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Allure of the Androgyny: Negotiating Gender and Genre in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*

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ABSTRACT: Throughout her life Virginia Woolf was seriously concerned with the issue of life-writing and how life could be truly represented through writing. She kept on experimenting with the genre of life-writing and this resulted in two biographies *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933). An interesting feature of Woolf's writing is that there is always a complex negotiation of genre and gender as they co-produce each other. The present paper seeks the interconnections between the genre of biography and gender in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. The text's perplexing narrative structure bewilders the readers as well as critics to place it into any definitive generic category. Interestingly again, it takes for its subject an androgynous person—a man-woman, a he-she. In this text Woolf by deploying playful techniques transcends the various parameters that try to delimit the inherent potentialities of both genre and gender.

Key Words: Genre, Biography, life-writing, Gender, Androgyny, man-woman

"Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above."

(*Orlando*, Virginia Woolf, p. 132-33)

Written in between *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) is Woolf's one of the major experimental works and at the same time it is also highly popular among readers and critics. Though the subtitle of this book claims it as a biography it is nevertheless equally enjoyable as a novel. So, it can be inferred that *Orlando* belongs to the hybrid-genre of novel-biography featuring the characteristics of both the genres. That's why it became problematic for the publishers to put it into a specific category. Some diary entries quoted in *The Cambridge companion to Virginia Woolf*:

> The balance between truth and fantasy in *Orlando* has from the time of publication led to questions of genre. When booksellers insisted on placing it among the biographies, a less popular genre than the novel, Woolf wrote, 'I doubt therefore that we shall do more than cover expenses – a high price to pay for the fun of calling it a biography' ($_{D3}$, p. 198). . . . Yet Woolf did not think of it as a novel either. 'Anyhow I'm glad to be quit this time of writing "a novel"; & hope never to be accused of it again', she wrote in May 1928 (D3, p. 185). (Roe and Sellers 62)

In fact, when viewed closely, novel and biography do not seem to be two mutually exclusive genres. We all know most novels are biographical or

autobiographical in nature. The *bildungsroman* (novel of growth) sub-genre of novel which traces the journey of the protagonist (male or female) through different phases into maturity, is the closest to biography. One major difference is that the subject of biography is a real-life character while that of a *bildungsroman* is a fictional one. Biographies are a very important branch of life-writing that deal with persons and characters. They form important sources for plots of fiction.

Woolf writes in her diary entries about the conception of *Orlando*:

> It struck me, vaguely, that I might write a Defoe narrative for fun. . . . Sapphism is to be suggested. Satire is to be the main note — satire and wildness. . . . Everything is to be tumbled pall mall. It is to be as I write letters at the top of my speed. My own lyric vein is to be satirized. Everything mocked. And is to end with three dots . . . so' (D. iii. 131).

Woolf had by that time published five novels as well as some important essays and short stories. After all these serious experimental works Woolf desired for 'an escapade', 'a writer's holiday'. *Orlando* was written by Woolf with Vita (Victoria) Sackville-West, Woolf's aristocratic friend, at the back of her mind: 'Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman . . . & it should be truthful; but fantastic' (Diary, III, 157). The book is a dedication to Vita, Woolf's friend and lady-love. Vita was a stunningly beautiful aristocratic lady who inherited gypsy blood from her grandmother named Pepita de Oliva who was supposedly a descendant of the gypsies. Vita was an open bisexual and a notorious sapphist (lesbian). She was married to the biographer Harold Nicolson and had affairs with many ladies of the time

Orlando is in no way a traditional biography. Being distrustful towards the traditional biographical pattern Virginia Woolf flouts, subverts, and even plays with conventional techniques. It can be considered a mock-biography, a pseudobiography, a metabiography and even a psychobiography. Despite its fantastic nature *Orlando* is a new kind of biography in every sense. Woolf strongly felt the need reformulating the existing biographical format. In this sense the text is metabiographical in nature since it deploys and lays bare some of the techniques of biography even while criticizing those. The Victorian literary predecessors laid down some rules for biography. For instance, biography cannot take a living person for its subject. By taking 'Vita' as the biographical subject Woolf brought a new vitality and life force to the old and distanced biographical mode. Again, the biographical subject of *Orlando* is a much controversial one. Orlando is an androgynous person who has lived life both as a man and a woman. This is a radical attempt on Woolf's part to lay bare the sexual experiences and adventures of an androgynous person, something which was complete ban for Victorian biography. Victorian biographers would have produced nothing base and irreverent about their subjects. Departing from the Western male-centric vision of archiving public lives Woolf wanted to set a new trend of biography writing which would capture the lives of the women, the marginal and the obscure.

