Preface

The rethinking of literary historiography that is going on today in many different contexts represents a communal will to explore the ways in which we can understand literary diversity and heterogeneity without imposing a master narrative. It must be remembered that, like the general history of communities, literary history too, is a story of fluctuations between good times and hard times, as told from the vantage point of the literary historian. The emergence of a certain kind of public life in communities usually leads to the flowing of what is called literature, theatre, music, art---things that most feel can strengthen and even create community solidarity, and go much beyond. In fact, in a postcolonial state, historiography proves to be an energetic art in that it gathers up all the recondite theories of reading and extravagant agendas for political subversion that, in societies more confident of their own cultural pasts, are normally left to literary criticism or philosophy.

Literary historians over the centuries have doubtless considered the complexities of literary production, but the new methodological paradigms developed by a variety of critical theories in the last few decades have made imperative an awareness of the equally complicated and significant nature of literary reception. Therefore, economic, political, and broader cultural and social perspectives or issues like race or gender must be brought to bear in the constructing of any literary history, for these perspectives help make conscious the ideological undercurrents of the experience of producing and responding to literature which are integral components of literary history.
In this context therefore, what my thesis does is to connect and reinterpret the fiction of Virginia Woolf and Fay Weldon as cultural constructs projecting marginality through self-expression and self-questioning and moving onto self-assertion and consequently redefinitions in their quest for a neutral narrative.

The reason for my selecting Virginia Woolf is not simply because she is one of the most formidable of British authors who wrote with a definite feminist agenda, but because she was also an individual trapped between two eras in which changes have been sudden and shocking. In fact, Woolf's fiction offer important continuities between the Victorian and subsequent periods so that many of the issues of the twentieth-century are also Victorian dilemmas.

On the other hand, as a writer belonging to the later group of the post-women's liberation era of the late twentieth-century, Fay Weldon focuses on newer challenges facing the modern woman, preferring satire and exaggeration to depict the tragi-comedy of sexual relations, especially from the woman's viewpoint, taking as her medium the instruments of mass media viz.— the radio, the T.V. and the movie screen.

This thesis is divided into six chapters:

Chapter I entitled "Introduction: Re-viewing British Women Writers in the Twentieth-century Milieu" traces the history of women's writing from the emergence of Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth-century to Fay Weldon in the present day, and reveals at the same time how the movement for an 'ideal' power politics is gradually turning 'inwards' toward self-analysis— be it of the 'body' or the 'mind'.

In this chapter, two parallel streams run together— that of the socio-historical context and the female literary tradition. The nineteenth-century has
been given special emphasis as this was the period which saw the growth of women's fiction as well as witnessed considerable socio-political reforms which affected the lives of women. A third movement exposes an academic interest in literature produced by women, the presentation of women in writings by male authors as well as the subversion and revision of female stereotypes with reference to groundbreaking polemical works by critics as Katherine M. Rogers, Mary Ellman, Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar among others.

I have endeavoured to show how conflicting ideologies have influenced women's lives and their writings in the nineteenth-century, down to Virginia Woolf herself, and that the contradictions which were experienced by earlier writers continue to persist in the present generation of writers albeit in different forms, despite the growth of feminist presses from the 1970 onwards which have encouraged the growth of popular genre fiction and the adoption of diverse subjects as the female body and sexuality which were earlier considered taboo by publishers and society at large.

Chapter II called "The Androgynous Self in Virginia Woolf's Orlando", focuses on the novel Orlando in which Woolf highlights the dangers of being simply 'masculine' or 'feminine' especially for an author and explores the idea of the androgynous mind.

The concept of the androgynous mind was also discussed in Woolf's A Room of One's Own, written a year after Orlando, and relates to Hélène Cixous's suggestion of a libidinal economy which 'does not annul differences, but accepts and celebrates it'. Therefore, Orlando though intended as 'an escapade', actually presents the ideal amalgamation of the masculine and feminine which is the basis
of humanist writing as is evident in Woolf’s quest for a neutral narrative through the figure of Orlando that simultaneously contradicts Freud’s famous assertion that ‘anatomy is destiny’. References have been made to the liberating concept of ‘androgyny’ in Eastern and Western mythology which has been effectively used as a metaphor by Woolf to signify a new and different discourse through Orlando’s trans-sexuality and cross-dressing in order to confront the contentious issue— that the sex of an author determines the sexuality of a text.

Chapter III--- “Indeterminism and the Art of Survival in Weldon’s The Hearts and Lives of Men”--- deals with Fay Weldon’s thirteenth work of fiction which traces the psychical development of a female child Nell, towards autonomy. Here, though I have focussed on the role of ‘indeterminism’ and ‘survival tactics’ in the growth of the infant Nell into adolescence, I have at the same time, tried to project the novel as a ‘story of liberation’ by presenting three generations of women whose lives show gradual changes in their attitudes towards heterosexual/marital relationships. But again, it is through the ‘boyish’ Nell, the ‘subversion’ of the ‘feminine stereotype’ that Weldon tries to establish the ‘horizontal sublime’ to which I have associated Donald Winnicott’s paper “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena”, and it is Nell who voices the ultimate formula of womanhood--- ‘I don’t want to live my life through men. Beside them of course, but not because of them.’

Chapter IV entitled “Gendering the Text: Symbols and Symbolism in Fay Weldon’s Fiction” shows how Weldon uses symbols and symbolic acts/motifs, not merely to serve the ‘feminist’ purpose of dislocating myths and stereotypes but refashions them into vehicles of female protest. Also, instead of confining itself within the regular classification of symbols into ‘conventional’ or ‘public’ and
'private' or 'personal' symbols, this chapter extends the idea of 'The Quiller-Couch Syndrome' by identifying symbols as 'masculine' and 'feminine' and proceeds to show how instead of allowing them to remain victims of the stereotype, Weldon, with the help of 'feminine' symbols, enables her heroines to subvert male hegemony and offer enabling alternatives as found in Praxis, The Fat Woman's Joke, The Life and Loves of a She-Devil, Life Force, Worst Fears, and so on.

Chapter V— "Explorations of the Female Psyche: Woolf and Weldon" reveals the impact of gender-based oppression of women's views of themselves and their ways of representing themselves in writing especially through 'the multipersonal representation of consciousness' through fragmented identities, madness, psychological disintegration as found in the novels of Woolf and Weldon. Also, once again as in Chapter II, I have showed how identity becomes culturally enjoined, which in turn is constantly resisted by the female characters whose perceptions of the world and themselves unsettle the official culture of 'regulation and control' (as in Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, and Weldon's Down Among the Women, Splitting and The Cloning of Joanna May) and allow for a 'utopian alternative', a space for the irrational, the feminine, a world released from heterosexual limitations.

Chapter VI headed "Conclusion: Identity— Crisis, Chaos and Integration" shows how Woolf and Weldon have tried to reconcile representations with reality by taking recourse to topical and biographical references and offered diverse solutions (both idealistic and bizarre) to counter male repression in their quest for an integrated self. The chapter presents the portrayal of the idea of 'split
consciousness' in their narratives, and also questions how far their preoccupation with sexual discrimination is relevant in contemporary times.

The concluding part however, claims that it is not adequate to seek freedom from the stranglehold of gendered identity by pointing out the inequities of social structures, but that a whole definition of what constitutes the human subject has to be found keeping in mind the rights of all members of society.