

FEMINISM IN WORLD THOUGHT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO VIRGINIA WOOLF

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ABSTRACT

Feminism is that specific trend which has been influencing the mystics, sages, philosophers and poets and above all the prophets since times immemorial. Whether it was Adam (the first mystic) or Abraham, (who was all intuition) or Prophet Mohammad (the greatest and most genuine mystic) and since their times many others as Ibn'l Arabi', Al-Jili, Rumi, Iqbal and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh etc. in the Orient and Plotinus, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Spinoza, Schelling, Kant and besides them Bergson, Shaw, Mill, Ibsen, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf etc. in the Occident (and long back, again in the Orient *the Ramayana, the Mahabharata* and *Vedanta*) all of them are, somehow or the other ultimately inclined towards intuition. Thus Feminism maybe defined as Intuitionism.

Keywords: feminism, reality, androgynous, masculine, harmony, humanism, divine

INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf was a Feminist. But due to the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the word 'Feminism' she did not like to be labelled as feminist because warrior-like attitude was against her mystical bent of mind. Acceptance and acknowledgement and not the negation of each other is the right way. Virginia Woolf's feminism is positive, constructive, vast and interesting. She had always in her mind an ideal of womanhood and motherhood and besides that the ideal of an androgynous and harmonious mind, a balanced personality in which the opposites are united. She is desirous of the evolution of woman as an individual and an artist. This double concern bestows upon her art a dynamism and vigour. Whenever she tried to play the role of an active feminist she tried to establish the relationship of the advocated matters with the spiritual life of women and interpreted those laws of mind and spirit which have never been written on paper. Her art fulfils a golden aim in which she has presented the ideal of a harmonious mind. Her novels are bright and lustrous with the light of universal ideas. Her prose is symbolic and poetic- poetry which is the most perfect speech of man. Thus, the most popular critical view about Virginia Woolf is negated that there is to be found a stream of consciousness technique in her fiction. At the level of thought she was labelled as "Feminist" and at the level of art she was called a mere technician. It was all done merely to limit her and to decrease her status which was actually sky-high! While William James had used the phrase "Stream of consciousness", he had compared personality with a stream and then with a wave which has a deep mystical meaning and which is different from mere interior monologue. This concept of personality will be interpreted in the forthcoming paragraphs.

In spite of all this it is to be said that the *Three Guineas* was not written in the vacuum. It is not an echo of the Suffrage Movement which was peculiar to the 'thirties' intensified by the depression, by fascism and by the misuse of sex. J. B. Batchelor has aptly quoted Ruth Gruber's

remark from her book, *Virginia Woolf: A Study* in his essay:

The tremendous battle cry for freedom, for the breaking of chains, which has characterized man like Shelley, is sounded now by women. Just as Nietzsche had proclaimed the men of the future, so Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries, women like Rebeca West and Dorothy Richardson are making the way for the woman of the future. The political emancipation is one step; the intellectual emancipation must follow.

Virginia Woolf considers individual life to be above sex. The *Three Guineas*, which had been considered by Forster to be a "cantankerous" book, is a mystical or sufistic treatise in which she has presented suggestions for preventing war and a very valuable advice to women that they should not compete with men as they have a better role of their own. Women are capable of giving men "a renewal of creative power". Therefore women's education should "bring out the difference rather than similarities". She feels that women, by their presence and "indifference" can renew a sense of life (and of the importance of life) in men and thus protect them from their lust for war and death. *Three Guineas* could be called a Utopia or a mystical treatise. Virginia Woolf seems to be yearning for the freedom to live her own feminine life fully. She wants at least those obstacles to be removed which are in the way of women writers- the lack of appropriate environment and economic independence, interferences and disturbances faced by them. Though, on principle, she agreed with the Suffrage Movement, she did not want to have a direct link with it as she was too sensitive about ridicules. But she was well aware of whatever was going on.

