

A Study on the Gender Fluidity of the Protagonist in *Orlando* from the Androgyny Vision



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ABSTRACT: As a representative work by Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* depicts the legendary life experience of Orlando, a nobleman, as long as four hundred years. Orlando grows up in self-contradiction and social contradiction, and finally realizes self-knowledge and the value of life. All characters in this work have distinctive characteristics, strong emotional color, revealing gender differences, reconstruction of gender by society and self and gender aesthetic diversity. Based on literature analysis and text research, this paper tries to use Woolf's androgyny theory to analyze the gender fluid of protagonist in *Orlando*. The main purpose of the study is to help readers understand the work better, grasp deeper connotation of literary works and have a deeper comprehension of gender differences and the gender identity.

KEYWORDS-*Orlando*, Virginia Woolf, androgyny, gender fluid.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the social cognition of gender aesthetics has tended to be lopsided and one-sided. The masculine temperament of male aesthetic and the "white, young and thin" female aesthetic highly advocated on the Internet have resulted in limitations to the gender aesthetic diversity. This phenomenon reminds us of *Orlando* written by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and her androgyny vision. *Orlando* was first published in 1928, between the first and the second wave of feminism. From 1920 to 1960, feminism was in a temporary state of retreat due to two world wars, the Great War, and the Cold War. Under the background of economy depression and wars, the living environment and conditions of female have not been improved effectively. Stereotypes justify all disparities that exclude women from equal accesses to social resources. Thus Women had to fight for franchise and the abolition of slavery. They also tried to win the rights to own and inherit property, to divorce and to joint custody. Many outstanding feminists' literature in pursuit of political and career fights came into being during this period of time, emphasizing to respect the gender differences and appreciate feminism charm. Woolf's is one of such works, which has contributed a lot to the development of the second phase of feminist movement.

Previous researches of this novel have mostly dwelt on the aesthetic thoughts of this book, for many scholars are concerned with narrative techniques of Woolf, and her ecofeminism ideology is often studied as a branch of her theoretical research. However, there is still in need of a further study concerning the androgyny vision of Woolf, who herself is in the confusion of gender consciousness and gender identity split, a study concerning the relationship between the gender fluid and the gender cognition as well. In Woolf's eyes, there is a contradiction of gender in literature under the patriarchal system and there is a must for a new conception for the harmonious coexistence of male and female in the future. Such a vision provides a theoretical basis for the latter feminist criticism. This paper will analyze the main character in *Orlando* from the perspective of Woolf's androgyny vision, concerning the writer's own psychological appeals (including the appeal for recognition of gender differences, the appeal for the social acceptance of gender self-identity and androgyny thought).

II. ANDROGYNY AND PREVIOUS STUDIES CONCERNING IT IN ORLANDO

The origin of the word "androgyny" can be traced back to ancient Greece, where the words "andro" (male) and "gyny" (female) form the current spelling "androgyny." At the same time, in western mythology, the concept of androgyny is also involved. For example, Athena, the legendary goddess of victory, is an androgynous representation of both masculinity and femininity. Modern psychology also discusses the concept of "androgyny." For example, Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, points out that there is no pure man or pure woman in the psychological or biological areas and the gender consciousness of human beings has feature beyond its own characteristics (Tong & Cheng, 2011). What's more, the famous psychoanalyst, Jung, proposes the inward face of the psychology based on the theory of Freud's psychoanalysis, Anima and Animus. The archetype of Anima is the female psyche of a male and the archetype of Animus is the male psyche of a female. Everyone is born with certain qualities of the opposite sex, not only because biologically men and women produce male and female hormones in the same way, but also because,

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psychologically, human beings tend to have emotions and attitudes on different aspects of gender (Tong & Cheng, 2001). This kind of trait ensures harmony and understanding between the two sexes. Only when the persona and Anima or Animus reach a balance and coexist harmoniously can the harmony of individual internal personality and the perfection of individual psychology be achieved.

