



Virginia Woolf's Androgynous Feminist Tendency in *Orlando: A Biography*

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf is one of the great stream-of-consciousness novelists of the 20th century and a pioneer of feminism. The core of her feminist ideology, androgyny, is best reflected in *Orlando: A Biography*, in which the author strongly criticizes the oppression of women in a patriarchal society, but at the same time opposes extreme gender antagonism. Woolf believes that there are two parts in every person's mind, male and female, and that only when the two parts are integrated can the ideal state be achieved. This is also true for literature, as only writers with androgynous characteristics can produce the greatest works.

Key words: Virginia Woolf; Androgyny; *Orlando: A Biography*

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1. INTRODUCTION OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is recognized as a major writer of the twentieth century, a great novelist and essayist, as well as a pioneer of modernism and feminism. Woolf paid great attention to depicting the spiritual world of her characters, and it was her creative philosophy that led her to the path of stream-of-consciousness writing.

Her stream-of-consciousness novels began with *Jacob's Room*, in addition to which she wrote *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando: a Biography*, and other important stream-of-consciousness works. In her writing, she strived to portray the subconscious mind of people, and gradually established and perfected the technique of stream-of-consciousness fiction, thus becoming one of the representative figures of stream-of-consciousness fiction.

In fact, Woolf is not only known for her famous stream-of-consciousness novels, but also as a feminist pioneer who cannot be ignored in history. She had always been very concerned about the treatment of women in society and abhorred the male hegemony that oppressed women. In her view, this result was caused by a deep-rooted male-centric bias against women, even many women were unable to see through the problems of this bias and belittled themselves. Woolf believed that men and women are not essentially different and that if women had the opportunity to engage in occupations that only men could do, they would do no worse than men. While she advocated women discover their unique value, unlike extreme feminists, she did not demand that women completely cut themselves off from men. In *A Room of One's Own*, she proposed the idea of androgyny, while she considered that people should strive to build an ideal society in which men and women live in harmony rather than an extreme patriarchal or feminist society.

2. INTRODUCTION OF ORLANDO: A BIOGRAPHY

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*, published in 1928, is a successful stream-of-consciousness novel. This book was inspired by Woolf's close friend, Vita Sackville-West, and has been called by many literary critics the most unique love letter ever written. Zhang Xin (2016) points out that inspired by Vita's character and her family history, "Orlando is a fantastically developed and embellished

portrait of someone Woolf loves, a man-woman who is as much a family as an individual. (p. 77). In addition to being loved by critics, Woolf herself considered the main character Orlando to be the best spokesperson for the androgynous temperament, because Orlando had all the important qualities Woolf thought a literary scholar should have, including androgyny.

Orlando: A Biography is a fictional biography that chronicles the life of the main character, Orlando, over a period of 400 years, from Elizabeth I to the time of the author. Orlando is a handsome noble boy, favored by Queen Elizabeth to enter the palace. After the death of the Queen Elizabeth, he suffered a double setback in love and career and returned to his estate in the countryside. In the years that followed he remained absorbed in literature, but never achieved much. Later, in order to escape the advances of an "Archduchess" (who Orlando thought was a woman at the time), Orlando went to Turkey as an envoy. A few years later, on the night of his investiture as a duke, he fell into a coma. A few days later, when Orlando woke up, she had become a woman. Due to the rebellion in Constantinople on the seventh day of her coma and the unbelievable changes that had taken place in her body, she decided to return to England with the help of the gypsies, out of her official position. After all her experiences, she gradually adapted to her androgynous soul and came to perfection. In the end, she found love and finally created successful poems to fulfill her literary dreams.

3. THE IDEA OF ANDROGYNY

The word "androgyny" first originated in ancient Greek mythology when Hermaphroditus and Salmacis combined during bathing to become hermaphrodites, which became the root of the Greek word "hermaphrodite". The concept of androgyny is widespread in mythology, with creator gods or human ancestors often appearing as androgynous figures. It means that at the beginning, human beings basically believed that everything in the universe was formed due to the joint force of two sexes and that androgyny is the most complete state of the human spirit. Hermaphrodite is a biological condition in which both male and female reproductive organs and secondary sexual characteristics are present in a single organism. Psychological androgyny refers to an individual who has both distinctly male and female personality traits. For example, toughness and boldness, which are commonly thought of as masculine traits, and gentleness and delicacy, which are commonly thought of as feminine traits, coexist harmoniously in the same person.