While conveying the life history of Orlando emphasis has been put on the psychic development of the protagonist rather than on external facts: '*Orlando* makes a crucial point about biography written in the light of theories of the unconscious; the

self is composed not only of multiple identities but of multiple temporalities' (Marcus 133). Unconscious plays a dominant role in the psycho-sexual development of Orlando. So many things seem to happen within the unconscious realm.

Equally interesting is the handling of time. Distrustful towards linear chronological narration Woolf develops a unique narrative where the treatment of time is completely arbitrary. Sandra Gilbert in her Introduction to Orlando observes that 'time' which is an important material for historians, chroniclers and biographers is itself mysterious. She questions: 'Is time what we experience or is it what we are told to experience? Do we, in other words, live primarily by personal internal clocks or are we really governed by an abstract, culturally imposed chronology? (xxxi). In case of Orlando, the lifetime of a biographical subject has been expanded to the passage of several centuries—from the Elizabethan to the modern period. On the other hand it might be said that the span of so many centuries is condensed into the duration of one's lifetime. Sandra Gilbert comments that an individual's subjective perception of time and his or her sense of the varieties of emotional, sexual and intellectual experience The gulf between one's adolescence and adulthood is so vast that it is often not possible to measure in 'years' but in 'centuries'. The transition from one period to another is equated with changing phases of Orlando's life. Woolf gives an example of the chronological pattern of biography writing:

> It was now November. After November, comes December. Then January, February, March and April. After April comes May. June, July, August follow. Next is September. Then October, and so, behold, here we are back at November again, with a whole year accomplished. (Woolf 184)

This linear chronological biographical format is what Woolf is skeptical about. Life comprehended only in terms of clocks, calendars and ages cannot reflect the totality of experience. Life is far more mysterious than that. Woolf says that the biographer can report only external facts. Thought, imagination, emotion and unseen actions are of no importance to him. Hence he cannot report them. This is the chief predicament for the biographers. The biographer's claim to objectivity, orderliness and the possibility of reconstructing the past also seemed to Woolf doubtful. The past can only be retained through darkness, opacity and obscurity.

Historical ages are difficult to understand. The straitjacketed categorization of different historical periods and the tradition imposed upon them are arbitrary. The transition from one age to another can be considered as psychic transition – from adolescent to maturity, from strict manhood towards femininity and finally to androgyny: 'The text and history move forward not only through violent transitions from one age to the next but during periods of amnesia, trances, and death-like states' (Marcus 132).

Within the fixed structure of gender norms repression in both sexes is quite common. The soul is trapped and suffers repression within such gendered bodies. The strict categorizations between gender and sexuality are socio-cultural impositions rather than innate aspects. In the text we find the different socio-cultural periods offer

varied discourses on gender and sexuality. The Elizabethan worldview of sexuality is different from that of the Victorian and the Victorian is different from the modern. There is no antagonism between masculinity and femininity.

Virginia Woolf deliberately gave this book a fantastic form in order to avoid controversy and censorship. In her time any alternative version of sexuality other than heterosexuality was strictly banned by law. Woolf's contemporary-writer Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) which portrayed the miserable life of the lesbian protagonist Stephen Gordon whose inherent homosexuality did not find approval in the society and made her life miserable; faced severe criticism on the face of the society and was banned. The theme of gender has been explored in all its ramifications in the text – gender switching, cross dressing, sexual ambiguity, shifting sexual shifting, role playing and what not. There are many instances in the text where the boundaries between man and woman fade. Orlando becomes a woman from a man, Archduke Harry cross-dresses in order to tempt Orlando and Orlando's husband Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine plays reversal of gender-role. Laura Marcus connects this subversion of gender with broader cultural cross-overs:

> Cultural images of sex and gender-crossing such as we find in *Orlando*, are not just transgressions of sexual difference, male/female, but indicate a broader 'category crisis', crossing over borderlines of which the binarism male/female is only one. Sex change, in this model, is the figure of fantasy, 'the transgression of boundaries as a play of difference', in Makiko Minow-Pinkney's words. (Marcus 128)

The major dramatic event of Orlando's sex change occurs through a coma or trance like state during his ambassadorship in Constantinople at the order of King Charles. Now, 'Coma' comes from the Greek word 'komos' meaning revelry or merrymaking. So, this sex change can be taken as a much desired and liberating experience, not at all a matter of worry. The trance lasted for six complete days and on the seventh day he woke up in the form of a woman. Woolf at this point remarks that it would have been extremely difficult for a biographer to report this incident. But for the sake of truth he had to confess that Orlando changed into a woman. Woolf mockingly says that it was a concern for the goddesses like Chastity, Purity and Modesty who wanted to hide the fact by throwing a towel over the stark naked body of Orlando 'which, unfortunately, fell short by several inches' (Woolf 98).