Before Freud and Jung, Coleridge has already introduced the concept of androgyny into the field of literary creation. He points out in his *Talk on the Table* that the androgynous writing should be promoted to embody both masculinity and femininity, however, he ignores the masculinity of female writers, and thus his theory is one-sided and unilateral. On the basis of Coleridge's writings, Woolf further enriches the concept of "androgynous." She emphasizes the masculinity of female and the femininity of male, redefining the importance of androgynous temperament in artistic creation. Her expressions of androgyny are often linked to her artistic trends. For instance, in 1929, Woolf published *A Room of One's Own*, which explores the relationship between artistic creation and women's history, economic and social status, and proposes to replace the traditional patriarchal writing style with "androgyny" writing style.

Since the publication of *Orlando*, a great number of studies have been widely conducted on *Orlando* mainly from the perspectives of space narration, feminism and aestheticism, while some scholars have undertaken *Orlando* from the perspective of the author's own personality. Elaine Showalter (2004, p. 215-216) studies Woolf and androgyny in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. The gender consciousness of female writers, or gender ideology, is one of the core concerns in Showalter's study. Combined with the increasingly prevalent psychoanalytic theory at that time, she points out that Woolf's literature style is narrowly divided into masculine and feminine, and the two styles could not be fused completely. As a defective moral concept, androgyny theory gradually evolves into an aesthetic issue in the process of literature creation, and also an extension of gender social roles. In *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literature Theory*, Toril Moi (1985, p. 21) regards Woolf's language as "infinite possibilities." Distinguished from traditional works, characters in Woolf's novels are not typical narrators. Through multi-angle narration, the identity of the same character subtly shows different levels of the temperament. In addition, Woolf's developmental writing in text and theory and innovative narrative strategies are her digestion of stereotypes in literary creation under the patriarchal system. Besides, Moi argues that the study of Woolf's androgyny concept should go beyond the traditional Anglo-American feminist literary criticism and its aesthetic category. Nancy Topping Bazin (1973, p. 78) states in her book *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision* that one way to achieve the idea (androgyny) is to collaborate across gender. In this book, she states that in addition to physical features, there are two different ways of thinking behind Woolf's androgyny theory. What androgyny theory pursues is the process of comprehensive thinking based on the two different ways of thinking. Only in this way can the historical iceberg of gender antagonism be finally melted and the idea of harmonious coexistence be achieved. In the following section, Woolf's life experience, its relationship to her androgyny vision and the latter's main contents will be further examined.

III. VIRGINIA WOOLF'S ANDROGYNY VISION

Woolf's life experience was of great significance to the formation of androgyny theory. She was born in the late Victorian age when the feminist movement became stronger day by day in Britain and grew up at a time when British women waged a series of struggles for political suffrage. As a child, Woolf heard and witnessed the great efforts made by her predecessors to achieve equal rights with male. Living in the patriarchy of the Victorian society, Woolf could feel the intense gender consciousness of the age. The death of her mother and the sexual abuse of her brother during her childhood had been devastating and traumatizing her mind and soul (Gruber, 2005, p. 59-74). Later, she found herself in the confusion of gender consciousness and gender identity split. Gender consciousness and gender identity were in conflict with each other in her mind, which made her deeply and thoroughly understand the unequal status of women in the family and society. Suffering from the onslaught of bipolar, she didn't give up on her writing, on the contrary, she used her works as weapons to fight against all the shadows in her life. Her writings fully reveal the androgyny vision.

