

Chapter - III
Women and the Public Sphere

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As I have said in the previous chapter, I have chosen to concentrate on the major themes that emerged in Winifred Holtby's novel. In this chapter, I would like to present some aspects of Winifred Holtby's perception of the socio-cultural and political reality of 1930s as it is represented in her novel *South Riding*. The novel is a mature embodiment of Winifred's most fundamental beliefs : her pacifism, her equalitarian feminism, her belief in social democracy and the value of education, in the importance of the individual human being and of the individual's obligations towards society. The novel has been described as a "social problem novel" which documents the good and evil in society from women's perspective. As Marion Shaw comments,

"Winifred's sense of history and the topical scene which made her a competent journalist made her also into a successful condition of England, particularly a condition of England's women novelist too."

(Shaw, 1988, P. 237).

We can view her historical sense and journalistic attitude in the way she handles her main problematique of local governance. Though *South Riding* includes one hundred and sixty seven characters, Winifred Holtby never gives a chance to distract our

attention from the main characters and main issues by too many side stories. She organises her large party with brilliant success by using the framework of local government.

South Riding is divided into eight sections, each section has a title taken from one of the departments of local government, such as Education, Highways and Bridges, Agriculture and Small Holdings, Public Health, Public Assistance, Mental Deficiency, Finance and Housing and Town Planning. The titles signal the most important part of the action. The story is set in native Yorkshire, it tells about the regional council and the way its decisions influence variety of lives Holtby must have drawn on the experiences of her mother who was an alderman of the local council. But she had also worked on other sources to obtain information about the functioning of local councils. As Winifred Holtby wrote at the beginning of the book in the dedicatory letter to her mother :

“... through listening to your descriptions of your work that the drama of English local government first captured my imagination. What fascinated me was the discovery that apparently academic and impersonal revolutions passed in a county council were daily revolutionising the lives of those men and women whom they affected. The complex tangle of motives prompting public decisions, the unforeseen consequences of their enactment on private lives appeared to me as part of unseen pattern of the English landscape. What I have tried to do in *South Riding* is to trace that pattern”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 11).

Holtby got inspiration from her mother who was the first alderman of East Riding county council and she also added to it the insights drawn from her research.

The world of *South Riding* is portrayed with the conviction that local government has considerable importance in its effect on human life. The Governing Council, especially, is, as Young Lovell Brown says in the prologue,

“the source of reputations, of sanatoria, bridges, funds, scandals, of remedies, for broken ambitions or foot and mouth disease, of bans on sex novels in public libraries, of educational scholarships, belighted hopes and drainage systems. Local government was an epitome of national government. Here was world tragedy in embryo. Here gallant Labour, with nothing to lose but its chains, would fight entrenched and armoured Capital. Here the progressive, greedy and immoral towns would exploit the pure, honest, elemental and unprogressive county. Here corruption would be studied and exposed, oppression denounced and lethargy indicted.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 3)

The story of *South Riding* revolves around characters who represent forces of corruption and strength, morality and selfishness, urban and rural communities. Though the total number of characters is well beyond one hundred fifty, the major characters are Sarah Burton, the new head mistress, Alderman Mrs. Beddows, Robert Carne, a farmer and an Alderman, Alderman Snaith, a rich businessman, councillor Huggins, councillor and later on, Alderman

Astell, a socialist, and innumerable other men and women. The crisis in the 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 (South Riding is the name of a county).

In this chapter, I have made a modest attempt to chart out the various social issues raised by Winifred Holtby and her ideological perception of the world around her.

The story begins with the most important matter of appointment of a new Headmistress, for the Kiplington High School for Girls by the South Riding County Council's members. There are five candidates, of whom the first four are disappointing : there remains Sarah Burton, M.A. Leeds, B. Litt. Oxford. She is small with bright red hair, her face not pretty, but lively. She comes from the South Riding, which is in her favour, but she has been away from it for some years, teaching in London and in South Africa. She has good references and speaks up sensibly for herself, so she gets the job, with the approval of Alderman Mrs. Beddows. Mrs. Beddows is the first alderman in the South Riding.

