Chapter I

Introduction: Re-viewing British Women Writers in the Twentieth-century Milieu

To write, or read, or think, or to inquire,
Would cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time,
And interrupt the conquests of our prime,
Whilst the dull manage of a servile house
Is held by some our utmost art and use.

--- Lady Winchilsea

This verse, written by an affluent woman born in 1661, was quoted by Virginia Woolf in the book on the subject of 'women and fiction' which she published in 1929, and strangely, in the present century, we find ourselves still debating the questions she raised in A Room of One's Own (1929), viz.— what barriers, both inward and outward, do women face in attempting to produce literature? How do these barriers affect the character of the work they produce? What are the consequences, for the woman author, of historical changes on the position of women in society?

But before one can strive for viable conclusions, it is necessary to understand that 'feminism', which forms the core of women's fiction, is not merely an ideology and a political movement, for fiction itself springs from the seed of social conditions and can be therefore considered a legitimate social document. Moreover, fiction doesn't remain strictly within the precincts of the writer's imagination, but is a mirror of historical and political actuality, as well as mass culture. Likewise, feminist fiction too, not only entails a revelation of contradictory, contemporary ideologies, but the complexities inherent in historical
and political changes. In fact, a major interest of feminist critics in English-speaking countries has been to reconstitute all the ways one deals with literature so as to do justice to female points of views, concerns, and values. The basic view of feminism is that Western civilization is pervasively patriarchal—that is, it is male-centred and controlled, and is organised and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic. The female is often defined as the negative pole, the Other, with reference to the male, by her lack of the identifying phallus, of male powers, and of the male character traits that are held in patriarchal view, as normal, to have achieved the most significant inventions and works of civilization and culture. Women themselves are taught, on the pretext of their being socialized, to accept and absorb conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority, and thus to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature.... which is described as feminine.’

Mary Wollstonecraft was perhaps the first major feminist of the eighteenth-century, and her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), written when the issue of the rights of man was bringing revolution to the United States, to France, and threatening even to shake the venerable English Parliament, was the first sustained argument for female emancipation based on a cogent ethical system. Therefore, in the chapter entitled “The State of Degradation to which Woman is Reduced”, she asserts:

Women, commonly called ladies, are not to be contradicted, in company, are not allowed to exert any manual strength; and from them the negative virtues are expected --- patience, docility, good humour, and flexibility --- virtues incompatible with any vigorous exertion of intellect.  

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Mary further argues:

... men, in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties. It is not business, extensive plans, or any of the excursive flights of ambition, that engross their attention; no, their thoughts are not employed in rearing such noble structures. To rise in the world, and have the liberty of running from pleasure to pleasure, they must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted.  

Thus, it is not difficult to understand why Mary’s own conservative contemporaries called her a ‘hyena in petticoats’, a ‘philosophising serpent’, or wrote jibing epigrams in the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, like:

For Mary verily would wear the breeches  
God help poor silly men from such usurping b---s.  

--- and even Hannah More wrote that there was something so ridiculous in the title of the book that she had no intention of reading it, which revealed the suspicion, derision and outrage which this bold yet sensitive woman, who herself underwent considerable physical and mental stress, inspired in a class-bound and male-dominated society.

It was however, in the nineteenth-century that writers began to openly resist for the first time, the idea that female characters had little option regarding their choice between the alternatives of love and learning. In France in particular, once it became possible to assume that a woman is capable of exercising imaginative intelligence, her right to exercise self-defined sexual femininity as well, could become a prominent issue. Thus, in *Corinna ou l’ Italie* (*Corinne*, or *Italy*, 1807) novel, Madame de Staël dramatizes what is now a favourite feminist theme: the conflicts between genius and womanliness. Similarly, in England, George Sand created heroines who consciously and successfully defy their assigned roles. They protest against the double standard and also exercise the
male prerogative of textual freedom. In addition, Sand creates more typical
nineteenth-century heroines,— those who are tormented by the disjunctions
between the ideology and reality of female experience.

It is notable that, due to the impact of mass industrialization in England,
the Victorian patriarchal family became 'feudal', where relationships increasingly
became mercantile and mechanistic. The position of the male breadwinner of the
family acquired greater prominence while women had to conform to a role, a set
pattern of female stereotypes devised by men. The 'perfect Victorian lady' was to
function solely as daughter, wife or mother,— an ideal which had little connection
with any functional and responsible role in society. She had no speaking voice, no
room of her own where she could find an outlet to realise her individual dreams
and aspirations:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was
utterly unselfish... She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she
took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it--- in short she was so
constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred
to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. 3

The most often invoked description of this structure is John Ruskin’s account in
"Of Queens' Gardens" (1865):

The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and
trial... But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled
by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no
temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home---
it is the place of Peace... And whenever a true wife comes, this home is
always round her. 6

However, as women grew conscious of their oppressed state and campaigned for
freedom, it started to expose the double standards by which many men lived---
man's privileged place being already undercut by Charles Darwin’s writing
especially The Origin of Species (1859). The double moral standard was further
revealed in the Divorce Act of 1857, which made a single act of adultery by the
wife sufficient ground for dissolving the marriage, while the husband’s adultery was so minor a peccadillo that it had to be combined with cruelty, desertion or some other matrimonial offence to provide grounds for the wife to obtain a decree. While this discrimination did not go uncontested, the double moral standard found added impetus with the CD (Contagious Diseases) Acts bursting upon a society already thinking about a number of issues to do with the male/female relationship, in and out of marriage, including domestic violence and marital rape. While towering personalities as Josephine Butler set themselves against such double standards by spearheading the women’s campaign against the CD Acts, and championed the cause of individual liberty, women like Florence Nightingale and Catherine Booth often managed to influence the shape of things to come, working with organizations and societies, some of which they themselves helped to form. Also, as a result of women’s growing participation in social work and respectable careers like nursing and teaching— the choice of most middle-class women at the end of the century was no longer motherhood or being an idle spinster.