Androgyny Vision in Gender Identity Performance

Woolf's androgyny vision mainly consists of two aspects, the first of which is the gender identity performance. The literary career of Woolf almost revolves around the overturn of traditional gender identity. Beauvoir points out in *Le Deuxième Sexe*: "Women are not born as women; they are made to be women." Judith Butler (1993, p. 8-13) summarized and expanded former's studies, and firstly indicated in her book *Gender Trouble*: "There is no pure natural gender in the society, what we called 'gender' is the result of various social norms and conditions imposed on us." In other words, different gender concepts and behaviors between men and women are understood as "performance," and we, as actors, have the rights to choose a gender role to play. Gender is a performance, there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; Identity is constructed through performance by those "expression" which thought to be its result. From the perspective of androgyny theory, the subject of gender is constructed by social norms. Although it seems that we are free to choose our gender, in fact once we are biologically identified as a male or a female, we have to abide by all the social rules for acting a male or a female, whether we want to or not (Yazdani & Chenraghi,

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2014, p. 469-476). Seemingly, it's as if we're volunteering to play masculine men and feminine women; In fact, we are all trapped in this ingrained system of gender stereotypes. The androgyny theory advocated by Woolf allows free choice of gender identity and people's tendency to express their opposite gender. Androgyny means that the two genders are equal, each has its own advantages and disadvantages, and their values complement each other. Androgyny theory provides the possibility for the homosexual community to get rid of gender identity. Woolf's androgyny vision is of special importance in a society that strictly classifies biological sex, social gender and sexual orientation, using the tool of "gender performance" to challenge the dichotomous structure of male and female. Because of this, the expression of gender identity can be constructed in a new form, variable and performative, instead of a single, permanent continuum. Women should see their own value more clearly, and men should refine the value of women beyond the traditional gender identity system.

Androgyny in Literary Creation: The second aspect of Woolf's androgyny vision is concerned with the importance of it in writing. Woolf introduces the difficult writing history of female writers in *A Room of One's Own*. In Victorian age, women still rarely participated in literature as a career in that their writings were mostly confined to emotional issues. Until the early 20th century, male literature and female literature are in an unbalanced position, and literary works contain far more male characteristics than female ones. Gender performance concerns not only physiology, but also aesthetics, drama, sociology and language. Through the writing Woolf supports the elimination of male-centered writing patterns, for she believes that every human mind is governed by two forces, one female and one male. Only by thinking from the perspective of both genders can artistic creation be fully expressed. Woolf quotes Coleridge's saying that "all great minds are hermaphroditic" to sum up this idea. Compared with monosexual brains, hermaphroditic brains are more empathic, more able to express their feelings without obstacles (Taxidou, 2020, p. 120-121). Woolf's view of androgyny emphasizes the elimination of gender opposition and the "forgetting" of writers' gender in writing. She acknowledges and respects gender differences and requires writers to find differences and complement each other with their strengths. There are certain differences in the way men and women think. The words and phrases used by women and men are distinguishing. It is precisely those differences that create a richer culture and more creative thoughts. Woolf regarded "androgyny" as a solution to the problem of female dependency at that time, aiming to promote gender equality and change people's view of women's status (Yang & Wang, 2016, p. 92). The proposal of androgyny not only re-examines the female writing, but also reveals the gender contradiction under the patriarchal system. It provides a conception for the future way of male and female getting along, a direction for the development of literature in the 20th century and a theoretical basis for the later feminist criticism.

IV. ANALYSIS OF GENDER FLUID OF THE PROTAGONIST IN ORLANDO FROM THE ANDROGYN VISION

Overview of the Gender Fluid of the Protagonist in Orlando

Orlando depicts the legendary life experience of a young nobleman, Orlando., who is handsome, brave and loves to write poetry. One day he wakes up to find he becomes a woman. He transcends the usual sense of time and space, following four centuries of adventure across Europe and Asia, searching for the significance of life and finally realizing his writing dream. Woolf takes a novel approach to writing, incorporating biographical elements into her work so as to make it closer to a true story, in which the reconstruction of gender is mainly reflected in psychological and social aspects.

