CHAPTER - I

Eudora Welty and Southern Fiction

With the passage of time American literature has got a very significant place in the annals of world literature. A number of literary luminaries contributed to this all round progress in the field of literature. Southern American literature started getting recognition in the beginning of the 20th century. Eudora Welty, Faulkner, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Robert Penn Warren and Andrew Lytle are the most notable names. They disapproved the dictum of H.L. Mencken that south was a ‘Sahara of the Bozart’. By their craftsmanship and dexterity in the style and variant themes, they carved a unique niche in the literary arena.

When the entire scenario is looked in retrospect, it is found that the south produced competent writers earlier but they ignored the region in their writings. Edgar Allan Poe was one of them. He did not give significance to it. Sydney Lanier wrote knowledgeably about the south but considered southern climate as stultifying. Mark Twain, who was born on the fringes of the South, despised its manners and customs. By going deeper into the literary gamut, it is
found that the Southern literature consisted of plantation narratives and sentimental stories quite nostalgic in their themes.

This period of aridity has not to continue for long. There was a spurt of literary writings, which gave birth to Southern Renaissance. The literature produced in mid 50s was remarkable for its diversity and coherence. The Southern writers gave more importance to the consciousness of specific locations - middle Tennessee, Southern Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, Virginia Piedmonts and New Orleans. “The story of Southern Literature since World War II consists in part of a continuing Renaissance at least during 1950s and early 1960s but increasingly it has included writers with little real knowledge of the older south, the living traces of which were still available to nourish people such as Faulkner, Wolfe, Eudora Welty and the Vanderbilt poets and novelists”

No doubt there was a big divide between the north and the south about the themes, but the southern topics remained pertinent for the southern readers. The popular themes during that time of the literary works were ever changing family relationships, one’s own family and those of friends and neighbours, later on

other writers described about the disparity existing between races. In such writing, the central figure or the protagonist was a slave character - black character who got popularity but had to face the challenges of the outside world. During 20th Century sentimental romanticism gave way to realism. Charles W. Chestnutt’s collection of realistic tales ‘The Conjure Women’ (1899) describes the interesting development of the black women. He describes the pitiable predicament of the black slaves emulating the strategies of the white to preserve their dignity and to ensure their survival. Kate Chopien portrayed sympathetically the condition of 19th Century women quite at loggerheads with the trammels and shackles embossed on her by the society.

There was perceptible change that was enveloping the atmosphere. This was reflected by T.S. Stribling (1881-1965) and Evelyn Scott (1893-1963). The former opened the way for the full-scale literary treatment of black that reached maturity in the novels of William Faulkner. In addition to that, he wrote the series of didactic novels castigating the bigotry and stark materialism of small town life in the mid south. His ‘The Unfinished Cathedral’ (1934) underlined the rise of poor white family and its later domination. Similarly, Evelyn Scott exemplifies in his novels the
developing revolution in southern attitudes. His ‘Narcissus’ (1922) and the ‘Golden Door’ (1925) traced the Southern families genealogy in three generations by pointing out the tension created in other marriages by the conflict that happens between their inherited social mores and the demands of their natural sexual impulses. She puts a new technique of narration which was utilized by her successors. Elizabeth Madox (1841-1941) understood the Jamesian principle of the narrative and was rendered in the form of language the action of her story rather than relating it. With the result her fiction took a poetic form.

It becomes quite clear by the beginning of the 1940s that women writers assumed a position of dominance in the realm of southern fiction. By 1940s the work of James Branch Cabell had disappeared from human memory. Similarly Pulitzer price winner T.S. Stribling has lost most of his shine. While taking a complete picture of that period, it is found Ellen Glasgow got equal rank with Faulkner. By 1940 Carson McCullers (1917-1967) and Eudora Welty unfurled the flag of southern fiction at a high pedestal. Carson wrote five novels, twenty short stories and a number of poems. The main theme of her writings was loneliness as was her own life. She got name and fame for her two novels – ‘The Heart is a
Lonely Hunter’ (1940) and ‘The Number of the Wedding’ (1946). In both the novels she presented the picture of a intelligent, highly sensitive young girl, quite desperate to establish a human relationship like her creator. The first novel describes the temperament and the life of Mick Kelly. She is poor but passionately in love with music (McCuller's first love). She dreamt of buying a piano one day. She wants a receptive heart to whom she can communicate her passion. Ultimately, she focuses her attention upon John Singer a local deaf-mute. The irony of this relationship is that he neither understands the music nor the girl’s earnest need of friendship. Ultimately, he commits suicide and Mick Kelly remains in the same lonely mood as she was earlier. Her second novel revolves around Frankie Adams who has the concerns that Mick lacks in the first novel. With her elder brother getting married, she starts fantasizing to join them at honeymoon trip. Actually she joins them later on as she finds a friend of her own age to establish a close communion.

