Chapter VI

Conclusion: Identity—Crisis, Chaos and Integration

One of the major concerns of this thesis is as much history in the work of Adeline Virginia Stephen alias Virginia Woolf as her work in history. Its principal premise is that history being itself the product of social, cultural and political contexts, not only contributes to the plot of a book but is in turn viewed according to the way it is projected and determined in works of literature. Indeed, the way in which Woolf renders the past through the memories of a variety of characters is part of her method to represent and explore the diversity of history.

Of principle interest in Woolf’s fiction is the relationship between the present and the past. This is to be considered in the context of her own experiences as an individual trapped between two eras in which changes have been sudden and shocking. It is already known that though her gender denied her the Cambridge University education enjoyed by her brothers, Thoby and Adrian, Woolf had the benefits of private Greek lessons with Janet Case and access to the library of her own father Leslie Stephen, an eminent biographer and editor of the Dictionary of National Biography. Moreover, the ‘Bloomsbury Group’ (the term was first coined in 1910 as a joke) comprising of Clive Bell, Roger Fry and E.M. Forster, as well as other non-Bloomsbury people such as T.S. Eliot, Katherine Mansfield and Hugh Walpole, offered an extraordinary opportunity for mental expansion for Woolf who was born and raised by the rules in Victorian England. As Alex Zwerdling says:
...if we count both the inner circle of Bloomsbury and its satellites, we can see that Woolf's private university included not only writers but painters, art critics, political theorists, practical politicians, economists, feminist reformers, philosophers, and psychoanalysts.

The Bloomsbury Group was influential in enabling Woolf to look critically at her father's library which had provided her a bland diet of great male biographers and histories of the nineteenth-century— the staple of upper-class Victorian culture. But it also nurtured a critique of how Victorian letters produced young men with what E.M. Forster described as 'well-developed bodies, fairly well-developed minds and under-developed hearts'. In this respect Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) was particularly important as a polemic against the Victorian establishment and its culture. Its influence is clearly discernible in the critique of colonialism in Woolf's first novel *The Voyage Out* and in *Jacob’s Room*— of how Victorian culture and Victorian education system conspired to produce a certain kind of unfeeling, upper-class masculinity, which Woolf believed led Britain into the First World War.

It is therefore important not to divorce the wider social world of Woolf's fiction from the Victorian period, especially the late century. Her own Victorian childhood together with the way in which most of the Bloomsbury writings were related in important ways to Victorian beliefs about religion, philosophy, politics and art, signifies that Woolf's fiction looks back to the Victorian period as much as forward to the present. In fact, her fiction offer important continuities between the Victorian and subsequent periods so that many of the issues of the twentieth-century— viz. the predicament of the woman author, the contradictions inherent in the individual, the problem of identity, and rapid social changes,— are also Victorian dilemmas. Indeed, the Victorian age no longer remains the 'smooth
continuum' from the ascension of the queen in 1837 to her death in 1901, as it is often taken for.

One of the most important differences between the last twenty years of the nineteenth-century, when in the Boer War 'the colonial situation had suddenly and dangerously strayed beyond the control of the British', and the mid-Victorian period for our understanding of Woolf's fiction was, as John Peck observes, a fundamental tension between 'a liberal discourse, that continued to be of importance, and an opposed discourse of empire'. While the mid-Victorian years, as Peck opines, 'manage[d] to conceal the cultivation of extremes', the last twenty years witnessed 'an unavoidable clash of conflicting values'. It is when the 'huge changes' that Victoria's reign witnessed, some of which she would have experienced vicariously through her parents' generation and some she would have witnessed for herself, are taken together with the new technologies, social structures and cultural forms of the twentieth-century that we can really consider that Woolf lived through an unprecedented period of transition. She believed, albeit cautiously, that real change began in the first decade of the new century:

We were full of experiments and reforms. We were going to do without napkins, we were to have [large supplies of] Bromo instead; we were going to paint; to write; to have coffee after dinner instead of tea at nine o'clock. Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial.

But even here, as Hermione Lee points out, the tone, combining domestic trivia with high-minded artistic ambitions, suggests that 'the lives of these young upper-middle-class free thinkers, all in their early twenties, were shaped by overlaps and gradual shifts, as well as by startling moments of change'.

Thus, for example, in Mrs. Dalloway, what is crucial is a dialogue between post and pre-war England, particularly the contradiction in post-war
British life between withdrawal from imperialist expansion, anxieties about empire and about the war on the one hand, and a perceived need to preserve the ideologies that informed and sustained empire, Englishness and masculinity on the other. It is also argued that the novel distinguishes between a feminine England and an England in which there is a preponderance of women and provides the spectacle of modernity in the 1920s.

Indeed, women in Woolf’s fiction enter and are seen as having entered new locations (streets, shops and offices) and different social positions in a changing socio-political milieu. The novels explore the relevance of these different locations for women’s identities and the role that the cartography of gendered relations, in which private and public had been so clearly separated, played in shaping them, unlike in earlier works of fiction in which the concepts of ‘private’ and ‘public’ had been subject to limited exploration. Woolf herself knew from her reading how much was owed to pioneering Victorians such as Octavia Hill and Sophia Jex-Blake, among many others. Her cousin Katherine Stephen became Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge. Her first reviewing and journalism was undertaken for Margaret Lyttelton, editor of the clerical journal, The Guardian. Her own doctor was Elinor Rendel (a woman!) But side by side, it was also unthinkable that a married woman, let alone a woman with children, could continue in her chosen career. The public sphere continued to exact a price from women which it did not exact from men, that it must be entered at the expense of ‘domesticity’, a word which in its semantic root contains the concept of being confined to the home.

In fact, in Woolf’s feminist historiography of war the two aspects of her fiction, highlighted by recent scholarship— her concern with war and with the
material conditions of women’s lives—come together. For as James Longenbach has argued, ‘the battle for women’s suffrage, the battle for modern art, and the battle in the trenches’ are all ‘inextricably intertwined’.\(^5\) The way they are intertwined in a refiguring of political and social history is very much of the historical moment. As Elaine Showalter points out:

> By the 1920s, women found themselves with little progress besides the vote (which had, in any case, been won by 1914) to show for their brief wartime emancipation.\(^6\)

Although women’s employment had skyrocketed during the war, these jobs were returned to men after the war. Consequently, by 1921 the female percentage of the workforce was exactly what it had been in 1911, that is 29 per cent. As Showalter says:

> Denied their work and coping with emotional loss, many women felt despair at the prospect of returning to shopworn roles and old routines. For them, too, the war continued to be fought in the psyche, and the period of readjustment precipitated psychological problems.\(^7\)

The Suffragettes undoubtedly had a profound influence on Woolf’s life and works. Most of the women involved in politics and social work whom she knew were supporters of the campaign for votes for women. But her own direct involvement with it was ambivalent and did not last long. Also, influenced by her husband Leonard who was drawn to the Women’s Co-operative Guild, Woolf herself presided over monthly meetings of the Richmond Branch of the Women’s Co-operative Guild for four years, where about twelve women usually discussed social questions, labour problems or travel. But here too, the group was often not as stimulated or stimulating as Woolf would have liked and she did eventually question why some of the members attended at all.

On the other hand, what is evident in Woolf’s works especially *Three Guineas* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, is her deep concern with war. Although she did not
feel that she could put the events in Europe into fiction because they were too close, she was both shocked and interested in Siegfried Sassoon's war poems, not simply because of their realism but because they exposed 'the terrible pictures which lie behind the colourless phrases of the newspapers'. Thus, the soldiers marching to the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in *Mrs. Dalloway* acquire significance not merely because it is the repetition of a poignant event that occurred years earlier, but because in the eyes of the narrator, it has already been modified into a 'new' context and has not been allowed to 'sleep on its own past'. As Trudi Tate points out, the war actually had a number of practical endings: soldiers returning home, demobilisation, a return to a peace-time economy, the expulsion of many women from the labour force, and there were 'other aspects of the war [that] had no conclusion; significant numbers of people were permanently disabled or war neurotic; others were suffering from the deaths of relatives, lovers and friends.9

Thus, as stated earlier, certain gendered themes and preoccupations recur in her depiction of post-war Britain--- the greater preponderance of women in the public sphere, the emergent sexualities, the changing nature of the symbolic order, the relationship between war and masculinity, how national identity is defined, the shifting nature of the family, the politics of the urban environment and the increasingly bourgeois nature of the upper classes.