Psychological Reconstruction of the Gender Fluid: According to Sigmund Freud's theory of personality structure, a complete personality structure consists of three systems: id, ego, and superego. The three systems of a normal person balance and restrict each other, while the impulse and control of the human mental world are expressed through the balance and imbalance of these three systems (Tong & Cheng, 2001, p. 26). The so-called id is the instinctive self. The id is the sum total of human instincts which ignores the existence of value, good and evil, and morality. The only purpose id pursues is the selfishness and greed of the human. The male Orlando represents the id, revealing his inner primal desire. As a male, Orlando has primitive desires. He yearns for love, freedom, and success in literary career. When Victorian asceticism is the dominant ideology of the time, his inner desires are not acceptable. As Freud's theory of personality structure states, the id never observes or even ignores the existence and importance of social morality. Orlando, as a male, is desperate to pursue what he wants and satisfy his desires, thus ignoring social moral constraints. When he is with his fiancée, he falls in love with Shara, attracted by Shara's attractive clothes and feminine charm which proves that id takes itself as the center, regardless of social ethics.

The superego, as the highest level of personality structure, represents the moral requirements for human nature. Superego is always governed by "moral principles" because its goal is to achieve fulfillment. Orlando transforms into a female after several days of lethargy. There is no denying that this identity has brought confusion to her. As a female, Orlando is an emotional and sensitive, which not only follows the moral requirements, but also lives in the restrictions of social traditional roles. She must always keep a graceful gesture and begin to think about chastity issues. It can be seen from above statement that although female Orlando has prejudice against the inherent traditions of society, she still tries her best to cater to such a trend, which is the force of superego.

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Freud states that the ego, between the id and the superego, plays a moderating role. The ego is susceptible to external circumstances. "The ego represents the ration and controls the activities of the id with the principle of reality. It can ensure that the id be affected by the external environment but not changed by it" (Tong & Cheng, 2001, p. 28). Therefore, Orlando chose to change clothes to satisfy the desires of id and lives a life juggling between two genders. Orlando, who is androgynous, finally marries a ship captain as a woman. On the one hand, she is stimulated by the primitive desires of id; on the other hand, she is limited by social morality and patriarchal ideology, which symbolize inner ego.

Social Reconstruction of the Gender Fluid: Society also contributes significantly to the reconstruction of Orlando's gender. Orlando's gender identity in this novel is difficult to define. Orlando explains society's stereotypes by changing gender to exclude conflicts between men and women. As a male, he courageously pursued the love in his heart, eager to kill the enemy on the battlefield. As a female, "it took her a whole morning just to brush her hair. Look in the mirror, another hour... And to remain chaste for years and years..." (Woolf, 2003, p. 219). Costume is a unique culture, and costume culture is a special form of expression of the culture of a particular era and society. Behind the culture of costume there are profound and complex spirits of social problems. Therefore, strong gender gap was especially clear when she boarded a British cruise ship wearing women's clothes. The attentions of the men around her made her realize the benefits and drawbacks of gender identity and led her to conclude that it's necessary to respect the view of opposite gender. Confused and struggling, Orlando tries to accept being treated as a "tamed" female. In every aspect of her life, she imitates feminine characteristics and behaviors of female in the traditional gender concept. Becoming a woman made Orlando further realize the suppression of human nature by gender concepts and the limitations of freedom by gender norms. Orlando can unload the task and responsibility of performing a male, but she must take on the new task of playing feminine female identity and traditional female image. Women are not born as women, but made to be after birth. The construction of gender identity and gender expressions under the theory of androgyny happen to coincide with this statement. The rules and standards set by society for gender enable people to acquire social gender which is different from the biological gender. Society imposes absolute gender divisions and gender norms on the grounds of biological differences and procreation. These rules and norms are passed from generation to generation and gradually become established traditions. Through the above discussion, it can be concluded that Woolf believes that gender identity in society is not completely determined by biological gender itself, but by the civilization level and social development. In other words, the social gender identity of men and women is engraved with the social development.