On the other hand, in spite of masculine predominance in the field of literature, the age saw the emergence of a vast number of women writers writing from the depths of their own experiences as females. The issue of what a woman’s ‘place’ ought to be in a proper society— had begun to obsess a startling range of thinkers and writers as George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë and others who, in their own ways, tried to find a solution to the Woman Question by revising the male ideologies in order to recognize female power.
Nevertheless, women writers were deprived of education because of their sex, and for the middle-class Victorian girl, the departure of a brother for school was a painful awakening to her inferior status. The Victorian girl was educated at home and was taught to believe that she was ‘morally superior’ to men in her lack of sexual drive; while on the other hand, her education was to ‘bring out’ her spontaneous submission to authority and innate maternal instincts. Therefore, in her book *Killing the Angel in the House*, Virginia Woolf uncovers something of the rift experienced by women writers brought up in an essentially patriarchal set-up:

> My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own.7

The hypocrisy inherent in the patriarchal social structure was exposed no less in Woolf’s own life, for though in theory Leslie Stephen believed in the importance of education for women, in practise he largely observed the conventions of the time in giving his boys a ‘good’ formal education, while Virginia and her sister were left to the mercies of their father and miscellaneous tutors.

The novel and the poem were women’s only instruments of social action in the early nineteenth-century, and especially the rise of the novel provided ideological as well as financial encouragement for the growth of women’s writing. A literary form enshrining the domestic, moral and sentimental values thought of as feminine, allowed women a special literary authority. However, the novel was not the origin of that authority, but rather the occasion of its fullest development. The foundations for the eighteenth and nineteenth-century acceptance of the woman novelist were already laid bare in the seventeenth-century, when the appearance of a number of women writers prompted discussion
of ‘feminine’ characteristics of writing. The traditional notion of woman’s proper silence was being challenged then, and in particular there were feminist writers (as Sarah Fyge Egerton) who, by their emphasis on women’s intellectual capacities and the need for education, fostered a view that women’s writing were the instruments of struggle against male domination. Likewise, one finds Virginia Woolf, trying to explain the causes behind the rise of women’s novels in her essay “Women and Fiction”:

Fiction was, as fiction still is, the easiest thing for a woman to write... A novel is the least concentrated form of art. A novel can be taken up or put down more easily than a play or a poem. George Eliot left her work to nurse her father. Charlotte Brontë put down her pen to pick the eyes out of the potatoes. And living as she did in the common sitting-room, surrounded by people, a woman was trained to use her mind in observation and upon the analysis of character. She was trained to be a novelist and not to be a poet.

During the Victorian age however, one became more aware of what was being said in the ‘silences and exclusions of the female experience’ and of what female stereotypes (The Angel in the House, The Fallen Woman, The Madwoman, The Siren, etc.) revealed about the needs and uncertainties of the Victorian male. There was now a double ‘politics of gender’ at work: an outer struggle for women’s legal and political rights and the inner struggle of both men and women to cope with the demands of powerful but failing cultural stereotypes. The emergent figure of the independent woman (the consequence of the Industrial Revolution), challenging for space on traditional male territory, threatened the complacent superiority of men and as a result, the female aspirants to higher education, political or public life were fiercely and unscrupulously resisted. Thus, in The Subjection of Women (1869), John Stuart Mill wrote:

Women who read, much more women who write, are, in the existing constitution of things, a contradiction and a disturbing element: and it was...
wrong to bring women up with any acquirements but those of an odalisque, or of a domestic servant.\textsuperscript{9}

Even evolutionary anthropologists argued that the differences in cranial shape between men and women were ample proof that women were by nature emotional and sympathetic rather than rational and worldly; and that it was dangerous for them to enter the public domain of political, social and intellectual debate when their countervailing power could be best exercised at home; and so, in \textit{A Room of One's Own}, Virginia Woolf sums up the fate of all the unrecognised and underdeveloped female genius of the past:

Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what should have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say... she was as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school... She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theatre. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act... Men laughed in her face... and so--- who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?--- killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.\textsuperscript{10}

Even George Eliot’s fiction showed that the usual daily collision of a man and woman in a patriarchal culture signified that no necessity of circumstance could bring them together, and thus, Tom and poor Maggie can never be brother and sister (\textit{The Mill on the Floss}, 1860), as Tito and Romola can never be husband and wife (\textit{Romola}, 1863). Indeed, it seemed that no union could be based upon the perfect understanding and mutual respect between both sexes--- one must dominate, the other has to follow:

\begin{quote}
With rod and line. Our basket held a store.
Baked for us only, and I thought with joy
That I should have my share, though he had more,
Because he was the elder and a boy.
\end{quote}

\textit{(George Eliot: “Brother and Sister”---1874)} \textsuperscript{11}
Nevertheless, the burgeoning of women's writing during this period also led Woolf to comment that:

Towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were re-writing history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write.  

The decades following the 1860's saw the gradual admission of women into universities, increased rights of married women with respect to property, a substantial victory won by women over the controversial contagious diseases legislation, the rise of the working woman seeking economic independence and the growth of the suffragette movement. The first major step in women's higher education was the founding of Girton College in 1868, under the leadership of Emile Davis. Cambridge admitted women students to the same examinations as men in 1881; so did Oxford in 1884. In the field of medicine women met stronger opposition, yet by 1891, there were about a hundred women doctors. The legal profession however, resisted the entry of women, but nevertheless had to accept a small number of women as clerks and typists. But in the main, a great majority of middle-class women took to teaching, the number of women teachers rising from 94,299 in 1871 to 123,995 ten years later.

Nevertheless, the conflicts regarding the enforcement of female suffrage were still raging on. In 1889, one hundred women including Mrs. Humphrey Ward, Mrs. Leslie Stephen, and Mrs. Matthew Arnold signed an article opposing female suffrage. In a notorious article of 1868 by Eliza Lynn Linton, the country's first professional female journalist but also one of the greatest opponents of liberated women, the 'Girl of the Period' was berated as a 'loud and rampant modernization with her false red hair and painted skin, talking slang as glibly as a man, and by preference leading the conversation to doubtful subjects.'
‘New Woman’ (who was variously defined as a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet as well as a fictional discursive response to the late nineteenth-century women’s movement)—(see Plate I, p.239), not only had to bear the scorn of her more conservative sisters, the strain of initiating a new code of conduct exacted a heavy personal toll in the form of neuroses, some driven to rancour against men, and others to extravagance in conduct. Naturally, the idea of the ‘New Woman’ imprisoned within the walls of convention but struggling for emancipation offered excellent material for the novelist and the Victorians could no longer avoid confrontation with a tarnished male ideal.

