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Breaking through the Limits of Flesh: Gender Fluidity and (Un)natural Sexuality in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*

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Abstract

With the politicization of sex around the nineteenth century, the categories of gender and sexuality became primary instruments of disciplining the personal as well as the public body. Sexual decorum, pertaining to one's gender and in accordance to social prescription, was encouraged and practised at large, alienating and condemning all forms of sexual expressions that did not conform to the economics of marriage and reproduction. Heteronormativity deployed mass homophobia which caused the suppression and erasure of major homosexual documentation in an attempt of silencing the homosexual voices and experiences. The absence of lesbian material in women's literature is a case in point. The chief responsibility of the lesbian feminist project lies in identifying or deciphering the underlying essence of lesbianism in women's writing at large. Following a similar objective, I propose to highlight the socio-political and cultural construction of homosexuality in an attempt to identify the undercurrents of lesbian desire and the dissolution of gender binaries in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. The idea of this research is to read gender as performance while interpreting the ideological politics as well as the literary poetics of Woolf's writing.

[**Keywords:** LGBT, Gender, Sexuality, Virginia Woolf, Orlando]

Homosexual writing in the English literature has always been problematized by the socio-political oppression and cultural taboo on the unregulated expression of same-sex desire. Most of the fiction related to the issue remained either unpublished or available for circulation only in private quarters. It is rather difficult to come across any significant main stream literary work with homosexual content before the augment of the twentieth century, and even then the writers took care to camouflage and mask the uninhibited exhibition of this outlawed desire. Radcliff Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) is one of the first attempts towards lesbian writing and the demonstration of what was then considered to be 'sexual inversion'. The fact that it was received with public aggression followed by a trial and subsequent prosecution speaks volumes about the homosexual intolerance of the age. Virginia Woolf's pseudo-biography, *Orlando*, published in the same year, approached the topic differently. Woolf's lesbian consciousness (though Woolf never identified herself as a lesbian, she was at various stages of her life described as homo-, hetero-, bi- or asexual) taken together with her feminist approach offered a deployment of gender instability in her dialogue with (un)natural sexualities. *Orlando's* paroxysmal shifts between male and female, heterosexuality and homosexuality, reality

¹ Sexual inversion was the term used for homosexuality by the sexologists of the nineteenth and twentieth

and fantasy, past and present, life and poetry, biography and autobiography² unsettles and disavows the very possibilities of fixed meanings and binaries.

Before getting into an elaborate diagnosis of Woolf's commitment to the lesbian feminist project and her politics of representation, it is crucial to map the evolution of the homosexual identity, and its relation to the notions of sex and gender, over the centuries, from a condition of social incognizance in the eighteenth century (during this time homosexuality was widely labelled under the generalized act of sodomy) to its discursive explosion in the nineteenth and twentieth century, in order to grasp the author's four hundred year long narrative of the life of her protagonist. Following Michel Foucault's (1976) critic of the repressive hypothesis of sexuality in the nineteenth century, it can be acknowledged that with the turning of sex into discourse, other forms of sexualities, which did not adhere to the economics of reproduction, were expelled from reality; minor perversions came to be dealt with legal severity and sexual irregularities were medicalized and categorized as mental illness, leading to a production and propagation of a kind of sexuality that was 'economically useful and politically conservative' (p. 36-37). While in the preceding century, sexual practises revolved around marital obligation and all sexual offenses (like adultery, rape, incest and homosexuality) were labelled under general unlawfulness, the nineteenth century experienced a shifting of focus . . . from conjugal sexuality to perverseness. Foucault writes, "It was time for all these figures . . . to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were. No doubt they were condemned all the same; but they were listened to" (p.39). Thus, the Victorian epoch encountered a multiple implantation of perversion rather than its suppression; perverse identities like homosexuality became both the effect and the instrument of power – it was embedded in bodies, judged through personal conduct and wrapped in an eternal flux of power and pleasure (Foucault, 1976, p. 40-45).