The Gender Fluid of the Protagonist and Woolf's Androgyny Vision

Androgynous Temperament of Orlando: Butler's theory of gender performance explains the process of body construction and the possibility of its reconstruction. First of all, there is no pure natural body in the society, and the "body" we usually call is the result of repeated and quoted multiple social norms relying on social compulsion. In another word, gender, as a social norm, creates the subject through performance. Norms (gender), performance (quote), and subject (body), which complement each other, theoretically can be distinguished, but actually are a complete process of continuous flow of self-consciousness, which means gender norms reference themselves to perform the subject, "performance theory" postulates the existence of a subject who can change genders at will (Butler, 1997, p. 13). Behind the norms, however, is survival beyond the borders. Exceptions that do not conform to social norms, such as homosexuals in heterosexual societies, and intersex people who are difficult to classify by the science that asserts gender differences. Butler not only regarded gender as the norm of the subject, but also began to pay attention to the cross-influence of race, class and other social norms and gender, which is the overall trend of gender studies today. In terms of culture, androgyny theory is similar to the traditional theory of "Yin and Yang" in Chinese Taoism (Chen, 2018, p. 163). No one is completely feminine or masculine. Everyone has more or less androgynous temperament and characteristics, just in different proportions. Through clothing, behavior and social shaping of human beings, Woolf made male Orlando and female Orlando become one person, no longer existed contradictions and conflicts, and both genders reached a harmonious state, thus completing the transformation of "androgyny" (Jin, 2016, p. 8). Orlando believed that in order to live an ideal, comfortable life, there is need to adjust sexual differences. Androgyny becomes an effective path to achieve her self-liberation. Orlando switches her identity between the two genders freely, male consciousness and female consciousness affect her behaviors and thoughts together (Wang, 2018, p. 109-110). Orlando can put on a dress as a woman and enjoy the pleasure of being saved by a sailor hero. At the same time, Orlando can ride a horse in trousers and boots and fight duels as a man. The androgynous life Orlando lives shows his desire and enthusiasm for life. This is also a reflection of the idea of androgyny can ease contradictions between men and women, overturn binary opposition and move towards freedom and equality (Wang & Ma, 2017, p. 113-122). For Orlando, being bisexual allows her to be both brave and strong as a male and sensitive and delicate as a female.

Woolf's androgyny theory indicates that a person should both have brave, rational and strong character of the male, and gentle, sensitive and tolerant disposition of the female. Only when the masculine and feminine qualities are in harmony with each other in one person is that person at his or her best, and only then can he or she establish a complete outlook on life and the world (Zhang, 2019, p. 21). Although some scholars, led by Elaine Showalter, think that this gender state is too ideal and androgyny theory is

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unrealistic, with the attention of more and more scholars and experts, the androgyny theory has been widely accepted as a way of achieving personal harmony.

Androgyny Vision Revealed in the Texts Concerning the Gender Fluid of the Protagonist: Androgyny is one of the manifestations of the gender fluidity theory. Essentially, Androgyny is a subversive physical act, which indicate when the biological gender and social gender appear inconsistent, namely when gender norms are broken, the process of transition between the two is called gender fluid. Gender exists in the form of substance in hegemonic language, and such a representation is achieved through a performative distortion of language or discourse, and it conceals the fact that it is essentially impossible to be born into a certain biological or social sex. Gender norms assume a distinction between men and women, and their masculine and feminine attributes. To some extent, only when the physiological gender is understood as social gender rather than psychological self, the desire of heterosexual desire will have some kinds of confrontations between two genders. There is always a relationship, and gendered talent always refers to a holistic experience of sex, gender, and desire (Butler, 1993, p. 53) — Establishing a causal continuum between sex, gender and desire, or identifying the authentic self-expressive paradigm of sex, gender and desire simultaneously or sequentially. Another embodiment of androgyny theory is in literary creation. When Orlando is a teenager, he loved literature, and of all his works “To the Oak tree” is his favorite, which follows him from male to female, from adolescence to maturity. But Orlando did not achieve literary success as a man, and it is only after Orlando became a woman that the collection is published and achieves great success. This shows Woolf’s androgyny vision: The purely male perspective in literary creation is one-sided, and only the viewpoints of both sexes can create eternal works. “Orlando grew up with the poem, and when she finally found a satisfying androgynous life, she completed the poem, which embodies the literary crowning achievement of the androgyny theory advocated by Woolf” (Cheng, 2015, p. 150).