“Mrs. Beddows was a plump sturdy little woman whose rounded features looked as though they had been battered blunt by wear and weather in sixty years or more of hard experience. But so cheerful, so lively, so frank was the intelligence which beamed benevolently



from her bright spaniel-coloured eyes, that sometimes she looked as young as the girl she still, in her secret dreams, felt herself to be.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 4)

There is only one member of the Education Committee, Carne, who opposes the appointment of Sarah Burton, partly from an old quarrel with her father, partly because she seems to him too sharp and modern. He wants a motherly woman who could help to educate his forlorn child, Midge. Carne is a dark sombre, handsome and reserved gentleman. His wife, Muriel, is a daughter of Sedgmire, a rich person. She is in a private asylum whose expenses are bringing Carne and his home near to ruin. He is a sporting farmer, he rides and breeds horses. He had a steady friendly relationship with Mrs. Beddows. This handsome, tragic Carne attracts Sarah Burton, though it is embodied in conflict between conservative Robert Carne and Sarah's fights for reform. Carne is obsessed by the hopes that his insane wife will recover. He also worries about his daughter Midge, who he fears will get insanity inherited from his wife.

There is hierarchy of family from upper class to lower class. The Holly family is one of the poor families. They live in a collection of disused railway coaches and huts known as shacks. Mr. Holly is a builder's labourer, feckless and self-indulgent. Six children and wife are dependent on him. The eldest daughter Lydia

has discovered at school a genuine love of books and a capacity for learning. But ignoring her doctor's warning, Mrs. Holly delivers another baby and dies. Lydia has to leave her school to take care of the children.

At the end of the novel Carne dies by falling from the Cliff. Mrs. Beddows and Sarah Burton together make good effort for the benefit of South Riding.

Actually, *South Riding* is a complex tale which mixes politics and human fortunes. As Winifred Holtby wrote in the dedicatory letter to her mother :

“When I came to consider local government, I began to see how it was in essence the first-line defence thrown up by the community against our common enemies—poverty, sickness, ignorance, isolation, mental derangement and social maladjustment. The battle is not faultlessly conducted, nor are the motives of those who take part in it all righteous or disinterested. But the war is, I believe, worth fighting.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 11).

South Riding addresses many issues like – education, birth control, unemployment, poor relief, landed versus commercial interests, the care of the insane, local authority building programmes, local authority reforms, the single woman – all issues Holtby had written about as a journalist. In *South Riding*, it comes together remarkably as a fiction about a community, a regional tale. It is also

a social problem novel of wider significance. Winifred herself claimed that it was the only novel about local government (Shaw, 2000, P. 243). She expresses in the preface to *South Riding* about the ability of a community to act corporately 'against our common enemies – poverty, sickness, ignorance, isolation, mental derangement and social maladjustment'. All the members of County Council are taking decision for good. But Carne the 'good' person opposes the malpractice is shown as a reactionary figure whose neglect and traditionalism have been one of the causes of the South Riding's descent into poverty. It is just as Mrs. Beddows says towards the end of the novel, 'all this local government, it's just people working together- as ordinary people, against the troubles that afflict us all'.

Winifred Holtby represented a complex tale with so many characters and issues in relation with the local Government of South Riding. Though she tried to see 'the complex tangle of motives prompting public decision, the unforeseen consequences of their enactment in private lives – as part of the unseen pattern of the English landscape' (Holtby, 1988, P. 11). Virginia Woolf made a very negative remark that,

"I think she has a photographic mind, a Royal academicians mind. It's as bright as paint, but how obvious, how little she's got beneath the skin. That's

why it rattles on so, I think, one's never pulled up by a single original idea. She's seen nothing for the first time, for herself. I feel, as I do when God save the King strikes up, that I could sing the whole book straight through.... she's a ventriloquist, not a creator. Sometimes of course, she has the very words on her lips. But they don't come from the heart."

(Woolf, 1979, P. 382).

According to Marion Shaw, "Woolf presumably meant an observational rather than an interpretative and innovative talent, conservative, conventional and guided by the expectations of a certain kind of readership. In some respects this criticism rings true as does Woolf's telling comment that 'she's a ventriloquist, not creator.'" (Shaw, 2000, P. 255)

As Marion Shaw says, *South Riding* is written for a certain kind of readership, which would not easily have taken to read Woolf's novels. But I am not totally agreed with Virginia Woolf's comment. Though Winifred Holtby tried to picturise various complex issues in one novel, it is not only a photographic representation. On the other hand, Winifred tried to represent socio-cultural and political reality of ^{the} 1930s, with ^{the} help of various issues. And as she herself believed – literature should address itself to the social conditions of its time, it should help to write history, not in any crude programmatic way but by careful observation of 'the material circumstances of life' which are the conditions in which

people live and the pre-conditions of their consciousness of themselves.' (Shaw, quote 2000, P. 249). *South Riding* is a good illustration of what Holtby believed about a novel.