While homosexuality thus gathered social prominence in the nineteenth century, the term came to represent mostly gay sexualities. William Acton in *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and in Advanced Life, Considered in the Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations* stated, "The majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind" (as cited in Evans, 2011, para. 3). The general prepossession that women are physiologically as well as psychologically asexual, characterized their exclusion from the domain of sexual scrutiny for a considerable period in history. Relationships between women were not viewed in the light of homosexual suspicion since the very existence of sexual urges in women remained uncertain at the time and even when it was realized, its passivity did not appear as a threat. The complexity of the women's sexual needs and desires, coupled with the perpetual subjugation and domination of the same, problematizes the formulation of any simplistic definition or understanding of feminine sexuality. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) in her phenomenal work, *The Second Sex*, attempts to arrive at a consolidated meaning of female eroticism and sexuality by underlining its

² Many parallels can be drawn between *Orlando* and Woolf's personal life. The very character of Orlando is said to be inspired by Vita Sackville-West, Woolf's friend and lover.

fecundity and functionality. Beauvoir argues that while for the man the sexual transformation from childhood to maturity is relatively simplified by the autonomy of his sex organ and a distinct culmination of his desires by the basic act of ejaculation, the woman's situation is complicated by the existence of multiple internal and external factors like the presence two sexual organs – the clitoris and the vagina, the social and moral supervision of her sexuality, the constant insistence on the virtue of virginity, the institution of marriage that assigns a unidirectional exhibition of desire, etcetera (p. 1214-19). Her analysis of feminine sexuality leads her to believe that for the female subject, the clitoris is always the center of eroticism and that the vaginal system is a male intervention to facilitate penetration and procreation (p. 1214). Thus, one can argue that lesbianism, rather than heterosexism, is the natural response of the female body in the sense that it does not induce a shifting of erotic centers or objectify the female body; lesbian sex is not designed around the principles of reproduction and does not threaten to abuse the body with non-consensual or forced impregnation (p.1217). Here, it is relevant to point out that Beauvoir does not question the existence of vaginal pleasure but signifies the complexity of such a reaction. She perceives that vaginal orgasm “can be qualified as psychophysiological because it not only concerns the entire nervous system but also depends on the whole situation lived by the subject” (Beauvoir, 1949, p.1218).

Beauvoir's claim on the naturalness of female homosexuality is also grounded in the belief that like men, women's primary attraction and allegiance lie with the female body, beginning with her mother. To the untutored female consciousness, the coarseness and acidity of the male flesh is more likely to produce repulsion than pleasure (p. 1227); a repulsion that she is obligated to overcome to ensure the unfettered continuance of social heteronormativity. Here, I would like to add that an acute understanding of the body is a crucial aspect of unravelling the mystery of female sexuality. Because the woman is always alienated from her body and her corporeal knowledge is constantly guided by the patriarchal myth about female bodies, she comes to realize her physicality as a cause for shame, a social impediment, and might even come to despise it or become too conscious of it. The fact that the woman is never allowed to come to terms with her own body also conditions her partial or convoluted appreciation of her own sexuality. Thus it is an almost irrefutable truth that a woman is certainly in a better position to comprehend the desires and fantasies of another female body through the commonality of lived experiences. Beauvoir (1949) writes, “Between women, love is contemplation; caresses are meant less to appropriate the other than to re-create oneself slowly through her; separation is limited, there is neither fight, nor victory, nor defeat; each one is both subject and object, sovereign and slave in exact reciprocity; this duality is complicity” (p. 1356).

Beauvoir's views on same-sex love is articulated in the essence of lesbian criticism which builds its argument around the conviction that female identity is not restricted to its relation to patriarchy, rather, female-female bonds are crucial in developing the emotive as well as intellectual consciousness of women. The essay “The Woman-Identified Woman” opines that lesbian feminism assumes, “the primacy of women relating to women, of creating a new consciousness of and with each other . . . we see

ourselves as prime, find our centers inside of ourselves” (as cited in Zimmerman, 1981, p. 345). Perhaps lesbian feminism can then be viewed as a political standpoint, breaking through the boundaries of heterosexuality, social stereotyping and cultural encryption of female subordination. Now, we have come to a point where we must try to define the lesbian and simultaneously question the possibility of such a definition. Judith Butler (1993), in *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*, endeavours to understand the decidability of the category of lesbian identity (p. 310). Who is a lesbian? On what basis should a woman be categorized (or categorize herself) into the lesbian identity? Should her lesbian practises, desires and sexuality be taken into account? And again, what would be the objective of such identification? Bertha Harris, the major novelist and critic considers the lesbian to be “the quintessence of all that is female; and female enraged . . . a lesbian is . . . that which has been unspeakable about woman” (as cited in Zimmerman, 1981, 353). Such a definition emphasises on the pluralities and multiplicities of the lesbian experience and hints at the impossibility of producing a specific lesbian identity. Butler (1993) reflects that though the identities ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ do not guarantee the description of one’s sexuality and or an escape from it, they are nonetheless important to take a political stance in the representation of homosexuality. But she simultaneously plays up the futility of any such attempt towards identification. Since it is already known that these identity positions from the very beginning have been designated as ‘impossible identities’, ‘errors of classification’ and ‘natural disasters’, it is possible to find in these sites of confusion and instability, the points of resistance to classification (p. 309). Instead of looking for specific identity locations and external points of resistance, Butler urges the homosexual struggle to begin and work within the very matrix of heterosexuality, disrupting its hegemony through the repeated performance of the gay/lesbian “I” (p.311). Homosexuality, she argues, is not a ‘bad copy’ of the heterosexual original, rather, she reads heterosexuality as a copy with no origin; its constant need to repeat itself exposes the possibility of its collapse (p. 314).