.In Laura Marcus's view Orlando's sex change is:

> . . . a matter of veiling and unveiling, literally and linguistically, as in Woolf's use of sexual innuendo in the following sentence's [here the above one] ambiguous use of 'which' to refer to the shortfall either of the towel or of the 'naked form'. (Marcus 130).

The tension involving Orlando's change of sex — the cautiousness shown by the three goddesses to hide the fact as opposed to the demand for the truth expressed by the three gods — gets nullified when Orlando himself (who

henceforth will be addressed as 'herself') does not show any sign of perturbation. It proves the fact that gender is more a matter of convention than a reality and that gender identity of a person is always determined by others rather than the person himself or herself. Within the fixed structure of gender norms repression in both sexes is quite common. The soul is trapped and suffers repression within such gendered bodies. The strict categorizations between gender and sexuality are socio-cultural impositions rather than innate aspects. In the text we find the different socio-cultural periods offer varied discourses on gender and sexuality. The Elizabethan worldview of sexuality is different from that of the Victorian and the Victorian is different from the modern.

Orlando first became aware of her changed sex in contact with civilization. So long as she lived with the gypsies she was completely forgetful about her sex. Perhaps the uncivilized gypsies did not bother about the intricacies of sex. But the intervention of civilization made her feel the pangs of it. The coil of soft skirts around her legs and the courteous behaviour of the sea-Captain made her realize the pleasure of being a lady. When the Captain pestered her for a little more food she felt as if:

> . . . a delicious tremor ran through her frame. Birds sang; the torrents rushed. It recalled the feeling of indescribable pleasure with which she had first seen Sasha, hundreds of years ago. Then she had pursued, now she fled. Which is the greater ecstasy? The man's or the woman's? And are they not perhaps the same? No, she thought, this is the most delicious . . . (Woolf 109)

She feels that women's apparel has added charm to her beauty though it has caused inconvenience for swimming. She cannot swim wearing this dress and in case she falls into water she needs to depend upon a man for rescue. She feels that it is a heavenly pleasure for women of being rescued by men. Yet having the experiences of both the sexes she observes that in reality men and women are completely different from what they are thought to be. She could now perceive the frailties and vanities of both the sexes:

> [. . .] she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. [. . .] She was a feather blown on the gale. Thus it was no great wonder, as she pitted one sex against the other, and found each alternately full of the most deplorable infirmities, and was not sure to which she belonged. (Woolf 113)

This indeterminacy of gender identity is a chief feature of this biography. Not only Orlando but the gender identities of almost all the important characters – the Russian princess Sasha, the Archduchess Harriet Griselda (who is actually Archduke Harry) and Orlando's husband the sea captain Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire exhibit equally indeterminate gender orientation. It cannot be definitely said whether they are male or female. For example, the gender of the

Archduchess Harriet gets reversed when Orlando is transformed from a man to a woman. She has become an Archduke Harry when Orlando meets her for the second time. Equally ambiguous is the gender identity of Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, the man with whom Orlando becomes engaged:

'You're a woman, Shel!' She cried.

'You're a man, Orlando!' he cried. (Woolf 174-75)

Clothes play a major role in the demarcation of the sexes. This has been well asserted in *Orlando*: 'Vain trifles as they may seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us' (Woolf 131). It clearly asserts what Judith Butler has asserted in her seminal book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) that it is not we who do gender but in fact gender does us – it makes man or woman 'culturally intelligible'. Similarly, clothes are not worn by men and women, instead clothes wear them. If both the sexes were allowed to wear the same clothes there would not have been possibly much difference in their outlook. There was a curious mixture of man and woman in her which made all her actions and behaviours not purely manly and womanly so to say. Inspite of being a woman, she did not care much for dress and make up. She never took more than ten minutes to dress. She chose her clothes at random. She detested household matters and spent much of the time outdoors.

Cross-dressing is an important strategy for gender subversion. When Orlando first met Sasha for the first time dressed in loose Russian tunic and trousers – an androgynous dress used both by the male sex and the female sex, he could not figure out whether the person was a man or a woman. The Archduke Harry cross-dressed himself in woman's attire in order to draw the attention of Orlando. Orlando as a lady herself cross-dresses choosing anything from her androgynous ward-robe whatever suits the mood of the situation best. If she spent her morning in an androgynous china dressing gown, she did gardening wearing knee-breeches which were convenient for the purpose, she received proposals of marriage from great noblemen in a flowered taffeta, attended the legal hearings of her cases in a lawyer's gown and, finally at night she would be found walking the London streets dressed completely as a nobleman. Thus she spent her day choosing multiple sets of clothes from her closet while 'her sex changed far more frequently than those' (Woolf 153).