As a pioneer of the Western women's liberation movement and feminist literary criticism, Virginia Woolf was the first to introduce the concept of androgyny into literary criticism and composition. Woolf's major feminist work, *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929, was

based on two women-oriented lectures Woolf gave at Cambridge University in 1928 on the theme of "Women and the Novel". In the book, she proposed that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf, p. 4). Because money represents the power of thinking, the lock of the room represents the power of independent thinking. Also in this book, she introduces the concept of androgyny, she considered that "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 other words, Woolf advocated that only those with androgynous character traits can produce great works, and she clearly discussed this view in *A Room of One's Own*: "in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have an effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought" (Woolf, p. 113).

Woolf's concept of androgyny is an ideal state that seeks to achieve the goal of equal and harmonious coexistence between the sexes, and ultimately to create a perfect human society together. It provides a conception for the future way of males and females getting along, a direction for the development of literature in the 20th century, and a theoretical basis for the later feminist criticism (Li and Zhong, p.2173). This idea is reflected in many of her works, but *Orlando: A Biography* is undoubtedly the one that embodies the concept of androgyny most typically and fully. Far from repressing the female sexual body, in both works, she disputes the possibility of androgyny, the androgynous mind of the genius, and the intermediate type or third sex (Helt, p. 143).

4. ANDROGYNY IN ORLANDO: A BIOGRAPHY

In *Orlando: A Biography*, the main character was male in the first half of the book, and he changed from a man to a woman at the end of the third chapter. However, in fact, even though he seems to be a man at the beginning, he had some feminine qualities in him, as can be seen from the very first sentence of the novel. "He—for there would be no doubt of his sex though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (Woolf, p.

5). It is not hard to see the masculinity in Orlando from this quote, as he was beheading a Moor who aspired to build a career like his father's, but his costume blurred his sex, which laid the groundwork for his sex transition later. And when he first met Queen Elizabeth, he was so shy that he buried his head so deeply that "he saw no more of her than her ringed hand in water; but it was enough" (Woolf, p. 11). Under the queen's gaze, his face would be red like a "damask rose" (Woolf, p. 13). All of these reflect Orlando's tendency to be shy, a trait that is often considered more common in women. In addition, Orlando had his own perceptions and thoughts about nature and death. He often imagined his favorite oak tree as "the back of a great horse that he was riding or the deck of a tumbling ship" (Woolf, p. 9). From time to time, he had some emotions that he could not control, for example, "suddenly, Orlando would fall into one of his moods of melancholy" (Woolf, p. 28). This sentimental side of him is also traditionally perceived as a feminine trait. What's more, when he fell in love uncontrollably, he was willing to give up all the glory and wealth he had and elope with the person he loved, this kind of impulsive, reckless, romantic characteristic in love, to a large extent, is also a female trait.

Although Orlando was born with some female personality traits, he was not a sissy. In fact, he was so attractive as a male, that he is very popular among women. As shown at the beginning of the story, even Queen Elizabeth was attracted by Orlando. Besides, his charm also made many women fall in love with him, the book recorded at least three women had been engaged to him, although they were not soul mates so they did not enter the marriage hall. He also had many affairs, including with a Russian princess Sasha, they fell in love with each other, but the princess finally left him to return to her homeland. Even after he returned to his big house in the countryside, there was an "Archduchess" who lived near their house and pursued him so persistently every day that he asked the King to appoint him ambassador to Turkey in order to avoid her. Even in Turkey, he was surrounded by women who were devoted to him, as can be seen from the letters of others on the night he was awarded the title of duke. "...as all admitted, for none could be so vile as to deny it, was the Ambassador himself. Such a leg! Such a countenance!! Such princely manners!!! ...He is unmarried, and half the ladies in the place are wild for love of him" (Woolf, p. 90).

Frankly speaking, although he began as a man has some female qualities until Orlando changed to a woman, he became a real sense of androgynous and gradually towards spiritual maturity and perfection. In the book, Orlando woke up as a woman after 7 days of coma, but she was not surprised or overwhelmed after finding this out. She calmly accepted the change that would alter the course of her life, and then "dressed herself

in those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex" (Woolf, p. 97). Later she lived for some time in a Gypsy tribe were, and in her opinion, "the gipsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gipsy men" (Woolf, p. 107). This kept her from deeply appreciating how the change in sex would change her life until she embarked on the ship back to England. Once a man, then a woman, this allowed Orlando to think from both a man's and a woman's perspective, and "she was censuring both sexes equally as if she belonged to neither...she was man, she was a woman she knew the secrets, shared the weakness of either" (Woolf, p. 112). She finally remembered that "as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled" (Woolf, p. 109). Now as a woman, she had to pay the price for her previous arrogant thoughts, as she learned, women were not born to conform to men's imagination, they were only forced to become so in the later oppression to cater to men. The fact that the oppression of women in a male-dominated society came from the mouth of Orlando, who had experienced the different identities of men and women successively, was humorous and mocking, reflecting Woolf's ingenuity.