Virginia Woolf considered feminine mind to be different from masculine mind. Woman, since ages, has been under man's subjugation and her attitudes have changed under the influence of masculine standards. Now she has to discover ways of her own. Without yielding herself before the criticism of any "task-masters" woman should be able to live her own life. Virginia Woolf has presented women to have been living in darkness and suffocation since ages and now slowly and gradually coming towards light. Her feminism is much more positive, constructive, interesting and deep. She discovered the basic characteristic of feminine experience and told where it differs from masculine experience. She feels that purely masculine and purely feminine mind is dangerous. Feminine and masculine, intuitive and rational realities are to be blended and synthesized together in order to create harmony and make the personality complete and balanced. Coleridge has said: "Only an androgynous mind can create". He was of opinion that purely feminine and purely masculine minds cannot create. Shakespeare's was an androgynous mind and so was of Virginia Woolf and George Eliot. For Virginia Woolf androgyny was a kind of parable having a solution to the dilemma of the feminist at war with herself.

Feminism, for Virginia Woolf, is a way to perceive reality. Being acquainted with social history she was convinced that Western civilization had emphasized the masculine faculties and suppressed feminine modes throughout. This subjugation has been the source of so many disorders of society social as well as psychological. The Victorians excessively suffered from this spiritual disease. Uncontrolled masculinity has been responsible for wars, dictatorship and bloodshed. This one-sidedness is the basic cause behind the tragic sense of loneliness and isolation in modern man who is

a stranger to himself as well as to others and has lost his intuitive self, his soul!

In Virginia there is a balance which is essential to transcend the boundaries and barriers of Time and Space. She is reflected and revealed in her writings in the same way as Shakespeare is omnipresent in his writings. The reason behind the presentation of such an ideal in her writings was that she was fundamentally a religious person, a mystic, a poet whose own personality was integrated. Her feminism could be named as Androgynism or Humanism. With the help of great consciousness of history and being inclined to the roots she has indicated towards the evolution of civilization. Intuitive element in itself cannot create a perfect personality. For it the inclusion of intellect or higher reason is required. The reference to the definition of the word 'criticism' in *The Dictionary of World Literature* by Shipley is quite relevant here due to a specific reason. He says:

All criticism is based on an individual's response to a work of art logically individual response is the first requisite... The intuitive response comes first... the next step is fuller understanding the movement towards the ideal and unattainable goal, of complete, clear, faithful comprehension. The final stage is judgement. This is the ideal order instinctive response, voluntary understanding, final evaluation.

There ideal, in a way negates the traditional masculinism and rationality on the one hand and on the other the one-sided feminism. Modern feminist criticism fulfils the ideal of Shipley. Keeping in view the tenets of this very approach to works of art and the artist we are trying here to search for the signs of greatness in Virginia Woolf. Otherwise mere reason and intellect had found her to be just an architect of the stream of consciousness technique having no capacity to establish and maintain constructive relationship with society. That is why she wants intellect to be controlled and restricted by intuition and that is why Universal Love is so much important for her. Intellect and intuition are to be harmonised for achieving the wholeness of personality. This concept of man is mystical and sufistic whose tradition has been very old in world literature and world thought.

Homer, Plato, Nietzsche, Goethe, Bergson, Shaw and many others had their specific concepts of man. The revelations of the ideal man are found in the ancient periods in the personalities of Sri Krishna and Sri Ramchandra and whose sublimest representation is to be found in the Holy Quran in the form of Perfect Man which is the source of the concept of Perfect Man of Ibn'l Arabi Rumi and Iqbal. A similar ideal is to be found in the writings of Virginia Woolf. It is astonishing that the sensibilities of Virginia Woolf and Bergson are very near to the spirit of Islam. Their concepts of Man, of time and space are nearer to the Islamic concepts of Man and time and space. Virginia Woolf had taken inspiration from the imagination of Coleridge which was enlightened with divine beauty. She had perceived in Nature, like Wordsworth, a living and stirring spirit and knew that there is a relationship between the physical world and human mind. Both of them were pantheists. She, like Wordsworth, does not regard God as something separate from Nature which an orthodox Christian would do. In its contemplation of Nature their minds did not remain inactive. A kind of light would come out of their minds and would make the sun, the breeze, and the other objects of nature more beautiful and splendid than they actually were. With the "auxiliary light of the mind" they perceived a "living soul" in Nature. As a mature man Wordsworth had found the sun to be the embodiment of wisdom and spirit of the Universe and so also had found Virginia Woolf. That is why her novel *The*

Waves is the most characteristic works having the symbolic setting of sun. Bernard Blackstone has said:

Virginia Woolf has been called a feminist. But more truly we might call her an androgynist because she puts the emphasis on the mystery of completion and not on the discussion of separate superiorities.