Butler (1993) suggests that heterosexuality validates and naturalizes itself by evoking an illusion about the continuation and parallelism between the categories of sex, gender and sexual desire (p. 317). It is through the critic and dislocation of this continuity that Woolf strives to articulate her lesbian voice. Throughout Woolf’s (1928) *Orlando*, the notion of gender is fraught with ambiguities and inconsistencies. Orlando’s experiences as man and woman, the constant interplay of masculinity and femininity in her body, taken together with her abrupt sex-change at the age of thirty, suggests an assumption of gender as performance. On reading *Orlando* following Butler’s proposition of performativity, one might appreciate the novel’s objective of exposing, and at the same time, upsetting the naturalized gender binaries. Butler’s (1993) theory of performativity claims that gender is an unstable category, a socio-cultural construction that needs to repeatedly perform itself through the subject to ensure its existence. Gender is not a natural expression of the subject’s biological sex; it is performative in its construction of the very subject that performs it. Butler writes, “There is no performer prior to the performed, that the performance is performative” (p. 315). Gender is thus a compulsory performance, that is, the subject is not allowed to choose which gender it wants to

perform; transgression of the gender norms can invite punishment and violence but it is through this enactment of these gender roles that one might hope to challenge their authorities (Butler, 1993, p. 313-15).

Woolf's representation of gender in *Orlando* is problematized from the very onset of its narrative. The text begins with the assurance that "there could be no doubt of his [Orlando's] sex" (p. 5), only to confuse the readers by incorporating multiple feminine adjectives in her portrayal of Orlando's appearance – the shapeliness of her legs, the redness of her cheek and lips (p. 5), the shyness of his personality (p. 10) are the qualities alluded to. An intelligent reader from this moment would be cautious of accepting anything at face-value and thus better prepared to comprehend the textual subversions. While Orlando was a man, she mostly did "as nature bade him do" (p. 13) but the author is quick to point that it made her "tired . . . weary of the repetition" (p. 15). Even with the extraordinary event of Orlando's sex change from male-female, her individuality did not alter. Woolf informs, "The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (p. 79). Thus she makes clear that it is not one's biological sex that decides one's gender and sexuality; Orlando's sexual transformation does nothing to change her gender as feminine; she shows us that it is rather the society that necessitates her adoption of the female role. Orlando as a woman was expected to follow the principle of 'chastity, purity and modesty' (p. 78), she could feel the changing responses of the world around her which in turn expected her to alter her identity. As a woman Orlando realizes rather instantly that "women are not . . . obedient, chaste, scented and exquisitely apparelled by nature. They can only attain these graces . . . by the most tedious discipline (Woolf, 1928, p.90). It is this disciplining of the female body and mind, this existence of social inequality that Woolf aims to debunk through the female Orlando.

In *Orlando*, Woolf makes use of the instrument of clothing to accentuate the inequalities of sexes in society. Dresses become metaphors of domination and restriction in the novel. Orlando's first choice of dressing after 'becoming'³ a woman is rather gender neutral but she soon discovers that "these skirts are plague things to have about one's heels" (p. 89). For example, such was the hypocrisy of the age (here it is the Victorian Age) that crinolines were invented to hide female pregnancy, one of the greatest truths of womanhood. Orlando becomes aware of the horrifying truth behind the beauty of these apparels which in the name of chastity and protection of feminine virtue compromise the entire female body. But clothing also serves another very important function in *Orlando*. Changing of clothes in the novel becomes equivalent to changing one's gender. Orlando repeatedly swings between masculinity and femininity by a simple act of changing her attire. The author writes, "she found it convenient at this time to change frequently from one set of clothes to another" (p. 127). In the above statement, the words 'set of clothes' can easily be replaced by 'gender' without altering its meaning. Butler (1993) explains

³ Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) asserts that "One isn't born but becomes a woman" (p. 899). Following this idea of 'becoming', we might say that femininity is not an universal attitude. Each woman affects it and is affected by it differently.