Orlando returned to his big house in the countryside as a woman, but the servants did not doubt that the one standing in front of them was their master, Orlando, because her face was not much different from before. This shows that what really matters in Woolf's eyes is not a change in physical sex but a change in spirituality. Although Orlando's body and spirit had undergone various changes, her core thing had remained unchanged, which was her love for literature and her thinking about nature and life. In fact, Orlando's costume changes reflect her mental state. When socializing, she generally dressed herself as a standard English lady, because it was a requirement of that society at that time for women to dress in a way that matched their femininity. But when she was alone, she would like to wear "in the neat black silk knickerbockers of an ordinary nobleman" (Woolf, p. 131). Sometimes she would change her dress several times in a day, in fact, it was through cross-dressing that Orlando became an androgynous person. In *Orlando: A Biography*, Woolf explained her views on clothing and sex: "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 man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion. Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same" (Woolf, p. 133).

In any case, Orlando slowly completed the integration of the male and female parts of his soul over the course of several hundred years. It was this androgynous state that helped Orlando realize her literary dream since childhood, and her poem "Oak," which she kept revising for centuries, was finally published and became a huge success. This also confirms Woolf's view in *A Room of One's Own* that neither a purely masculine nor a purely feminine mind can write, and that only an androgynous mind can produce great works. In addition to the success of her literary dreams, Orlando's growth helped her to find her true soul mate and to incline her soul slightly toward the feminine for him, as Orlando said after their engagement, "I am a woman...a real woman at last" (Woolf, p. 180).

In addition to the most obvious androgynous character, Orlando, several other characters in the book also show some androgynous qualities: Russian princess Sasha, Archduke Harry, and Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. The first one is Sasha, who initially attracted Orlando's attention because "the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex" (Woolf, p. 22). Besides, her skating skills were so good that Orlando concluded that she was a boy. But as Sasha approached, he found that "legs, hands, carriage, were a boy's, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea" (Woolf, p. 22). It is clear that Orlando fell in love with her precisely because of her androgynous qualities. The second one is Duke Harry. When Orlando was a man, Archduke Harry fell in love with him, but he could only pretend to be a woman to court Orlando. In this process, Orlando never suspected his identity, which reflected his femininity. Archduke Harry didn't show his true form until Orlando became a woman. In the face of Orlando's repeated teasing, he still chose to forgive her because she was a woman, which again reflects his masculinity. The last one is Orlando's husband Shelmerdine. When they first met, they shouted at the same time. "'You're a woman! Shel!' she cried. 'You're a man! Orlando!' he cried" (Woolf, p. 178).

Like Orlando, Shelmerdine was born with feminine qualities, which is the fundamental reason why they can be united as soul mates. He liked to sail, and he could remain calm no matter how much danger he faced while sailing, which reflected his masculinity in him. But he often blushed inexplicably, which reflected the femininity in him. They also suddenly ask each other questions about gender from time to time. "'Are you positive you aren't

a man?' he would ask anxiously, and she would echo, 'Can it be possible you're not a woman?'" (Woolf, p. 184). These seemingly absurd questions actually reflect to a certain extent that they see through the essence of each other and see the hidden side of each other's souls.

5. CONCLUSION

For the study of Woolf's feminist views, especially androgyny, *Orlando: A Biography* is a work of great significance. Combining more than four hundred years of Orlando's experience, Woolf realistically explored gender relations. Through Orlando, who had an androgynous identity, she criticized the oppression of women by a patriarchal society. But she was not extremely feminist, as she was equally opposed to gender dichotomy. What she advocated was for both genders to live in harmony and build a perfect society together, which made a significant contribution to the development of feminism and offered her insights into the future progress of society. At the same time, the androgyny advocated by Woolf is also an ideal state for literary creation, because writers should not be bound by their own gender; only by looking at it from both perspectives can they create truly great works. This is what is special about Woolf's thinking and what makes her great. It is because men and women are different and have their own strengths that writers should go beyond the confines of gender as much as possible. In a word, to understand the development of feminism, Virginia Woolf is a person who cannot be ignored, and to understand her, Orlando, and the idea of androgyny is paramount.

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