However, while some of these themes are present in the work of other post-war writers, in Woolf's case they reflect her concern not only with the gendered but the codified nature of post-war English social life. Like all modernist fiction, her works call into question the assumptions of classic realism about the certainty and totality of truth, knowledge and perception, offering the
reader instead a more fragmented, partial and subjective world. Thus, for example, in Orlando, Sasha the Muscovite, mocks and ridicules the imperialistic, patriarchal and monolithic assumptions of the English:

Who were those bumpkins [Sasha asked Orlando], who sat beside her with the manners of stablemen? What was the nauseating mixture they poured on her plate? Did the dogs eat at the same table with the men in England? Was that figure of fun at the end of the table with her hair rigged up like a Maypole (comme une grande perche mal fagotée) really the Queen? And did the King always slobber like that? 10

Also, the Great Frost of the seventeenth-century may be seen as analogous to the Great War of the twentieth-century. The emphasis in the account of the Frost upon the enormous population, the suddenness of death and the frozen corpses clearly bring the front lines of the Great War to mind---e.g. a young country woman is ‘blown in a puff of dust over the roofs as the icy blast struck her’11 (emphasis mine).

Thus, Woolf’s continuousness with the past and with the future demonstrates how dynamic and flexible her writing is, as well as how it resists the idea of ‘character’ as fixed, located and essentialized, and presents it as traumatized and somewhat fragmented. In this case, the ‘psychiatric institution’ becomes a space outside the moderating influences of social veneers and restraining laws. In this space women become the captives and helpless victims of the institution of psychiatry, whose practitioners deny individual identity and agency. Thus, as claimed earlier in Chapter V, Septimus in Mrs. Dalloway takes the role of the feminine in relation to masculine authority, and he is linked with Clarissa in that both are suffering the trauma of loss---a trauma which is linked to Woolf’s own experience with ‘male’ psychiatrists.

In her seminal essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985), Gayatri Spivak argues that ‘it should not be possible to read
nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English'. Thus, in her anti-war treatise *Three Guineas* (1939), written just prior to the outbreak of World War II, Woolf analyses the position of women in British society, including their lack of education and financial independence. Speaking from the perspective of the female 'outsider' within British society, she asserts that:

our country... throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions... in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman my country is the whole world... 

--- and more chaos ensues when the letter-scribbling Lady Bruton in *Mrs. Dalloway* exhibits her patriotic fervour despite the nation’s refusal to recognise her as equal to her male comrades:

... if ever a woman could have worn the helmet and shot the arrow, could have led the troops to attack, ruled with indomitable justice barbarian hordes and lain under a shield noiseless in the church, or made a green grass mound on some primeval hillside, that woman was Millicent Bruton.

But again, though Lady Bruton’s ‘talking like a man’ might show her as something of a rebel, Woolf finds women like Lady Bruton as having sacrificed too much of their femininity in order to ‘play’ in a man’s world. As Vita Sackville-West wrote in one of her accounts in 1928:

*Wednesday 26th*. We had breakfast in my room, and entered on a heated argument about men & women. V. is curiously feminist. She dislikes the possessiveness and love of domination in men. In fact she dislikes the quality of masculinity. Says that women stimulate her imagination, by their grace & their art of life.

On the other hand, Weldon's novels are more directly reliant upon topical references, though reviewers have criticised them of following a set formula. Thus, in a review of *The Heart of the Country*, Marianne Wiggins wittily summarises the generic Fay Weldon novel:
a) an arch, ironic narrative spiked with b) a lot of sex between c) stereotypically gruesome men and d) neurotically heroic women who are the keepers of e) weird and/or precocious children accustomed to f) scenes of domestic violence in g) a topsy-turvy, random world where people suffer all sorts of h) physical grotesqueries. Oh yes, and i) the women pretty nearly always win the war between the sexes and j) the prose is broken on the page by distinctive spaces between episodes, defining brief vignettes as salty and addictive and as easy to consume as individual nibbles in a bag of chips.  

But there is a superficial truth in this apparently flippant list. A quick glance at her fiction suggests no flagging of originality, creativity or energy. Thus, the plot of *The President's Child* has its germ in an actual historical incident, the brutal murder of the mistress of President Sukarno of the Philippines and the son she bore him, to prevent the son from becoming a ‘political inconvenience’ to the state. On the other hand, *The Rules of Life* hints at colonies of quarantined AIDS sufferers; the Great New Fictional Religion and the Great Screenwriter In The Sky which feature in this novel, may be a witty reflection on current postmodernist theorizing, and Gabriella’s account of her moment of death accords with newly popular descriptions of near-death experiences. In *Leader of the Band* and *The Cloning of Joanna May*, Weldon’s interest in the latest reproductive technology is evident. While the female protagonist of the former novel is the product of a Nazi genetic experiment, the latter novel according to the writer, “is the penalty of thinking one day, when I read in my Sunday paper a report from a Canadian laboratory which said that the cloning of human being was possible but there was no call for it, ‘but that’s absurd— I’d like to be cloned.’” Moreover, *The Cloning of Joanna May* is set in 1986, the year of the Chernobyl disaster, and Carl May’s death by radiation is a grim reference to the ills of the nuclear power industry, which is reminiscent of the earlier issue of the faulty nuclear plant in rural England in *The Heart of the Country.*
Topicality continues to find importance in the collection of short stories *Moon over Minneapolis* which includes “A Visit from Johannesburg” in which fears are voiced that now ‘Mandela was free... all hell [was] about to break out.’ *Growing Rich* also hints at scandal in the upper social circles; and in 1993, Weldon’s radio play about the ozone layer “The Hole in the Top of the World”, was acclaimed by * Plays and Players* as ‘a marvellously produced piece of drama.’

It is also significant that Fay Weldon’s popularity was established in the early 1970s, at the height of the Women’s Liberation movement. In fact, she brought the full import of the movement home to thousands of women through her highly readable style, though the assertion of Melvin Maddocks (*Time* reviewer) that ‘beside Fay Weldon, all the Germaine Greers, all the Kate Milletts, all the non-fictionists of Women’s Liberation pale into abstract,’ may sound over-enthusiastic.

Though initially she did not have ‘a room of [her] own’,— (her first serious writing took place under the kitchen table which was the only clear space she could find),— Weldon’s portrayal of women’s victimisation is not on a mental or subdued level as Woolf’s but depicted with violence and black humour. So while Woolf mused on why men drank wine and women water, Weldon’s gynocentric themes concern single parenthood, sisterhood, reproduction and mothering, heterosexual sex, marriage and divorce, infidelity and revenge, woman-turned-demon, madness and rejection. In this, she not only overturns narrative conventions based on traditional relationships, but interrogates and at times, even topples myths, stereotypes, or just plain lies that society uses in defining and ultimately confining women. The subversive elements are so evident that the shocked male reviewers have variously described her works as
‘retaliatory sexism,’ ‘persuasive aversion therapy against the male sex,’ and ‘sexist political tract[s].’

Indeed, unlike Woolf who was concerned about ‘a liberal version of consciousness raising [in women] whose aim was to awaken them to the new possibilities of individual self-fulfilment’,18 Weldon extends Gilbert and Gubar’s concept of identifying the ‘Other’ in disobedient women who may be located as witches and monsters by society, to serve a feminist purpose:

From a male point of view, women who reject the submissive silences of domesticity have been seen as terrible objects---Gorgons, Sirens, Scyllas, serpent-Lamias, Mothers of Death or Goddesses of Night. But from a female point of view the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self-articulation, and therefore, like Mary Shelley giving the first-person story of a monster who seemed to his creator to be merely a “filthy mass that moves and talks,” she presents this figure for the first time from the inside out. Such a radical misreading of patriarchal poetics frees the woman artist to imply her criticism of the literary conventions she has inherited even as it allows her to express her ambiguous relationship to a culture that has not only defined her gender but shaped her mind.19

This is perhaps why Weldon has never written a novel, or even part of one, from the point of view of a man. This immediately distinguishes her from other contemporary women writers---Bernice Rubens or Jennifer Johnston, for example---who have managed to achieve a male perspective with ease. This is why, in a Fay Weldon novel, we find the presence of an incorrigible and unpredictable narrator who claims she is the author, who is implicitly or explicitly aligned with the cause of marginalized women, and who rectifies the balance/imbalance by wreaking havoc, turning tables, and generally cutting a swathe through ‘organized’ society. However, the figure of Ajax (whose name though reminiscent of the mythical Greek hero, is actually a fusion of Angelica, Jelly, Angel and X, signifying maleness) in the novel Splitting, is an exception in that he is not only one of the narrators but is introduced as a sort of deus ex...
machina when Lady Angelica's bickering selves reach a deadlock in their bid for individual dominion. In fact, the birth of Ajax from Angelica's head is comparable with Athena's bursting out from the top of Zeus's head, and suggests a subversion as well as inversion of the mythological story by assigning the role of 'creator' to the woman. Also, Ajax emerges at a time when the 'father' fails to rescue the daughter during crisis and is 'busy rescuing someone, somewhere'.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Weldon's penchant to make her women undergo whirlwind adventures often at the risk of self-destruction is at times too bizarre to be real when compared to the women in the fiction of the sombre Bloomsbury intellectual, who undertook no hazardous measures for revenge predictably because their victimization is more of an experience on a subtle, mental plane and thus appear to be more realistic. But on the other hand, while Woolf's women are too introspective and too refined/dignified in their sensibilities and perceptions, Weldon's women can be encountered in our day to day lives. In fact, her street-wise characters are reminiscent of her own past which can become the subject for any picaresque novel. Indeed, one cannot miss the author's association with any one of her numerous characters as she blatantly confesses in an interview to John Haffenden of a time when she was struggling to make a living as a single mother:

"Being a young woman with a child to support and no father for it, you lived on what you as a woman could make, which wasn't much." 20

Even a brief survey of Fay Weldon's life points to the transmuting of a unique memory into fictional enterprise. The themes of female solidarity, biological and genetic determinism, single parenthood, financial hardship, marital dissension and divorce, as well as the embedded and overt references to advertising and analysis and the undeniable influence of stage, screen, and
copywriting illustrate how the essentially personal inspires recurrent motifs.

