

**Chapter - IV**  
**Women And The Private Sphere**

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### WOMEN AND THE PRIVATE SPHERE

In the last chapter, we looked at Holtby's representation of public sphere. Her ideology in delineating the role women played in the public sphere, in the 1930s, is positive and views women as active agent of change. Her women characters have a well defined social consciousness. It is interesting to note that none of her women characters in *South Riding* have a negative role to play in the public sphere. This was probably necessitated by the wide-spread patriarchal belief that women's place is essentially at home. Probably, Holtby was trying deliberately to propose, a role model in public sphere, through her characters, Sarah and Mrs. Beddows.

In this chapter, I intend to view critically, her ideological perception and representation of women in the private domain of family and home and inter-personal relationship. Her most sensitive and incisive analysis of the private sphere is found in her analysis of institution of marriage, family, love and sexual relationships. Under patriarchy, women have been identified with private and men with public sphere. The masculine power is reinforced most strongly through the institution of marriage. Family life is always define by power relationships. The act of defining women's problems as personal and therefore not suitable for public discussion and change,

is simply another menace by which men have kept women by realizing the extent of their oppression.

Before we go on to discuss Holtby's representation of women in the private domain, it is necessary to understand the various views regarding marriage and family, proposed by feminist theory.

Marriage is the social institution which forms the deepest as well as the most problematic of all human relations. Marriage is related with all such concepts as family, children, husband-wife relationship etc. Sociologists define it as a "cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their offspring" (Abercrombie, et.al.1984, P.127). For religion marriage is supposed to be a holy union of two souls and bodies. The first parents were made, "bone of one and flesh of one flesh". In marriage oneness, companionship and mutuality are stressed and it is assumed that the interests of the husband and wife are one.

There are such idealized conceptions of marriage but in reality woman is essentially a subservient partner in marriage. Marriage is not a companionship; nor does it spell equality for her; rather marriage negates the rights to individuality, independence and self-realization of woman. She is subjugated, marginalized and sidelined. The term 'power politics' by Kate Millett can be used in reference to

marriage, which reduces the status of women to merely a 'utility item' an object of decoration, for possession and man's sexual gratification.

The feminist philosophers, thinkers have expressed various critical opinions on this issue. The review of their views will be helpful to understand the institution of marriage.

Engels's *The origin of family, private property and the state* offers the basic Marxist explanation for the oppression of women. According to Engels, oppression of women is rooted in the twin facts of private ownership of property and exclusion of women from social production. He also points out that the Latin word 'familia' means the 'total number of slaves belonging to one man'. According to him "marriage is not a reconciliation of the man and woman, but the subjugation of the female in the interest of perpetuation of slavery and the private property" (Schneir, 1996, P. 193). He also points out that the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. He rightly points out that the overthrow of mother-right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. According to Engels, the first class opposition that appears in the history coincides with the development of antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage. And the first class oppression coincides with

that of the female sex by the male. Engels suggests that full freedom of marriage can therefore only be generally established when the abolition of capitalist production and of the property relations created by it has removed all the accompanying economic considerations, which still exert such a powerful influence on the choice of a marriage partner. He also visualizes an ideal perception, a world in which there will be a generation of men who never in their lives will have known what it is to buy a woman's surrender with money or any other social instrument of power; a generation of women who will never have known what it is to give themselves to a man from any other considerations than real love. I want to relate this perception of an ideal situation described by Engels, with that of Holtby when she writes 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 lie, 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. I shall have to be a feminist with the motto "Equality first".

She locates marriage as the site on which the unequal relations between men and women are produced and reproduced. Hence her understanding of family is an essentially political one.

Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* also describes marriage as an institution negatively affecting women's life. According to Beauvoir, marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. She rightly points out that the celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution, so while studying about women we must continue our study by analyzing the institution of marriage.

