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Reforming Beliefs

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF PROMINENT WOMEN NOVELISTS OF TWENTIETH CENTURY**Dr. Naveen K Mehta****ABSTRACT**

Women novelists of the twentieth century have played significance role in the development of English Fiction. Round about the year 1930 they seemed to dominate the literacy scene. They made notable contribution to English Fiction. They followed the track which Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth had left behind in the eighteenth century. They sought to capture in their work the feminine view point. They represented the world from the view point of women. They also attempted satirical fiction and tried their hands at the Stream-of-Consciousness technique. The present paper is an attempt to have a critical review of leading women novelists of twentieth century.

Keywords: Women, Characters, Theme, Plot, Twentieth Century.

Among them Virginia Woolf has occupied a great place. The value of her fiction is that she has carried it both forward and backward, by a cyclic process, to that spring of all fiction. Her novels are lyrical and at the same time sharp and clean. She has been regarded as one of the pioneers of the Stream-of-Consciousness movement.

Her *Night and Day* deals with minute psychological details of the characters. Her *Jacob's Room* deals with the life of Jacob Flanders. Jacob Flanders's life has been shown in various lights. *Mrs. Dalloway* is the most popular of her novels. It deals with life of Mrs. Dalloway in London. Its limit is merely going out of Mrs. Dalloway to buy flowers for a party and closes with a description of the party. It is rich in day-dream, memories and immediate impressions of the central figure enriched by translation into consciousness of other characters who are connected with Mrs. Dalloway in some emotional or even merely passing relationships. Her *To the Light House* is divided into three parts. Part first, *The Windows* describes a house party on the island of Skye. Part second, *Time Passes* describes how during the long years of war the house is left to dust and

silence. Part third deals with the visit to the Light House after the passing of the years. C.S. Fraser remarks: "perhaps the most solid and real of all Mrs. Woolf's novels is to the light house where she used the experiences of her own childhood." Her *The Waves* deals with lives of Bernard, Louis, Susan and jimmy symbolically. Her *The Years* deal with the city life and the family life. Her *Orlando* is a fantasy based on life, personality and literary background of her Victoria Sackville west. "Woolf's novels are a beautiful monument to excessive delicacy of that kind. She created a fictional world which was not a reflection of the actual world, but only a world made in the image of her own excellent sensibilities, a better world may be, but a beautiful world." Legouis and Cezamian observe, "One cannot help believing that the novels of Mrs. Woolf even if they were to be isolated portent, will experience a fuller Survival." C. S. Fraser points out that, "in spite of all their beauty and charm, the atmosphere of Mrs. Woolf's novels is rather a sad one."

Katherine Mansfield is a writer of short stories and during her life time five volumes of her stories were published. As writer of stories, she followed in the footsteps of the Russian novelist and story writer Chekov, whose work she admitted inordinately. Unlike Dorothy Richardson and Woolf who are exclusively autobiographical, Katherine Mansfield studied life objectively and understood characters widely divergent from herself in both temperament and accidentals. Some of her stories have the setting of New Zealand life. While in others she presents the weariness frustration of her English life. Her stories are marked with a note of somberness and are characterized with a haunting sense of pathos. One should turn to *Prelude*, *To the Boy*, *The Fly* and *The Garden Party* to have glimpses of the fine psychological art of Katherine Mansfield.

Rose Macaulay is a critic of modern society. She wrote satirical novels in which foibles and weaknesses of modern society were exposed. In a succession of satirical novels, she demolished the follies and pretenses of several generations. Her second novels *Dangerous Ages* and *Told by an Idiot* are in the same style expressing the foibles of the Victorian age. To them Rose added her significant work, *Potterism* which is written against Victorian philistinism. "Rose Macaulay entered upon fiction as an acute social critic and her brilliance was almost insolent, for she appeared to turn no more than half an eye upon the world."

They were Defeated is a historical novel and recreates the life of the seventeenth century society with fidelity. *The World My Wilderness* is inspired by the war. "The Characters of Barbary and Raoul are drawn with sympathy and understanding and the wilderness of the bomb desolated area around St. Paul's Cathedral is too accurately and vividly projected that future social historians may well find in this novel something more than a world portrait of the city in ruins."

Henrietta Richardson brought her novels under the pseudonym, Henry Handel Richardson. She is principally interested in her native land Australia, and her novels bring about her love for Australia. Her works are characterized with vigour and deep understanding of Australian life. Her main works are *Mauire Guest* (1908), *Young Casima* (1939) and *The Fortune of Richard Moleony, A Trilogy*, which she published between 1917- 1929. The trilogy which is an elaborate study of the misadventures of the physician hero in Australia.