cross-dressing or drag as a performance that has the potential of countering the prevalence of gender distinction as well as heterosexuality. Drag, says Butler, is not an imitation of a particular gender but constitutes “the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalised, worn and done” (Butler, 1993, p. 313). Cross-dressing can therefore liberate a person from the constraints of gender boundaries while refuting those boundaries at the same time through parody and imitation. Cross-dressing also allowed Orlando a free expression of his sexuality and his love for the same sex. The author herself declares that “Orlando professed great enjoyment in the society of her own sex” (Woolf, 1928, p. 127) and a masculine appearance rather facilitated the realisation of this fantasy. Orlando’s potential homosexual affair with Nell is a case in point. The undercurrents of lesbian desire in the Orlando-Nell episode are thoughtfully substituted with conversation; here ‘desire’ and ‘conversation’ is interconnected since men deny the existence of either between women. At this point it is fitting to argue that almost all the sexual relationships that Orlando developed during her lifetime surrounded around people with gender discrepancies. Archduke Harry’s disguise as a woman, Archduchess Harriet, to gain the love of male Orlando and his rejection of the guise later in persuasion of her feminine version, mockingly denigrates the rigidities of gender identities. Even in the male Orlando’s liaison with Sasha, the question of gender followed the spontaneous attraction and desire for the individual body rather than preceding it – “Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question” (Woolf, 1928, p. 19). In Orlando’s marriage with Shel, both found a compromise of gender extremities and rejoiced in the identification of elements of both the sexes in each other. Though there is not much evidence of sexual exchange between Orlando and Shel (their marriage was mostly an outcome of the nineteenth century demand for heterosexual, conjugal relationship), their camaraderie evoked a different kind of love and security.

The only names that Orlando recalls towards the end of the novel as serious loves are those of women (Woolf, 1928, p. 181). Karyn Z. Sproles (2006) records that Orlando’s love for these women is “continually revealed and repressed by the biographer’s interruption” (p. 83). Indeed the biographer plays a significant role in *Orlando*. The biographer’s perspective taken together with that of Woolf’s, that is, the writer’s, maintains a constant tension between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy till the distinctions cancel out each other and no longer remain valid. Woolf sole purpose in *Orlando* seems to be a nullification of all possible boundaries; her vision of the world is steeped in plurality and acceptability. Patricia Cramer observes, “Woolf’s aim was to write as clearly as she could about love between women while avoiding detection. To do so, Woolf crafted works that could “pass” within the dominant cultures and at the same time communicate subversive in-group messages to savvy readers” (as cited in Sproles, 2006, p. 8). But is it enough to say that Woolf incorporates the modes fantasy and stream-of-consciousness⁴ with the singular purpose of evading moral judgement or social criticism? Woolf’s fantasy and poetic writing, I would like to argue, is a part of her feminist project

⁴ It is a narrative technique made popular in the twentieth century. The device is used to depict the thought process of the characters and lacks the linearity of formal language.

that mocks the entire pursuit of meaning and core identity. Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan Woolf commented on Woolf, Gertrude Stein and others as “a feminist aesthetic, as it emerges out of women’s evolution, ground itself in female consciousness and in the unrelenting language of process and change” (as cited in Zimmerman, 1981, p. 355). It is this incoherence and fantastical nature of Woolf’s language that makes it a potent medium for writing the lesbian consciousness.

Hélène Cixous (1976), in “The Laugh of the Medusa” urges the women to write, write about their selves, through their bodies, in a language of subversion powerful enough to break through the walls and boundaries across classes and sexes. She rightly remarks that women have always been separated from writing, the vocation was considered ‘too high’ or ‘too great’ for their kind; writing for a long time has been reserved as the exclusive right of the ‘great men’ (p. 876) of the society and any female interference to this domain was suppressed by exuding the feelings of guilt and shame in them. She derides, “big bosses don’t like the true texts of women – female-sexed texts. That kind scares them” (p. 877). But she also believes that it is through the act of writing that the woman will be able to regain the confidence in her body, introduce her voice in the social dialogue by shattering her silences and ultimately disrupt the laws of patriarchy from within (p. 877-82). Cixous predicts, “Her libido will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think” (p. 882). Woolf’s *Orlando* gratifies this very objective of resuscitating the feminine voice into the symbolic. Woolf writing is impregnated with undertones of female desires and fantasies and works towards a validation of lesbian relationships. Her approach is cautious yet bold, fantastical yet real, poetic yet powerful. Like *Orlando*, whose body could not be contained within the confines of gender, who repeatedly transgresses the norms of heterosexuality in recognition of the depth and complexity of her (un)natural sexuality, Woolf, the writer and the feminist, resists any attempt to pin-down her sexuality to a fixed and predetermined category or identity location. Woolf’s *Orlando* challenges the authorities of heteronormativity in the fluidity of her body and the multiplicity of her selves.

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