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### Exploring Gender and Identity in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*

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#### ABSTRACT:

Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography* is an innovative modernist work that challenges the constructions of gender and identity with the imaginative and fantastic richness of the story. Introducing a character that breaks the limitations in time, space, and even biological sex having a life that starts as a nobleman in the Elizabethan era and, later, turns into a woman, Woolf defies the established discursive models of gender and underlines the clearer role of identity play and performance. In this paper, I aim to answer the following questions: How does Woolf experiment with *Orlando* to challenge patriarchal conventions, queer the traditional biography form, and project the idea of a more inclusive and broad idea of self-identity? The paper will utilize feminist and queer theories, especially Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, and how these interact with gender, history, memory, and expectations of society to formulate an identity. It also places *Orlando* in the context of the specific literature and the modernist context within which Woolf was writing and finding her way as a writer against the conventions of both literary and social forms. The study will examine the elements of narrative voice, symbolism, character change, and time out of place to show how *Orlando* prefigures most of the cultural discourse about gender fluidity and non-binarity that currently exists in our collective cultural consciousness. This paper aims at reaffirming Woolf's contribution to feminist and queer literature and highlighting the role of *Orlando* in addressing the issue of gender and identity complexities today in their detailed literary and theoretical analysis.

**Keywords:** Gender identity, Modernism, Identity constructions, Gender Performativity, Non-Binary Narratives.

#### Introduction:

Virginia Woolf is one of the most prominent literary representatives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only due to her experimentation in narration and modernist style but also to her risky questioning of the social rules, especially the gender- and identity-related rules. *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) may be the most imaginative and the most conceptually daring of all her works. A hybrid between a fiction and a biography, Woolf creates a novel that spans over three centuries and follows a main character, who transforms in the middle of the story into a woman. Such transformation is not discussed as the severe discontinuity but as a smooth continuity, which was an artistic decision that allowed Woolf to experiment with the subject of the constructed nature of gender roles and the plurality of identity. By writing *Orlando*, Woolf lends a voice to patriarchal literary and social tradition whereby women were silenced or misrepresented concerning their role in society and in literature. It is also possible to interpret the novel as a joyful ode to her friend and potential love interest, Vita Sackville-West, the life of whom as an author and a gender-nonconforming person greatly informed the narrative subjects and choices of the novel. *Orlando* can neither be contained behind the traditional boundaries of history, literature, or biography to which it bears a satiric relation, nor can it be contained behind the gender essentialism that it powerfully plateaus long before the advent of gender studies in the present day.

This paper aims to examine *Orlando* in terms of both feminist and queer theory, with the aim of looking at how Woolf instigates the notion of gender as a performative and malleable concept that is defined by time, culture, and experience rather than a biological status. Thereby, the phenomenon of historical context, narrative voice, and symbolic imagery as contributors to the ever-changing sense of self can also be explored within the context of the work. The wider point here is to show how *Orlando* is not only a flight of fantasy but also a highly political and philosophical investigation into the very essence of the possibility of what it means to be gendered and about the meaning of identity. Contextualizing *Orlando* in terms of its literary and historical origins and synthesizing the existing theories that pertain to the subject of gender diversity, identity politics, and the theme of the reimagination of the self through literature, the present study will fit into the current discourse in academia. Woolf, who wrote almost a century ago, still speaks to the modern reader due to her visionary approach to the themes that are crucial even in modern times of the cultural and scholarly environment.

Originally a London girl, born in 1882, Virginia Woolf is one of the most significant writers of the past century. She was a leading figure in the Bloomsbury Group, a group of powerful thinkers, writers, and artists that united in questioning conservative concepts of politics, sex, and beauty. Personal loss, mental illness, and being a woman in a patriarchal society influenced her literary imagination as a result of the life experiences she went through. It is also a common characteristic of her work that she is very concerned with what goes on inside of a person, the fluidity of time and memory, and the restrictions of social convention, at least gender-born convention. Woolf lived in an epoch of strong transformation in British society. The first part of the twentieth century was dramatic in terms of political, feminine, and mental changes, and especially after the First World War, women were aspiring to have equal

access to education, occupations, and politics. These trends encouraged Woolf to publish feminist essays like the famed *A Room of One's Own* (1929), in which she had written that a woman requires both money and a room of her own to write fiction. The theme of her critique of the social and economic obstacles to being a woman writer found its expression in her fiction also, which speculated on how identity is limited by gender roles.