Her novel *To the Lighthouse*, in a way, could be called an attack on the male community as its emphasis on the feminine sensibility of Mrs. Ramsay is one-sided having no blending of masculine sensibility. But in the novel *The Years* the central figure Eleanor, has learnt, after having reached her old age, to maintain a balance between the feminine and masculine, intuitive and rational aspects of her mind. In this novel an effort has been made to bridge the gap between individual consciousness and group consciousness, hence the blending of poetry with reality. Its mystic heroine Eleanor is not detached from day-to-day life and acts in the real world. Eleanor means 'light'. She directs the way as to how perfection is to be attained in spite of social and political chaos and disorder. In Virginia Woolf's writings there is to be found the highest standard of morality which is above mere preaching. She is an androgynist as she prefers an integrated personality over a one-sided one and tries to synthesize matter and spirit.

Her vision and ideal of life has been most perfectly revealed in her novel *The Waves*. Therefore it is to be assessed in detail. In it fiction and poetry have been blended together. It has characters who are thinking and feeling intensely, whose childhood, youth and old age have been presented symbolically- Bernard, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda, Neville and Louise who take us deeper into the recesses of their souls. The language used by Virginia Woolf seems to be akin to the poetic English of the Psalms of the Bible. It is symbolic and metaphorical as she was more interested in human experience than in individual character. Life's joys and pains, mysteries of the self, beauty and search for truth have been transformed in words. She has tried to recapture time. Here is to be found a mental poesy, an atmosphere of the mind which brings her near to Shakespeare. The lives of these characters are inseparable. An inclination towards the roots is also an important theme of the novel as the knowledge of roots is exhibitivive of our being civilized and cultured. Batchoffen says: "Nowhere in history do we find a beginning but always a continuation. How then we understand the end if beginning remains a mystery?"

Bernard, the central personality in *The Waves*, says:

I am not one person, I am many people. I do not know who I am Jinny, Susan, Rhoda, Neville or Louis-my life from theirs - 'we are bound not only to our friends but to or how to distinguish the long-long history that began in Egypt in the time of Pharaos when women carried pitchers to the Nile.

Louis says: "I had a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots godown to the depths of the world...I am all fibre". There is a natural effect in *The Waves* which is presented in many ways: "Virginia Woolf seems to agree with the Islamic Pantheist, Ibn'l Arabi that the essence is (in reality) Nature; that the world of Nature is many forms in one mirror, nay, one form in diverse mirrors."She, like Arabi, indicates the relation of one to the many by means of metaphors.

In this novel the heavenly journey of the sun, the movement of the waves, the colours of the horizon - all these have been presented parallel to the different periods of character's lives. Every current of thought is a stream. By the blending of all those streams there is formed an all inclusive stream named Bernard. He is a "living stream" who possesses an androgynous personality. Virginia Woolf's Bernard, in an ecstatic state of transcendence, of fullness of life, says:

Immeasurably receptive, holding everything trembling with fullness, yet clear, contained so my being seems, now that desire urges no more out and away; now that curiosity no longer dyes it a thousand colours. It lies deep, tideless, immune, now that he is dead the man I call 'Bernard'...But now let the door open...Let a woman come, let a young man in evening dress sit down: is there anything that they can tell me? No I know all the too...So now, taking upon me the mystery of things, I could go like a spy without leaving this place, without stirring from my chair. I can visit the remote verges of the desert lands." During these moments of vision he is tideless like the calm sea. He is with himself getting intuitions, capable of knowing things without being told about, and he is "free, traversing, swift in expanse and vastness". He is capable of transcending time and space. This state of bliss gives him freedom and peace.

Virginia Woolf's vision of life is very similar to the vision of Jala-ud- Din Rumi. The symbols and metaphors employed by them are archetypal because since ages saints and sages have had similar visions. N.C. Thakur, the author of *The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf* has rightly found analogies between the visions of Rumi and Virginia. He is of opinion that Virginia Woolf could not see reality in terms of theistic symbols, as the Christian Trinity, an awful shadow of some unseen power.