At first reading the novel appears conformist and traditionalist as Virginia Woolf argued. But as it is subtitled 'An English landscape', this seems to confirm a nostalgic stereotype of Englishness. The pastoral suggestion in 'landscape' is fulfilled in the novel by depiction of agricultural scene and its focus on the small town of Kiplington. At the end of the story, the citizens come together for the celebration of Silver Jubilee. At that moment, the thoughts of Sarah Burton, the heroine summarise the message the book has advanced :

'This is what it means to belong to a community; this is what it means, to be a people'

(Holtby, 1988, P. 492).

Holtby's main preoccupation with the issue of "governance" is reflected in the way she gives minute information about local government. This is illustrated by the following paragraph :

"Here, he told himself was the source of reputations, of sanatoria, bridges, feuds, scandals, of remedies for broken ambitions, or foot-and-mouth disease, of bans on sex novels in public libraries, of educational scholarships, blighted hopes and drainage systems. Local government was an epitome of national

government. Here gallant labour, with nothing to lose but its chain, would fight entrenched and armoured capital. Here the progressive, greedy and immoral towns would exploit the pure, honest, elemental and unprogressive country. Here the corruption could be studied and exposed oppression denounced and lethargy indicted.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 3).

Holtby talks about all these above matters in *South Riding*. All these subjects are skillfully integrated in the narrative. The love story of Sarah Burton is one of the themes of *South Riding*, but it is only one thread amongst several. Winifred claimed that it was the only novel about local government. Because of this declaration the scope of writing is widened. While writing about local government and politics, she observes the state of local government and at the same suggests reforms which might bring about improvement. Here it would be useful to look at some autobiographical details in order to understand her preoccupation better.

Her mother was the first woman alderman in the East Riding County Council. The problems which were faced by East Riding County Council as roads, education, public assistance, health, maternity and child welfare, are reflected in *South Riding*. Winifred Holtby describes in *South Riding* the lack of proper housing and of maternity care for the Holly and Mitchell families and on the other hand also portrays the process of ruination of Robert Carne through

having to pay privately for the treatment of his wife's mental Breakdown. So *South Riding* discusses various problems faced by local government and the local politics. *South Riding* represents problems of corruption as well. Holtby views the politics as a process of formulating strategies to counter common enemies of the community – poverty, sickness, ignorance, isolation, mental derangement and social maladjustment. She has an acute awareness with other human beings in social life –

“We are not only social individuals and each face to face with eternity and our separate spirit; we are members one of another.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. XII)

The problems of poverty and unemployment in the rural populace had grown very acute in the 1930s in England. Because of the war and because of the overall process of industrialization, towns and villages had no place for people from the old agrarian system. Though big cities had developed industrially township and villages were at the periphery of the industrial development. In *South Riding* Carne represents the agrarian system which was crumbling against the onslaught of the new capitalist system represented by Snaith, who is ^a rich businessman. Carne's world is based on agriculture, grooming and breeding of horses, that is what he good at. Therefore, he cannot understand the importance of new railways or any other

construction business. The sufferers in the world of *South Riding* are the poor people, represented by the Holly family, the Castles, the Crossfields and other such people. The shacks in which the poor people live, invariably become the prisons in which they suffer and die. There is no employment in the town of Kiplington. The town survives on tourists only. There is nothing but poverty and invariably it is again women and little children who suffer and die because of lack of money and food, sanitation, water, medicine. Poor women die through the lack of contraception.