*Orlando: A Biography* is a work of Woolf published in 1928, which surfaces in the literature of this author as a mirthful yet serious novel that confuses the roles of male and female, not to mention fiction and biography, history and fantasy. The novel was facilitated by Woolf and her friend and lover Vita Sackville-West, with her flowing relationship with gender and aristocratic family background, which served as a prototype of the androgynous character. On the one hand, *Orlando* can be considered a satire of the traditions of biography and history writing, but on the other hand, it is a more serious analysis of gender identity over time. Woolf adopts the transformation of a character from man to woman as a literary tool aimed at raising questions as to the stability of gender and how it is culturally performed. In a sense, the life and the literary philosophy of Virginia Woolf were closely interconnected. She presented literature not merely as an expression of artistic expression but as a domain where it is possible to call into question certain notions of definite concepts regarding society and self. Her interest in feminism, her opposition to literary practices, and her acceptance of queer identities all come to a head in *Orlando*, which makes it a peculiar text in which to learn about how gender and identity can be rewritten in narrative.

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### Gender and Identity: A Theoretical Framework:

Gender and identity are the two main concepts that have been on the academic minds of the various academic specialties in the fields of literature, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. Feminist theory and gender studies have evolved in the last century, challenging the status quo, which says that gender is binary, fixed, or established biologically. Scholars are increasingly insisting on another theory according to which gender is a social and cultural construction that depends on power, history, and the individual experience of the person. One major theoretical point of departure is differentiation of sex and gender. Whereas sex is biological traits, gender is roles, manners, and expectations that were allocated by societies based on those perceived biological differences. Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most well-known feminist philosophers, makes this clear when she says in *The Second Sex* (1949) that “we are not born but made into women.” Her claim focuses on the fact that gender identity is determined and culturally overrated rather than biologically predetermined. This notion came to underlie subsequent Breakmeier feminist and gender studies discussions. This realization was taken further by Judith Butler, who pioneered the idea of gender performativity in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler claims that gender is not an intrinsic truth or unchanging identity but a form that is continually performed through social performance through repeated actions, words, clothes, and relations. Such social conventions and expectations shape these forms of performances in ways that lead to an impression of stable gender identities. The theory by Butler challenges the binary distinctions and allows the more fluid and non-normative forms of the expression of gender to crop up. These discussions are further extended into queer theory. Philosophers like Michel Foucault (*The History of Sexuality*) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Epistemology of the Closet*) on the relationship between power, language, and history and how this affects not merely our perception of sexuality but also our ideas of identity and normalcy. Queer theory reveals the so-called heterosexuality and two gender categories as natural and intertwined with systems of power and knowledge. Another important aspect they introduce to postcolonial feminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is that gender and race cannot be analyzed separately but in relation to class and colonial history. Their intersectional approach reminds us that we cannot make sense of gender except that gender exists in a network of intersecting social ranks and international disparities. Woolf appears to follow various theoretical stances intuitively in *Orlando*, at least its aspects, at some time before they were formalized. By telling a story about a hero that is genderless and timeless, she unveils the so-called identity as a fluid and changing occurrence instead of an unalterable and essential reality. The performance and social construction of gender is the dramatizing event of Orlando's change of his gender to female, which changes the social experience and perspective. Therefore, looking at *Orlando* through such a theoretical lens, we discover how deeply Woolf confronted the questions of identity, performance, and power. Her experimentation in the literary field develops as a slight but deep blow towards the strict gender rules and gives a vision contrary to this in the way of self-definition being a dynamic, multi-layered interest in redefining itself.

