



A Study of Feminism in the Context of Androgyny Consciousness Take Virginia Woolf's Orlando as an example

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Abstract. Through the theory of androgyny awareness, the writer Virginia Woolf in "Orlando" (1928) explored the concept of the perfect integration of both sexes and powerfully revealed the spiritual oppression of women under the entrenched patriarchal system through the dramatic experience of Orlando's gender transformation. This article takes Woolf and her work "Orlando" as examples, from the perspective of "androgyny consciousness," to study the current situation and problems in the development of feminism.

Keywords: Index Terms— Feminism; Androgyny Consciousness; Orlando; Virginia Woolf

1 Introduction

Androgyny, from the Greek "andro" (male) and "gyn" (female), originally refers to certain animals or plants in nature that possess both male and female characteristics^[1]. The notion of androgyny was once prevalent in Western cultures during ancient times, when the relationship between the two sexes was not as intense and separated. However, as society advanced and the power of men grew, the suppression of women began, and a fixed patriarchal system replaced the harmonious state of androgyny. Consequently, the influence of women became much smaller in a variety of fields, including literature^[2]. Against this backdrop, Woolf devised a strategy to free women from their chained reality to the literary ideal, in which the protagonist undergoes several sex changes and experiences the privileges and joys of both sexes, thus realizing the maximum intensity of personal freedom, both physically and spiritually^[3]. This is the full expression and manifesto of Woolf's androgynous theory, which aims to achieve gender equality by viewing the two sexes equally and combining them into one person, who can switch from one sex to another freely. "Orlando" starts as a noble and handsome boy, favored by Queen Elizabeth but falls out of favor during the reign of King James, retiring to his

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country mansion and devoting himself to literature^[4]. He becomes a successful Turkish envoy, spends a night with a dancer on the night of a rebellion in Constantinople, sleeps for several days, and wakes up in the body of a woman—although his face had not changed at all. She breaks away from the office and joins the Gypsies. After returning to England, she joins high society, meets Pope, Addison, and other literary figures, then marries a sea captain and has a child^[5]. As she reaches middle age, her poems win prizes, her literary ideas and writing skills mature, and her spirit becomes more complete. Orlando's life spans 400 years, from the Elizabethan period of the 16th century to 1928. This article will discuss the prospects and challenges for feminist thoughts and mindset and the theory of androgyny consciousness as solutions for gender inequality and patriarchy, using Adeline Virginia Woolf's literary work "Orlando" as an example^[6].

2 The development of androgyny consciousness

In Western culture, the notion of androgyny has an ancient origin and is evident in many philosophical and religious systems. It was Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, who first introduced the concept of androgyny. In Plato's "Symposium," Aristophanes presents a speech suggesting that original human nature was different from its current state. Initially, there were not two sexes but three: man, woman, and a union of the two, with a name reflecting this dual nature. This original form is now lost, and "androgynous" remains only as a term of reproach. According to Aristophanes, Zeus split these beings in two because of human hubris, resulting in "half humans" who forever seek their other halves. Upon finding each other, they would embrace so passionately that they could not be separated. Zeus then allowed them to join or separate at will, granting them the ability to reproduce^[7].

However, as society developed, a patriarchal system and the dominance of men prevailed, replacing this primitive ideal with gender separation and the suppression of women. Thousands of years later, in modern times, it was Virginia Woolf who revived the idea of androgyny in literature, advocating for a state of combining two sexes or, rather, experiencing the two sexes spiritually. Similar to ancient Greek philosophers, Woolf acknowledged that wholeness could only be achieved through the combination of two sexes. However, she emphasized the spiritual experience of these sexes, as opposed to the physical wholeness implied by sexual intercourse. Lyu Hongling, in her essay, notes that Woolf symbolically demonstrated sexual integration, shaping androgyny into a dynamic concept that allows for the coexistence of differences. Woolf introduced both male and female consciousness in "Orlando," advocating for gender integration and acknowledging gender differences. Under her design, the transformation of gender transcends the simple binary opposition between men and women, fostering a state of communication and cooperation based on willing difference.

Woolf argued, "It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple: one must be woman-manly or man-womanly." In her book "A Room of One's Own," she wrote, "Each of us has two powers to control everything, the power of a male and the power of a female. In men's minds, men are

stronger than women, and in women's minds, women are stronger than men. The most normal and ideal situation is that these two forces live together in harmony and cooperate in spirit... Only in this kind of harmony, the brain becomes fertile and can make full use of all the faculties. Maybe a pure male brain and a pure female brain cannot create." This notion of "androgyny" has been further enriched by the growth of feminist theory. Betty Friedan, a famous American contemporary feminist and social reformer, advocated in her book "The Fountain of Age" for older men to develop their passive, nurturing, or contemplative female qualities, and for older women to develop their self-confident, brave, or adventurous male qualities. According to Friedan, it is most advantageous for individuals to develop the aspects of themselves that predominantly reflect the second gender, aiming for a more balanced and harmonious existence. In an ideal society, women would be equal to men, enjoying the same rights and freedoms. Therefore, we should respect the differences between men and women while also reflecting the best qualities of both masculinity and femininity, realizing the development of multiple personality types based on respect for femininity.