It is this atmosphere, in which there is a crying need for employment, that corruption is also generated. The councillors of the old system fail to understand the importance of construction of new houses, but the new age people like Huggins and Snaith plan to sell land to council with huge profits. Winifred Holtby perceives, how the politics of local governing bodies involves people, who love to fish in troubled waters. Rehousing of dwellers from slums in one of the decent areas of South Riding, the proposal to build a railway track are opportunities for councillors like Snaith and Huggins, to defraud the county council. As Huggins later on says, people like Snaith are politicians 'who gamble with human souls.... and push other over the brink of Hell.' (Holtby, 1988, P.433)

Apart from construction, housing and employment, health services is yet another area which, Holtby represents from a typically feminist perspective. The council meetings very often show two perspectives, masculine and feminine. For example men are often concerned with construction of rail road and various types of building projects (Holtby, 1988, P. 129). Women in the council, however, are keen on the establishment of district nurse. Mrs. Beddows is very keen on the Cottage Nursing Association. She is constantly trying to improve the work of the mental hospital. The death of Mrs. Holly is a very tragic incident in the novel and forms a telling comment on the senseless waste of the poor women's lives. Holtby's essentially feminist perspective can also be seen in the way she links the issues of sanitation, slums, employment to the mortality of women. Women from poor families die an early death because they have to undergo multiple childbirths. The issue of women's lack of control on their bodies and procreative ability has always formed a major theme in feminist thinking. Holtby's representation of poor women's lives indicates, how deeply she felt about these issues. Winifred Holtby had a reformist's eye. When women in England got voting rights, she published, *A New Voter Guide to Party Programmes* (1929). In the same way, the leading characters are focused with their growing awareness in democratic politics. In *South Riding* Astell gets elected as Alderman and not Carne because



Holtby wants to show her belief in Astell as a socialist politician and not in Carne because he had somewhat reactionary attitude towards politics. Though Carne is a 'good' person and opposes the malpractices, still he never approves of reformatory changes in *South Riding*. He opposes the scheme of school building and housing scheme for the lower class. Because of Carne's conservative thinking, Sarah Burton never agrees with him. Carne knows well about the corruption in Snaith-Huggins-Dolland scheme of housing. Snaith and Huggins make this plan of housing not for the welfare of South Riding but for gaining money from the scheme. Alderman Astell who is a socialist has to compromise with Snaith-Huggins Dolland scheming of capitalism to achieve certain concrete results. Sarah Burton also agrees with the scheme because her school will get new building from it. Carne only sticks to his principles and opposes it. One important point is that, Winifred Holtby doesn't want to show Snaith or Huggins as villains. She tries to present all her characters with both weaknesses and strengths.

With this local politics, the problems of education are thoroughly discussed by Winifred Holtby in *South Riding*. The Kiplington High School was started only for girls. Four tall apartments are turned to school because, 'girls were delicate' (P.21) and cannot go to Kingsport Highschool by train. Maximum students

in the school are tradesmen's daughters and lower class girls. Carne is governor of this school but hesitates to send his daughter, Midge to this school.

Sarah Burton is the Headmistress of this school. She is a reformist woman and believes in the power of women's education. She believes sincerely that young girls from any social, economic background can reach upto higher educational position in society, if guided properly. Though Mrs. Beddows and Sarah Burton are shown as reformists, there is a contrast in their views about education. The lack of opportunities that girls from poor, working class families have to face is illustrated through the character of Lydia Holly. Lydia Holly wants to learn but her family background doesnot allow her to go to school. Sarah becomes troublesome because of Lydia. But Mrs. Beddows comments that,

"There'll be one school teacher less perhaps one fine woman and wife the more."

(Holtby, 1988, P. 188)

On the contrary Sarah Burton thinks,

"It was her business to equip the young women entrusted to her by a still adequately enlightened state for their part in that achievement. She wished to prepare their minds, to train their bodies and to inoculate their spirits with own courage, optimism and unstaled delight."

(Holtby, 1988, P. 48)

Sarah Burton brings discipline, good organization to the school. Her philosophy of life leads her to be the caring figure of the school. She says,

“If the law is oppressive, we must change the law. If tradition is obstructive, we must break tradition. If the system is unjust, we must reform the system. ‘Take what you want’, says God. ‘Take it and pay for it.’”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 189).

The Kiplington Highschool is meant for lower class girls, but girls like Lydia cannot fulfil their desire to learn because of poverty, family responsibilities and lack of awareness in their working class parents, who themselves are uneducated and illiterate. Now we can see the vicious circle of poverty which leads to problems like housing and large family. Poverty is due to unemployment and unemployment creates the problem of ‘drinking’. This is a vicious circle and families like the ‘Hollys’ are crushed under this weight. The Hollys are living in unused railway coaches. Mr. Holly works as a labourer with a builder. He has a wife and six dependent children. Mr. Holly spends his spare time in drinking beer and playing darts. When his child Gertie is ill, he does not go to the hospital; on the other hand he feels helpless and borrows some money and goes to drink. Then he comes home and when Mrs. Holly tells him that Gertie is well, Mr. Holly wants to express his

happiness and to celebrate this occasion by sleeping with his wife. Mrs. Holly is pregnant again inspite of the doctor's warning. Mr. and Mrs. Holly represent the way in which poverty, failure of family planning, unemployment claim innocent lives. When Mr. Huggins tries to find answer to the question, 'Why had Mrs. Holly died?' The answer is,

"Because she had given birth to a child under impossible conditions. The shacks were insanitary and unfit for human habitation."