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### Exploring Gender Fluidity in Orlando:

A radical approach to gender identity can be cited as one of the most distinctive features of Virginia Woolf's writing. When the very idea of gender was still widely visualized as a binary concept, Woolf created a character who switches the sexes halfway through the story and goes on living with a layered identity. In this chapter, the author discusses the way in which Woolf challenges the biologically determined vision of gender by the idea of gender as dynamic, performative, and dependent on social contexts. Woolf, through Orlando, criticizes the orthodoxically gender perspectives existing during her lifespan, remarking that she envisions a realm where identity does not revolve around biological sex. Central to this query is the metamorphosis of Orlando into a woman. The nonchalant attitude of the actual change is what makes this change so striking. Woolf does not eulogize the process of a woman transferring into a man but makes it natural and practically unavoidable. Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; since then, she has been a woman and will always live this way, as the narrator says simply (Woolf, 1928). This quote summarizes the main idea of the novel “the fact that gender is not a particular and intrinsic truth; it is a social identity, which can change in the course of time.” Following the transformation, Orlando is saddened by the way the society has treated her as a woman when she is internally the same. This shows how performative gender roles are “depending on the perceptions that are constructed about the individual view, society expects them to behave in a certain way.” Orlando's internal consistency against external change reflects here the positions of the gender theorists of much later times, like Judith Butler or other authors, who stressed the idea that gender is something that one does and does all the time by using language, their own Behaviour, and their interactions on a social level, but it is not something one inherits. Dressing and social roles are highly present in what Woolf has written regarding gender fluidity. Orlando varies his costume between male and female and demonstrates how appearance determines the way that other people treat us. To illustrate, in female attire, Orlando has the obligation of staying

down-to-earth and docile, but in male attire, she is free to move and even receive an inheritance. This is used to criticize measurements that women are put in society and demonstrate that gender expectations are superficial, not biological in nature.

Woolf also criticizes the legal system and cultural system that uphold gender binaries. After Orlando turns into a woman, she suddenly becomes denied rights and privileges that she used to enjoy when she was a man. However, the novel does not approach such a shift as a tragedy; it is signified with irony and humour, making the readers start doubting the justice behind such socially crafted regulations. Woolf then creates an Orlando by means of which he points out the absurdities of discrimination based on gender and promotes a wider view of humanity in terms of its identity. Moreover, Orlando's centuries-long life enables Woolf to demonstrate how gender norms change throughout the course of time. As much as Orlando is the same individual, there is a significant difference in the expectations on her as a man in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and as a woman in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century. This time-related view entrenches the notion that gender is not cross-cultural and transcendent but historically and culturally particular. Finally, the issue of gender is fluid and dynamic in Orlando, which is incompatible with the notions of easy classification. Woolf intentionally confuses the boundaries between men and women to allow her readers to re-visualize the basis of gender and speculate on a universe where everyone should have a right to freely describe themselves beyond the social norms of gender identity. In this, Orlando does not lose the potency of feminism, as it can still be related to the present arguments on gender diversity and expression.

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### Identity and Time in *Orlando*:

Mohd Farhan Saiel in his thesis titled [Globalization patterns of migration and cultural identity in Amitav Ghosh select novels](#) states the conditions of identity, he describes that "In recent decades, a new form of identification has emerged which breaks down the understanding of the individual as a coherent whole subject into a collection of various cultural identifiers. These cultural identifiers may be the result of various conditions including location, gender, race, history, nationality, language, sexuality, religious belief, ethnicity, aesthetics, and even food and clothes." (p-42-43)

The two concepts of identity and time in *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf are brilliantly interlaced together through the lifespan of the protagonist and gender switchover, which is far beyond ordinary. This makes the book challenge the entire definition of personal identity. In contrast to the traditional tales as we know them with established fixed identity and chronological time flow, Orlando defies this expectation by describing the role of identity as liquid and the time flow as elastic. Woolf also employs this literary model in showing how an individual sense of self is profiled and redefined in various temporal and social engagements. Among the most radical features of this novel is the separation of identity from biological determinism. Orlando is born as a man in the sixteenth century and one morning has a wake-up call to be a woman in the eighteenth century. The protagonist experiences not much resistance or drama when it comes to such a sudden change, indicating that gender is not the construction of identity but only one of many layers constantly changing. In this way Woolf demonstrates that identity is not fixed but performative and strongly conditioned by social expectations. In *Orlando*, time is thematic, not chronological and not experiential. The other milestones of the passing centuries are not historical events but the shifts of clothing, Behaviour, and attitudes in the society. The terribly moralistic world of the Victorian age experienced by Orlando is presented as a contrast to the mobility of the Elizabethan and the new modern world. The changes help to indicate the construction of identity through a dialogue with dominant cultural discourses and non-existence outside the kaleidoscope of discourses.

