# Analysis of Gender Roles of Mıchael Cunnıngham's "The Hours" and Vırgınıa Woolf's "Orlando" in Lıght of Postmodernıst Perspectıve

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## INTRODUCTION

In the worlds of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, both protagonists are defying, exploring or subverting traditional gender roles much to the worrying eyes of society within their individual eras. Through a postmodern lens, these individuals come to light as fluidic and plural selves generation by stripping in addition of the core concept of self-built onto them creates resistance against conformity and ossified identities. Orlando biographically travels from male to female, over a number of centuries in the book *Orlando: A Biography* and messing with each morningside gender roles. The transformation raised questions of stable and fixed identity; fluidity and performativity in gender thus reflect postmodern notions of fragmented identity and rejection of grand narratives. Characters in *The Hours* also reject conventional gender roles. Virginia Woolf, the protagonist of the novel, places importance on her writing career above all other things and explicitly discusses how she resists domestic and social expectations of women in her day. It depicts Laura Brown, a typical 1950s housewife, who is frustrated with her domesticated role in the home and deeply attracted to another woman named Kitty. Living in the 1990s, Clarissa Vaughan also keeps a non-heteronormative relationship with her partner Sally, thereby disobeying conventional gender expectations and postmodern critiques of fixed identities and societal norms. Therefore, the characters in Orlando and The Hours resist social norms of their times with their acts and identities with their own way and give a rich exploration of identity, authenticity and resistance through a postmodern lens. Their stories problematize the individual identity and constructed nature of societal norms, hence making these works very significant in the study of gender and and identity in literature. Gender is explained as those roles, behaviors, activities, expectations and attributes that a given society deems appropriate for men, women and people of other gender identities.

"The fact of living in the world shared by two sexes may be interpreted in an infinite variety of ways; these interpretations and the patterns they create operate at both the social and individual levels. The production of culturally appropriate forms of male and female behavior is a central function of social authority and is mediated by the complex interactions of a wide range of economic, social, political and religious institutions" (Conway, Bourque, Scott, 1987, p.22).

It means both social and cultural aspects of being male, female or non-binary, and the personal sense of one's own gender identity. This article will argue that the characters in the novels Orlando and The Hours challenge the social norms of the time through their gender roles. Gender is created to a big extent by society; thus, all the roles and expectations of males and females are culturally and historically ignited. Do the characters in the novels *Orlando* and *The Hours,* go against the social norms of the time with their gender roles?

## LITERARY CONTEXT

In effect, the characters in *Orlando* written by Virginia Woolf and *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham mostly challenge the socially accepted norms of their respective periods by subverting gender roles.

"The binary metaphors through which our narratives and storylines are constructed and our identities as men women are made real are recognizable here. It is possible to recognize one's gendered identity (who you are or believe you should be ora re seen to be) by looking at the appropriate side of the table (the one you have been "assigned" to)" (Gannon, Davies, 2006, p.74).

According to Gannon and Davies, one can identify one's gendered identity; viewed through a postmodern lens, these characters' actipons and identities do shed light onro broader themes of fluidity, multiplicity and deconstruction of societal constructs. There is an element of understanding that these characters bring to a literary context and shed insight into how they resist and then redefine expectations set up by society. In *Orlando*, Woolf uses both nonlinear and fantastic narrative structures to highlight postmodern notions of fragmented identity and question history and biography. "Inserting postmodern understandings can expand our thinking by naming how power relationships and multiple contexts intersect to influence early childhood professionals' complex

identities" (Nicholson, Maniates, 2015, p.2). The novel questions the idea of stable, coherent identities, as it represents gender as performative and mutable. In both novels, there are fragmented and fluid identities that reject a unique, stable self. Orlando's change in sex and the changing desires and roles of Laura and Clarissa in The Hours underline multiple identity. That the lives of three women across different time periods intertwine in The Hours testifies to the richness of the interleaving of personal and literary histories. From this intertextual approach, characteristic of postmodern literature with its emphasis on multiple subjectivities and fluidity of meaning, an other than natural way of living was shaped.

**DISCUSSION**

*The Hours*, explores the intersection of gender and sexuality through the relationships and desires of its female characters. Clarissa's homosexuality, as well as Laura's brief kiss with her neighbor, Kitty, give a glimpse into the complicated nature of sexual identity and its bearing within society.

"It had seemed like the beginning of happiness and Clarissa is still sometimes shocked, more than thirty years later to realize that it was happiness; that the entire experience lay in a kiss and a walk. The anticipation of dinner and a book. The dinner is by now forgotten; Lessing has been long overshadowed by other writers. What lives undimmed in Clarissa's mind more that three decades later is a kiss at dusk on a patch of dead grass and a walk around a pond as mosquites droned in the darkening air" (Cunningham, 2000, p.54).