According to Simon de Beavouir a man is socially an independent and complete individual but woman is a slave or vassal and dominated by fathers and brothers and she has always been 'given' in marriage by certain males to other males. Marriage is her only means of support and the sole justification of her existence .It is enjoined upon her for two reasons:

1. she must provide the society with children
2. women's function is also to satisfy a male's sexual needs and to take care of his household

(Beavouir, 1997, P. 447)

Simon de Beavouir points out that how the whole world changes for a girl when she marries. She takes his name, she belongs to his religion, his class, his circle, she joins his family, she becomes his subordinated half. She follows him wherever his work calls him and

determines their place of residence: she breaks more or less decisively with her past becoming attached to her husband's universe. The traditional marriage does not invite women to transcend herself with him, it confines her in immanence, shuts her up within the circle of herself. The home becomes the center of the world. Simon de Beavoir calls the domestic work of cleaning as the 'torture of Sisyphus' (Beavoir, 1997, P. 470). It has endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over and day after day it is negative struggle because the battle against dust and dirt is never won. And so the life of a woman became gray and identical. The various domestic tasks as washing, ironing, sweeping, ferreting out fluff from under ward-robes are unending. Simon de Beavoir states that on the whole marriage is today a surviving relic of dead ways of life and the situation of the wife. Man marries today to obtain an anchorage in immanence, but not to be himself confined therein: he wants to have hearth and home while being free to escape therefrom he settles down but often remains vagabond at heart: repetition bores him, he seeks novelty, risk, opposition to overcome, companions and friends who take him away from solitude a'deux. The children, even more than their father wants to escape beyond family limits: life for them lies elsewhere. Women try to set up a universe of permanence and continuity, husband and children wish to transcend the situation she creates, she

finds herself alone, forlorn, a subject all sincere women writers have noted the melancholy in the heart of 'the woman of thirty'. It is a trait common to the heroines of Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Parker, and Virginia Woolf. They sing gaily at the beginning of married life and maternity but later on they manifest a certain distress. The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness –but that it mutilates her: it dooms her to repetition and routine. According to Simon de Beavouir, through the child she is supposed to find self-realization sexually and socially so this supreme stage of mother should be studied carefully.

Traditionally, motherhood is regarded as the 'biological destiny' and the greatest ambition of a woman. A child is considered to be woman's happiness and her justification, through which she is supposed to find self-fulfillment and self-realization.

Simon de Beavouir points out that pregnancy and motherhood are very variously experienced in accordance with the woman's true attitude, which may be one of revolt, resignation, satisfaction or enthusiasm.

On the whole Simon de Beavouir made a deep study of various issues like family and marriage with help of various phases of women's life.



While analyzing various issues like marriage and family, the brilliant analysis of marriage by Marxist feminists like Michele Barrett has to be taken into account. Her book *Women's Oppression Today* mainly deals with the oppression of women in contemporary capitalism through consideration of gender division in Britain.

According to Michele Barrett understanding of 'the family' is essential to solution of some of the analytic and practical problems. Barrett quotes Talcott Parson's view that the family of today has two main functions : 1. to socialize children into society's normative system of values and to inculcate 'appropriate' status expectations. 2. to provide a stable emotional environment that will cushion the (male) worker from the psychological damage of alienating occupational world. (Barrett, 1980, P. 188)

Within the family, the wife and mother carry out these functions. It is the woman who plays the affective 'expressive role' of nurturance and support and it is the husband who plays the 'instrumental' role of earning the family's keep and maintaining discipline.

According to Barrett, it is the family, which provides the nexus for various themes-romantic love, feminine nurturance, materialism, self -sacrifice, masculine protection and financial support and all these characterize our conception of gender and sexuality.

Now, family is not only source of gender construction but it is one of the main sources in the process whereby the little girls are enjoined to be helpful, dependant and earning and little boys to be active, independent and protective. The intense emotional and psychological forces deployed in family life clearly play an important role in bringing pressure to bear on children to internalize appropriate gender identities and in structuring our consciousness of gender. And so that feminists have pointed to 'the family' as a prime agent of gender socialization and hence women's oppression. Families clearly play a crucial role in constructing masculinity and femininity.

Then Michele Barrett concerns the household itself as a material institution where women are primarily responsible for all the tasks connected with house work and children. She must serve and care for three major categories of people who require considerable labour, children, the sick and disabled, the elderly.

The family –household system of contemporary capitalism constitutes not only the central site of the oppression of women but an important organizing principle of the relations of production of social formation as a whole. According to Barrett, this contemporary family –household system has incorporated a substantial element from struggles between the interests of men and those of women.