(Holtby, 1988, P. 192).

Winifred Holtby describes how all these problems are interconnected with each other. When Snaith tells Astell about one case in the Junior court :

"Girl, Thirteen soliciting. Eight people at home sleeping in one room. Elder sister pregnant by the father, procured an abortion. This child told us. Mother in mental hospital."

The cryptic statement speaks volumes about the plight of poor people. Several such tragedies are described in *South Riding* which constitute the fictional world of Winifred Holtby.

One of the most sensitive portrayal of young girls from poor families, aspiring for education, is that of Lydia, who has to give up the school because she has to take family responsibility after her mother dies. Mrs. Holly's death doesn't really affect her husband in

any significant way because he gets Mrs. Brimsley to get married to. But Mrs. Holly's death crushes Lydia's hopes for any better future education could have created for her. When she is given gifts at Christmas time by her teachers, she gives the educational presents to sell off. Lydia's anguish is heart rending. When even the Mitchells, leave their poor neighbours, she is left alone to fend for the children, and the burden breaks her spirit –

“She wanted to pass examination, she wanted to take her matric. History, Chemistry, Maths and Latin... she could do all these things and essays too... Her young mind was hungry for facts and propositions and solution. She enjoyed its power. She knew that she was clever. But something had broken in her spirit.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 369)

It is interesting to see, that there is a neat division in Holtby's scheme of thinking. Most of the women suffer social evils, more than men. For example, Lydia, Mrs. Holly, Mrs. Brimsley, Mrs. Beddows etc. But again there are women alone who are also portrayed as agency of change. Mrs. Beddows, the women teachers in the school and Sarah Burton, consider it their duty to intervene in the scheme of thing and bring about a positive change.

Holtby describes the status of women in the public realm of this local government. The novel illustrates Holtby's perception of

the relations between public sphere and women and of how women are trying to achieve success in the so-called male dominated world of public domain. This representation of the women who work in the public sphere in *South Riding* points to the problems encountered by women in the post-war period. The novel, of course, does not give us a historical account of the social problems but creates a point of view from inside as if we are looking at their problems. So while exploring into the fictional world of Winifred Holtby, it is essential to find out the debate about working women and women who discarded the tradition of marriage and family to achieve success in their career, as it took place in post-war Britain. According to Sally Brown,

“During World War-I women had taken over from men by high-profile occupations, releasing men for the front. The upper and middle class women were taken out of the suffocating atmosphere of the drawing room and given opportunities to be socially useful. After the war considerable social pressure was placed on these women to withdraw from paid labour in order to enable the returning soldiers to find employment.”

(Wesker, 1994, P. 151).

These working-class young women could be identified in the public imagination with the image of the independent, consumerist modern girl. In her political writing, Holtby fought against this pressure of releasing the job, for example, in an article in the *Manchester Guardian*, 23 November, 1928. Here she responds to an

article by a man who suggested that women should spend less time at women's institutes and more time making their husband's teas. Holtby suggested that, where husband is co-operative, a working wife can enhance the life of the family.

Against this background, Winifred Holtby presented her protagonist of *South Riding*, Sarah Burton, as headmistress of Kiplington High School for girls. She is a successful and independent woman. Her success is dependent upon the fact that she works in female education which is emerging as the field for women in the public sphere. The other important female character in this novel is Alderman Mrs. Beddows, who is the first woman Alderman (an extension of public work long practiced by middle class women) on the South Riding County Council. In ^{the} 1930s, work in local government offered women more opportunities than work in national politics. Holtby clearly chose to situate her novel in the two areas, girls' school and local government where women did have some power and autonomy in the inter-war period. Both of these areas had historically been associated with women's work-teaching and voluntarily charitable work. The representation of women in *South Riding* is thus 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.