In the novel, both gender and sexuality are made fluid and transcend the strict, historically defined norms. Most fundamentally, postmodernism with its emphasis on flux and deconstruction can provide a rich framework within which to locate these characters' sexual identities. Clarissa Vaughan embodies, living in late 20th century New York, the postmodern conception of fragmented and fluid identity. "Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life... Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The orhers disappeared; there shi was alone with Sally. And she felt shad been given a present" (Cunningham, p.38). The kiss between Sally and Clarissa symbolizes how special and uncommon the experience was for her. "The kiss left Clarissa uncertain of her feelings towards women and men" (Svensson, 2020, p.12). Clarissa's history with Richard and her current relationship with Sally establish her as bisexual. Her ability to love and connect with both a man and a woman firmly establishes the postmodern notion of sexual identity as fluid and multifaceted, not fixed. This fluidity therefore problematizes binary notions of sexual orientation. Clarissa's passion for Richard, even as she nurses him in his sickness, further problematizes her identity. Her retrospection on their past and her present life with Sally depicts coexistence of aspects of her identity that resists easy reduction. Clarissa's life and relationship stand in sharp contrast to traditional heterosexual norms. Her same-sex relationship with Sally is depicted as loving and fulfilling, thus not confirming to the societal expectations that so often say that only a heterosexual relationship is normal or ideal. The identity of Clarissa is proven to be multi-faceted and produced by her experiences and relations. The multiplicity chimes well with the postmodern view that identity is not unitary but constituted by different parts that cut across each other. For instance, there is the characterization of Laura Brown, who stands in opposition to the later protagonist Clarissa, symbolising the rigidity and oppression of the 1950s. The long-term relationship of Clarissa with Sally is a direct challenge to the expectation of heterosexual marriage as the norm of society. In living openly as a same-sex couple, they resist the pressure to fall in line with conventional relationship models. To some degree, they have a private and social professional relationship that creates a blur between their personal and social lives. This visibility also works to rupture the social norm and encourages greater tolerance of different relationship models. Clarissa has a fragmented identity, one which incorporates her as partner, mother and professional. Her relationship with Sally fragments this even further. This fragmentation is a key postmodern concern, focusing upon the fluid and social constructedness of identity. Heteronomativity as a grand narrative frames heterosexual relationship as normative or ideal. By revealing their same-sex relationship, Clarissa and Sally challenge the story of inappropriateness and abnormality of alternative relationship structures. "The decrease in the influence of conventional and religious life style and of communities' moral principles leads to acquiring a new morality from other resources such as newly more fragmented life styles from philosophic, scientific or leisure-based communities. Fragmented life styles enforce the self and identity to be adrift in terms of sense" (Baldil, 2016, p.84). Theirs is a relationship that does not bend to conventional gender roles, which usually define behaviors an deven powers in a partnership. Rather, they forge a relationship wherein both partners are equal and rejecting of the grand narrative of gendered expectations. More than this, one sees in Clarissa's relationship with Sally a strong bodying forth of the postmodern, wherein social mores of late 20th century society are put the task. Their non-heteronormative relationship reflects an equitable and authentic pairing that resists hegemonic discourses, showing the fluidity and construction of identity and relationships. As far as Laura is concerned, the kiss she shares with her neighbor Kitty reveals her secretive desires and suggest a bisexual identity that she cannot entirely enact while entrapped in her societal role of being a housewife.

"Love is deep, a mystery-who wants to understand its every particular. Laura desires Kitty. She desires her force, her cheerful, and disappointment, the shifting pink-gold lights of her secret self and the crisp shampooed depths of her hair. Laura desires Dan, too in a darker and less exquisite way" (Cunningham, p.143).