The family household constitutes both the ideological grounds on which gender difference and women's oppression are constructed and the material relation in which men and women are differentially engaged in wage labour and the class structure. Women are financially dependent on men. Virginia Woolf also saw women's struggle for mental independence of men as directly related to the difficulties of shaking off the burden of financial dependence. Because of this, men can be benefited exclusively from the present organization of the household and ideology of the family.

The further comment on family by Michele Barrett can be traced in her book, *The Anti-social family* written with co-author Mary McIntosh. Marx and Engels have called, in the polemical rhetoric of the communist Manifesto, for the abolition of the family, but the family continues to thrive, both as institution and as an ideology. In their highly acclaimed socialist and feminist critique of traditional nuclear family, Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh explore the personal and social needs that the family ideally meets out but often denies. They consider the role of the family in capitalism and its functions in the formation of gendered subjectivity. The view both the writers has taken in this book is that 'the family' must be understood in two senses as a social and economic institution.

Marxist analysis explains changes in the structure or ideology of the family as the effect of historical changes in the system of production. But radical feminists locate patriarchy as the outcome of divisions between men and women in the 'family'. Shulamith Firestone in her book *The Dialectic of Sex* argues that the nuclear family is merely one development from a basic 'biological family' which has existed everywhere through-out time .She characterizes the biological family as the reproductive unit and asserts that it rests on the 'facts' that :

- Women are at the mercy of their reproductive biology and are therefore dependent upon men for survival.
- Human infants are dependent upon adults for a long period.
- A basic mother /child interdependency is universal.
- The natural reproductive division between the sexes is the origin of all divisions of labour, economic and cultural classes and possibly of castes.

These facts then are the intractable and universal material to which human arrangements must adapt –the Procrustean bed of reproductive biology. Because of women's dependence on men, the 'biological family' is an inherently unequal power distribution (Shulamith, 1979, pp 17-18). Firestone puts forward a feminist polemic and is concerned to show how advances in reproductive

technology could liberate women. Shulamith Firestone's description of 'the biological family' embodies the central feature of contemporary ideology of family unit; women are defined in terms of their anatomy and hence assumed to be 'naturally' dependent upon men.

Shulamith Firestone sees women's liberation as a 'struggle to break free from oppressive power structure set up by nature and reinforced by man' (p.23). She puts forth two points of view :

- Opposition to the family as women's universal biological fate.
- Recourse to artificial reproduction as basis of freedom from biology.

The second is seen strategically as the key to undermining the first: To free women from their biology would be to threaten the social unit that is organized around biological reproduction and the subjection of women to their biological destiny, the family (Shulamith, 1979, P. 193).

The Radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone insist that women's specific form of oppression demanded a revolution in the realm of ideology, a shift in consciousness. Women's oppression could be felt at any moment of the day: awareness of it could be increased by developing 'consciousness'. The most intimate experience of everyday life, seen in terms of this new consciousness,

could be discussed and shared so as to become a part of the politics of the women's movement and be itself politicized. The importance of this consciousness raising is continuously stressed throughout *The Dialectic of Sex*. It demands that the locus of women's oppression – the family and home – be discovered as a political institution, not just as a private one, that its internal conflicts be seen as having political significance. According to Rosalind Delmenr,

“‘The personal is political’ is an extremely effective slogan, since it is capable of many interpretations. One of the values of *The Dialectic of Sex* is that it demonstrates the course of an argument through which this thought could first appear: not as slogan but as conclusion.”

(Shulamith, 1979, P. 10)

Now it is against this background of theoretical debates that I want to explore Winifred Holtby's attitudes towards the private sphere like marriage, family and other related areas like children, household work, illness, poverty, restriction, denial of opportunities, sexual exploitation, which are reflected in her novel *South Riding*. Winifred Holtby delineates with keen perception and sensitivity, the problems and suffering of women in marriage who feel entrapped, oppressed and doomed to the care of husband and home. Some of her female characters accept their fate unhesitatingly. But on the whole marriage and family are no longer seen as a woman's happiest fate in Winifred Holtby's novel.

According to Sally Brown,

“Holtby seemed fascinated by the near impossibility of satisfactory relationships between men and women, a theme that is prominent in her fiction as well as in her political writing, and it seems, in her private life as well, characters in Holtby’s novels, especially women, seem to experience serious difficulties whether they marry or remain single.”