3 Woolf's idea of androgyny

By advocating for androgyny in literature, Virginia Woolf argues that male writers should allow space for their feminine consciousness, and female writers should do the same for their masculine consciousness. This approach deconstructs and affirms gender consciousness within a writer's mind. As Woolf mentions in "A Room of One's Own," "The whole of the mind must lie wide open...there must be freedom and there must be space." From this, we can infer that Woolf views androgyny as a pathway to unbiased creativity, offering a state of complete freedom and purity, devoid of distractions, for perfect writing. This kind of mental intercourse, which can be seen as a form of spiritual androgyny, allows Woolf to fully express her creativity in literature and writing. Reflecting on Woolf's personal experiences, her father was depicted as extremely selfish and arrogant, which contributed to her negative attitudes towards men later in life; her mother was gentle and obedient. These early experiences motivated her to explore and demonstrate the value of women. The Women's Liberation Movement further influenced Woolf's development of androgynous thought, focusing on how women in patriarchal societies can break traditional gender norms and perceive themselves. This evolving feminist movement led Woolf to envision an ideal model that transcends "full gender integration," encompassing both same-sex discourse and self-actualization. The progression of Woolf's writing reflects this journey: from articulating a vague awareness of women's consciousness to stream-of-consciousness writing, from celebrating feminine qualities to exploring the body and its imperfections.

Moreover, as Woolf states in "Orlando," "Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex. And perhaps in this, she was only expressing rather more openly than usual—openness indeed was the soul of her nature—something that happens to most people without being thus plainly expressed." Woolf suggests that while

on the surface, Orlando's gender identity and personality may seem to change in accordance with his or her attire—aligning with the theory that gender is performative rather than fixed—the real catalyst for change lies deeper. It is Orlando's inherent nature and instinct to embody characteristics of both sexes. Woolf posits, I argue, that this is not unique to Orlando but is a natural capability of all humans, thus challenging the binary division of sexes and advocating for individual liberty in mindset and soul.

4 Androgyny and feminism in this work

4.1 Androgynous Characters in Orlando

Orlando tries to move beyond the false gender dichotomy, which insists that differences between men and women are natural. Butler writes, "If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way." At the beginning of the novel, Woolf particularly narrates Orlando's female gender, making it obvious that "the role of social conventions in the formation of gender identity is undeniable." It was the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters. It is evident from the first line of the book that Orlando's manly/womanly characteristics overlap. Woolf stated, "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." Through keeping the contrast, Woolf tries to show that Orlando as a man and Orlando as a woman are the same character. She proclaims, "If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman, we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are certain changes." The description of Orlando's physical appearance by the narrator in the first pages of the novel, mixing masculine and feminine features, again creates the sense of ambiguity and undermines the criteria of identifying gender based on appearance. "The red of the cheeks was covered with peach down; the arrowy nose in its short form; eyes like drenched violets." Orlando is shown as a handsome man who has some delicate elements which should be described as feminine.

Using such words that almost universally represent femininity to describe Orlando is contrary to the sturdy and strong male image that the world is familiar with. It seems to be a perspective formed by the queen's high position over time, but in fact, Woolf deliberately combined strong masculinity and femininity, which aimed at confusing the boundaries of gender discourse. Later, Orlando wandered around women but couldn't grasp the real sense of life, so he kept trying to escape, until one day he woke up and found that he had become a female. After that, she once again met the Archduke who she had missed, but this time he appeared in front of Orlando as a male. It turned out that because the Archduke was previously attracted by a male Orlando, he disguised himself as a woman in order to be able to get close to him. Now that it was discovered that Orlando is a female, he resumed his male identity and pursued Orlando. Behind this dramatic plot is the prejudice produced by traditional gender ethics in reality. So, the Duke's cross-dressing and Orlando's transgender seem to be illogical, but it is

Woolf who satirizes traditional gender ethics. The treatment of the two gender transitions seems absurd, but the Archduke can accept male disguise as women, and Orlando, who has experienced the two genders, can see the world from male and female perspectives, there lies behind Woolf's desire of breaking the traditional gender ethical boundaries and constructing an androgynous gender ethics. As Lyu states in her essay, "Woolf takes an attitude of demonstrating and exploring contradictions in the question of gender."

In fact, whether to appear as a male or a female is not just a matter of gender identity for Orlando, because as long as he wants to, he can appear as a male again when he wears the old men's attire. Just as after the sex change, Orlando still often wears the costume of her teenage years and takes herself to the streets. No one finds that she is actually a woman in men's clothing. This is what Woolf said, "Although genders are different, men and women are mixed. Everyone can swing from one sex to another, and often only clothing shows the appearance of male or female. And the gender inside is just the opposite of the appearance. Everyone has personal experience of the resulting complexity and chaos."