Indeed, the period (1950s) spent in advertising has had a lasting effect on Weldon’s style and typography. In a talk given at Morley College in 1985, she commented on the way in which the combination of career and motherhood produced what was to become her characteristic writing style:

My stories have short, sharp paragraphs, like advertising copy, because I had a great deal to say and very little time. I used to get up at 6am to write before I went to work. I was unusual as I had to work fulltime, on a pittance, while supporting my children. So I couldn’t begin writing till I was thirty. 

Thus, Weldon (like Woolf), may be seen to exemplify an essential feminist tenet: that ‘the personal is political’. Even when she begins her autobiography Auto da Fay (2003), she confesses that:

This is an attempt to narrate a real life, my own, and to find the pattern within it. The pattern can’t really be completed, of course, until death, when autobiography so rudely turns into biography, but so far as I can do it, I will.

Her narrative technique and claims (as Virginia Woolf’s too), flout the programme of Jean-Paul Sartre, that not only must an author avoid omniscient commentary altogether, but must give the illusion that he does not even exist. Narrative experimentation has always been Weldon’s forte. In the early novels, for instance, she tests the possibilities of the first-person narrative voice, alternating voices and tenses, but in Puffball, The President’s Child, The Life and Loves of a She-Devil, The Sharpnel Academy, and The Hearts and Lives of Men, Weldon plays not just with point of view but with genre and convention. Intertextuality, the hallmark of postmodernism (though already found in the writings of some earlier authors, as in R.L. Stevenson’s “The Misadventures of John Nicholson”), becomes a favourite Weldonian trick. In The Hearts and Lives of Men, for example, the neat divisions between author, implied author, narrator,
implied reader, and reader are cheerfully violated as we are ‘reminded’ of a party
given by real people—the Conrans—and attended by fictional characters. Of
another party, the narrator reveals, ‘I was there, with my first husband’. A
chapter of the same novel opens ‘Christmas Day. 1978. What were you doing,
reader?’, thus conflating the normally discreet realms of life and art.

But on the other hand, in Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen,
she also complains that:

“it is not just my novels (legitimate prey, as works of what they care to
call the creative imagination) but me they end up wanting to investigate,
and it is not a profitable study.”

This disparity is also noticeable in her remarks made during the various
interviews, especially her on and off acknowledgement of herself being a feminist
writer. Such contradictions have been regarded in the light of Weldon’s
progression from vociferous member of the Women’s Liberation Movement to a
postmodernist prevaricator who listens to her own words being quoted and says—
‘Did I really say that? How interesting. I must have believed it.’ Indeed, while
being face to face with the author Fay Weldon, one is constantly faced with
‘ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity’ which seem to defeat any serious
intent to study her works with a definite agenda in mind.

But it is again, these very contradictions inherent in the author which
makes such an investigation imperative for her outlook really reveals the
ambivalence of the age in which she writes, especially the New Age movement
which rose to prominence in the 1980s. The New Age consisted of an eclectic
array of beliefs and practices, all broadly spiritual in origin—viz. ecology,
feminism, self-help, astrology, holistic thinking, divination, tarot, zen,
vegetarianism, reincarnation and healing—all of which, though not new in
themselves, were subsumed into a zeitgeist, precipitated by a worldwide resurgence of paganism. Thus, the novel Puffball reflects a mystical and naturopathic interest; The Heart of the Country introduces a strong environmental undercurrent; in The Hearts and Lives of Men, we are furnished with little Nell’s astrological chart; and the tarot features prominently in The Cloning of Joanna May. It is however, Affliction which reveals Weldon’s personal disenchantment with New Age notions (she wrote an article entitled “Against Therapy” and has subsequently lectured on and debated the topic)—a debate already initiated in John Osborne’s play Look Back in Anger (1956). The section entitled “Change” in Auto da Fay reveals Weldon’s response to the dizzyingly rapid transformations which promised progress and confusion in equal measure:

... All around her is change, the old order being swept away.

How suddenly the fashions changed. Skirts shot up, hair frothed around the face in a springy birds’ nest: look down on your shoes and they were green with satin bows, not the brown and black of the old days. Language loosened up: students took to Marxism, it became the thing to speak with the accents of the people: the young wore jeans in homage to the poor, the future was seen to lie with the workers. The schools stopped teaching by rote, and decided grammar was not important. Carrier bags were made of bright plastic not brown paper, and were everywhere, as people shopped for the fun of it; on the TV rockets aimed for the moon, curved, drooped and fell in a cloud of hot air.27

Whilst Woolf shared male modernists’ interest in finding new forms and voices with which to express the new world they found themselves in, her critique was grounded in a keen awareness of the dominant patriarchal structures that were as much a feature of male modernism as of nineteenth-century realism, and of the material conditions which meant that women were excluded from institutions of power. To be freed from the stranglehold of gendered identity it was not enough to point out the inequities of the social structures, but a whole definition of what constitutes the human subject had to be found. This awareness in turn, provided
scope for multiple possibilities to be distilled into the one moment in the experience of reading (disrupting, as it does, the idea of the single, bounded narrative of the individualist autonomous being). An example can be seen in the figure of Elizabeth in Mrs. Dalloway. Having ‘most competently boarded the omnibus’, denoting women’s new ease in the city, Elizabeth dreams of the country (the space of her mother’s greatest freedom), but appears at the party in a pink dress, the same colour as the dress that Sally Seton wore at Bourton. This could suggest Elizabeth’s having the pure freedom that Sally had back then, but with the inevitable entry into the heterosexual economy waiting ominously at the wings; but it could conversely, suggest that this is a pivotal moment--- she might make other choices than Sally and not end up with ‘five enormous boys’.

What emerges is the style of Woolf— her capacity to use free indirect speech to decentre the narrative point of view and merge one consciousness with the other and, demonstrate ‘the elusiveness of identity itself and the process by which it is perceived. In her, aesthetic meanings are not single, bounded and cerebral, they are multiple, and meanings of the body as well as the mind. But she was not alone in her active engagement with the processes of the inner mind. Immediately prior to Woolf’s own attempts at fiction, novelists as Marcel Proust, Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce had written novels that tried to delve into the so-called ‘stream of consciousness’. All of them were aware of the frustrations of the modern man trying desperately to hold on to his identity in a welfare state. Indeed, the smothering of individual identity by the welfare state could not have been summed up better than by W.H. Auden in his poem “The Unknown Citizen”:

When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went.
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard. 29

As C.G. Jung says in “The Plight of the Individual in Modern Society” (The Undiscovered Self, 1958):

Under the influence of scientific assumptions, not only the psyche but the individual man and, indeed, all individual events whatsoever suffer a leveling down and a process of blurring that distorts the picture of reality into a conceptual average. We ought not to underestimate the psychological effect of the statistical world picture: it displaces the individual in favor of anonymous units that pile up into mass formations. Science supplies us with, instead of the concrete individual, the names of organizations and, at the highest point, the abstract idea of the State as the principle of political reality. The moral responsibility of the individual is then inevitably replaced by the policy of the State (raison d’état). 30

Moreover, according to Jung, the reason behind man’s psychological trauma is man’s own ‘paradoxical evaluation of humanity’ and his lack of ‘all criteria for self-judgement’ despite being himself a ‘conscious, reflecting being’. Jung attributes this disturbing aspect to the rupture between ‘faith’ and ‘knowledge’ which results in the split consciousness which is so characteristic of the mental disorder of the modern world. Jung describes it as if ‘two different persons were making statement about the same thing, each from his own point of view, or as if one person in two different frames of mind were sketching a picture of his experience.’ 31 This is what happens in every neurotic psyche, which if left to its own deep distress, eventually brings the patient to the doctor.

Thus, ‘Who am I? What am I? What is life?’--- are the incessant questions that form and disperse throughout Virginia Woolf’s work, questions as evanescent, helpless and stubborn as the characters who pose them. This tumult, this agony of identity, these dubious characters merging into each other or splitting like amoebas, whose only joy is self-assertion, whose only lament is that there is no one to lament--- all make us feel that her world’s dynamics are
somewhat impossible, exaggerated. One cannot say that her characters develop, for when they are moving it is with dizzy speed, swirling into the wind and the waves; when they are still they are struck dead still, grounded, sunk. Age, face, body, even sex—the usual marks which determine identity, are as unstable as coat and dress; Orlando, fluctuant, transsexual, three hundred years old, wholly outrageous, is only an exaggeration of the liberties which Woolf's characters habitually take.