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Laura's pull toward Kitty and Dan at the same time symbolizes the fragmentation of her identiity. She navigates roles and desires that challenge the notion of a singular, coherent self. Here, her connection with Kitty has been the momentary glimpse into part of herself, most of which is really suppressed. Laura finds herself in Virginia Woolf's "Mr. Dalloway," which symbolizes a desire to lead another life, an escape from her repressive domestic situation. By itself, such an act of reading heralds resistance to normative expectations of her gender and sexuality. "The defining moment of postmodernity is the emergence of fundamental changes in the scope and character of culture, a development widely thematized in postmodern thought and the underlying foundation of the field of cultural studies" (Dunn, 1998, p.81-106). In the light of these changes, postmodernism strongly underlines how identity and reality are fragmented. Fragmentation, is reflected in Laura's life because she struggles to find an outer self that would identify her as a good wife and mother while she, as an inner self, wants freedom and self-expression. Her narrative is of multiple often conflicting identities, reflecting the postmodern notion that identity is not something fixed but fluid and multifaceted. Skeptical to grand narratives or overarching truths that claim to explain human experience comprehensively, postmodernism belongs with struggle against the the kind of societal narrative represented in the ideal 1950s housewife, which Laura resists. Not satisfied with her role, she finally leaves her family; this goes totally against the dominant cultural script, which dictates that highly prescribed domesticity leads to universal fulfillment and applicability. "The postmodern individual not asserting any claim of self is interested in the extraordinary, s/he breaks of the ties and does not care about such ties as family, religion and nation" (Mardin, 1993, p.32). Laura's existential crisis can also be understood as a postmodern questioning of the "real" and the "authentic." For Laura, life in suburbia should be fulfilling according to societal standarts, yet it seems inauthentic. The postmodern critique, with regard to appearances and norms of society, is further underscored by her eventual leaving this life behind in search of something more genuine. Laura Brown's character in The Hours offers an interesting exploration concerning the struggle between individual desires and the expectations of society that are felt during the 1940s and the 1950s. Her story, from a postmodernist point of view, comes to the forefront with the fragmented condition of identity, resistance to grand narrativesand authenticity in a World greatly hasted toward the attainment of conventional or superficial standarts. Society had dictated that women should essentially be good wives and mothers in the 1940s and 1950s, with their lives completely revolving around the home environment. "The primacy of the woman's role as wife and mother and which assumes that other aspects of women's lives must be fitted into that. The emphasis on the dual role of women as wives and mothers and as paid workers is very characteristic of the period" (Birmingham, 2005, p.11). The perfect women were self-denying, nurturing and content with their place in the home. any deviation from that norm was usually met with societal disapproval and personal guilt. Laura Brown is imbued with a deep sense of dissatisfaction with her ordained role. She has by all appearances, the perfect suburban life: a loving husband and son. Yet she feels an innate unhappiness, a feeling of longing for something beyond the domestic sphere. Laura's interest in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway is characteristic of her craving for intellectual and emotional stimulation, which is absent in her daily life. For Laura, reading becomes an intimate form of self-reflection. In Woolf's characters, she examines the feelings of being entrappen and yearning for something beyond suburbia. It is a postmodern exploration of the self as complex, multifaceted and at times contradictory. Much of postmodernism blurs the distinction between reality and fiction. In Mrs. Dalloway, Laura goes into the novel to have a view of escapism concerning her banal reality by means of living vicariously through the created world that exists within the novel. That is, it is a kind of blurring between real and imagined experiences at the heart of a postmodernist challenge to the boundaries established between reality and fiction.

Cunningham intertwined the lives of these three women across different eras with the character of Virginia Woolf herself. The illustrative style of her character, an independent woman living, by writing and thinking all on her own in those times when women were merely restricted to household chores, rebels against the so-called conventional notion of gender. In Clarissa's character in New York, he is shown struggling with the same problems in modern society as was portrayed in Woolf's times. She negotiates her identity and relationship against a backdrope that Marvin first complicates, then transcends, being a woman who redefines traditional roles but struggles between self-actualization and societal expectations. Cunningham's narrative smudges the edges between past and present, indicating fluidity that debases fixed gender roles. Characterization in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* with Virginia Woolf during the early twentieth century disrupts traditional gender roles in very strongly redolent ways of postmodern themes. Even as late as early twentieth century traditional gender roles were guite set in their ways. Women were first and foremost to be good wives and mothers whose existence was to be confined to the domestic sphere. To this end, intellectual and professional pursuits were typically the preserve of men, with deviant women suffering hefty doses of social pressure and stigmation. Postmodernism specifically focuses on the fragmented nature of identity, and this is well reflected in Woolf's treatment of multiple, often conflicting, subjects of the self. This fragmentation her characters frequently embody mirors her own experience of identity as fluid and multifaceted. "Woolf works through oppositions between the classics and the moderns, the present and the past, continuity and change. It suggests that even though Woolf politically contents historical contradictions which point to and sustain various forms of oppression" (Spiropoulou, 2012, p.4). Woolf's life and work reject the grand narrative of patriarchy that has defined stringent gender roles. Intellectual autonomy and social critique can thus be held to have challenged the dominant narrative by which women were confined to their households. By intertextualizing Woolf's life with her work and the lives of the other characters in *The Hours*, it becomes complex with multiple layers. This intertextuality, one of the hallmorks of postmodern literature, underlining

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the interdependence between text and realities. Woolf's search for gender fluidity, especially for *Orlando,* precedes the postmodernist critics of binary gender constructs. It challenges a kind of grand narrative about fixed, binary gender roles.