4.2 Credits and defects of Woolf's androgyny displayed in Orlando

Despite the transition to female, Orlando has always been engaged in contact with the field of literature, especially the field of poetry. He often attends various literary communication occasions. When presented as a man, he had no friends to go with, and although he later became a woman, due to deep gender biases, the poet Pope excused himself, compulsively unable to appreciate or even believe that Orlando could have any talent for literature. As a result, Orlando could not argue with him and could only serve him tea and water like a housewife. This does not mean that he respects his opinion; rather, it's a forced acceptance of Orlando's understanding. The more experience Orlando has as a woman in society, the more she realizes that a male-dominated society relentlessly denies women equal rights and wisdom. She felt that as a woman, she had to learn to obey and respect the opinions of the opposite sex.

After enduring this prejudice, Orlando looked at herself in the mirror and saw that she hadn't been completely held back by the strong pressures of patriarchy over the years. "She stood in front of the mirror, looked left and right, and saw that although she has been wearing petticoats for many years, her legs and feet are still walking freely, so she is very reassured." Orlando, who went out in male attire, met a prostitute and went back to her residence with her. The prostitute absently smeared her face to please Orlando. It was not until Orlando said she was a woman that the girl laughed and let her manners to please men go away. "Although the girl's conversation is vulgar, compared to the elegant rhetoric to which Orlando is accustomed, she is as intoxicating as fine wine." Orlando is attracted by her free beauty, while Woolf hopes to use the androgynous Orlando to deconstruct the stereotyped image of prostitutes pleasing men and use her behavior to deconstruct the prejudice and criticism of prostitutes in social discourse. By forcing the contrast of the different attitude of the prostitute, we can see how pathetic women are forced to be only to make a living by pleasing men and giving

away dignity. Woolf tries to use the androgynous double identity to uncover this doubleness of prostitutes and, in fact, alludes to all women, who are forced to play nice and be obedient to please men in the repressive patriarchal society. Woolf endeavors to depict this contrast scene to appeal to women to be consistent and natural around both sexes and bravely be oneself and less propitiatory in front of men. Equality is achieved first by the equal treatment and psychological roles towards both sexes.

At the same time, however, it is important to note that there are also flaws in Woolf's version of feminism or point out certain difficulties in the development of women's freedom. First, Orlando was a male when he first appeared in the novel. The protagonists of traditional British biographies are mostly male—kings, ministers, heroes, or dignitaries—and most women struggle to get the status of monuments. At the beginning of the novel, Orlando is "unmistakably" male, and as an aristocrat of an honorable family background, he can be considered a close relative of the emperor. Even though he became a woman after entering the biography, he could not erase the influence of the patriarchal sense ingrained in this biography. Second, whenever Orlando encounters something unfair or intolerable, one option is to be in nature, and the other is to change into menswear and go outside to ease her inner feelings, which means she still finds a way to solve her problems or ease the pain of life by making herself a man and hiding and negating all aspects of her femininity. The subconscious way to break free from the shackles of the feminine image and characteristics is precisely the greatest dilemma encountered in the development of feminism, that is, the fatal weakness of women in their own existence, in other words, they are so deeply influenced by patriarchal ideology that they are not aware of the fact that they themselves are afflicted with morbid misogyny just like their counterpart men. To solve the above problem, we need not only the awakening of true feminist consciousness instead of just using masculine traits and mindsets but also the strength of women's confidence and determination to move beyond the mere idea of conventional homosexuality, as the Orlando problem mentioned above. Only when the balance of the sexes is achieved can one expect true spiritual abundance.

5 Conclusion

The concept of androgyny is one of Woolf's major contributions to female literature. The novel "Orlando" achieves success in its subtle juxtaposition of the author's consciousness and the spirit of the era, but we must also recognize its success as an extension of the idea of intersexuality, into which Woolf's reflections on gender and creativity are woven. "Orlando" connects male and female consciousness, promoting both gender integration and gender difference; the goal of gender transformation is to break free from the simple binary of male and female. Her fantasy novel "Orlando" has set a precedent by breaking through the limitations of time, space, and sex, in which Woolf deconstructs and subverts the binary system through the androgynous character Orlando. As a literal and social ideal, androgyny plays an important role in inspiring Woolf and her successors to fight for equality between the sexes. However, as a subjective wish, it is practically impossible to achieve in real life, though she did strive to

propagandize the consciousness of androgyny for women's liberation. Like Orlando, the purpose of the "androgyny" consciousness advocated by Woolf is to free people from the bounds and definitions of gender, and to gain freedom in life, space and creativity in writing, and innovation and liberation in literature for women. In terms of literary invention, Woolf presents a wonderful and innovative persona who experiences the life of being both sexes and enjoys eternal youth at the same time. Nevertheless, though with little actual effect, through the theory of androgyny, Woolf leads feminism into a new phase of development. There is still a long way to go to shake the deep-rooted notion of masculine superiority, but women can apply this mindset of androgyny and learn from Woolf to pursue their freedom and equal status in both the physical and spiritual realms. By placing themselves in a balanced position when valuing themselves and the other sex, and also combining the characteristics of both sexes together, they can achieve the wholeness of mindset and spirit.

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