Woolf's fullest statement about the origin of human personality occurs in the final soliloquy of The Waves which is perhaps her single most impressive achievement, surely her most painful:

But we were all different. The wax—the virginal wax that coats the spine melted in different patches for each of us. The growl of the boot-boy making love to the tweeny among the gooseberry bushes; the clothes blown out hard on the line; the dead man in the gutter; the apple tree, stark in the moonlight; the rat swarming with maggots; the lustre dripping blue—our white wax was streaked and stained by each of these differently. Louis was disgusted by the nature of human flesh; Rhoda by our cruelty; Susan could not share; Neville wanted order; Jinny love; and so on. We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies.

The six characters in the novel, Bernard implies, are identical at birth. But different experiences—red-hot—destroy different patches of their insulation, leaving them mottled, figured, articulated, regrettably human. This myth of the origin of the self is the culmination of a set of images that had been growing in Virginia Woolf's mind since the beginning of her career as a writer of fiction: in the early story "Kew Gardens" she speaks of heavy waxen bodies, candles whose flames are their voices. The use of wax as an image which defines the relation of the self to the environment makes certain obvious assumptions: we are born without features, without individuation, just lumps, passive, waiting for
impression, quiet, dumb, incompetent. This passivity seems identical to that of the helpless mind menaced by perception that appears in an essay of 1919:

The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old.

(*Essays II*, p.106)³³

In any case, the structure of *The Waves* is based on perhaps the single most important principle of motion in Woolf's fiction—namely unity and dispersal, integration and disintegration—and even reintegration, as the characters are always separating and coming together, running off into random privacy, clustering for a moment into satellite groups, such as the affair of Louis and Rhoda, finally all concentrating in Bernard's mind. This collision of 'voices' in Woolf's work then becomes a great dialogue of truth. Yet, this diversity and polyphony are hardly a recipe for 'total' chaos for ordinary human social life gives Woolf the image of both absolution and anarchy:

It is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly, military progress; a convenience, a lie. There is always, deep below, even when we arrive punctually,... with our waistcoats and polite formalities, a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sighs... [and] women's writing.³⁴

On the other hand, 'disintegration' in Weldon's novels becomes more of a 'physical' rather than a mental activity as in Woolf's, as the characters perform multiple roles rather than merely expose their fragmented selves through multiple perceptions of multiple images. The novel *Splitting* is the fittest example of Weldon's projection of disintegration and consequent reintegration as it plays with the idea of multiple personalities by borrowing the psychological concept as a poetic device in creating Lady Angelica Rice, whose hidden identities reveal
themselves as distinct personalities after a painful divorce and their reunion into a single unit after Angelica wins the case.

Therefore, in this instance, neuroses—signifying the 'conflict between conscious and unconscious, spirit and nature, knowledge and faith'—may also result in the accumulation of individuals who have got into this critical state, thus starting off a mass movement purporting to be the champion of the suppressed. Likewise, the problem of identity, of the cohesion and integrity of the self, has long been recognised as predominant issues in the modern novel. By seeing the core self as based on an interactional construct, the relational perspective can show how textual representations of intimacy, love, and sexual relationships are bound up with the question of identity.

In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), Nancy Chodorow argues:

To the extent that females and males experience different interpersonal environments as they grow up, feminine and masculine personality will develop differently and be preoccupied with different issues.36 Chodorow’s claim for fundamental differences in masculine and feminine personality has been similarly applied by Carol Gilligan who (in *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, 1982), finds two differing male and female modes of seeing the self in relation to others and the world. Drawing on the texts of men’s and women’s fantasies and thoughts, Gilligan discovers that the male mode is dominated by images of hierarchy while images of web define that of the female (as in the paintings of the Lady of Shalott):

Thus the images of hierarchy and web inform different modes of assertion and response: the wish to be alone at the top and the consequent fear that others will get too close; the wish to be at the center of connection and the consequent fear of being too far out on the edge.37
Like Chodorow, Gilligan sees masculinity as defined through separation and femininity through attachment; which is why male gender identity is threatened by intimacy and female gender identity by separation. In *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989), Patricia Waugh too, asserts that:

... it seems likely that the mobilizations of the paranoid-schizoid defences of splitting (intense idealization and denigration), fragmentation, projection, and introjection is more likely to occur in the formal strategies of male writers. An expression of ‘depressive’ concerns and anxieties—the struggle to cope with ambivalence without splitting; fear of loss; recognition of guilt; desire for reparation and relationship—is more likely to occur in women’s writing.  

However, it would be incorrect to compartmentalize fiction by men and fiction by women within such generalized assumptions, for both tend to overlap each other. In fact, formlessness and disintegration are always the dominant threat in the modern novel irrespective of the sex of the writer. On the other hand, the claims put forth by the likes of Chodorow, Gilligan and Waugh, carry credibility—-for instance, while a male author as D.H. Lawrence fights this threat with a domineering insistence on boundaries and separateness, Woolf combats it by ceaselessly striving to make connections with others and with the environment.

Nevertheless, Woolf’s depiction of fragmented reality and her preoccupation with the consciousness, has made critics like E.M. Forster comment that she had little feeling for form and none for actuality. Such an impressionistic view of her treatment of external reality cannot obviously provide us with an insight into the real issues of her approach. On the other hand, in *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), Erich Auerbach selects Virginia Woolf’s novels precisely as typical examples of a modern approach to reality. Certainly, the world of objective reality that Woolf was confronted with in the early part of the twentieth-century lacked the old
certainties that were taken for granted until the late nineteenth-century. Under the influence of the theories of William James, Freud and Bergson, the early twentieth-century world in which she lived began to place an increasing emphasis on the unconscious and subterranean aspects of the human mind, and this in turn cast an aura of indefiniteness and subjective vagary on the mode of perception of the external world. Woolf was very much aware of the change that was coming over human perception and explains what she thought about the challenge that confronted the artist in the modern world in her essay “The Narrow Bridge of Art”:

... for our generation and the generation that is coming the lyric cry of ecstasy or despair, which is so intense, so personal and so limited is not enough. The mind is full of monstrous hybrid, unmanageable emotion. That the age of the earth is 3,000,000,000 years; that human life lasts but a second; that the capacity of the human mind is nevertheless boundless; that life is infinitely beautiful yet repulsive; that one’s fellow creatures are adorable but disgusting; that all bonds of union seem broken, yet some control must exist— it is in this atmosphere of doubt and conflict that writers have now to create. 39

This awareness of a new mode of perception of external reality in the modern world and the consequent sense of the need for a new form of art come to be constantly emphasized in Woolf’s criticism as well as her fiction. Perhaps no twentieth-century literary woman better exemplifies this shift from the nineteenth-century fictional tradition than Woolf. By proceeding beyond stereotypical presentations of madwomen and docile heroines who infest Victorian novels, she depicts such diverse artist-figures as Lily Briscoe, Orlando and Miss La Trobe through whom she not only traces the modernist woman’s consciousness of the influential existence of her foremothers, but also the ambivalent vision of female literary autonomy.
Indeed, Woolf’s modernity then becomes a moment of realisation and revelation of progressive thought which embraces both the past and the present. In one sense modernity captures the dynamism of tradition either through rejection or acceptance. Thus, rather than confining her vision within industrial progress or feats in technology, Woolf captures moments of cognition and revelation--- as seen for example in momentary glimpses of revelation in her heroines, and more particularly in her vision of the androgynous self (in Orlando) which celebrates the bliss of togetherness and integrality for individual nirvana. But again, it is because of such a demand for a unified approach towards the philosophic essence of both sexes, that in Woolf’s novels, man, stripped of all conventional trappings, becomes simply the ‘other’--- not the ‘Other of Western rationality’ which opposes the ‘marginalized, unseen, feminine other’,--- but a poor shadow of deflated masculine ego, physical prowess and intellectual superiority as opposed to feminine grace and sensitivity, so that androgyny may paradoxically appear too far-fetched. The apparent reconciliation to circumstances, at least in her fiction, though realistic offers no ultimate answer to women’s problems.

Weldon’s solutions on the other hand, though impractical, may generate some hope for justice in battered women. Men in her fiction are not mere projections of Woolf’s idea of the ‘other’ which leaves room for spiritual reconciliation, but ‘ruthless’ oppressors’, and this dichotomy between men (who seek self-gratification) and women (who seek self-definition) is the major theme in her work. It is especially Praxis (which A.S. Byatt described as ‘the single best modern novel about the condition of women’), which represents the culmination of Weldon’s interest in the connection between biology and destiny, her insistence
on the perfidy of men, and her concern with the uneasy compact of women. But on the other hand, she also confessed to John Haffenden:

... when I started writing the structure of society was weighted very heavily against women and their lot was very obscure. Now it's not so obscure, and there are many who are prepared to take a more political stance than I do.  