Virginia Woolf feels that reality is not something insubstantial and imaginary and life, which is the essence of this reality, will continue to exist. After having seen various deaths in her family and destructions of the First World War, she had become conscious of the transitoriness of life. Though we continue changing we perpetually exist. Life continues. This very abstract idea has been made alive by using the metaphors of waves and sea. In the form of different individuals there were born Jinny, Rhoda. Susan, Neville, Louis and Bernard. Every object returns to its origin. That single and lonely force is all-pervading. Even after death, life continues. Thus man defeats death even after he has died. Bernard challenges death towards the end of the novel. There is defiance in his tone which removes despair and pessimism. He says: 'And in me too the wave rises. It is death. Death is the enemy. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding. O Death!

Virginia Woolf's vast learning and close familiarity with both the Orient and the Occident should not be taken as a drawback or weakness but a proof of her all-inclusiveness and cosmic and oceanic vision and sensibility. Like Radhakrishnan and Mohd. Iqbal, Virginia Woolf seems to believe that unless civilization is based on spirituality neither the dream of world peace can be realized, nor human beings can become real and perfect men. The restructuring of spirituality and morality, i.e., of religious thought is the greatest need of the time. Virginia Woolf, along with Bergson and Rumi, feels that man is capable of ascending more stages of evolution, hence their effort to bridge the gap between matter and spirit. Real spirituality does not negate life in which the mystic seems to come

forward as a man of action. It does not negate body. The essence of *The Upanishads* is also the same. Virginia Woolf stands with the magnanimous personages of the world due to the concept of an ideal man. She feels that perfection could be attained both by men and women as they have been created by the same soul with the same origin. Virginia Woolf is of opinion that the world is on the verge of annihilation due to the prevailing prejudices about women who have been negated. She seems to agree with Ibn'l Arabi that man's biggest enemy is his lower and baser self which takes him towards evil whose manifestation is to be found in the form of war and bloodshed. She feels, like Rabia Basri, an Oriental Sufi that the desire of worldly things takes us towards pain and misery. Love of this world and material gains, of a "sordid boon", is, according to her, the root of all sins. Sincerity can be attained by being unconcerned with and indifferent to the world. Sincerity of action is mysticism whose opposite is hypocrisy. It is the best remedy of many spiritual diseases of the modern world. She accords with Wordsworth that "little we see in Nature that is ours".

Virginia Woolf feels that the vision of the Absolute Reality can be realized in the mirror of love and intuition. Intellect and reason search for reality in pieces. Universal love is beyond time and space and is supreme without which self is a blind force. It makes us courageous and dauntless. It is a "boundless ocean" which, being all-inclusive, absorbs everything. Man attains unity of self by this power. It enables him to know himself. Virginia Woolf's deep interest in Universal love is suggestive of her concern with moral values and action. A. D. Moody, in his book *Virginia Woolf* writes confidently with a visionary insight: "Virginia Woolf's response is to dramatize the disorder in the hope of discovering the image of health and wholeness".

She withdrew from the conventional realities of her world which no longer served human needs but had enslaved man in his own machinery. She has rebelled against society for society's sake. She felt that man's innermost need is for a social order in which he may be whole and entire. In this respect she becomes a seer, a real Sufi like 'Arabi' and Rumi etc. She like Arabi, had contrasted the "finite God of religion with the infinite God of mysticism" and seems to believe in the right- to modify the religious ode. Like Al-Jili she feels that all the souls will be finally saved. Every existing thing is an object of mercy. Religious intolerance appeals as little to the pantheist who says "All is God". Arabi feels more deeply and pleads more earnestly and confidently. What God created in His own image let none take upon himself to destroy except by God's command. All actions belong to God. Love is the highest form in which God is worshipped.

Virginia Woolf, like Rumi, was sensitive to the intimate relationship between Time and Personality which contains Universal Love and is related with Time. Rumi says:

Every instant thou are dying and returning.

"This world is but a moment," said the Prophet.

Our thought is an arrow shot by Him how should

It stay in the air? It flies back to God.

Time and duration are phenomena produced by the rapidity of Divine Action.

