

## Unveiling the Treatment of Transgender in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*

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Virginia Woolf, one of the most acknowledged contemporary writers, is known for challenging deep-rooted socio-cultural norms of the Western metaphysic through her most radical, experimental and innovative writings. One such work is *Orlando* (1928). Orlando is undoubtedly a biographical work that centers on Woolf's friend Vita Sackville-West. It is her relationship with Vita that primarily informed the author's imagination to produce Orlando- a transgender character but the novel has very serious concerns too. Stef Craps writes: "I argue that *Orlando*, far from being an insignificant *jeud'esprit*, is in fact a radical text, whose subversion of deep-seated and taken-for-granted assumptions about gendered behavior is suppressed by its reduction to an escapade or a mere tribute to Vita Sackville-West." The novel has not limited itself to the projection of physical relationship between the people of same sex; it rather has much more to unfold before the world. The novel undoubtedly revolves around the transgender issues. "Transgenderism can be defined as the breaking of gender roles and gender identity and/or going across the boundaries of gender to another gender" (L. Nagoshi 2). Talking about Identity and its complexities has occupied spaces in philosophical, social, intellectual and psychological spheres of thinking and discoursing. The novel *Orlando* too is oriented towards the labyrinth ideas and problems attached with the concept of identity. The novel has posed a bold challenge to the world by redefining the concept of identity and subjectivity through transgenderism. How far one's identity is biologically constructed and to what extent it is

determined by political, social and cultural conditions of life is one of the chief investigations of the novel.

The novel famously opens with the statement: "He, for there could be no doubt about his sex ..." and it is ironically found that Woolf throughout the narrative keeps questioning this very certainty that Orlando like any other person enjoyed in the beginning. Thus

*Orlando* is a book where the concept of gender is wide-ranging and deliberately amorphous, and not just with the clothes (or anything else) left hanging in the closet; in Ms. Woolf's fictive universe, the biological imperatives seemingly set in stone at birth can be countered and redefined. Male and female are no longer binary oppositions, but part of a fluid continuum. Sound familiar? (Gioia)

The fixities and rigidities that inform individual's life since his birth time leave no room for any change and alteration. Our perception of the world, since Aristotle's time, is governed by "the laws of logic" that has divided "the world into strictly demarcated entities" (Habib 668). "[A]ccording to Aristotle's laws," as Habib writes, "either one is a man or one is woman; a person is either black or white, either master or slave" (668). Such binaries are thought to be based entirely on natural distinctions but when seen through postmodern perspective they are socio-cultural constructs and mere imaginary structures that largely govern one's identity, sexuality, subjectivity and their intricate implications in the social spectrum. Since it is considered normal to see the things in the forms

of 'normative dualism,' man and woman too are seen within the linguistic constraints of male/female binary oppositions. This is now a known phenomenon that such insinuations are informed and governed by the patriarchal regime. In the Male/Female binary, female falls on the other side and treated as other, insignificant and peripheral. The normative dualism is sustained through power/knowledge dynamic. Michel Foucault talks about that how various institutional, physical, social mechanisms and knowledge structures work towards furthering and sustaining the power hierarchy within society. As Stacy points out: "For Foucault, Knowledge, power, oppression and resistance always circulate around one another, alternatively feeding off and nourishing one another" (quot. in. Aberra 3). The male community highlights the perceived weaknesses of women folk to represent themselves stronger or better. Such imaginary knowledge about women becomes the basis for the binary oppositions and any attempt to cross that line does not come under the range of normal behaviour. The novel *Orlando* is an enquiry into such predetermined patriarchal and hierarchical norms, binaries and certainties which have intensely seeped into our system and so entrenched into our being that they appear normal and natural to the human eye.