Indeed, this desire to transcend obscurity has been voiced also in the novels of Woolf. *The Waves* (1931) for example, interestingly depicts two female figures Rhoda and Jinny who express their desire for autonomy in a school which demanded uniformity and subjugation:

... said Rhoda,... 'But here I am a nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity. We are all callous, unfriended. I will seek out a face, a composed, a monumental face, and will endow it with omniscience, and wear it under my dress like a talisman and then... I will find some dingle in a wood where I can display my assortment of curious treasures. I promise myself this...'

And Jinny says:

'... for winter I should like a thin dress shot with red threads that would gleam in the firelight. Then when the lamps are lit, I should put on my red dress and it would be thin as a veil, and would wind about my body, and billow out as I came into the room, pirouetting. It would make a flower shape as I sank down, in the middle of the room, on a gilt chair...'  

In fact, Rhoda's submission to obscurity leads her to abandon all effort to find coherence in her experience of self and meet her death:

I came to a puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell.  

Rhoda's condition is an extreme version of the psychological state underlying Woolf's work and informing all of her characters. Even the magical maternal figures are at times tempted to relinquish the effort of living, of tirelessly constructing connections to sustain themselves and others. Mrs. Dalloway thinks:

Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them;
closeness drew apart; rapture faded, and one was alone. There was an embrace in death.44

Death is conceived here in relational terms: it is a 'defiance' of the enemy life, and it is 'an attempt to communicate,' an ultimate 'embrace' or final loving union, which is why Mrs. Dalloway is also symbolically allied throughout the novel with Septimus Smith, who does kill himself: 'She felt somehow very like him--- the young man who had killed himself'; yet his death frees her--- 'He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble'.45 In To the Lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay too, in moments of solitude, abandons her usual effort to assemble and becomes a 'wedge-shaped core of darkness'.46 In this state, she also experiences a mystical embrace (much as Clarissa Dalloway conceives of death as embrace) with 'inanimate things':

It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one.47

But despite the arguments put forward in A Room of One's Own, for an androgynous ideal, it remains true that Woolf's novels show a radical awareness of feminist issues though she has always remained adept at gracefully sidestepping the moment she felt herself being steered towards any definitive standpoint, and this is what has been disconcerting to generations of intellectuals:

A.J.: Virginia Woolf has said that it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex.

S.B.: Nonetheless, Virginia Woolf thought a lot about her own sex when she wrote. In the best sense of the word, her writing is very feminine, and by that I mean that women are supposed to be very sensitive to... I don't know... to all the sensations of nature, much more so than men, much more contemplative.

(From Alice Jardine's interview with Simone de Beauvoir, trans. Ellen Evans, printed in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 5 [1979])48
However, Beauvoir's insistence upon Woolf's gender-consciousness as a writer can be countered by Woolf's own argument that the female author should write from a perspective which is unashamed to be female, and which has as its ultimate goal the ability to take its own femaleness so much for granted that the issue of gender can be forgotten, as in the hypothetical case of Mary Carmichael in *A Room of One's Own*, who had 'mastered the first great lesson; she wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that the pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself.' Virginia Blain in "Narrative Voice and the Female Perspective in "The Voyage Out"" however, considers each of Woolf's works as 'trying out means of breaking through the barriers of inherited male conventions towards the expression of an authentic woman's voice: not the voice of Everywoman so much as the voice of Virginia Woolf as subject-of-consciousness.'

It is tempting to take this view further to state that Woolf's success in dismantling the kind of masculine prejudices morally endemic in the morally superior tone of the typically Victorian narrator-persona is in creating a discourse which can give voice to a morally neutral or unprejudiced female omniscience---or more accurately, as J.W. Graham says in "Manuscript Revision and the Heroic Theme of The Waves" (*Twentieth Century Literature* 3, vol.29, 1983) may be termed 'omnipercipience'. Indeed, *The Waves* can in some cases be regarded as a special case, coming as the final ('six-sided') flowering of her 'androgynous' period of the late '20s, and in its exploration of the idea of the androgynous mind even more of a tour de force than *Orlando*. This is evident especially in the character of Bernard who says:
I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs.  

And some eleven pages later, he further reiterates:

There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt, “I am you”. This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome. Yes, ever since old Mrs Constable lifted her sponge and pouring warm water over me covered me with flesh I have been sensitive, percipient. Here on my brow is the blow I got when Percival fell. Here on the nape of my neck is the kiss Jinny gave Louis. My eyes fill with Susan’s tears. I see far away, quivering like a gold thread, the pillar Rhoda saw, and feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt.  

In Weldon however, there is neither betrayal of discomfort with male evaluation as found in the overt protestations or compliance of early nineteenth-century women nor the attempt to find an androgynous narrative as in Woolf; but an outright flaunting of differences in strange tales where the woman often tries to get the ‘better’ of the man without asking for an ‘equal’ status. That Weldon’s most recent novels have more topicality than trenchant content is because she goes beyond the boredom of stereotypical projections of exploited women and exposes the hazards of living in an economically privileged modern society which makes the victimization of women acquire a new dimension altogether. Thus, in her recent volume of short stories entitled Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide (2002), we see a subtle power politics intrinsic in the story “The Medium is the Message” (which falls under “Things That Go Bump in the Night”) where the selfish Hugh is content to live off his economically independent wife Oriole:

But some residual sense of the authority of the male over the female remained bedded in him: his it was to dictate the nature of the universe. She was older than he was by seven years and the family breadwinner, but never mind.  

Accomplished women serve either as sources of income to the family or as ornamental exhibits to enhance the husband’s position in society. As the ‘trophy wife’ Marianna (in “Trophy Wife” listed under “Making Do”) explains:
A trophy wife... must keep her own likes and dislikes to herself: she must be socially adept, always well groomed, talented and charming, never bored, always gracious. It helps for her to have a measure of fame in her own right, or a title, or a family name others might recognise. I had no title or celebrity name, but before my marriage I had been a successful portrait painter and once even painted the Queen of England. That was enough for me to qualify as trophy wife in the highest circles in the land.  

Nevertheless, what is notable is that gynocentric themes—motherhood, reproduction, single parenthood, sisterhood, sex, and marriage—are transformed by Weldon into uproarious feminist revenge comedies. This is achieved through an intertextuality which often involves unorthodox typography, genre swapping, and metafictional devices. Such strategies have both feminist and postmodernist implications through which the author consciously achieves her subversive ends. This is why her characters have been criticised by male reviewers as ‘one-dimensional figures in a feminist cartoon strip.’ As mentioned earlier, Weldon herself has admitted that she would like to be able to create more believable male characters, but despite extensive experimentation on her part, her narrative point of view remains female. How serious this intention—expressed in a 1984 interview for the Contemporary Authors series—may be questionable, because in her interview with Haffenden (recorded two years earlier), she admitted that she might well ‘have a prejudice against men,’ and she added, ‘Let the men liberate themselves.’

On the other hand, the contradictions in Weldon’s public statements have elicited the criticism of reviewers like Clara Connolly who, in the Feminist Review journal, has accused the author of a shallow feminism: ‘I often felt I was eavesdropping on unguarded expressions of witty irritation she would indulge in at the dinner table with friends.’ What Connolly really wants from Weldon is rigour and fairness and respect for sociology and the problem of her
dissatisfaction lies partly in the fact that Weldon, as popular author, is consequently afforded an oracular status by the media and may speak on any platform. Indeed, her fictionalising habit is so deeply ingrained as can be seen in *Rebecca West* and *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*, that she cannot or will not adopt the serious discourse of nonfiction. In the latter work, Weldon admires in Jane Austen’s juvenilia her capricious announcement that ‘indeed the recital of any Events (except what I make myself) is uninteresting to me.’[^56] Aunt Fay’s exclamation: ‘You see! The born novelist. She is raising invention above description; what she makes herself is above what the real world has to offer’[^57] leaves no doubt about the author’s priorities.