The temporal journey is also the journey Orlando undertakes by constantly seeking self-understanding. She keeps wondering what and who she is, and her personality keeps changing as she witnesses various historical periods. This extended life gives Woolf an opportunity to demonstrate how the identity of a single person may take a thousand forms, all by virtue of the time and its specific set of rules. Metaphors and symbols are also used to further highlight the connection between time and identity, as Woolf does. An example of this is the symbol of continuity and change attached to the great oak tree in the estate of Orlando. Likewise, the repeated theme of writing, a biographer that traces the life of Orlando, helps to emphasize the point that identity is a narrative that is established through time rather than an essence that can be preserved through time. Criticism In a way, Orlando criticizes the notion that identity can be destroyed or defined by time. Woolf, instead, implies that identity is cumulative, stacked, and time receptive. In demonstrating the life of only one character over a hundred years and two different genders, Woolf reveals the nature of identity not as fundamental but instead as a patchwork created by years, culture, and individual happenings. The interpretation questions the reader using the fluidity of the self and how historical time and gender binaries have artificially caged a person.

Saiel, Mohd Farhan in his article entitled "Cross-Cultural Communication of Hybrid Identities: Displaying Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*" stated that "Finally, it is imperative to state that no human is culture-free. Everyone is a product of the many distinct cultures that exist on the outskirts of the borders. The beliefs, worldviews, and experiences that people have are shaped by the society and culture that they live in every day. It is therefore critical to have a strong cultural identity before becoming a multicultural individual. Culture and identity are considered as universal changes in people's lives, whether for the better or for the worse. These have advantages and limitations, therefore it's important to consider their benefits and drawbacks." (p-44)

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### Feminist and Queer Readings of *Orlando*:

The novel has long been a book calling to feminist and queer readings since its radical treatment of gender, sexuality, and identity. When, in literature, it was still normal to present fixated attitudes towards men and women, the novel by Woolf presented a liberating image and broke the existing gender patterns and fusion with its idea of fluidity and transformation. Queer theorists have discovered in *Orlando* an abundant reservoir of indeterminacy and multiplicity, of ambiguity and insistence upon resistance to sexual and gender stuffing, whereas feminist critics have applauded its adventurous narrative