(Brown, ed. Wisker, 1994, P. 147)

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 woman should or could 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 Sally Brown,

“Holtby consistently questions the viability of marriage. She seems uncertain about whether the institution has anything valuable to offer women and it dubious too, of its effect on men.”

(Brown, 1996, P. 151)

Holtby’s most extreme condemnation of the institution of marriage is found in *South Riding*, where a broad cross-section of

marriages is serially anatomized. In *South Riding* we can examine marriage and family system from every social class. We can observe problems of lower class, middle class and upper class families. Every social class is facing its own problem. The lower class family of Hollys faces the problems of poverty, housing, education, ever expanding, large family size, unemployment, illness etc. The middle class family of Lily Sawden and her husband think that love each other but there is a lack of communication between them. The higher class family of Carne and Muriel has a life fraught with psychological tensions and Jim Beddows and Mrs. Beddows represent an old couple where the husband is jealous because of his wife's popularity in the public sphere. This broad cross section of family and marriage is related with many other issues.

The central marriage in the novel is the unfortunate union between Robert and Muriel Carne. Carne is a squire, lives in Maynthrope Hall. Muriel is the daughter of Lord Sedgmire. Though both marry by elopement, Carne can never understand her. 'She remained a stranger, to him, lovely, enchanting, perilous, incalculable (P.409). Muriel is whimsical. Once she had thrown all his possessions, out of their hotel window. Once she had maintained a terrifying silence in the train and above all, she had once denied that Midge was his own daughter and she explained that :



“She didnot know which of the officers with whom she had played in her final escapade before he left in the winter of 1917 might not have been the father of their child.”

(Holtby, 1988, P.410)

And after the child was born she relapsed into insanity. So Carne never came to know whose child it is. After this Muriel is in the mental hospital and reduced to a non-life by the loss of everything, she holds most dear – her vivacity, her physical attractiveness, her riding, her selfhood. She does not even recognize Robert. He keeps her in a private hospital. But the payment of this private hospital ruins Carne’s economical condition.

So Carne’s beloved wife is in the mental hospital and he is not sure whether Midge is his own daughter. According to Sally Brown this disempowerment means the way in which he has literally and metaphorically been deprived of the capacity to act as he wishes. Robert Carne knows that the women find him attractive and he likes them.

But he cannot cross the invisible line. Holtby does not portray the predicament of married women but also of married men. Marriage imposes inhuman restrictions, on both men and women, it doesn’t allow them the space to grow; it creates a feeling of ownership between men and women and this destroys all that is lovely, pure, human in relationships. Against this unfortunate

marriage, Sarah provides Carne with a romantic escape. The relationship between Sarah and Carne is very complex. Sarah and Carne are drawn to each other despite wide personal and political differences.

Once Carne and Sarah meet in a hotel in Manchester. They take dinner, dance with each other. Carne asks her if he might come to her room and Sarah gives permission. The whole situation is described as in popular fiction where the relationship between man and woman develop on this line and turn to sexual satisfaction. But here in *South Riding* Winifred Holtby uses the convention of popular romance novel with a different objective. Because when Carne enters into the room, he suddenly suffers from Angina Pectoris, a heart attack. Holtby gave a twist to the whole affair. According to Sally Brown,

“Here, love is portrayed by Holtby in ambiguous terms: it is clear that Carne has a different view point from Sarah’s; for him love is little more than an opportunity to be seized, whereas for her it is a chance to fulfil her secret desires. Sarah’s behaviour is uncharacteristically bold for the period, but Holtby uncharacteristically withholds from the characters and the readers the consummation of their passion, as Carne becomes seriously ill.”

(Brown, 1994, P. 158).

It is interesting to note how Holtby employs the narrative technique of traditional popular novel and yet manages to enthuse it with a new meaning.

Though Robert Carne is not sure about Midge as his daughter, he is a very caring father. He gives Midge's guardianship to Mrs. Beddows because,

"She was his friend, to her alone had he ever been able to speak freely about his wife and daughter. She had stood by him during the terrible days when he returned. From France to find Muriel unable to recognize him."

(Holtby, 1988, P. 39)

Winifred Holtby tries a different kind of relationship between Carne and Mrs. Beddows. She is a woman of 72 years still,

"She loved him so much that to scold him was a sensuous pleasure to her."