It is this ambivalence that has problematised Weldon’s own feminism. In 1982, she had asserted to John Haffenden that:

I am a feminist and I write novels, and because I believe feminism to be a true view of the world what I write is bound to come out to be feminist. You could advance the view that all good writing is bound to be feminist.^[58]^

However, in 1984, her confidence seems to flag when she says that the label ‘feminist’ was

not a label I would ever disown, because it would seem as if I were disowning it for all the wrong reasons. Many feminists wouldn’t consider me a feminist at all. Many nonfeminists would think I was. I flicker in and out of the feminist mainstream.^[59]^

--- and in 2006, she makes another remark equally controversial and flippant for feminist activists:

The fight for gender equality is bad for the looks. It makes no one happy, unless you find some reward in struggling for a justice that evolution failed to deliver. It will just develop your jaw, wrinkle your brow beyond the capacity of Botox to unravel, muddy your complexion so much that no amount of Beauty Flash will clear it, and in general do you no good.^[60]^

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The journey from 'Woolf to Weldon' has been quite an arduous one, but despite all confusions and caprices, a special case needs to be made for researching biographies of women writers like Virginia Woolf and Fay Weldon, in order to consider their works as their own 'stories' rather than mere reflections of history. It cannot be denied that during her struggle to overcome the burden of nineteenth-century masculine domination within her household, Woolf was at the same time engaged in a life-or-death combat with the masculine voice of the omniscient narrator. Indeed, in some senses, all of Woolf's work can be read as a quest for an authorial self, though her early work shows on its surface more of the signs of struggle inherent in such a quest. This is particularly evident for example, in the double-edged characterization of the two Bloomsbury figures in *The Voyage Out* (1915)--- St. John Hirst and Helen Ambrose. In fact, one of the effects of the novel is to make sinister the alliance between the female-despising Hirst and the strongly male-identified Helen and their effect on Rachel Vinrace who has been in ways identified with Woolf herself. As Virginia Blain says (in "Narrative Voice and the Female Perspective in “The Voyage Out”"): 

...more than enough has been written elsewhere about Virginia’s relationships with her Bloomsbury friends, as well as with her father, mother, sister, brothers, half-sisters, half-brothers, brother-in-law, to say nothing of husband, to make one almost begin to doubt whether any of her novels were “made up” at all. 61

On the other hand, nearly ten years down the line since *Splitting*, after writing her experimental book *Mantrapped* (2004) in which fiction intersperses with sections of autobiography and is centred around the switching of gender, identities and soul, while being preoccupied with the queries--- ‘What is it to be male? What is it to be female? Are we the sum of our hormones, or the sum of our souls?’, Weldon quips:
One of the problems of being a writer of fiction active over several decades — I have some thirty-three novels, plus various other works to my name — is that you tend to forget who you are. You become a sum of your fictional parts, with a soupçon of characters to come, waiting in the wings to pounce.

While insisting that the creative mind must be androgynous, incandescent and unimpeded by personal grievance, Woolf nevertheless affirmed that differences between male and female experience would naturally emerge in distinctive fictional shapes:

No one will admit that he can possibly mistake a novel written by a man for a novel written by a woman. There is the obvious and enormous difference of experience in the first place... And finally... there rises for consideration the very difficult of the difference between the man’s and the woman’s view of what constitutes the importance of any subject. From this spring not only marked differences of plot and incident, but infinite differences in selection, method and style.

It is however, precisely this awareness of difference in the conventional narrative matrix which has initiated in her acts of revision of the stereotype. Thus, it is notable that the narrative present, patterned as the sequence of a day, both recalls the structure of Ulysses, which Woolf completed reading as she began Mrs. Dalloway, and offers a female counterpart to Joyce’s adaptation of an epic form. In fact, Mrs. Dalloway inverts the hierarchy Woolf laments in A Room of One’s Own. Her foregrounded domestic plot unfolds precisely in shops and drawing rooms rather than on battlefields, and substitutes for epic quest and conquest the traditionally feminine project of giving a party, of constructing social harmony through affiliation rather than conflict; the potentially epic plot of the soldier returned from war is demoted to the tragic subplot centering on Septimus Warren Smith. By echoing the structure of Ulysses in the narrative foreground of her text, Woolf revises a revision of the epic to accommodate the values and experience of women while cloaking the more subversive priorities explored in the covert.
developmental tale. Woolf like Freud, reveals the cost of female development with acculturation through the rites of passage established by the Oedipus complex, as evident for example, in Clarissa’s relationships with men and women with whom she comes in contact.

In any case, both Woolf and Weldon present the basic theme of the misapplication of patriarchal power, its inherent corruption and conscienceless violence (both psychical and physical). While Woolf’s heroines have to settle down for a forced complacency, Weldon’s women (Jocelyn, Praxis, Maia, Ruth or Sonia) finish their tales after some sort of retribution has been achieved, either by the sheer satirical force of the writing, or because a physical act of revenge has been performed.

But what is disconcerting is the fact that, the paradoxical nature inherent in women’s struggle and actions has prevented contemporary feminism from having a clear agenda. Even the promiscuous and wayward Starlady Sandra in Weldon’s *Leader of the Band* (1988) utters the stereotypical hometruth that:

> Fame in a man is for a woman a great aphrodisiac: fame in a woman appeals to the man who likes public fucking.
> Pity.  

This in turn, has been attributed as responsible in providing women excuses to avoid pursuing a career for the sake of family and Weldon cites women who ‘find they had children in order not to be obliged to write, to put their ambition to the test’ as it was easier to submit to conventional pressures—“that old-fashioned concept of creativity, namely that men had art and women had babies,” and this is probably why critics like Carole Angier have complained that ‘Fay Weldon has thrown a lot away... to release her own creative energy. Mainly she’s thrown away feminism.’
Therefore, the questions which one must confront time and again are— Is the 'woman in the text' a representative of the real woman? And if so, can representations offer viable answers rather than remaining confined within the precincts if the 'ideal'? Our answer to the first depending on our study of the biographical accounts of Virginia Woolf and Fay Weldon and of the social milieu in which they were/are writing, is partially in the affirmative (and justifiably so) as their women (as already established), project in various ways the anxiety of their authors and the unpredictability of their times. An apt illustration may be Weldon's recording of the penalty she paid as a female public figure within the home in *Mantrapped*:

We went out to dinner the night the pilot episode of *Upstairs Downstairs* was screened— to universal acclaim, as they say— and our hosts insisted on switching on the television and watching, to my apologetic discomfiture and Ron's fury. He thought it was trashy, popular, down-market stuff. That was mid-Seventies. Mid-Eighties, I took the fuse out of the TV plug just before the BBC version of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* was screened. 'Oh dear,' I said, 'the TV has broken down,' and we had a peaceful evening. Otherwise there would have been tears before bedtime. 68

The fictionalised portions are inevitable in that both Woolf and Weldon wrote mainly 'novels' which can only be rendered richer by the liberal use of imagination.

However, regarding the second problem, one is filled with misgivings, for while on the one hand Weldon's solutions for her heroines seem too outrageous as to be almost impossible to adopt, Woolf's vision of the androgynous self sounds too spiritual to be realised in practical existence. As Donald Winnicott says:

The self is not really to be found in what is made out of products of body or mind, however valuable these constructs may be in terms of beauty, skill and impact... The finished creation never heals the underlying lack of sense of self. 69
Winnicott asserts that personal loss in the artists themselves can never be truly repaired through the artistic products alone, while countering Heinz Kohut’s argument (in *The Analysis of the Self*, 1971) that ‘The broken self is mended via the creation of the cohesive artistic product’. Even so, when one considers the lady of ‘Elvedon’ in *The Waves*, who is found sitting between two long windows, writing, we may envision in her the New Woman who inhabits a place which may be hallucinatory or separate but is nevertheless a manifestation of the originatory female energy.

Nevertheless, we are now tempted to ask ourselves---‘Is feminism then irrelevant in the new millennium?’ In “Feminism and Postmodernism: Recent Feminist Criticism in the United States”, Toril Moi comments:

... I start from an agonistic definition of feminism, which I see as the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression. Such an oppositional definition posits feminism as the necessary resistance to patriarchal power. Logically, then, the aim of feminism, like that of any emancipatory theory, is to abolish itself along with its opponent. In a non-sexist, non-patriarchal society, feminism will no longer exist.

Moi opines that since feminism is caught in the end in a constraining logic of *sameness* and *difference*, it is necessary that feminists take up a political position which accepts the pain of loss, sacrifice and closure. Nevertheless, present-day feminism is a historically specific movement, rooted in French Enlightenment thought actuated by Montesquieu and Condorcet for equal rights for both men and women (and expounded by Mary Wollstonecraft) and in British liberalism (initiated by John Stuart Mill), and consequently wedded, in deeply critical style, to notions of truth, justice, freedom, and equality whilst it avoids taking sides.

As a result therefore, the demand for equality on women’s behalf, also entails an implicit redefining of male status. This is because, England’s rapid democritisation and socialisation has affected its creative life. Men and women
who, a couple of generations or so back would have been doomed to grey, pedestrian lives, who would never have dreamed of a university career, are now graduating, teaching, and best of all, writing. They are refusing to accept the values that once kept their fathers from an equal opportunity to develop their potentialities. They see that social upheavals bring about tragedies, and they also seem to be painfully aware of the awkwardness that accompanies a man on his way up. They watch, but at the same time they are part of the change. Others, who were a bit older, have witnessed the new England with less enthusiasm, scorning a ‘welfare’ state which they believed diminishes individual dignity and encourages a lack of respect for tradition.

