1918 saw David Holtby sell Rudston house farm. They moved towards Cottingham. At Cottingham her mother was making her mark in local politics, becoming the first female county councilor of East Riding County Council. This was one of many events Winifred would later use in her novel *South Riding*.

On her return to England, Winifred began writing and during this period completed her first novel *Anderby Wold* (1923). Winifred wrote another novel, *The Runners*, based on the life of John Wycliffe, but this was rejected by the publishers and never published. Despite this setback, Winifred worked hard for becoming a prolific journalist, writing for a wide range of newspapers and journals, including, the *Daily Express*, *Evening Standard*, *Good housekeeping*, *Manchester Guardian*, *New leader*, *Radio Times* and

Yorkshire Post, Time and Tide, an independent paper run by, written for and read by women, established by Lady Rhondda. It employed some of the most distinguished inter-war feminist writers: Elizabeth Robins, Rebecca West, Cecily Hamilton and Winifred Holtby. She became ^{the} youngest director of *Time and Tide* at the age of 28.

A year later, in 1927, her novel *Land of Green Ginger* was published. During the next four years, she worked hard as a journalist and lecturer of repute. She was often referred to as the most brilliant journalist in London. Winifred travelled all over Europe lecturing for the League of Nations Union and Six Point Group. She also wrote in support of Women's rights. When women got the right to vote in 1928, Winifred produced *A New Voter's Guide To Party Programs* in 1929. It aimed at helping the new women voters to find their political feet.

In 1926, Winifred accepted an invitation from her friend, Jean MacWilliam, a headmistress at a school in South Africa. She went to South Africa for studying conditions and problems of native Africans. The question of radical discrimination made her determined to visit West Africa, but she died before this was possible. In her visit to South Africa, she felt:

“That one day I should want to write a novel about the contrast between the two ways of life – African and European.”



So she wrote *Mandoa Mandoa!* It is in a tradition of comic novels about cross-race conflict and misunderstanding. Winifred had also become very active in helping collect a fund for the work of William Ballinger, a Scotsman working in Africa to improve conditions for native South Africans. Winifred's support was not just limited to campaigning and writing letters of appeal for funds, but direct funding from her own pocket.

But her family life was filled with sadness with the death of her sister, Grace in 1928 during childbirth and her father, David in 1923 and Medical tests showed that Winifred was suffering from a kidney disease, which, as long term result of childhood illnesses. Initially, she was given only two years to live, but she undertook an intensive and painful treatment which gave her an extra eighteen months of life. This borrowed time became a frenzy of work in which as well as continuing with her journalism, she produced two more books during 1934, *Truth is Not Sober* and *Women and Changing Society*. In September 1935, Winifred had spent a few days at Cottingham with her mother. But returning to London, she was admitted to a nursing home there. Just after dawn on 29th September 1935 she died. A memorial service was held on 1st October 1935 at St. Martin-in-the-fields Church in London, followed by funeral service and burial the following day at Rudston church in

east Yorkshire. Winifred's mother sent a letter to the Yorkshire Post:

"I should like everybody to know of the utmost joyous last days and hours. Winifred was so gallant, so determined there should be no 'sadness of farewell'.... For some days before the end she had no pain ... if the world is happier place because she had lived in it, may I say to the many young people who have sought her help and advice that what she has done they can do –and she calls them to bear the torch which she may no longer hold. I can finish on no better note than was written by Annie Swan in her 'we travel home' just published":

'God give me work till my life shall end,
and life till my work is done'
to you, each one, who loved her, just the thanks of

Winifred's Mother
(Yorkshire post, 9 Oct., 1935).

Vera Brittain worked hard to publish her last two works, *South Riding* and *Pavements at Anderby*. Winifred Holtby was best remembered for *South Riding*. It was published in England as well as in Holland, France, Germany, and America. It is recognized as a first class novel. *South Riding* was adopted for the cinema in 1937 and in 1974 was televised by Yorkshire television as well as adaptation by local writer, Gill Adams for Radio 4 in June 1999.

Winifred Holtby was a prolific writer. She wrote many novels, poems and one critical work. Here is the list of her novels and other writing.

1. *My Garden and Other Poems*, 1911, Browns, Hull
2. *The Crowded Street*, 1924, Bodley Head
3. *The Land of Green Giner*, 1927, Academy Press
4. *Eutychus, or the Future of the Pulpit*, 1928, Kegal Paul
5. *Poor Caroline*, 1931, J. Cape.
6. *Virginia Woolf*, 1932, Academy Press
7. *Astonishing Island*, 1933, Lovat Dickson
8. *Mandoo, Mandoo!* 1933, Chivers Press
9. *Truth is Not Sober*, 1934, Collins
10. *Women and Changing Society*, 1934, Bodley Head
11. *The Frozen Earth and Other Poems*, 1935, Browns, Hull.
12. *South Riding*, 1936, Collins
13. *Pavements at Anderby*, 1937, Collins
14. *Take Back Your Freedom*, 1939, J. Cape

This is the biographical sketch of Winifred's life. Her whole life was very interesting. There were many important aspects which must be taken into consideration. Winifred was a spinster when the term supposedly held horrors for women and when there inevitably were many spinsters around. Winifred embraced the name and the

condition of spinsterhood and campaigned on its behalf not pityingly or complainingly but with a genuine sense of its potential for love and usefulness. Like her heroine of *South Riding*, she would say, 'I was born to be a spinster, and by god, I'm going to spin'. Her writing also became important for understanding the creative preoccupations of writers during the inter-war period. Winifred Holtby was not only the writer of fiction but also was an activist in political movements. She was part of groups which worked for betterment of women's lives.

CHAPTER SCHEME

In the present chapter, I have presented a biographical account of Winifred Holtby and a brief review of the British writers in the inter-war period. Chapter-II discusses the feminist literary critical perspective and the issues highlighted by them, so as to evolve a methodology of analysis of *South Riding*. Chapter-III and IV present the actual analysis of *South Riding*. Chapter-V presents the conclusion of the study, and also notes the limitations and shortcomings of the study undertaken. This is followed by a bibliography.