But the call for women’s suffrage failed repeatedly and marriage law reforms did little to alleviate the sufferings of women at large. The militant phase of the suffrage was yet to come and the ‘New Woman’ learned the familiar, sad lesson that the pioneering movement for social justice was but a small simple step in its attempt to change the vision of a hostile, uncomprehending society. Nevertheless, the overtly feminist writings of Sarah Grand, George Egerton, Mona Caird, Mary Cholmondeley and others, propounded the belief that women were the spiritual guardians of the race and that female values could transform gender relations in the new century.

In the early 1880s, translations of new foreign literature such as the fictions of Zola and other French naturalists, the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and the plays of Ibsen, were introduced into England, and the innovations of this literature in terms of subject matter, social criticism, psychological insight and sexual frankness, had a profound impact upon British writers. In particular, naturalism—or realism, as it came to be called in England—
-- with its candid presentations of social inequities and sexual relations, held a strong appeal for writers who had begun to chafe against the restrictions imposed by circulating libraries and the periodicals which serialized their work. Censorship became the major literary issue of the 1880s, and writers who wished to benefit from the force of 'Zolaesque honesty' began to campaign for artistic freedom of expression, portraying themselves as sophisticated and sensitive intellectuals who were being held back by ignorant Philistines. On the other hand, shocked by the sexual frankness and ignoble subject matter of the new realists, critics of realism insisted that novels ought to be sources of knowledge, and powerful moral influences, particularly upon their impressionable female and lower-class readerships. Side by side, in the political frontier, suffragette movements led by WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union), became increasingly violent with arson and bomb attacks on pillar boxes, churches and homes of politicians, and though the 1912 Women's Enfranchisement Bill was defeated by fourteen votes on its second reading in March 1912, the militant campaign did keep the issue of votes for women at the forefront of public imagination and the political agenda.

Therefore, as if as a natural consequence of this conflict, the first years of the twentieth-century saw the growth of the suffrage novels of Mary Findlater (The Rose of Joy), Annesley Kenealy (The Poodle Woman), Evelyn Sharp (Unfinished Adventure) and others. Also, there were suffragist plays as The Pot and the Kettle (1909) by Christabel Marshall, Pageant of Great Women (1909) and Diana of Dobson's (first produced in 1908) by Cicely Hamilton, and Elizabeth Robins's Votes for Women! (first produced in 1907) which was later transformed into a novel, The Convert.
However, there was also the development of literary modernism, with its war cry ‘Make it New’, which became the more significant point of transition. Therefore, in Virginia Woolf’s and Dorothy Richardson’s fiction, we find those features associated with literary modernism (the use of stream-of-consciousness techniques, fluid characterizations and explorations of subjectivity, and experiments with temporality) in conjunction with the depiction of aspects of modernity— as the portrayal of the modern city with its new forms of transport and communications and chance encounters, which provided powerful metaphors, as Woolf showed in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Richardson’s extraordinary novel sequence *Pilgrimage*, is in part a celebration of her protagonist Miriam’s journeying in and around London, finding opportunities despite economic hardship, for self-creation and relationships denied to the heroine of the nineteenth-century novel. There were however, writers as May Sinclair, who used modernist explorations of consciousness and the new findings of psychoanalysis to depict the continuation of Victorian constraints upon women’s lives. Thus, in her novel *The Creators* (1910), one finds the psychological complexity of the characters taking precedence over the expression of ideas. Though she turns to the themes of sexuality and marriage, as found in her earlier novels *The Helpmate* (1907), *The Judgement of Eve* (1907) and *Kitty Tailleur* (1908), for the first time, her psychological focus allows her to scrutinize gender roles and examine the ways in which gender determines one’s sense of self. As novels of transition, her works are distinct from Victorian novels in their rebellious heroines, their sexual frankness and their unconventional morality, while hesitating at the same time, at the brink of modernism in their formal struggles. Her novels both depict and exemplify the difficult, sometimes awkward, but ultimately exhilarating drama of
the old yielding to the new, an inevitable change that Woolf records in her essay “Women and Fiction”:

The great change that has crept into women’s writing is, it would seem, a change of attitude. The woman writer is no longer bitter. She is no longer angry. She is no longer pleading and protesting as she writes. We are approaching, if we have not yet reached, the time when her writing will have little or no foreign influence to disturb it. She will be able to concentrate upon her vision without distraction from outside...  

Meanwhile, women were also responding to the trauma of World War I, and Sinclair herself suggested in her novel The Tree of Heaven (1917) that feminism fades into insignificance in comparison to the ‘larger’ cause of which Olive Banks mentions in her Faces of Feminism (1981) that--- militant feminism was replaced by ‘welfare feminism’ which was concerned with economic and social issues; the novels of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby in particular, reflect these concerns. Indeed, for a majority of the female population, it was also an era of emancipation. Thousands of women served in medical field hospitals, and the spectacle of Nurse Edith Cavell martyred by the Germans for assisting in the escape of British and French prisoners of war in Belgium, added powerfully to the public esteem of women in general. Moreover, the fact that half the female adult population were given the vote in 1918, made it imperative that the women’s organisations lose much of their impetus which they had before the war:

The very dissolution wrought by total war exerted powerful pressures in eroding the sex barriers which had restricted British women over the decades. It was hardly possible to argue now that women were incapable of exercising the rights of citizenship to the full; in the 1918 Representation of the People Act, therefore, women aged 30 and over were given the vote. It was almost anti-climactic. A long, bitter saga of persecution and prejudice ended with a whimper.  