She around 1932, resolved to speak out for her sex due to immense self-respect (self-respect

and women are considered to be two opposites!) as she knew that woman had been brought from the high pedestal to be degraded. She herself felt hurt whenever she was underrated or humiliated due to being a woman and moreover a self-respecting woman! She decided to establish the real worth, the superiority of woman but she could never communicate herself fully. She felt that the invisible moments of a writer's life are not found in a writer's work. She and Eliot both wanted to express the obscure corners of character and experience and secondly to give shape to life span. Virginia Woolf was deeply interested in Egyptology, in Isis, the Mother Goddess, who, once, pervaded the whole universe, who was Aditi or Shakti of the Vedas who had said "I am God", "aham Brahmasmi".

Although there is a deep reverence in Virginia Woolf for Feminism as in 'Arabi', 'Jili' and Rumi etc., she has made her own way. For her men as well (not merely women) may be creators if they possess Divine Attributes of Mercy and Love (as Prophet Mohammad to the highest degree and many others to a lesser degree possessed). Therefore all men and women who possess ardent Love are worthy of being called Perfect Beings in the image of God. Al-Jili says: *He is one, He is many. There is a universe in Him. The world is like a circle. The soul of God is permeating. In its form He is androgynous.*

Men and women, all these sages feel, would be perfect in the image of Mother Goddess, a female androgynous deity and not a male, partial God, the finite God of religion. The infinite God of mysticism is all-inclusive, boundless, who does not discriminate, does not negate anyone or anything. The metaphor of circle is very popular among these seers who had a vision of the entire world not a fragmented one. Therefore, all of them are perfect beings themselves. Their search for a Perfect Being was actually a search for their own self. They wanted the world to understand them properly and profoundly. "Know thyself", or self-knowledge has been the ideal for these saints. Their search for the circle is actually their search for the centre, for themselves the microcosms; otherwise no one would have ever recognized their real worth. They had rebelled against the conventional Male God and had tried to re-enthroned the female Mother Goddess (or Mother God)! For this bold venture almost all of them had suffered and struggled. But the suffering of Virginia Woolf was double as she was a woman and the world, being male-dominated, was not hers; she was an alien. All those Sufis, Saints, Sages, poets etc. (including Virginia) were aware of the fact that they had perceived the Absolute Reality, the mysteries of the Self to be revealed to the world if it was to be saved. This was the message of all these saints and mystics. The upright, the virtuous, the noble and the sincere people of the world welcomed and absorbed this message. The morally and spiritually blind still ridicule these magnanimous souls!

Virginia Woolf was no doubt, "the hostess of the Bloomsbury Group", but was not of their 'ethos'. How could she be of their 'ethos' while she was a seer, a visionary like many seers of the Orient East where the Sun rises! N.C. Thakur rightly feels that she was not an intellectual or a philosopher but a seer and an artist trying to body forth her vision. Both her vision and the symbols she employs to evoke it are archetypal because since ages saints and sages have had similar visions. She has expressed the limitations of the mortal mind to see the invisible Light. Her message was for the indivisible humanity. Hers I was a quest for truth. She was a messenger of peace and Universal Love, of liberty, equality, fraternity, of justice and non-violence and a rescuer of essential human values. Due to this vision she attained a prophetic grandeur. She emphasized the psychological, moral

and spiritual aspects of time and space. She yearned for a world having been made beautiful by the realization of her dreams and ideals. All this may be called Feminism or Androgynism, Humanism, Pathism or Intuitionism. It is mystical, Sufistic and saintly whose sole objective is to save mankind from degradation and annihilation. It encompasses, like Vedanta, all religions, all sects, all sciences and all ways of living. It is Universal transcending the narrow boundaries of caste, creed, religion and nationality. Obviously, it is the religion of humanity, the greatest religion of the world superior to any "ism". It aims at creating perfect Men whose way is love which makes man bold and dauntless that even the fire of Nimrod does not seem to him to be dreadful. Love is an ocean which absorbs everything being all-inclusive. It is message of Universal Love, ardent Love or 'Ishq' which enables man to embrace death and thus defeat it. Only feminism is capable of saving the world from annihilation and re-enlivening the modern man who has lost his soul and is searching for it.

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