The second Southern woman who emerged as a major figure during 50s was Eudora Welty. She won a number of honours for her literary works. Among them are four O’ Henry first prizes, the Gold Medal for the Novel from the National Institute of Arts and
Letters and in 1973 a Pulitzer Prize for fiction. She was really a southern novelist because she gave local colour to her novels by describing Mississippi and the Jackson area where she was born and lived for most of her life, the delta region, the hill country and New Orleans. She made this local colour a medium through which she could explore the multi-faceted aspects of the human comedy. In one of her essays writing in 1956 she called the use of local colour “An Instrument, not an end in itself”\(^2\). In that way she is quite equal to the literary acumen of her contemporary in Oxford to the north and well above that of the rest of her peers. The body of that achievement consists of four volumes of stories (one of these a series of related stories that many have treated as a novel), five novels a book of children’s stories, a remarkable collection of photographs, of collection of essays on writers and writing and a book of auto biographical reminiscences.

She started her literary career with her short story, ‘The Death of a Traveling Salesman’ in 1936. Within a year she was able to get the attention of Brooks and Warren at the Southern review. Later on she wrote ‘A Curtain of Green’ in 1941, ‘the Wide Net and Other Stories’ in 1943 and ‘The Golden Apples’ in 1949 and three

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\(^2\) Ibid. p.140.


In all her works remarkable range is found in style, subject matter and theme. She gave the subtitle ‘Experiments in Fiction’ to
her first book ‘A Curtain of Green’. It contains high and respectable quality as far as matter and method is concerned. In the words of Henry James, it can be said that ‘Welty was such a rare artist in whom nothing is lost’. Like Faulkner the most important quality in her works is the representation of the world she knows best. She has rendered them available with a compassionate eye. Her characters include Mississippians of all classes and age groups, mainly white. She was criticized in her early career for not portraying adequately the black characters. Different firms of Mississippi life are described in her works like delta plantation in ‘Delta Wedding’ the hill country in ‘Loosing Battles’ and small town in ‘Golden Apples’.

Like Mark Twain, Welty has other talents and qualities to a great extent. Her first novel ‘The Robber Bridegroom’ (1942) substantiates this fact. It has a combination of Hellenic myth and southern tales of folk heroes and villains. Her second novel ‘Delta Wedding’ (1946) explores the concept of love and proves that love is essential for human beings for living in communion with one another. ‘The Golden Apples’ (1949) deals with members of three or four families as they flourished in the small town of Morgana, Mississippi during the years following World War I. All the principal
characters of the short stories are wonderers of heart. They always go in the search of impossible dreams. This trait of their characters can be summed up in the personality of King Maclain, a wandering tea and spice salesman. He has seduced many of town's wives and thus physically and spiritually fathered many children. This aspect of patrimony is pointed out by Welty by giving examples from great myths as well as from Yeat's Song of wandering Aengus'. Similarly this wanderlust was continued by King Maclain's daughter Virgie Rainey. She returns only in the final story to Morgana for her mother's funeral. Afterward she wanders in the rain to a nearby village where all the Maclains are buried and thus recognizes her kinship with rest of perennially wandering humanity.

Welty's 'The Ponder Heart' (1954), a short novel was her first attempt at pure comedy. It describes about Edna Earle Ponder, a benevolent manager of the Beulah Hotel in clay, Mississippi. Here uncle Daniel's greatness of heart is stressed who joyfully gives everything he owns. At the end of the story it is found that his gestures of giving even though he no longer has anything to give. This novel elicited spontaneous admiration from all quarters. Its success as a novel prompted play Wrights Jerome Chodorov and
Joseph Fields to write a dramatic version of the piece which played on Broadway with great success.

In 1969 Welty Published, again in the New Yorker, a second short novel, ‘The Optimist’s Daughter’, which provided Pulitzer Prize to the novelist in 1973. In this novel like in ‘The Ponder Heart’, Judge Mckelva late in life has optimistically married to a much younger woman named Wanda Fay. Her other novel ‘Losing Battles’ (1970) shares a relationship with ‘Delta Wedding’ of 1946. It is a family novel. It is set in Banner, Mississippi, and a small community in the hilly north eastern part of the state. The novelist describes this fact that love among human beings is an essential quality for having congenial relationship in marriage, family and community. This communion in love comes to the fore in the annual gathering of the Beecham Renfro Clan to celebrate the birthday of their family matriarch, Granny Vaughn.

Welty’s main reason of success is her masterful method of presentation which is a mixture of humour and realistic details. Her works have identifiable marks of Mississippi- the geography, which she has observed at first hand, the language, which she has reproduced faultlessly and the people. But this local coloring gradually becomes the progressive revelation of the universal
human condition. This aspect makes her significant among other women novelists like North Carolina’s, Francas Gray Patton, Kentucky Borh Elizabeth Hardwick and West Virginia’s relatively prolific Mary Lee Settle.