If World War I had created an ambivalent attitude in many women writers towards a war whose destructiveness they deplored but whose conduct they felt inhibited from criticizing, World War II saw a strengthening of feminist pacifism.
Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (1938) was a central work in this context, with its argument that peace depends upon an end to the oppression of women. Woolf appeals for a recognition of the links between the private and public spheres of life, along with an end to the system that links the private with the feminine and the public with the masculine. By contrast, Stevie Smith’s novel *Over the Frontier* (1938), contains more fantasy and dream material than polemic, and at times seems to celebrate the idea of a woman empowered by fighting a just war. Smith also explores the link between war and the ‘battle’ between the sexes.

The image of the androgynous self, much debated in recent feminist criticism and theory, takes us back to perhaps the most influential text of twentieth-century ‘literary’ feminism— Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), with its claim that ‘it is fatal for anyone to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly’. This however co-exists with Woolf’s more grounded social and material analysis of the impediments, external and psychological, faced by women writers throughout the centuries.

But, the conflict between women’s creativity and conventional roles women are required to play is also the theme in a number of women’s novels of the early twentieth-century— a fact, which is further substantiated in the restrictions imposed on the writers themselves. In this context, Woolf’s life-story is particularly interesting— for, though born in the late nineteenth-century when women had little say in matters of education, marriage and public life, she was herself a part of the privileged, literary world and was given free run of her father’s library. She read voraciously, but nonetheless resented her brother’s easy access to a university education, a theme she expanded in *Three Guineas*. Woolf’s
sense of oppression was further intensified while enduring the sexual harassment of her two half-brothers; and in 1895, the death of her mother, together with the successive deaths of her half-sister, father, and her brother Thoby, precipitated the first series of mental breakdown which were to increase in severity, together with the ensuing repugnant treatments. After their parents’ deaths, Virginia and her sister (the painter Vanessa Bell), and her brother Adrian, together with their Duckworth half-brothers and a sister, lived in a series of houses in Bloomsbury, which eventually became a nucleus of the so-called ‘Bloomsbury Group’ of writers, artists, and intellectuals dedicated to opposing Victorian orthodoxy and promoting a refined modern culture. Other members of the ‘group’ included Roger Fry, John M. Keynes, Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster, and Clive Bell (husband of Vanessa). By 1915, Virginia had begun to write fiction, and her novels as *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* established her as a writer in the forefront of the modernist movement. Even then, while critically looking at patriarchal society, Woolf found men still enjoying complete domination over women:

Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?——

Even attempts to self-instruction was at times curtly discouraged:

--- but here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued,... a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction.

Central to the twentieth-century women’s writing of the 1920s and 1930s, are explorations of female sexuality, the focus being strongly directed towards middle and upper-class women’s experiences. The issues raised by the ‘woman’s
novel' were complex ones bearing on definitions of 'female experience', on the
tensions between feminist radicalism and class conservatism, and on the way one
chose to draw the literary map to link or to distinguish between disparate women
writers.

The decade after the war was marked in British women's fiction by a
sense of loss of traditional values and conventional morality accompanied by
uncertainties about women's roles in the general instabilities of post-war Britain.
Therefore, in the works of Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Taylor and Antonia
White, one finds dramatized, the difficulties middle-class women faced in
adjusting to a new order, and to the prevailing ideology of female emancipation as
an achieved state which so often conflicted with women's actual experiences and
self-images. These writers were, of course, part of an earlier generation, a fact that
was to become particularly apparent with the upsurge of the cult of youth in the
1950s and 1960s.

Side by side, in the year 1949, emerged Le Duxieme Sex (The Second Sex)
by Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most extensive and groundbreaking study of
women, based on the existentialist movement initiated by Martin Heidegger's
Being and Time (1927, trans. 1962). The philosophical premise is that temporality
and historicality--- a stance in one's present that looks back to the past and
anticipates the future--- is inseparably a part of each individual's being; that the
process of understanding something, involving an act of interpretation, goes on
not only in reading verbal texts but in all aspects of human experience; and that
language, like temporality, pervades all aspects of that experience. Thus, in The
Second Sex, while resorting to anthropological, social, biological and
psychoanalytical argumentations, Beauvoir not only portrayed the highly trained
professional woman and the highly placed woman in business while propounding ideal human relations between men and women, but at the same time, questioned primitive myths and traditional beliefs where 'marriage' signified freedom for women, and at the same time required conventional, constricting sexual responses in both the male and the female. On Balzac’s poetic expression of the body-politic during love-making, where 'woman is like a lyre which gives up its secret only to him who knows how to play it', Beauvoir comments in her essay “Sexual Initiation”:

Feminine sex desire is the soft throbbing of a mollusc. Whereas man is impetuous, woman is only impatient;... Man dives upon his prey like the eagle and the hawk; woman lies in wait... She is absorption, suction, humus, pitch and glue, a passive influx, insinuating and viscous: thus, at least, she vaguely feels herself to be. Hence it is that there is in her not only resistance to the subjugating intentions of the male, but also conflict within herself. To the taboos and inhibitions contributed by her education and by society are added feelings of disgust and denial coming from the erotic experience itself: these influences are mutually reinforced to such an extent that after the first coition a woman is often more than ever in revolt against her sexual destiny.20

In England, Iris Murdoch was one of the few women writers to be situated as a part of the new 1950s writing, with Under the Net (1954) and The Flight from the Enchanter (1956),--- novels strongly influenced by Existentialist philosophy in their emphasis on contingency and human choice. Murdoch’s concerns for ethics and the novel, the need for a literature of commitment, a renewed concern with character rather than literary form, and a revaluation of nineteenth-century realism and naturalism,--- are shared by a number of post-war women novelists, including Margaret Drabble, Pat Barker, A. S. Byatt, Anita Brookner and Doris Lessing.

In the 1960s, themes concerning 'female experience' were becoming increasingly central in the works of a number of women novelists including
Penelope Mortimer, Nell Dunn, Lynne Reid Banks and Edna O’Brien. Their novels dealt primarily with sexuality, love, marriage and motherhood—including the experience of child-birth and the burdens placed on women’s emotional and sexual lives.