(Holtby, 1988, P. 41)

And due to Mrs. Beddows loving attitude towards Robert Carne, she is given responsibility of Midge by him. She is the only person who has tried to give Midge the protective love which her mother could not give. He has recognized her endeavour and is grateful to her. Gratification and fulfillment does not come from marriage as it is popularly believed, but from friendship outside of marriage.

This relationship between Mrs. Beddows and 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)

So Sarah Burton and Mrs. Beddows love Robert Carne. But he falls from the cliff and dies. In the traditional novel, a woman must die for the reconciliation of two. But here Carne dies. Sarah and her mother figure Mrs. Beddows togetherly work for the welfare of *South Riding*. So Winifred Holtby does not give importance to institution of marriage but she is giving another alternative to it by creating a new relationship of women working as friends and allies and also by creating new relationships between men and women.

As it was said earlier, in *South Riding* Winifred Holtby has described marriage and family institution with many examples from different social strata. One of such couples is that of Jim Beddows and Emma Beddows. Jim Beddows is an auctioneer and corn dealer. He is ten years junior to his wife. Mrs. Emma Beddows is the first woman alderman in the *South Riding* County Council. Yet she is able to take decisions in public sphere but not in her husband's house. As she thinks,

“ She had gone to Jim Beddows in love with his brisk efficient geniality, expecting him to prove a gallant lover and stalwart companion. She had found him a man of straw, mean, ungenerous, jealous, his little grievances and grudges, rejoicing when other men could lose a fortune, but lacking the enterprise himself to make one.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 130)

Jim Beddows is a kind of person who wants to have a complete control over his wife. He does not like luxury and always hesitates to spend money even in the house. Actually the Beddows family is economically a well-to-do family but Emma's first two babies die at the young age of seven weeks and in both cases she was sure they could have been saved if her husband's economics had not included the prohibition of medical advice. Because of this incident Emma Beddows has hatred for her husband.

Actually he does not like her power in public sphere. He never loses a chance of complaining to her about her public business. He says,

“Road's plaguey dusty, why don't you sprinkle'em?”

On that Mrs. Beddows gets angry and asks, ‘What with? Do you want us to waste water, or must we spit on them?’”

(Holtby, 1988, P.236)

Emma Beddows however is shown not to be the kind of woman who would permit marital discord to ruin her life. She has

put all her energies into her public life, sublimating her personal unhappiness into effective public service. Winifred Holtby explains it as,

“She had learnt to manage Jim; she had built up a new life on other people’s needs.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 131)

and

“Again and again when her own affairs became intolerable, she could stifle all thought of them by public business.”

(Holtby, 1968, P. 238)

Mrs. Beddows invests all her energies while working as first woman alderman in South Riding County Council. She enjoys authority, popularity as an alderman. Dolores, one of the school teacher describes her as,

“Mrs. Beddows – Deputy God, we call her. General undertaker. Divorces arranged, relatives buried, invalids nursed, municipalities run free, gratis and for nothing. All for love of interference.”

(Holtby, 1988, P.63)

At the time of Christmas, Mrs. Beddows sends various gifts to the poor, invalid people. She becomes a friend to Carne, a caring mother to Midge. But her own family has given her nothing but frustration.

But even then we can see her as ideal Victorian wife. When Sarah Burton comes to the Beddow’s at the Christmas family party

and interrupts her for the problem of Lydia's education. Lydia is the daughter of Holly family. She is a very talented girl but due to her family problem cannot fulfil her eagerness for education. Sarah wants to talk with Mrs. Beddows about this matter. But Mrs. Beddows has involved herself in serving her husband's family. Sarah thinks angrily that even when the woman of Mrs. Beddows generation –

“gave one quarter of their energy to public service, they spent the remaining three-quarters on quite unnecessary domestic rituals and precipitation. The little plump woman with the wise lined face might have gone anywhere, done anything but she would set limits upon her powers through her desire not to upset her husband's family.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 183)

And while talking about this Lydia, what Mrs. Beddows thinks is very significant.

“You know, there are other things in life besides book learning, what if she does give up her scholarship and does not go to college? There'll be one school teacher less and perhaps one fine woman and wife the more. Is that such tragedy?”

(Holtby, 1958, P. 188)

On the other hand, Sarah feels all waste as tragedy and to waste deliberately a rare, unique human capacity as wickedness.