Dorothy Richardson is a prominent woman novelist of the twentieth century who belongs to the School of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. She has made experiments in the field of psychological analysis and popularized the Stream-of-Consciousness technique which had been cultivated with success by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. She follows the method of Fanny Burney of the eighteenth century in presenting social manners from the standpoint of a woman. In her *Pilgrimage*, she presents the life story of a woman. A.C. Wards says, "Dorothy Richardson's books amble onwards as Miriam goes through a life which has a few emotional contours."

Miss Ward is an intellectual novelist and her work is marked with a note of seriousness and earnestness. There is a streak of religion and philosophical wisdom in her famed work, *The History of David Grieve*, *Robert Elsmere* and *Marcella* are saturated with religion and philosophical thought.

Sarah Grand is interested in the emancipation of women and her novels aim at betterment of feminine life in her times. She is a great advocate of the 'Woman Movement'. Her two chief novels are *Idea* and *The Woman Who Did*. In the art of narration and in the faculty of presenting a large number of characters in interaction with each other, Sarah Grand has given her best wave in *Admas Orchard*. She is a novelist of strong intellectual force and her work is immensely appreciated by woman readers.

Cliffard is the novelists of heart and touches the choral of tender sentiment without under exaggeration. Pleasant sentiment is the distinguishing characteristic of her fine work, *Aunt Anne*. This book is the character sketch of a pathetic and foolish woman, deceived into marriage by an adventurer who loves her only for her money.

Ivy Compton-Burnett describes mostly dialogues of the crowded upper middle-class Victorian households at the turn of the century. The contrast between their stiff and formal exterior and their hidden low impulses produces shocking results. There are murders, adultery incest and such other things like as in Greek Tragedy. What is most striking is that such themes are treated informal, proper style, reminiscent of Jane Austen who, however, would never have touched such themes. Burnett has written nearly two dozen novels, the most outstanding being *Pastors and Masters, A Family and a Fortune, The Mighty and Their Fall*. David Duches says, "Miss Burnett is an eccentric among modern English novelists and it is the eccentrics in this period of technical consolidation who have kept the novel lively and interesting."

Rosamand Lehmann, in her *Echoing Grove* she advances the interesting theory that human beings are sexual mixtures. Man is not entirely male nor woman entirely female; each has something of the other. According to this theory much of the tension in male-female relationship which is due to unawareness of this fact.

Elizabeth Bowen is a prominent novelist of our times. She is a novelist of exceptional individuality and is a close follower of Virginia Woolf. She has little in common with Graham Greene though both of them are interested in the study of the human heart. She studies life around her with an artistic detachment and presents her impressions of life in a delicate, subtle style characterized by feminine sensitiveness. The main novels of Elizabeth Bowen are *The Heat of the Day* and the *Last September*.

Doris Lessing a Rhodesian by birth, emigrated to England after the second world war. She is a crusading novelist devoted to two causes: the coloured of Africa and women's subjection in man's world. An accomplished writer, she is quite objective in her treatment of the colour problem, though for less so in respect of woman's problem. She thinks communism along could solve the problems, *Children of Violence* is the little of a tetralogy whose constituent novels are *Martha Quest, A Proper Marriage, A Ripple from the Strom* and *Landlocked*. In her passionate

concern with questions of morality Lessing is reminiscent of George Eliot.

Concluding Remarks

"There was more freshness and daring than art and staying power in many of these women writers, both though the literary revolution of the woman's movement was a brief one, it left a permanent mark on the fiction that succeeded; and the experimentalists today, such as Mr. Compton Mackenzie and Mr. Gilbert Cannan owe a considerable debt to the women pioneers who broke fresh ground, especially in the domain of sexual psychology, in the 'nineties' of the last century."

To sum up, the women novelists in different ages have their individual genius as the male novelists have genius of their own. In the eighteenth century women novelists—Fanny Burney, Miss Clara Reeve are equal to every respect to the male novelists of Victorian Era and the modern age have own importance as the male novelists of the above mentioned ages have in field of English novel.

END NOTES

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³ Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, History of English Literature, 1st ed. (1981:rpt., New Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd., 1987), p.1362

⁴ C. S. Fraser, The Modern Writer and his World (London: Curtis Brown Ltd., 1961), p. 74.

⁵ A.C. Fraser, Twentieth Century Literature (Norwich: Tarrold and Sons Ltd., 1963), p. 75.

⁶ A.C. Fraser, Twentieth Century Literature (Norwich: Tarrold and Sons Ltd., 1963), p. 76.

⁷ A.C. Fraser, Twentieth Century Literature (Norwich: Tarrold and Sons Ltd., 1963), p. 68.

⁸ David Daiches, The Present Age (London: The Cresset Press, 1958), P.117

⁹ Arthur Compton –Rickett, A History of English Literature (London : Thomes Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1964), p.p. 662-663

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