The central character Orlando experiences this world both as a male and a female which can be interpreted as an attempt to dissolve the gender binaries – male/female and masculine/feminine. After sleeping for several days when Orlando wakes up, he finds himself transformed into a woman: "He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! We have no choice left but confess – he was a woman" (106). During his sleep when Orlando was in the process of becoming a woman, all the pretences and artifices of the patriarchal world come forward to construct the identity of a woman in a particular direction. A woman's subjectivity is decided before she is born. When Orlando is about to take birth as a woman, Purity, Chastity, and Modesty struggle to inform her being so as to give her a gendered identity. The attempts are made to constitute the protagonist's identity and subjectivity placing her within the paradigm of patriarchal ideology. An individual is informed by the ethical and moral values of the time. Such values are nothing but ways to maintain power control within a social body. A woman too becomes subject through disciplining and regular monitoring by the

androcentric forces. Orlando's feminine identity is determined even before she is born. But all the preconceived notions Purity, Chastity and Modesty constituting feminine identity of Orlando vanish when Truth comes forth to mark her real being. Truth gets precedence over all the prescriptive norms that try to determine her subjectivity. Thus in case of Orlando, what Sartre has said that "existence precedes essence" comes true. The change of sex does not alter her subjectivity: "Orlando had become a woman-there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (106). This shows that one's sex does not decide one's being. Orlando's inside remains same after he is a changed sex. Orlando acts as a transgressor who knows no pre-determined norms of sexuality and gender and his sex-changing and cross-dressing is an assertion of the fact that sexual identity is not fixed; it is rather more fluid. "Human subjectivity is not unified and coherent but shifting and fluid" (Craps). Human being in the Western Enlightenment world is regarded a coherent and rational entity but the Postmodernists seek to fragment that very assumption by "denying that the self is either stable or coherent" (Cameron, 11). So one's identity as a female and male cannot be fixed thereby highlighting the arbitrary and unstable nature of the binary opposition male/female. Since Orlando has known both the sexes, she "found each alternatively full of the most deplorable infirmities" (122). What was thought so impossible and against nature to cross the strict line of demarcation between man and woman, Woolf makes Orlando transgress that line very easily giving him a fluid identity. By blurring the line between fantasy and reality, the author intends to diminish the imaginary line drawn between male and female, representing two different modes of existence.

Orlando is undoubtedly born with a true and authentic self whether a man or a woman but as the story advances she gradually starts becoming a woman by adhering to the androcentric laws and norms. She showed some resistance in the beginning as she was not in conflict with 'the self' which does not change after the biological transformation from one sex to another. In the beginning days of her transformed self, she went to spend some time with the gypsies in the midst of Nature. There she was without "ink and paper" as the gypsies never rely on language for seeking metaphysical truth; they rather draw on the world of Nature to understand life in its pure and

authentic form. It is language that lays the foundation of male-oriented Western Metaphysical system that governs life of human beings. The whole Western culture with its phallic orientation came into existence and is understood through the medium of language only. Though the relationship between language and meaning is arbitrary as emphasized by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure: "there is no inherent connection between a word and what it designates" (Barry, 41). Being in the world of nature and living an authentic life of the gypsies without pen and paper, Orlando remains outside the realm of language or what the French Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls 'symbolic order.' Lacan's theory of symbolic order refers to "a given culture" which is supported by "a pre-existing system of language" (Bentley 8). According to Lacanian perception, boy and girl are so positioned in the symbolic order that it forms a patriarchal hierarchy which keeps man at the centre of everything and woman at the periphery. Since the Western system of language, "pen and paper," was not available to Orlando, She initially failed to see herself within the linguistic constrains of binary oppositions male/female. She could not see herself other than her real self. She behaves normally and naturally. Woolf endeavours to show how the world forces her to mould herself in accordance with her sex. The narrator tries to fix Orlando's identity attempting to fit her within some frame but she fails in all her endeavours. Orlando slips away from her hand every time. Stef Craps remarks: "To the dismay of biographer, who wants everything to be predictable and its place, woman refuses to be contained and tied down by his masculinist narrative paradigm." Orlando's preferences do not fall categorically on either side of the binary. She can keep crossing the line freely at her disposal. She herself gets curious about her sex and the presence of mixed attributes of man and woman both in her disposition:

The curious of her own sex would argue, for example, if Orlando was a woman, how did she never take more than ten minutes to dress and were not her clothes chosen rather at random, and sometimes worn rather shabby? And they would say, still, she has none of the formality of a man or a man's love of power. She is excessively tender-hearted. She could not endure to see a donkey beaten or a kitten drowned. Yet again, they noted, she detested household matters, was up at dawn and out among the fields

in summer before the sun had risen. No farmer knew more about the crops than she did. She could drink with the best and liked games of hazard. She rode well and drove six horses at a gallop over London Bridge. Yet again, though bold and active as a man, it was remarked that sight of another in danger brought on the most womanly palpitations (145-6).