Though Mrs. Beddows is almost an ideal wife and mother who seeks to create a balance between her family life and public life, here husband is not happy with her. He is somewhat jealous of his wife's achievements. As a traditional husband he wants that his wife should wait for him in the evenings but when the situation is not like that, he remarks that,

“a long suffering husband I am, never know who I'll find my wife with when I come home from market.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 43)

This comment represents the male-dominated ideology where woman, though she is working with efficiency in public as well as private domain, should first have her attention on her husband only.

The other couple from the middle class background is that of Tom and Lily Sawdon. Tom is a car driver of a Colonel and has lived away from home for many years. Lily has lived quietly in the home at Weetwood. When he comes back, he notices a change in Lily and as he loves her very much, he decides to buy Nag's Head for her comfort. But though he loves his wife, he does not ask her about her idea of comfort but takes it for granted. He believes that she would automatically be happy to accept his choice to go and settle down in South Riding. Lily's wifely loyalty to Tom is misguided because it makes her conceal her cancer from him -



“She was wondering how she should tell Tom without disturbing him, when he laid the Nag’s Head at her Feet, his gift to her, a reward for her fidelity.... she had not the kind of courage which would enable to her to shatter that happy confidence. She said nothing.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 91)

The marriage between Tom and Lily represents the culture of silence, and the failure of communication between the husband and wife in a traditional family. She represses the urge -

“to scream out to him her secret, telling him that she had let herself be crucified upon his simple vanity, that if she had stayed in Leeds she could have been spared this agony. It maddened her that he should be so blind, childish, so patient. He thought that he as being so very good to her.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 249)

His insensitivity is such that he buys an Alsatian dog to keep her company. But she never reveals to him how much she hates dog. She does not tell him the depth of her pain and illness until just before she dies, when it is too late to do anything about it. It is not the case that Tom does not love Lily, but that love is selfish, self-centred and blind. He is more in love with his own image as a loving husband.

The tragedy in this family is due to break down of communication. Tom feels that what he thinks as good is good for his wife but he never asks what his wife thinks as good for herself.

In the cross-section of *South Riding*, Winifred Holtby describes not only upper class or middle class families but also the poor families that live in railway coaches in very poor condition. The family of Holly is one of them. They are living in two broken down railway compartments. Mr. Holly has been a builder's labourer, but he is now out of work, draws unemployment, insurance benefit for himself, his wife and six dependent children. Annie Holly,

"his wife, a competent, stout, impatient woman of forty-three, cooked on a small oil stove with a box oven, washed, baked, ate, slept, scolded and loved in one of the two compartments and in the other brought up seven children in the fear of God."

(Holtby, 1988, P. 31)

Mr. Holly himself takes life more easily. He involves himself in beer and dart playing. 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 and play dart. Then he comes home and Mrs. Holly tells him that Gertie is well. Mr. Holly, drunk with happiness, needs his wife and though the doctor has warned them not to have a baby again, Mrs. Holly becomes pregnant again. Holtby's portrayal of the Holly family has been done with tremendous sympathy for the plight of women in poor families who undergo multiple pregnancies because religious and social ideology of

motherhood forbids them from using contraceptives and leads them to untimely disease and death. Though Mr. Holly is ultimately responsible for his wife's death, he, as an individual, cannot be blamed alone. His behaviour is ultimately conditioned by the patriarchal norms he has internalized. What all the three families signify is the process of imprisonment of both men and women in the institution of marriage. False expectations, in human treatment and breakdown of communication leads to madness and death.

Lydia Holly is a rebel in this system. Her mother insists that she should take the second chance of a scholarship to Kiplington High School. But this wish is not going to be fulfilled because Mr. Holly's sexual incontinence in inflicting on his wife the final pregnancy. It leads Mrs. Holly to her death in childbirth and it leads the father to the ruin of their daughter Lydia's chances of education and bright career. Mrs. Holly tells Lydia with sorrow that,

“May be it will finish me... then that'll finish you too. You'll have to quit your grand school and come home to look after the kids.”

(Holtby, 1988, P.137)

The sexual exploitation not only leads a wife to ruin but it leads all the family to ruin. The unemployment leads Mr. Holly to poverty, it leads him to drinking and on the whole all the family has to suffer for that.