“He—FOR THERE could be no doubt of his sex” (Woolf, 1995, p. 8). The author pointed out the gender of Orlando in the first sentence—he is unquestionably a male. As a male aristocrat who lived in the 17th century, Orlando lived his life in the familiar, high-profile aristocratic circle. Although his relationship with the princess makes him lose the favor of the royal family, there are still many women around him who can not get emotional fulfillment, while his writing can not be recognized by the people of the time. The book’s climax comes when Orlando wakes up in Turkey to find himself became into a woman. It is interesting to note that when as a woman Orlando stays with the gypsies in the wild life, she even doesn’t feel her gender has changed,. However, when she puts on a fashion female’s dress at the ship to return to the UK, she suddenly considers “virginity.” And, when someone holds up an umbrella for her and kissed her hands, she suddenly begins to think about whether to need to rely on the protection of male. All this bears out De Beauvoir’s saying. “Women are not created, they are made.” Identities are so important to gender that the word “virginity” never comes to Orlando’s mind, when she is dressed in a male’s suit in a wild field. “Women” would not exist if they were not required by society to play the role of women. It is the dress that completes Orlando’s gender transition. As Christina’s “the semiotic” shows, within the framework of social culture, semiotics are very important to gender. Wearing gender neutral Turkish clothes, Orlando has no awareness of his gender at all, while she returns to England, she begins to have a female gender awareness in her popular female’s skirt. As the return of self to the maternal body and as the practice of individualization, Orlando begins to realize the advantages of androgyny after completing the transformation of gender mobility. This “ideal” transformation of Orlando seems difficult to happen in real life, but the concept of Androgyny is reflected in all aspects of social and cultural symbols.

Later in the novel, Woolf describes Orlando’s pregnancy in a very vague and ambiguous way, without mentioning the father of the child. Instead, the image of kingfisher repeatedly appears. “Blue, like a match struck right in the ball of the innermost eye, he flies, burns, bursts the seal of sleep...” (Woolf, 1995, p. 212). Orlando doesn’t appear as a mother, but simply as a life giver. Gender has been diluted. Marriage, childbirth, the things that traditionally matter in a woman’s life, don’t matter for Orlando. From the absence of any mention of the role of father during this period of birth, it can be seen that Orlando’s sexual orientation is female from the beginning to the end. Even if she is married to a man in the end, it is just following the trend of society and gender norms. The affection between her and her husband is more like confidant than sexually attracted lover.

In short, gender fluid causes not only differences in physiological characteristics, but also ideological convergence of two genders. Gender fluid provides an external expression for androgyny. At the same time, androgyny also lays various restrictions under social norms for gender fluid. Therefore, the gender construction mechanism can be realized.

CONCLUSIONS

At present, the “white, young and thin” aesthetic of female and the “masculinity” aesthetic of male has already become the mainstream aesthetic, which contributes to the flourishing of a variety of cosmetic medicine, plastic surgery and other consumerism products. This series of one-sided gender aesthetics are the direct expression of gender norms imposed by the society. Nowadays the subordinate status of gender still leads to the fact that one’s self-identity must be in accordance with the norms of the patriarchal community and the male dominant aesthetic which tends to create the aesthetic anxiety. Woolf’s *Orlando* breaks the absolute gender identity through the gender fluidity. While it emphasizes the differences between different genders, it

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also arouses the awakening of female consciousness through according to the theory of androgyny. It calls women to pursue freedom, to get rid of the spiritual shackles. It guides women to get out of the plight of oppression so as to realize the value of their own. Thus, *Orlando* really provides some new idea concerning people's gender aesthetic diversity.

There is still room for further exploration in *Orlando*. The paper only focuses on the protagonist, only shows the common characteristics of human beings. Besides, Woolf's works and ideological system are also extensive. However, this study has arrived at its goal, if it might help readers achieve a better understanding of the theory of androgyny and Woolf's works, and grasp of the sexual relationship.

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