The text is a critique of compulsory heterosexuality which finds its best manifestation in the nineteenth century i.e. during the reign of Queen Victoria. It was an age of sexual concealment, confinement, evasion and hypocrisy. The differences between men and women became too prominent. The life of women was particularly affected. Their plight was intolerable as their life meant confinement within the domestic sphere and a series of childbirths. They became nothing but tools for producing children. They were in the habit of perpetually wearing crinolines (a kind of tight corset) to hide the fact that they remained pregnant continuously. This poor status of women was supported by the government with the insidious intention of populating and extending the British Empire.

In Victorian England the accepted mode of sex was between heterosexual married couples with the purpose of procreation. Any other kind of sexual practice was considered deviant and hence forbidden, denied or hidden. Such was the incumbent pressure of compulsory heterosexuality that Lady Orlando was forced to submit to the spirit of the age. For this she needed to marry. The wearing of the wedding ring around the second finger of the left hand came to be the symbol of marriage. The abundance of wedding rings made Orlando feel positively ashamed of her bare second finger of the left hand. Being unmarried she began to feel a strange kind of agitation about that finger. The vast solitary emerald given by Queen Elizabeth was not enough now. She required a simple gold band without any stone called the wedding ring. The thought of marriage or wedlock did never bother her the way as it started bothering her now. She had always craved for life and a lover, not for a husband. The spirit of the nineteenth century 'took her and broke her, and she was aware of her defeat at its hands as she had never been before (Woolf 168).

But where is she to find her mate? All the men whom she knew were either married or engaged: 'Whom', she asked casting her eyes […] looking the very image of appealing womanhood as she did so, 'can I lean upon?' (Woolf 169). At this crucial juncture she met Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine with whom she fell in love and subsequently married. Only now did she find her true soulmate in the sexually ambiguous Shelmerdine with whom she could relate. It is because they both share the same sexual code – that of androgyny—which makes their union perfect – "the sea of Shelmerdine the explorer and the earth of Orlando the land lady, all incarnated in the revisionary love of a 'womanly' man and a 'manly' woman, may conspire to conceive an 'unwilled' but 'potent' *vita nuova*" (Gilbert xxxviii). Orlando's relationship with Shel was the most stable and rewarding one. Technically it was a heterosexual relationship as proved by the fact that she gave birth to a baby. But it was more than that. Their union was based on mutual understanding and reciprocation.

Throughout her life Orlando had searched for a lover with whom she could commune perfectly. Unfortunately her previous relations with Sasha and the Archduke Harry did not materialize due to lack of proper understanding. When Orlando first met Sasha dressed androgynously in the Russian fashion he could not figure out whether the person was a man or a woman. Yet he felt an irresistible attraction for the person of unidentified sex. When he watched that person skating with great speed and vigour he considered him (the person) to be a man and 'Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex' (Woolf 26) because society would never permit such homosexual relationship. It was only after knowing that the person was a woman he developed intimacy with her. But even this heterosexual relationship was lacking something – something which created barrier in their union.

Again, her relationship with the Archduke Harry did not materialize. When Orlando was a nobleman, the Archduke disguised himself in the attire of a woman in order to draw Orlando's attention. He introduced himself as Archduchess Harriet

Griselda. Orlando fled to Turkey in order to resist the temptation of the Archduchess whom he perceived to be inwardly male. After Orlando's return to England as a woman the Archduke discarded his woman's disguise and revealed his true self. So, now, technically there was no problem in their union. Still Orlando was reluctant to marry the Archduke because she could perceive that it was going to be an unequal relationship. It was not to be based on love and understanding, but on materiality and status. Actually, Orlando did never bother about a husband, 'a fortune', 'a title', 'an Archduke', 'the safety and circumstance of married life' (Woolf 130). What mattered to her was – 'Life and a lover' (Woolf 130) and that lover she found in Shelmerdine. From the very beginning Orlando had shown a peculiar androgynous tendency. Her apparently strong heterosexual relationships failed because these were very much shaky and unstable at the core. It is clear that marriage is more the union of two like-minded persons than that of two bodies which Shakespeare beautifully expresses in his Sonnet 116 – 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds/ Admit impediments'. Orlando's psycho-sexual orientation is best manifested in crossing borders, breaking shackles and negotiating odds.

Thus, this study shows that *Orlando* is both thematically and generically indeterminate and androgynous. Its androgyny results in *jouissance* (French 'bliss') — a kind of forbidden erotic pleasure which according to the French poststructuralist critic Roland Barthes is obtained from the transgression of borders and traditions.

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