But while there might be arguments about the politics and economics of Britain today, it is evident that the social reorganisation has made for the very stuff of fiction, and, in their various ways many writers have responded to the changes about them, and they have created a lively literature. This is why the fiction of writers like Graham Swift and A.L. Kennedy, revolve constantly around the issues of social meaning. Thus, in his novels like *The Sweet Shop Owner*, Swift construes the formation of the subject in terms of a process of malformation, of damage incurred by the failure to negotiate the gap between the movement of history and the rhythms of ordinary lives.

The use of psychological models to account for the pattern and significance of historical events is particularly well suited to the structure of the post-nineteenth-century novel, resulting in the especially compelling pictures of crisis and trauma that characterise the work of Pat Barker and Kazuo Ishiguro. An alternative template, in which the organising tensions of the writing are still
primarily psychological in their mode of operation, comes from the cultural historical version of the Oedipal conflict.

On the other hand, for Hanif Kureishi, Caryl Phillips and Zadie Smith, multiple identities could only even be ambiguated in the British context by an awareness of the history of immigration, which gives a special urgency to their examinations of the grounds for cultural hybridity. Therefore in his acclaimed novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi not only critically explores the quality of identity formation and conceptions of nationality but being a British-born descendant of the Pakistani immigrant community, presses against the assertion of a set of traits that are counted as intrinsically British, as well as against the assumption that an ensemble of differences from Britishness will mark it out by default.

The maleness or femaleness of the author becomes secondary when one considers the basic tenets of the works by Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter. Though Rushdie shares with his friend and author Kingsley Amis a tendency to combat the power of charismatic forefathers, he also shares with Carter the impulse to challenge traditional forms and methods of narration. However, one has to keep in mind that if Carter’s resources are all European, she can draw on them more variously than Rushdie’s author-surrogates, who must concentrate to a degree on the points of overlap between European and Eastern cultures, and specially between English, Indian and Pakistani variants.

Finally, mention must be made of Jeanette Winterson who is something of an enigma. The recipient of a number of prestigious literary prizes, including the E.M. Forster award and the 1985 Whitbread award for the best first novel, Winterson has been excoriated for her remarkable and unapologetic egotism.
(referring to herself as a veritable reincarnation of Virginia Woolf). Like the author herself, varying examples of multiplicity and contradiction within a singular body consistently appear throughout Winterson’s fiction, especially in her most critically acclaimed and popular, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, *The Passion*, *Sexing the Cherry*, *Written on the Body* and *Gut Symmetries*.

Thus, irrespective of gendered experiences, contemporary British fiction, in its most ambitious varieties, re-engages with history by drawing on the resources of literary modernism, allowing technical experiments developed by a tradition of writing from the margins of the dominant culture, to bring together in one place fragments of history of various communities as well as of both sexes, and to give them voice.

Therefore, androgyny in the literary text, requires equal liability, equal impartiality as well as equal exercise of power on behalf of the writer irrespective of sex. In practise, the old debates about which sex has power, and which is oppressed, are hardly relevant in our transformed landscape once the complexities of men’s and women’s relationships are acknowledged. This is in fact, just a symptom of a wider shift, of the fact that the changes affecting women’s position have intersected with very great changes for men in their working patterns, in their family roles and in their social expectations. In this scenario, feminism itself has been reduced to a ‘topic’ to be discussed and debated in air-conditioned rooms, sometimes in front of flashbulbs and television cameras circulated at tea sessions or other such evenings. Nevertheless, we are even now consistently plagued by the question--- if there is a call for androgyny, can there exist any art or creative writing that is truly male or female? The issue remains unresolved in the light of the contradictions inherent in present-day sexual politics.
Though it is true that a disparity in the social role of men and women is manifest among virtually all people in the world, the debate at times sounds too clichéd. Is there no way out from these banal much-harped-upon male/female typologies? — we wonder. It would be bizarre to claim that women stand vis-à-vis men on the same plane either socially or institutionally. As Sharmila Ray says in her article “Now Here’s One from The Heart”:

If historically we have painted more flowers and still-lifes than nudes, the simple reason is that till recently nude classes were forbidden zones to us. Our exclusions are thrown back upon us as our own inherent natural nature. If we have been writing more drawing room novels and coffee table chit chat, it’s simply because that’s where we’ve lived for so long while our men go to the city every day to gather material for their adventurous novels.  

Perhaps, the only way to extricate oneself from the deluding, deceptive maze of imminent liberty is to read and reread the history of women’s deprivation to advantage, for it is women who know only too well about the half-uttered words behind barred doors, the ways to cope with a decentered universe. On the other hand, we have also to identify the common history of ‘stifling’ and ‘deprivation’ in both men and women, thanks to those who are ruling this world through violence and torture. It is true that while in the west, women studies began with literature and history, in India especially, its inspiration as a formal inquiry sprang from a more direct concern with the low status of women in society and from particular social evils (sati, purdah, child marriage, child widows, ban on widow remarriage, and so on), which afflicted sections of Hindu society. Though, after the independence of India in 1947, the Hindu Code, passed as separate Acts between 1950 and 1955, rewrote for Hindus the laws of marriage and divorce, adoption and inheritance, and adult suffrage added women to the electoral roles, the growing women’s movement around issues of dowry, rape,
prostitution, domestic violence, birth control and health led to research on these subjects as well as on the nature of women’s struggles. Culture and ideology came gradually to be added to the list.

But again, at a time when the term ‘gender’ has gained so much currency that now people take it for granted, it might seem odd and superfluous to dwell on its genesis. Nevertheless, tracing the political and cultural history of gender in the context of feminist ideologies, helps to expose the present context in which it now exists. In fact, what we must remember is that violence and victimisation are making themselves manifest in more gruesome and often unimaginably menacing forms. What counts now is not gender discrimination but assault on the ‘vulnerable’ irrespective of class, gender or age--- (consider the Abu Gharib prison where the atrocities were perpetrated on male prisoners of war, by both male and female US soldiers). But as women and children are identifiably (physically) weaker, they are easy targets to anti-social bodies and exploitative or pervert men - (‘touching’, ‘eve-teasing’, being few of the many common sexual aggressions perpetrated, for example). At such a time, even Virginia Woolf would have perhaps found her notions on ‘androgynous narratives’ floundering due to lack of proper spaces where discriminations are easily discernible, and androgyny itself tends to remain a ‘fantasy’, an ‘illusion’ in the words of Julia Kristeva who says:

I see in the psychical bisexuality of the woman not a cult of the phallus or something beyond it, much less beneath it, but a maintenance and an estrangement of illusion as illusion.\textsuperscript{73}

In this context, I cannot help but recall a newspaper report on Iris Chang, a young historian who wrote a book called \textit{The Rape of Nanking} on the atrocities of Japanese soldiers on Chinese civilians in 1937. What moved me at first glance,
were her eyes (in her picture), haunted and disturbed, reminding me of those of Woolf's. But Chang was more than a historian, and Oliver August writes about how 'Orphans, rape victims and Holocaust survivors all wanted to bare their souls to her, finally relieving themselves of agonies sometimes decades old' and Chang could have been another writer of *Three Guineas* had she not gone further to study Chinese photographs in archives. Consequently, her end in November 1999 is equally violent. I mentioned Iris Chang to show that when she published her book in the 1990s, her concern was for the victims of the Holocaust, not to use the siege of Nanking as a metaphor for women’s subjugation (though the title shows otherwise) as Woolf had done in *Three Guineas* in 1938. Nevertheless, Chang had to remain confined within the limits of historical authenticity most of the time while Woolf was more of a social thinker.

In any case, when one considers the concerns of both Virginia Woolf and Fay Weldon, we realise that at present there are still more men in management, politics and industry and at higher levels; and women still need support when they encounter discrimination in male bastions like the army, the police or the fire service. Mothers running to work often face discrimination when they try to reduce hours or to job share. While this is indisputable, it does not necessarily amount to a situation where all the women are more in need of support than men - a change already marked by Angela Mc Robbie in *Feminism and Youth Culture* (1991):

...when we ask the question, ‘on what grounds can it be argued that young women in Britain today experience sexual discrimination?’ there is constantly no single, linear sense in which inevitably ‘things are getting better’. But the question remains, are young women still unequal on the basis of their gender? It is also a good deal more difficult to answer this question than it was 20 years ago, when a number of feminist writers, myself included, made such loud claims on behalf of young women, they confronted massive obstacles to achieving independence and equality in
every aspect of their personal and public lives. It is now quite routinely argued that it is thanks to feminism and to developments in the education system and changes in family life that there have been such tangible improvements for young women. In witnessing confident, voluble young women in the sixth-form classroom, or also in leisure, or simply on the streets, the very idea of sexual marginality seems to disappear into thin air.\textsuperscript{75}

Therefore, the discrimination women still meet now takes place against a different backdrop. What is significant about the various attempts to challenge legislation set up to help women is that there is clearly no longer any consensus among the populace that women suffer from structural discrimination and need extra help. It is also for this reason that most feminists still have not dissociated themselves from the idea of positive discrimination (which is illegal in the UK).