After his wife's death, Mr. Holly marries again to a widow, Jessie Briksley. Though because of this marriage Lydia can attend her school, the question remains that woman is not shown as a human being but merely a machine. One machine is replaced by another. Mrs. Holly works for the family and dies for it. But Mr. Holy can enjoy family life once again. It is his social right!

So the women seem to be caught in a classical double bind; the status they have in the family does not give them power but burden. In domestic sphere, they shoulder the responsibility for the emotional, physical and spiritual well-being of the whole family. Winifred Holtby looked at social situation around her. Her critique of marriage becomes all the more pertinent through her spinster protagonist who chooses to remain single against the frightening scenario of frustrated marriages around her.

One of the most sensitive figures for feminism to deal with during the inter-war period was that of the spinster. Spinsters were considered to be a threat to social stability. They were supposed to have got freedom from domestic responsibility and gained economic independence. Women were trying for equal pay and better employment opportunities during these years in England. But if fear of the young, unmarried woman was largely economic, fear of the older spinster was compounded by assertions from popular

psychology that a full sex life was essential to both physical and psychic health. As Winifred Holtby noted, during the inter-war years, the terms 'spinster' and 'frustrated women' went together like egg and egg-cut. (Shaw, 2000, P. 150)

Sexologists of the period described the potentially terrible results of thwarted sexual impulses of women without access to sexual intercourse, which it was suggested, would lead to the atrophy of women's sexual organs, depression, bitterness and manhating. Not only sexologists but many writers were found to have the conviction that only in the proper domestic sphere could women find an appropriate outlet for femininity. (Wesker, 1994, P.150)

Holtby, in her work of criticism on Virginia Woolf, pointed out the irony of the fact that :

“at the very moment when an artist might have climbed out of the traditional limitations of domestic obligation by claiming to be a human being, she was thrust back into them by the full authority of the psychologist. A woman, she was told, must enjoy the full cycle of sex experience, or she would become riddled with complexes like rotting fruit.”

(Holtby, 1932, P. 29)

In the *Female Malady, Women Madness and English Culture* (1830-1980) Elaine Showalter describes the way in which hysteria was seen as a particular female sickness linked with sexual problems

such as frustration. It was fully recognised in the post-war period. In the Chapter 'Feminism and Hysteria- The Daughter's Disease', she comments on the tendency by doctors" to label rebellious, unconventional and independent women as hysterical.

Many of the novelists of the time, particularly the women novelists, explored and exploited the figure of the Spinster. Some writers celebrated the possibility for women released from the expectation of marriage. Some used the stereotypical behaviour and appearance of Spinster as fussiness, genteel poverty, propensity to gossip.

Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* presents a new model of spinster heroine, a working class, high achieving headmistress. She is a triumphant spinster in her fiction. She has known what it is to desire and be desired. Her spinsterhood has come about because of her principles, it is not a forlorn fate but one which equips her to carry out the larger service to society which reaching demands. Although after Robert Carne's death she believes she would have risked everything she had achieved to be his mistress, the novel does not end on this note but on her renewed dedication 'to finish the task before her'.

There was a prominent view about spinster among British people of <sup>the</sup> 30s as Miss Parsons discussion with Sarah Burton suggests:

“Now I suppose I’m talking exactly as she thinks I talk- She’s always sneering at unmarried women. She seems to think that either we all envy her, her wretched little finance or that we’re frozen and inhuman and all riddled with complexes.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 251)

Though it was the way of thinking about spinsters, Winifred Holtby suggest a positive attitude towards spinster as :

“Miss Parsons seeing herself now not as Miss Jameson saw her, an envious, embittered and frustrated spinster, but as Miss Burton saw her, a woman of warm heart, naturally lovable and loving, the generous friend of those naughty girls.”

(Holtby, 1988, P. 252)

Holtby’s treatment of single women is the focus of 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 a psychological and social necessity. 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 influences of the modern world’. Holtby detaches her discussion on ‘Frustrated Spinsters’ from issues of sexuality by arguing that woman had more freedom to have sexual lives even if

they were not married. This view of Winifred is reflected in *South Riding*. Here we have the description of Sarah's previous love affairs. Instead of discussing frustrated sex lives in women, Holtby asks why we should consider women who work as 'teachers, doctors, political organisers, 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 to argue that a career and public work should be understood as an important alternative to marriage and motherhood.