Let us examine Sarah Burton and Mrs. Beddows as instance of this developing female subjectivity.

The central character of Sarah Burton is introduced as,

“Her face was not pretty at all, the nose too large, the mouth too wide, the small, quick, intelligent eyes were light and green.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 23).

In traditional popular literature the heroine is always shown as young and she is very beautiful; she is shown to be dependent on the hero; she is always depicted as docile, young etc. But Sarah Burton is thirty nine years old, a spinster, independent and confident about every act of her own.

Sarah Burton is the daughter of a black smith and a district nurse in South Riding. After her father dies, the family go elsewhere. Sarah Burton had developed herself against all odds into a candidate for head-mistressship.

Though all members of committee agree with Sarah's appointment, Carne opposes it because he thinks,

“Miss Burton was neither gentle nor a lady, and her bosom was flat and bony as a boy's.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 29).

But at last, Sarah Burton is appointed as head-mistress. While she thinks about her assets and defeats as,

“brains, will-power, organizing ability, not temper, a real enjoyment at teaching, a Yorkshire childhood. She counted her defeats- her size, her flaming hair, her sense of humour, her tactlessness, her arrogance, her lack of dignity.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 46)

Sarah Burton is a kind of woman who believes in action, believes in fighting. She has unlimited confidence in the power of intelligence and will to achieve order, happiness, health and wisdom. She has a dream -

“I shall build up a great school here. No one yet knows it except myself. I know it. I’ll make the South Riding famous.”

(P.49)

This is her ambition, dream. She fights with Carne because he opposes the new building for school. Though she loves him, she is not ready to leave her ambition of making the school better.

Carne hesitates to send his daughter Midge to this Kiplington Highschool. But when no option is left, he send her to that school. Midge is so much absorbed in this school because of Sarah Burton’s keen interest in the school, the various programmes she has introduced in it, the improvements.

Sarah Burton is confident about her actions as well as her perspectives. While talking about her social view she says,

“There are certain things I hate-muddle, poverty, war and so on- the things most intelligent people hate now-a-days, whatever their party. And I hate indifferentism and lethargy and the sort of selfishness that shuts itself up into its own shell of personal preoccupations.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 104)

Winifred Holtby presented in *South Riding* a new model of spinster heroine, a working-class, high-achieving headmistress in the form of Sarah. She is a triumphant spinster. She says,

“I was born to be a spinster, and by God I’m going to spin.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 106)

Sarah has known what it is to desire and be desired. Her spinsterhood equips her to carry out the larger service to society which teaching demands. Spinsters are usually looked upon with disgust, they are subjects of ridicule. But Sarah is an illustration of the process of subversion of the popular stereotype.

The other important woman character is that of Mrs. Beddows. She is the first woman alderman of South Riding County Council. Winifred Holtby describes her as,

“She was a plump sturdy, little woman, whose rounded features looked as though they had been battered blunt by wear and weather in sixty years or more of hard

experience. She was a portent, she was a mascot, she was the first woman alderman in the South Riding and therefore she must be a character. Her naturally racy tongue was credited with malice ribaldry quite foreign to a nature fundamentally decorous, comfortable and kind. She enjoyed her popularity, and appreciated in power.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 4,5,6)

Mrs. Beddows as an alderman has a forceful role to play in making decisions in the County Council, but in her home, she is only a wife who must serve her husband. Women may be successful in public domain, yet in the private domain, they are oppressed by patriarchal ideology and Mrs. Beddows is a very good example of this.

The relationship between Carne and Mrs. Beddows is very interesting. She is his friend. She loves him very dearly. Winifred Holtby describes it as :

“She loved him so much that to scold him was a sensuous pleasure to her. ... In her hard, rich, varied, unconquered life, his friendship for her was one of her most treasured experiences.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 41)

This relationship between Mrs. Beddows and Robert Carne is very difficult to label as she says to Sarah Burton -

“You know I loved him. you know he was my friend more like a son to me.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 466)

Thus, both these women working in the public sphere, represent an important stage in progression of narratives of female self-development and independence. In the closing moment of the novel, there is the development of a new relationship in the public realm of the *South Riding*. This is the Friendship which develops between Sarah Burton and her mentor, Alderman Mrs. Beddows that represents the possibility of powerful and influential women working together as friends and allies. This is the answer, probably, when women have to face problems in a hostile work sphere.