Thus it is vain to see Orlando within gender constraint as she exhibits androgynous characteristics. Though this very complex androgynous character, Virginia Woolf perhaps intends to reconcile the opposites male and female. By frequent cross-dressing and living the life of both the sexes, Orlando fails to fit within the binary oppositions. Transgressing the lines of jurisdiction, Orlando lives a complete life. Restricting one within the constraint of gender role is limiting and restricting their life. Possessing the mixed traits female and male, Orlando enjoyed the freedom of moving from one realm of life to another. Orlando's story justifies that whatever is the mode of living, one's subjectivity remains intact. Orlando liked the company of women when he was a man and continues to love them even when *he* has become *she*. The sexual change does not bring any change in the essence of her character. Her subjectivity remains unchanged.

The novel is also an expression of the American Philosopher, Judith Butler's notion of 'gender performativity.' Orlando's identity as a woman is constructed through performance, that is, by wearing a female outfit and behaving like a woman. Initially Orlando is seen dressing "herself in those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex" (107). After becoming a woman, she is forced to wear feminine dresses to fit in the parameters of gender identity. She is compelled to go through the process of feminization in appearance and behaviour though her sexual change does not entail any alteration in the inner reality of her being. Simone de Beauvoir claim that "One is not born, but, rather *becomes* a woman" comes true in the case of Orlando. She gradually becomes feminized by conforming to the gender norms or gender determining factors – feminine outfit, behaviour and attributes. "Her modesty as to her writing, her vanity as to her person, her fears for her safety all seems to hint that what was said a short time ago about there being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing to be altogether true" (143). Orlando has to do hard work in the process of getting feminized as all the traits which

are thought innately present in a woman are a subject of hard work and regular monitoring through different mechanism and knowledge structures. So Orlando's subjectivity and identity is created through 'gender performativity.' Orlando with lots of efforts "becomes a woman" though after her sexual transformation from a man to a woman she experiences absolutely no difference in herself. Now, she has to undergo the process of 'subjectification' and impersonate a woman with all the feminine traits: obedience, chastity and modesty etc. Orlando herself remembers

"...how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled. 'Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires,' she reflected; 'for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature. They can attain these graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline'" (120-21).

Feminine dress is not just an outfit for woman; it has a regulated effect on her persona. It controls and restricts her in many ways. Orlando herself realizes that if she wears skirt she cannot swim. Man's hand is always free to hold his sword while woman uses her hand "to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders" (144). They differ not only in their dresses but also in their perception of the world and in their approach towards life. "Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm and breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking" (144). Orlando performs her gender by using feminine dresses and exhibiting feminine attributes like allowing her tears to flow more freely and expressing shock seeing a male person crying before a woman. Orlando can cry not only when she is a woman but she could also cry when she was a man. She knew it from her own experience that though crying is an attribute ascribed to a female only but men too can frequently flow tears. Orlando brings modesty in her writing and vanity in her character. She becomes extremely concerned for her safety. She learns that she should not walk in public spaces without the protection of the arms of a man. She becomes to be subservient to man in all walks of life. She works hard to

become a culturally accepted gender identity.

Ordano's journey of life shows that gender identity is not an inborn quality of a person; it is rather acquired with lots of efforts and regular monitoring and surveillance. Butler opines: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; their identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (25). Thus the motive behind Orlando's transgender identity, partly real and partly imaginary, is to dissolve the binaries that are based on some false rationality. The whole narrative works towards the subversion of the false notion of a fixed and coherent gendered identity that sustains the binaries. Thus, blurring the line of demarcation becomes the chief motif of this narrative on transgenderism.

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