In 1970, one witnessed the emergence of Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*, as ‘a part of the second feminist wave’. The book, as Greer herself put it some twenty years later, was pleading for the ‘freedom to be a person, with the dignity, integrity, nobility, passion, pride that constitute personhood’. When it was written, there were feminist organisations still in existence, and women’s groups as Mrs. Hunkins-Hallinan’s Six Point Group were considered to be of special relevance in the political arena. By now the media was clamouring for the exposure of women’s issues, and women from all walks of life, could at last not only freely speak out their minds, but could reasonably expect to find strong support. However, the uneasiness regarding the attainment of absolute freedom was still persistent and therefore had to be overcome:

The fear of freedom is strong in us. We call it chaos or anarchy, and the words are threatening. We live in a true chaos of contradicting authorities, an age of conformism without community, of proximity without communication. We could only fear chaos if we imagined that it was unknown to us, but in fact we know it very well. It is unlikely that the techniques of liberation spontaneously adopted by women will be in such fierce conflict as exists between warring self-interests and conflicting dogmas, for they will not seek to eliminate all systems but their own. However diverse they may be, they need not be utterly irreconcilable, because they will not be conquistatorial. 21

In the same year in which appeared *The Female Eunuch*, a number of women including the feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham, organized the first national Women’s Liberation Movement Conference. While questioning the role women were forced to play in society, the Women’s Liberation Movement Conference held marches and demonstrations very like the suffragettes before the
First World War and lobbied Parliament and politicians on issues which affected women, even demonstrating against events like the Miss World Contest. Indeed, the Movement had success in terms of legislation as several new laws were passed removing many of the inequalities women suffered in the legal system. The Movement was also inter-national and brought changes in the legal position of women in countries such as France which was the first country to appoint a Minister for Women. It also brought changes in the social position of women and women’s awareness of themselves and their value to society in countries with such vastly different cultural heritages as the USA and Japan.

Women’s equality and rights reached the international agenda in 1975, when the UN held its first International Women’s Conference to mark International Women’s Year. The conference covered three themes: equality, development and peace. It was an important event because women’s concerns were legitimised in the eyes of national leaders who were required to address, vote on and make agreements about women’s status. By the end of 1987, the governments of ninety-three countries had consented to be bound by the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (albeit with reservations and opt-out clauses).

The growth of writing by women in the last two decades is inextricably linked to the development of feminist presses from the 1970s onwards, which have ‘recovered’ earlier women writers, published much new and original fiction, and developed lists in increasingly popular genre fiction, such as chick literature (the famous *Bridget Jones’s Diary* by Helen Fielding, for example), feminist detective fiction and science fiction. Also, like those other forms more immediately associated with the sociology of the media— the press, the T.V, film,
radio— there are now women's and girls' weeklies which are proving to be powerful ideological forces though they have not yet been subject to rigorous critical analysis like the former. Addressing themselves solely to a female market, their concern is with promoting a feminine culture for their readers. They define and shape the woman's world, spanning every stage from early childhood to old age. From *Mandy*, *Bunty*, *Judy* and *Jackie* to *House and Home*, the exact nature of the woman's role is spelt out in detail, according to her age and status. She progresses from adolescent romance where there are no explicitly sexual encounters, to the more sexual world of *19, Honey*, or *Over 21*, which in turn give way to marriage, childbirth, home-making, child-care and *Woman's Own*. Though derided by many as cheap, superficial, exploitative and debasing, responsible for reducing the consumers to a 'mass of mindless morons', they also promise a space of greater personal freedom and free choice to their female readers.

Meanwhile, the members of the Feminist Writers Group— Sara Maitland, Micheline Wandor, Valerie Miner, Michèle Roberts and Zoe Fairbairns— who published their early work in the collectively produced *Tales I Tell My Mother* (1978)--- continue to write and to reaffirm their commitments to a socialist feminist politics. Side by side, one finds American writers as Marilyn French representing in her feminist tome *The Women's Room* (1977), the angst of the average American suburban housewife, caught in the dull and mentally stunting confines of a patriarchal society. Here, ironically, French's protagonist Mira Ward, though pretending to be deliriously happy with her beautiful suburban home, her reasonably affluent husband and her two lovely children, is still aware of the feeling of absolute emptiness inside.
In the 1980s, Angela Carter both used and questioned the feminist strategy of 'revising' traditional stories. Even when she uses the materials of fairytale, as in the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), the rewritings and narrative layerings are so complex that we move beyond the idea of a single 'original' story and its retelling. On the other hand, in Fay Weldon's novels as *Splitting* (1995), *Big Women* (1997) and *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989), one finds the demonstrations of inner tensions or splits within women's experiences; or at times the portrayal of the simple awfulness of the lives of women who are the inhabitants of

... that other terrible world, where chaos is the norm, life a casual exception to death, and all cells cancerous except those which the will contrives to keep orderly; where the body is something mysterious in its workings, which swells, bleeds, and bursts at random; where sex is a strange intermittent animal spasm; where men seduce, make pregnant, betray, desert: where laws are harsh and mysterious, and where the woman goes helpless. 22

Weldon's own life as an advertising copy-writer, then a single parent of a son, and later, marriage to an antiques dealer,--- all influence her novels one way or the other, especially *Praxis, Affliction, The Heart of the Country* and *The President's Child*. Weldon writes in a survivalist spirit (anger, hatred, bitterness, laughter taken as signs of life), often adopting the language of sisterhood with bitter and sometimes shameless abandon. Characters in her novels live on their wits, and often at each other's expenses--- in fact, motherly women are accused often of taking over other women's children and sometimes husbands. Sisterhood is founded in the recognition of mutual wrong. And by a logical if shocking progression, bad, superficial women who openly barter their assets become anti-heroines, because they at least demystify the means of survival. Moreover, in scores of books and essays, Weldon exposes her characters' propensity to take
good ideas and turn them into bad practices—whether they be bolshie feminists, exploitive therapists, or madcap Utopian dreamers. But on the other hand, in a Café talk with Rachel Kohn in March 2000, Weldon countered the idea that her characters' attempts to self-justification are 'self-serving', and provided a more positive interpretation:

It is hard for us to live without a sense of purpose or without some sense, not just we're kind of creating a new society, but that as individuals there is something mysterious about it, and when you have a baby you think there is something slightly magic and mysterious about all this. It's a profound thing.²³

Again, the postmodernist challenge to traditional stories and ‘grand narratives’ should also be understood in relation to the challenge to traditional race and gender inscriptions in black, Asian and lesbian writing. Thus, while Barbara Burford in The Threshing Floor (1986) explores attitudes to race and sexuality in her depiction of an English country town, one finds the Caribbean-born writers, Grace Nichols, Merle Collins and Joan Riley, and Asian-born writers as Leena Dhingra and Ravinder Randhawa depict the difficulties of cultural migrations and the painful imagining of generational histories.