However, as more and more women are joining the workplace we wonder if this sexual adjustment between the sexes in the labour market is intersecting with an evolving and raw political and social situation, so that the rhetoric of rights, equalities and affirmative action to achieve them sometimes grates rancorously in a society which on the one hand is increasingly divided and on the other is more unsettled domestically. In this regard, M. Esther Harding, one of Jung's disciples and a founding member of the Jungian analytic movement in the United States, recognized as early as 1933 that women might rise to a high level in their careers, but this could occur 'only through the exercise of those masculine qualities which are ordinarily latent or unconscious.'\textsuperscript{76} Dr. Harding believed that a woman achieves success in the world only at the risk of sacrificing her love life completely. The only hope, as Harding saw it, was that a woman would have to manage her career and her home with equal capability and efficiency, an idea which unfortunately most of the currently popular sexist magazines and television images conform to. No word is mentioned about a man's responsibility to his
working wife to serve as an 'enabling' factor in her life, in ways similar to what is taken for granted that a woman will do for her husband. Also, in her article “Women in Managerial Cadres in a Liberalised Environment” (2005), Reshmi R. Prasad points out that though in many countries, the number of women who work outside the home is substantial, the representation in the managerial scenario is almost negligible everywhere. In fact, in all the countries, the higher the rank within the organisation, the fewer is the number of women executives found there. Prasad also considers women’s lack of self-confidence and self-defeating attitude as responsible for their ambivalent feelings towards promotion and added responsibilities, which, she feels, are the outcome of age-old cultural constraints which put women (especially those who are married) at a disadvantage:

The cultural tradition in each country defines the normative predispositions or ground rules. Custom and religious laws vary in the rights they grant women to enter the public domain and in the recognition of women’s independent status. The parenting role is gender specific and the ideology of motherhood requires that the mother be eminently available to her children. Thus, women cannot afford to enter a ‘time-greedy’ occupation involving management function. Reports show that the proportion of non-married managers is significantly higher for women than for men...

However, what is most disturbing is the paradoxical status of women in the present day, for women are still ‘biologically’ at a disadvantage when it comes to reliable alliance for the sake of nurturance namely, women’s desire for a ‘family’, a fact voiced by Laura Tennant— ‘In our haste to free ourselves from an ignoble dependence on men, we forgot that a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle right up _until_ she gives birth.’ (italics mine)

On the other hand, Victor J. Seidler in _Transforming Masculinities_ (2006) focuses on the contradictions which exist also in the lives of men. Therefore, while young men often disdain their own vulnerability and emotions, fearing that
these can threaten their male identity in a society that demands heterosexual responses, in a postmodern culture, the decline of traditional work can make it difficult for men to sustain their conventional roles:

With the decline of traditional work it can be harder for fathers to sustain a sense of their male identities as providers and breadwinners. This can create its own forms of depression that can unconsciously be passed on to the next generation. Boys may feel uncertain about their identities as young men. They may feel antagonistic towards a feminism that insists that men can only name themselves as figures of power who are somehow responsible for the subordination and oppression of women. Since this is not the way young men experience themselves, they can feel uneasy and confused. 79

--- a view also put forth by Kathleen Gerson in “Moral Dilemmas, Moral Strategies, and the Transformation of Gender: Lessons from Two Generations of Work and Family Change”:

Modern society have reconciled the dilemma between self-interest and caring for others by dividing women and men into different moral categories. Women have been expected to seek personal development by caring for others, while men care for others by sharing the rewards of their independent work achievements. Changes in work and family life have undermined this framework... contradictory social changes have produced new moral dilemmas. Women must now seek economic self-sufficiency even as they continue to bear responsibility for the care of others. Men can reject the obligation to provide for others, but they face new pressures to become more involved fathers and partners. 80

However, there are also women like Lady Bruton who are obsessed with the idea that they have to prove to the world, by making visible changes in themselves, for which they have undergone a process of psychological adaptation. Seidler opines (while responding to Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble) that:

The subversion of identity can work to produce its own forms of gender trouble as people explore their desires – or rather allow themselves to be explored through their desires. The deconstructive impulse can leave people stranded, with a sense that they can no longer trust the love they have had in relationships. They can be left uncertain about their own desires and feel troubled about what they might want for themselves. 81
If today, when we are gradually coming in terms with issues like trans-sexuality, homosexuality and lesbian relationships, and one accepts generally that each person has a variety of psychological tendencies and capabilities that fall into both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ categories, then one must also ask: ‘How are these aspects within myself relating to each other?’ instead of asking ‘Which is predominant?’ If peace about this is established within the individual, there will be no need for public proclamation, or attempt at mastery over the other sex.

Nevertheless, simultaneously male hostility to women is still a significant social fact. Old sexual attitudes remain highly problematic, especially for vulnerable women and rape, sexual violence and harassment, economic and financial exploitation are all real and not imaginary problems which are unfortunately increasingly on the rise in countries around the world. In her article entitled “Violence and Women” (Social Change: A Quarterly Journal of Social Change and Development, Vol. 35, No. 4, December 2005), Ruby Dhar lists a series of brutalities commonly inflicted upon women, from physical and psychological abuse (especially of married women by husbands and in-laws) within the home, to trafficking, FGM (forced genital mutilation) and honour killings, which are rampant in African and Asian countries, as well as immigrant communities in Europe, Australia, Canada and the USA. Violence against women during war and armed conflict has reached alarming proportions and Ruby Dhar records that in Rwanda, approximately half a million women were raped during the 1994 genocide. In Bosnia, 20,000-50,000 women were raped during five months of conflict in 1992, and mass rape has been so systematic and brutal in the Democratic Republic of Congo, that the country has probably seen the largest numbers of women raped in any conflict. As Racheal Walker in the New
Statesman (28 November 2005) observes, it is the misconception of assuming, especially in the first world countries like the USA that the fight for women’s rights has already been won, which has made ‘feminism’ an outmoded label. Walker in fact, questions the moral high ground of developed nations, who, she accuses, of undermining campaigns for women’s rights in those countries where they are most urgent— for example, support for such serial women’s rights abusers as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan hardly conveys the image of developed countries as moral standard-bearers. But what Walker finds most disconcerting are the ‘unbalanced relationships’ between the women themselves:

Standard reporting of women’s rights presents women who live in the developing world as a homogeneous, victimised bloc, and neglects the role that middle- and upper-class women in these countries play in perpetuating social structures that keep their poor compatriots underfoot. But it is women in the developed world who are the chief accomplices in attacks on the rights of women in developing nations— for example, when they hire cheap foreign nannies to look after their children, or seek exoticism in holiday destinations whose tourism industries exploit women’s labour, or buy clothing made in sweatshops.

This only serves to illustrate the point that the problems of sexism in our time do not respond very effectively to recitals of the sociological ills people suffer on account of the inequities that are in practice between the sexes in countries vastly different from each other culturally and economically. A mere symptomatic treatment can only alleviate immediate distress. Thus, what is required is the clarification of the real issues, which have their foundations not so much in anatomy as in the ways, historically and culturally, that people have become used to regarding the differences between what is ‘masculine’ and what is ‘feminine’. It is these psychological attitudes that have been responsible for the formulation of the gender roles that openly and subtly, consciously and unconsciously, have been transmitted through the generations. Therefore, as Cynthia Enloe declares in
her book *The Curious Feminist* (2004) that recognising patriarchy, or even misogyny is not enough. She speaks for the need of what the 1960s women’s movement called ‘consciousness-raising’: waking women up to their low status from the boardroom to the bedroom. Women must be more curious, she says, about the power structures that affect them. But, we might conclude with Rosalind Coward’s attempt to look not just at ‘women’s rights’ but at the rights of all members of society that call for equal respect and uniform justice:

> The real aims now should be to be aware of gender division and how it can discriminate and to find policies which aim at equal treatment rather than to assume one sex or the other necessarily has advantages. We need to understand how people are living their lives and making their choices without preconceptions about men being one thing and women another. More than anything else, we must make sure that we are not dealing with passé notions of women’s rights but with what is now right for all members of our society. 83
NOTES AND REFERENCES


17. Ibid., p.143.


20. Ibid., p.27.

21. Ibid., p.28.


24. Ibid., p.240.


26. Ibid., p.25.


31. Ibid., p.74 (from the section entitled “The Philosophical and the Psychological Approach to Life”).


37. Ibid., p.63.

38. Ibid., p.64.


42. Ibid., p.25.
43. Ibid., p.50.


47. Ibid., p. 72.


52. Ibid., p.241.


54. Ibid., p.108.


56. Ibid., p.24 (from Fay Weldon, *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*, p.52).

57. Ibid., p.24 (from Fay Weldon, *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*, p.52).

58. Ibid., p.25.

59. Ibid., p.25.


66. Ibid., p.1.


70. Ibid., p.83.


82. Racheal Walker, “The fight for women’s rights has been won in the west… or so you might believe. The Truth is much more complex” (essay), New Statesman, London, 28 November 2005, p.34.