This relationship has developed between Sarah and Mrs. Beddows in the final moments of the novel. The friendship between these two women is sealed because Sarah is able to calm Mrs. Beddows' fear that Carne committed suicide by revealing that he had a heart problem. Mrs. Beddows then passes on a message of warmth and sympathy sent by Carne to Sarah on the day that he died. 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.

Jean Kennard comments,

“Instead of providing a romantic reconciliation between Sarah and Carne and a traditional ending, Holtby reduces Carne to a mere means of reconciliation between two women.”

(Kennard, ref. By Clark, 1996, P. 5).



Thus 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.

Sarah Burton, a progressive and practical woman and her ageing mother figure Mrs. Beddows remain at the center of *South Riding*. And because of this *South Riding* becomes a feminist novel and not least in its appeal to largely female readership, not accustomed to think of itself as revolutionary or even as reformist, but, in Winifred Holtby's view, still capable at bringing about change. Women finally become the agents of change. They become in all respects the 'subject' figures who have an indomitable will, personality and force of convictions. It is left upto them now to look after the place South Riding, as it were.

South Riding is a radical text in relation to women in several respects but the most important point is that it has to do with Sarah as a model of singleness and independence and the novel's consequent refutation of the claims of romantic love as the only satisfactory destiny for women. Sarah's unmarried, lonely state is not only taken lightly; she is not unattractive to men nor unattracted by them, she has been engaged to be married three times, she falls unexpectedly and violently in love with her political opponent,

Carne. At the time of romance with Sarah, Carne suffers from heart attack. The novel does not have a happy ending, it is a tragic one. Carne dies, not because he commits suicide but because his horse rears on the cliff path. After his death Sarah wishes to die but as her plane threatens to crash, she realizes this is a false wish. After that the text carries her on beyond this towards a 'serene old age', towards usefulness and public service and in this the mother figure, Mrs. Beddows, is always with her. At a time when women still outnumbered men by a million and a half, and when many of these 'superfluous women must have had memories of unfinished love affairs, *South Riding* offered an alternative model for life. Sarah Burton does not symbolize the spinsterhood of rejection and defeat – 'she knew herself to be desirable and desired, held only from marriage by bars of death of principle.' In the novel, the opportunities Sarah will have outweigh the loss of Carne and even of personal happiness and its narrow satisfaction.

"I shall build up a great school here' she says, 'I shall make the South Riding famous."

So here Winifred Holtby used the character of spinster very positively. Otherwise - 'spinster and frustrated' these words go together in popular beliefs. Winifred Holtby presents a new model of spinster heroine, a working class, high-achieving headmistress

who is a triumphant spinster in the novel. Sarah says, 'I was born to a spinster, and by god I'm going to spin'. Her spinsterhood is not a forlorn fate but one which equips her to carry out the larger service to society which teaching demands.

Holtby's treatment of single women is focused on by an article by Alison Oram entitled 'Repressed and Thwarted, Bearers of the New World? The Spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses'. During the inter-war period, marriage came to be viewed as both psychological and social necessity for men. Oram suggests that in both women and *South Riding* Holtby can be seen to be countering the implications of these developments. So for Oram, Sarah Burton is represented as an 'energetic and competent heroine whose life is rich in political and emotional incident.' Holtby comments that the 'legend of the frustrated spinster is one of the most formidable social influence of the modern world.' She detaches her discussion on 'Frustrated spinsters' from issues of sexuality by arguing that women had more freedom to have sexual lives even if they were not married. This view of Winifred Holtby is reflected in *South Riding*. Here we have the description of Sarah's previous love affairs. Instead of discussing frustrated sex lives in women, when Holtby turns to the discussion of frustrated lives she asks, 'why should we consider women who work as teachers, doctors, political organizers, artists

and explorers to be frustrated?' Such women have known 'ecstasy, power and devotion.... They have served a cause greater than their own.... and know the satisfaction of creative achievement. Whether or not such women have experienced the 'relief of being loved' is a matter of less importance, her main aim is not to argue that a career and public work should be understood as an important alternative to marriage and motherhood.

Thus 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 in Winifred Holtby's novels. All her heroines are loners; their parents are dead, their husbands or lovers die. Although this causes them suffering, it leaves their spirits free for adventures and they're available for the work they have to do in the society around them. Sarah Burton is therefore a role model of Winifred Holtby's heroines.