form and its challenge to patriarchal models of femininity. *Orlando* is feminist in the way the author criticizes the inequalities that surround women in the past years and borders their social freedom in comparison with a male one. The shift of Orlando as a male to a female just halfway through the novel also is not just symbolic but rather commentary on the shackles that have long been chained around the female equivalents. Orlando, being a man, gets political privileges, literary fame, and an advantage to move up the social ladder. When, however, she becomes a woman, she faces direct restrictions to legal rights, the right to property, and the right to intellectual freedom. This development captures a certain preoccupation of Woolf regarding gender inequality, which she addresses much more explicitly in her essays like *A Room of One's Own* (1929). The life of this character portrays the social construction of gender roles rather than the biologically established gender roles, an aspect that formed the foundation of much of feminist thought. In addition to this, Woolf refers to the fact that literature has also contributed towards the legitimization of gender norms itself. As time advances in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Orlando also advances through time as the story parodies how women have to conform to rigid requirements in literature: as objects of beauty, as the muses to the male heroes, and in the quaint sing-alongs. As soon as Orlando tries to assert herself as an independent writer and intellect, it is the literary culture, which is dictated by the dominant male nature, that resists her. Woolf, in this way, criticizes not only the society but also the institutions of literature and authorship. The queer theory brings additional complexity to the understanding of Orlando, particularly in the denial of identity categories. The transformation of gender and gender-shifting of the protagonist is not depicted as a traumatic experience but, on the contrary, a natural, even playful process, implying the fact that identity is fluid and of a performing nature. The early manifestations of the idea of gender performativity developed by Judith Butler can be found in the text of Woolf as Orlando changes his Behaviour, clothes, and manners according to the surrounding society instead of his inner, supposedly essential identity. This play with sex and gender disrupts the binary way of thinking about sex and gender to the point of Orlando becoming neither a man nor a woman, and in this intermediary position, it explodes the reasoning behind thinking in symbols. He or she also queers the straight romance, Orlando. The love interests of the protagonist can hardly be classified into strict orientations. The liaison with Sasha, e.g., takes place at a time when Orlando is a man and Sasha is a woman, but Sasha is discussed in androgynous terms and even, to an extent, masculine terms. At a later stage, even the gender-nonconforming nature of Orlando when she gets married to Shelmerdine, another gender-nonconforming character, also challenges heteronormative expectations. They do not get together because of social order, but they respect each other, and they understand each other, and they are together, beyond traditional definitions of gender. Woolf does not want to pin down their identities, and the book ends with Orlando embracing the multiplicity: a self that is at once male and female, past and present, and physical and spiritual. That makes Orlando an early work of queer literature, with a vision of identity that does not categorize in a single way. It is a celebration of difference, transformation, and complexity, and it enables the reader to dream of selves free of the scripts of gender. Feminist as well as queer interpretations of the novel disclose how Woolf is faithful to the exploration of the potential of being, not only in life but also in terms of literature.

Paul, Pratyasha and Saiel, Mohd Farhan in their research article titled Exploring Psychological and Gender Concerns in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, describes the conflict of marriage uttering "the conflict between the society's expectations and Esther's dreams is what the novel is primarily focused on. Esther wanted to create her own life and make her own decisions. Her unwillingness to get married and become a mother is quite evident throughout the novel. Through Esther, Sylvia Plath describes women's experience of being expected to desire only two things in life: marriage and motherhood. The image of an 'ideal' woman in 1950s America was a suburban housewife who cared for the home and the children. The American propaganda promoted image of women with their feminine hairdos and delicate dresses, tending to the hearth and the home. Marriage was considered very important. Stereotype was that women went to college to get a Mrs. degree that is to get a husband. But Esther does not agree with such alteration of character. She did not want to be conditioned into serving men. She despised the idea of serving men in any way. She sees marriage life as stagnant. She craves change and excitement. She says that when a man comes to like her, it reduces him to ordinariness." (2018)

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## Conclusion:

*Orlando* is one of the most momentous reads in the world of literature because of the boldness with which it touched on the issues of gender and identity. Describing the character of a protagonist who goes through transformations between the two centuries and between the sexes, Woolf escapes definite binary frameworks. She argues against the supposition that identity is biologically instrumental, implying that it is determined by the passage of time, culture, and how one sees it. The role of gender and its limitations and inconsistencies is evident in the life of Orlando as a nobleman and woman writer. Woolf is not only ironical but indeed quite profound in his criticism, rather, through the fiction, unfurling the incapacitation that social norms and expectations have on the self. She can also be said to provide an early model of gender fluidity, which later influences feminist and possibly queer theory. The fact that the novel is non-linear supports this claim of the flux of identity as a continuous process rather than as a fixed, solid construct. Orlando transforms itself into a hero of emancipation by the means of satire, historical parody, and lyrical prose. Woolf challenges the audience to think differently concerning identity and how it is not a category but a continuum. By so doing, she makes room for some voices that have been locked or shut. Another message that the novel implores us to think of is the role that language, literature, and history have in determining who we are. Orlando is a rejection of constraints: gender constraints, genre constraints, and time constraints. It is a feat of the potential of existing outside of the forced perceptions and images of being and a resolute vision of becoming. At a time when gender and identity, to some, are pressing social issues, Woolf remains a challenging work of thought and discussion. The power of poetic imagination, as combined with philosophical insight, makes *Orlando* stay super relevant in time. Finally, Orlando is not just a literary experiment, but freeness is a call. The ability to change, to doubt, and to exist.

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