Early feminists were however, concerned with social and political changes, and little attention was paid to literature and literary criticism at the initial stage of the women's movement. But soon enough, their political action was extended to the cultural field, as it is here that gender differences are created and naturalized. The feminists who worked in academic institutions became convinced that literature and literary criticism were powerful cultural weapons in the hands of male hegemony to perpetuate its sexual politics in the name of universality, objectivity and neutrality. In fact, conventional literary criticism acknowledged the writings of predominantly white, male British writers, such as
Coleridge and Arnold, sanctified in F.R. Leavis’s preaching of *The Great Tradition* in Cambridge in the 1940s. Women writers and those from colonial and Third World cultures were consciously ignored. Eventually, new theories, many emanating from the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, rejected Leavis’s school of criticism as ‘humanist’ and dismissed his anthropocentric view of the world. Before Saussure, meaning was thought to exist in the mind or in the object. Saussure claimed that meaning lay in language, in the relations between its parts, its *structures*. Structuralism’s arguments unsettlingly assert that there is no neutral, no objective ground for criticism and meaning. Saussure’s revolutionary insight was that meaning does not precede language, but is constructed in it. Language is both a social product of the faculty of speech, and a collection of necessary conventions. Meaning is not intuitive, but learned, and differs from language to language. All attributed meanings, all judgements, mask one’s underlying ideology, that is, one’s moral, psychological and political presuppositions about the world.

Thus, consequently, one finds the influences of structuralism embodied in the central tenet of feminist literary criticism as opposed to the claims made by humanist discourse,—that no account, whether creative, critical or theoretical, can be neutral. A work of literature invariably reflects the personal or cultural bias of its author. The first task before the feminists, therefore, was to lay bare the patriarchal practices in literary discourse as they had done it in other walks of life. They questioned patriarchal, ‘universal’ definitions of what constitutes knowledge, in order to open up social, political and cultural systems to the vast majority of women and men who are not in positions of power.
Three crucial and influential works which deserve special mention in this respect are --- Katherine M. Rogers’s *The Troublesome Helpmate* (1966), Mary Ellmann’s *Thinking About Women* (1968), and Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1969). While Rogers argues that male misogyny in literature stems from that patriarchal feeling or the desire to keep women subject, Millett’s and Ellmann’s books provide the inspiration for what is now known as the ‘Images of Women’ approach to literature.

Kate Millett’s immensely popular *Sexual Politics* defines sexual politics as the process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex. At the same time, Millett emphasizes the need to study social and cultural contexts if a work of art is to be properly understood. Also, through her analysis of the novels of male writers like Norman Mailer and Henry Miller, she exposes their patriarchal bias and their sexual/textual harassment of women. Besides taking their work as part of their sexual politics, she also challenges the author’s authority and insists on the reader’s right to express her own viewpoint. But what is important here is that such approach relies on woman as reader and her experience as reader. In fact, her experience of literature is supposed to tally with her experience of real life.

If writers like Kate Millett or Mary Ellmann have been busy with ‘the critique of male discourse’ or representations of women by men, the other feminist critics like Elaine Showalter or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have been preoccupied with ‘women’s self-representation’. If the former deals with woman as reader, the latter have focussed attention on the subject of woman as writer. In the late 1970s, three major studies on women writers were published which tried to reconstruct a female literary tradition in British and American
literature and history,— Ellen Moers’ *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of their Own* (1977), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

*Literary Women* was the first attempt at describing the history of women’s writing as a ‘rapid and powerful undercurrent’ running under or alongside the main male tradition. Inspired by Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* which brought Moers to change her views on the need to treat women writers as a separate group, Moers’ own book mirrors the development of many academic women: from suspecting all attempts at segregating women from the mainstream of historical development as a form of anti-egalitarianism, they came, during the 1960s, to accept the political necessity of viewing women as a distinctive group if the common patriarchal strategy of subsuming women under the general category of ‘man’, and thereby silencing them, was to be efficiently counteracted.

In *A Literature of their Own*, Showalter traces a female literary tradition in the English novel from the Brontës to the present day and demonstrates that the development of this tradition is similar to the development of any literary subculture. She discovers three major phases of historical development which she claims to be common to all literary movements:

First, there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalisation of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages, feminine, feminist and female. 

Also, the British female tradition is accordingly divided into three phases:

1) The Feminine phase from 1840 to 1880,
2) The Feminist phase from 1880 to 1920, and
3) The Female phase from 1920 to the present day.

Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, on the one hand, aims to describe the ‘distinctively female literary tradition’ of the nineteenth-century and, on the other, to propound a complex theory of women’s creativity. The authors argue that since creativity is defined as male in patriarchal culture, the Victorian woman writer suffers from an intense anxiety of authorship. Though she possesses a distinctive female voice, she can give expression to it only in an indirect manner. This is why she creates the angel and the monster as male writers have done, but in creating them, she subverts and revises them. The novelist’s anger and anxiety against patriarchal prohibitions take the form of the female monster, as in *Jane Eyre*, where Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic, is actually the dark double or the repressed self of the woman writer, and who like her author, has her own story which patriarchy tries to suppress. Therefore, while referring to the heroine incidentally called Bertha (Grant) in George Eliot’s less known novella, *The Lifted Veil* it is stated:

The fall into self-division, murderous materiality, and sexuality that haunts the characters of Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë is portrayed by Charlotte Brontë through the madwoman driven to rage that impels her to tear down, burn, and destroy the symbols of male power that have deprived both her and her docile double of love....