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is one of the pioneering novel that broke all the social taboos of her time, especially those concerning gender. Going down to the character particularly Orlando from a postmodernist perspective allows insight into how Woolf deconstructs ideas of gender and identity. Orlando covers several centuries from the Elizabethan age to well into the 20th century. Each epoch that is drawn on in the novel had its well-marked gender roles and expectations. For instance, in Elizabethan times, men were supposed to be confident, dominant and active in public life, while women were supposed to be unassertive, submissive and confined to the domestic sphere. "I have found my mate… It is the moor. I am nature's bride" (Woolf, 1928, p.220). Orlando considers the reality that all women, particularly in Victorian times, were required to get married.

Certainly, Orlando's transformation from a nobleman to a female in the 18th century was characteristic of fluidity in gender. This directly challenges strict gender binaries of the Elizabethan age, wherein roles were strictly defined and observed. "Elizabethan preoccupation with heroines is that isolation is more terrible in a being conditioned to dependence on men. It is possible then to use tragedy as a way to study women's place in a system that rejects and oppresses them. More specifically, women's isolation is widely discussed in the plays under scrutiny" (Durin, 2018, p.18). In young Elizabethan England, Orlando does what is expected of his rank: he writes poetry and indulges in courtly love. All this gets unsettled with his transformation into a woman, showing that one's sex is not necessarily definitive of purpose or ability. "Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than to merely keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us" (Woolf, p.166). Through the narrator, it is made clear that since Orlando's beginning of changing from a male into a female, not much had changed in his appearance. It was hinted that Orlando's face and leg amongst other distinguishing characteristics were the same, only that this sexual anatomy had changed that is, it was not only a mental transition. Orlando rips through nobleman, poet, ambassador, noblewoman each phase adding to a multiple self speaking against self-simplification. We feel that this multiplicity challenges established scholarship on stable and unified identity.

In the 19th century, particularly during the Victorian era, the norms of gender were unusually stringent and most excellent emphasis was accorded to the separate spheres between men and women. Entering the 20th century, although there were marvelous changes and challenges to the conventional gender norms, these still had a strong grip. Orlando is born a male and in the middle of the novel changes into a lady magically. This transformation contradicts the notion of gender as a fixed identity and posits that the concept can be quite fluid. Change from one biological sex to another does not bring change in personality, memories and hence identity. Such continuity makes it appear as though gender is not part of a person's core identity but a superficial attribute. Orlando himself experienced life from both male to female perspectives and thus is in the perfect position to criticize gender roles. Whereas Orlando is a man, he holds many privileges and freedoms denied to women; when he becomes a woman, Orlando's constraint and expectation from society differ from a being a man.

"The postmodern self is released from the fixed relationship between nominal identity and social roles. Freedom is found not in the pursuit of authenticity but in the interplay of multiple roles that signify the openness of all meanings. The self is no longer defined as a consistent conglomeration of attitudes and perceptions strung together by the power of reason" (Mehrabi-Maleki, 2011, p.4). Orlando's change epitomizes the postmodern view of fragmented identity. The character traversing into other genders brings about fluidity and social construction of identity in the face of a stable, unified self. Above all, Orlando masters both male and female roles, pointing toward the performative aspect of gender elaborated by the postmodern theorists, among whom Judith Butler figures prominently. A novel spanning centuries with the same identical core identity of the protagonist over time is in itself a critique against the historical continuity of gender norms and thus that these normsa re arbitrary, socially constructed and not innate. In *Orlando,* as in all postmodern writing, the distinction between fictive forms and biography occurs. A second reason that Orlando can be considered postmodern is its payfulness, self-referential tone and its self-conscious commentary on the act of writing.

**CONCLUSION**

Both *The Hours* and *Orlando* are representatives of crossed borders with social norms of their time concerning gender roles, through which the postmodern themes of fluid identity, resistance to grand narratives, intertextuality and problematization of reality and authenticity are conveyed. These characters deconstruct a binary view of gender as fixed and show the complex construction of identity within both novels, greatly important to the study of gender roles from a postmodernist perspective. In Orlando, the change in sex by Woolf's protagonist, crossing centuries, flows from one identity to another, breaking up the stability assumed in gender roles. The experiences of Orlando underline the performativeness of gender and the social constructs that create it. The characters in Cunningham's novel are going through complicated relationships and identities that lead outside that the blur of traditional gender roles. Laura's crush on Kitty, Clarissa's same-sex relationship, all speak to the fluidity, multiplicity of identity, emphasizing the constructed nature of societal norms. In a manner paramount to the challenging of social norms of their respective times, the characters in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* profoundly challenge those social norms through

their exploration and defiance of traditional gender roles. Such characters analyzed from the postmodern perspective would represent resistance to fixed identity and social norms, therefore underscoring fluidity, multiplicity and authenticity.

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