Of course, in some sense, all Berthas seem to be symbols of powerful female sexuality. Like the “bad” sister of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Bertha in the Lane”, whose heat and fire contrast with the pale coldness of the dying angel whose lover she has seduced, Bertha Grant specifically resembles Bertha Mason Rochester not only because of her demonic sexuality but also because she is an orphaned, wealthy heiress whose physical strength and determination are markedly in contrast to prevailing notions of feminine delicacy and compliancy.25

Thus, women’s writing at present, has a relevance and a validity for more reasons than one. Not only does it project the observations, situations, responses and struggles of women within the ambit of kinship, marriage and procreation, it
also questions values and structures hitherto considered axiomatic, and in turn focuses attention on the definition of freedom and creativity while throwing up queries related to oppression and colonization. Therefore, one finds most of the post-colonial feminist critics in India and the Third World detect and decry a 'colonialist move' in Western feminist criticism as— in the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, it 'celebrates the heroines of the First World in a singular and individualist, and the collective presence of women elsewhere in a pluralized and inchoate fashion'.

Receiving its impetus from the feminist movements, a process of self-discovery and of recovery of a female tradition has been set in motion. It is a journey of questioning of the form of epistemological formulations and of personal awareness. The process has also necessitated a reworking of strategies in order to break through conventional patriarchal power structures and to render status and relationships of the sexes more equal, for inequality has been created through exclusion (whether excluding women from learning, or from equal opportunities in any field which involves decision-making). Working through radical movements and silent changes, through legal and political battles and psychological barriers, women are learning to know and discover themselves. True, all women's writings are not feminist, and many women writers are tentative about their feminist affiliations even today, for fear of getting pushed into the category of the victim and the oppressed.

Nevertheless, women's fiction has been steadily moving from timidity and marginality through self-expression and self-questioning toward self-assertion and redefinitions. It has projected alternative structures and meanings, and transformed disorder and chaos into enabling structures. It has attempted to
dissolve polarities and move towards pluralistic meanings. Thus, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *The Rights of Woman*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, have helped in the relocations of meaning from the female perspective. Also, it must be noted that, literature itself is a cultural construct and provides us with valuable insights into the development of societies; it helps psychological understanding, and reformulations of epistemological constructs. Literature is moreover, a rich source material for interpreting the past (historical, social and political), for defining and redefining the present. Thus, women’s fiction focuses attention on both the manifestation of a female sensibility, a feminine reality, and on its significance as a means of bringing about an awareness of this reality. It is clear, that like other categories such as race and class, gender has become a significant category of social and political reality.

In any case, gender discourse on its own, has its multiple categories. There are socio-feminists whose interest in the roles assigned to women in society prompts studies of the way in which women are represented in literary texts; there are semio-feminists whose point of departure is semiotics, the science of signs, and who study the signifying practices by means of which females are coded and classified as ‘women’ in order to be assigned their social roles; there are psycho-feminists who forage in Freud and Lacan for a theory of feminine sexuality unconstrained by male norms and categories, and who examine literary texts for unconscious articulations of feminine desires or traces of where it has been repressed; there are Marxist feminists more interested in ‘oppression’ than repression infiltrating women into their discourse at precisely those points where in a non-feminist Marxist analysis one would expect to encounter ‘the working
class'; and there are socio-semio-psycho-marxist-feminists who do a little bit of everything as the occasion arises. There are lesbian feminists who explore the connection between sexuality and textuality by looking to the labia as the source of a distinctively feminine writing, thus countering that dominantly phallocentric myth of writing as an erectile and ejaculatory activity; and there are black feminists, who feel themselves to be doubly if not triply oppressed: as blacks in a white supremacist society, as women in a patriarchy, as workers under capitalism.

Another interesting aspect which is gradually finding space in feminist interpretations of literature, is the role of mass culture as well as popular culture in shaping a literary piece. While analysing the influence a writer has over his reader by means of language (which in itself can become a dangerous tool because of its fluidity), Elizabeth Meese in her essay “Sexual politics and Critical Judgement” (After Strange Texts: The Role of Theory in the Study of Literature – 1985), regards ‘interpretive community’ (which professes to allow the readers to respond on the basis of their own established predilections), as a cover label for ‘authoritative community’ based on ‘gender-based literary tribalism’. She projects as the arch-enemy a privileged body holding in its hands the power to legislate in the sphere of literary evaluation. This concept of truth as dependent upon power systems which themselves obstruct knowledge, is one that paradoxically gives impetus to various so-called ‘minorities’ in their rejection of what they see as established hierarchies of authority. Meese herself uses it to assert a feminist challenge to the ‘methods and techniques of the inherited critical tradition’. Since the determination of what constitutes reason rests where the centre of power is— in ‘the community of elite white men’, the task of feminist criticism is to revise ‘the politics of “truth”’, and this is not just a question of formulating contraries...
and opposing the male to the female, the outsider to the insider, for such a process fosters the very oppositional logic by which privilege is sustained.

The present study attempts to analyse the works of Virginia Woolf and Fay Weldon in the light of French psycho-feminist interpretations—keeping in mind that, whereasJacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud interpret female authors suffering from neurotic disorders along the lines of patriarchal assertions, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva are concerned with the specific problems raised by women's relation to writing and language while questioning Freud and Lacan's sexually biased stance, and even do away with Simone de Beauvoir's liberal desire for equality with men, rather emphasizing on 'difference', thus calling for the right to cherish female values. But to what extent do Woolf and Weldon's fiction conform to or deviate from French feminist arguments remains to be seen.

I would specially like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Toril Moi's _Sexual/Textual Politics_, for Moi is one of the few critics who have successfully managed to illumine the feminist responses (both positive and negative) that Woolf's works have elicited. However, I am also aware that this thesis demands a further elaboration of the utility of French feminist response (at the point where Moi has left off) to the works of Weldon, and its spilling onto postmodernist literary discourse in the concluding phase. Nevertheless, what will be highlighted in the following chapter on _Orlando_, is the concept of 'androgyny' as an alternative discourse which, to some extent acknowledges the Freudian concept of the influence of the unconscious on the individual's conscious thoughts and actions---a possibility which Elaine Showalter has somewhat wrongly denounced as 'a myth that helped [Woolf] evade confrontation with her own painful
femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition'. But on the other hand, Freud also negates the ‘female’ experience because of the woman’s lack of the ‘penis’ (as critics tend to interpret Woolf’s writings as expressions of inner turmoil and ‘feminine’ madness) along the lines of Lacan’s theory that the unconscious is the outcome of the repression of desire, views which Julia Kristeva refutes by opining that ‘the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary opposites of masculinity and femininity.’ In fact, from Kristeva onwards, we have begun to move towards a woman-centred perspective where Irigaray denounces Freud’s concept of ‘penis envy’ in the woman as a projection of male superiority, and Cixous romanticizes her vision of the female body as the site of women’s writing.

Thus, beginning with explorations of androgyny in Woolf’s *Orlando,* where androgyny may signify anything from the author’s own guilt regarding her relation with the subject of her text, to mere playful fantasy, or a philosophy concretised, the work proceeds on to the novels of Weldon in which even common objects appear menacing to the fevered brain and split identities (as in *Splitting, The Cloning of Joanna May,* to name a few) become the order of the day. Also, special emphasis is laid on Weldon’s *The Hearts and Lives of Men,* not because it has the usual dose of wickedness, lust and supernaturalism, but because it calls for a study of Little Nell’s point of view and subsequent actions which throw Freudian concepts of ‘penis-envy’ and ‘mother-hating’ to the winds, for not only will Nell ‘not’ be her father or her mother, but she reverses the curse which hounded her from birth by sheer perseverance and grit— giving rise to new possibilities of individual ‘freedom’, (it must be noted here that Nell faces the
struggles which waylay her as the natural outcome of her lack of a protective family, not sexual marginalisation as in the case of her mother or grandmother).

In fact, what the thesis offers is an alternative reading based upon the characters' journey from social-conditioning (as in the case of Orlando), their view of the world in accordance with their own suppressed desires and their acceptance of it, to their struggle to free themselves from social/psychological inhibitions towards a confirmed goal (like Nell). Therefore, while Orlando travels through the ages, carrying along with her the vestiges of the past, it is Nell who catches up with her past (not vice versa) and has full control over her future. What is to be considered now is that, in feminist literary writing, there is a marked shift from the muted, subtle forms of protest of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the more overtly voiced protests of contemporary fiction, which not only reveals the presence of a more vigorous power politics, but also uncannily indicates that the struggle for women's independence has rather gained in momentum for the inequalities continue to exist in some form or the other. There is again definitely a change in position for we are no longer in the nineteenth-century with the genteel lady Orlando in her layered skirts, 'feeling liberated' as she drives her car and smokes cigarettes, but with street-smart Nell with close-cropped hair, who does all sorts of odd jobs not out of curiosity but to earn a living and finally turns into a fashion designer.

But the conflict may not be necessarily external,--- for conflicts may result from a character's inability to face the trauma of confronting his/her own self/sexuality, or of trying to negotiate with it, or in the attempt to break away from it. Since the issues no longer involve political, academic or professional discrimination, the movement now is to turn 'inwards' for self-analysis--- be it of
the 'body’ or the ‘mind’, for career-oriented women and single mothers are uncommon no more. The perspective consequently shifts from the merely adventurous type to the bold sci-fi superwoman, from verbal protests to violent retaliations with newer and more outrageous schemes for revenge. Women no longer tolerate or seek sustenance in conventional relationships but are now ready to strike, rapier in hand, exulting in the sensuous luxuriance of their own bodies, equally eager to make friends and to slay enemies, thus dislocating traditional myths of their own silence. But discriminatory social practices and attitudes are still rampant and the journey towards the ‘ideal’ state has just begun to get thrilling.

Indeed, feminism as a political movement, has at every stage, produced a complementary academic interest in the study of women, whose main objective is to render women visible, to claim legitimacy for women as objects of knowledge. In fact, in the last two decades, women’s fiction have adopted a number of diverse subjects ranging from the female body and sexuality, to domestic violence and child abuse, hitherto considered taboo by publishers and society at large. This is why, women’s fiction can now be regarded as historical and social documents, which has also elicited my analysis of how far fictional representations of women can be reconciled with the women in real life and whether representations can offer viable answers rather than remaining confined within the precincts of the ‘ideal’. It is a new world, with a new set of challenges, as Fay Weldon remarks humorously in her essay entitled, “Pity a Poor Government” (Godless in Eden, 1999):

We now have a New Adam and a New Eve.... God is no longer seen to exist, to bar the door with flaming sword.... The happy couple walk again in paradise. The Garden, mind you, is pretty battered these days, it lacks its ozone layer, is buffeted by the storms of global warming and so on....

33
--- and in such a world, a woman can increasingly choose to be financially independent, to spend, to party, to choose her sexual partners or not to have a male companion at all--- and unlike Woolf's serious vision of the perfect androgynous self, Weldon's ideal world is one of playful mischief where--- A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3. Ibid., p. 152.

4. Ibid., p. i.


13. The Contagious Diseases Act of 1864, which was introduced as a pretext to control the spread of venereal diseases, allowed for the licensing and
inspection of brothels in garrison and dockyard towns with the forcible
detainment (by the police) and examination of any woman suspected of being
a prostitute. Men, who might be equally infected, were obviously exempted
from such humiliating procedures.


15. The first Married Women’s Property Act was passed in 1870 prior which a
woman had no automatic right to maintain ownership of property which was
hers before marriage, nor to possess her own savings and earnings after
marriage. The Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 was the first
comprehensible piece of legislation to give property rights to married women,
and in 1891 an Act was passed which denied men ‘conjugal rights’ to their
wives’ bodies without their wives’ consent.

1979, p.48.


19. Ibid., p.5.

20. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Tr. and ed. by H.M. Parshley), Vintage

p.24.


23. *No Sacred Cows: A Café Talk with Fay Weldon*, 2nd June 2003,

