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A Study Of Homosexuality In Virginia Woolf's Orlando: A Biography

Mantan Kumar Behera
Lecturer In English
Salipur Autonomous College
Salipur
Cuttack
Odisha

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Abstract

Love for a person of the same sex has frequently been concealed from the judgmental gaze of the public in order to escape social stigma; nonetheless, it has also been covertly transcribed into a wide range of art. Virginia Woolf embellished Orlando's horrific lines with her homosexuality. Vita Sackville-West, a writer, served as a model for the main character in the book at the time Woolf was writing it, and the two were deeply involved in a lesbian relationship. The book's hero's timeless beauty, which has endured for generations, and his delicate gender change were all reflected in Woolf's declaration of her masterpiece, "A Biography," which also mirrored the duality of her own and Vita's characters. In the study, we analyse some of the homosexual themes that were prevalent in Orlando and were shaped by a variety of factors, such as the ancient Greek literature, feminism, and the LGBT movement.

Keywords- Concealed, Stigma, Covertly, Homosexuality, Lesbian, LGBT.

Introduction

Despite the fact that we live in a fairly liberal society, Woolf's book Orlando presents problems on a variety of levels. The story is mostly explored because of Orlando's openly transsexual transition throughout the novel, which also uncovers gay undertones. According to Algweirien (2017), Woolf is best known as a feminist author who wrote about a wide range of sensitive topics relating to women's independence, status, and roles in society. According to Freedman (2003), the feminist movement was created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to unify women and achieve gender equality in opposition to patriarchy.Beers (2020) agrees with Orlando Davis (2021) that the term trans feminism is an umbrella term for perspectives, experiences, and forms of liberating feminism offered by women who were not born female and cannot find a place not only among feminist women, but also among men in society. According to White (2017), gender identity does not correspond with sexual orientation. While surgical gender reassignment is possible, attraction to the same or opposite sex is not well defined. On the one hand, gender identity is a social role, a person's viewpoint, and affiliation with a specific sex. Sexual orientation, on the other hand, is associated with emotional and sexual sentiments toward others (ibid.).Gender identification in Orlando is determined by the protagonist's situational perspective as well as the reader's perception; sexual orientation is predominantly female. According to Gaard (1994, p. 232), "a person may be born a woman (biological sex), appear to be feminine (gender identity), but behave in ways considered masculine (social sex role), describe herself as lesbian (sexual orientation), and have sexual relations with men and women (sexual practice)."

Orlando is entitled "A Biography" and is dedicated to Woolf's partner, Vita Sackville-West, with whom she had a lesbian relationship for almost ten years (Raitt, 1993). The novel was inspired by Sackville-West's inability to inherit his aristocratic family's house at Knole, where Vita and Virginia spent their time. The answer is simple: Vita was born female. Orlando's original manuscript can still be discovered at the home today, according to the National Trust (2020). The goal of this study is to explain and further investigate gay dynamics in Orlando from a literary standpoint.

LGBT Literature

Orlando may be interpreted from a variety of angles, but principally those of feminists, transgender people, and queers, who are all included under the label queer. According to Whittington (2012), the gay movement is extensively articulated globally and encompasses a number of departures from socially accepted norms in addition to the topic of homosexuality. of prevailing social tendencies. A new form of homosexual freedom is being proclaimed by queer, a blatant forum for varied individuals with differing viewpoints from all corners of society (ibid.). According to Norton (2016), gay literature and gay history portray homosexual relationships, including their romantic and emotional ties; this is not an objective view, but rather the perspective of individuals who are in love.

In postmodern and contemporary works, gay literature has established a steadfast niche. According to Spargo (1999, p. 9) “it is not a singular or systematic conceptual or Methodological framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire”. According to Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth (2015), not only because of its structure and experimental context, which contrasts with traditional writing and formal innovation, but also because of its language, which is very concrete, playful, and sometimes too fragmentary about space and time, as if he had lost all contact with reality, displaying a typical element of strangeness.

Orlando's life spans three centuries, from 1588 to October 1928, the year the book was released. The author explores the individuals' past before their sympathy for LGBT people via flashbacks and further flashbacks. It is possible to analyze Orlando using Bakthin's concept of chronotope, which refers to "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Macovski, 2006, p. 67). Depending on the era, the author changes the viewpoints and roles of the hero while taking into account his current gender. Orlando stays in his house, which has a symbolic number of rooms, 365 days in a year, and 52 steps, standing for weeks after Sasha, his seductress, deserts him without warning.He made the decision to finish writing a lengthy essay titled "Xenophila a Tragedy" one evening. According to DiBattista (2009), the name "Xenophila" is an incorrect pronunciation of the Greek word "xenophobia," which derives from the word "xenos," which means "strange person." Descriptions of Orlando authoring The Oak Tree, a poem he keeps near to his heart and carries with him everywhere, are threaded throughout the whole narrative. The poem resembles a tree that is flourishing in Orlando's dad's garden. Orlando is located below at the beginning of the narrative, and she is still there when the story ends. Orlando's existence spans decades, yet the poetry still provides him with a lifeline and keeps him connected to the present.

Queer texts' language manifests through a variety of techniques, violations, digressions, or paradigms. According to Goldstein (2003), the homocon movement—a more conservative sector of homosexual society—rose as a result of homosexuals' revolutionary form and style. They reject the gay movement because they find it "too vulgar and noisy." They also attacked gays for demonizing prominent gay people, engaging in open sexual activity, and looking for safety from the rude mainstream (ibid.). According to Cadden's findings (in Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth, 2015), homosexual writings utilize lighthearted, almost childish language with sarcastic aspects, like Orlando, to help readers outside the LGBT community understand the conversation surrounding the theme of problems. We must comprehend the language surrounding homosexuality in order to investigate gay reasons.

Themes Of Homosexuality In Orlando

We must comprehend the idea of the motif in order to look for the homosexual components in literature. A motif is "a dominant idea in a literal work, a part of the main theme," according to Vogel (2010). A character, recurring imagery, or language pattern are all examples of themes. They are symbolic in nature. However, it can also be a specific instance, circumstance, thing, or component that permeates the narrative.

According to Cuddon (2013), the political, literal, and philosophical movement of aestheticism, derived from the Greek for "perceptible by the senses," was created in the nineteenth century. This display of the purity of art became the opposite of the industrial revolution, portraying pure art devoid of any realia (Johnson, 2018). Orlando's love manifests itself in a variety of beautiful manifestations. Nature, art, literature, hedonism, luxury, and both sexes are all favorites."The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-colored velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar, greenish-colored fur" (Woolf, 1995, p. 17). The main character favors unusual luxury clothing, primarily in violet and green. According to Kress (2002), colors have semiotic representations in literary contexts. White, pink, violet, red, and green feature frequently in homoerotic discourse; these colors were extensively worn and adored by both the queer movement and Dandies (Kularski, n.d.). The phrase "oyster-colored velvet" is not a coincidence. Oysters were utilized as a female aphrodisiac in Elizabethan times, according to Williams (1994). According to Ribeyrol (2017), the color of oyster is akin to mauve, a violet tone popular among gays and dandies. According to Garelick (1999), dandyism was a 19th-century literary and artistic movement marked by frivolous lifestyles and flashy clothing. A dandy, with his own artificial area, standing beneath the lights in his own play, in which he stars as the main character (ibid.).

Woolf's Feminist Views

The tale begins in 1588, during the Elizabethan period. Queen Elizabeth I advocated for male and female equality. Women in Elizabethan times were not permitted to attend universities, although they might be educated at home. Doran (2011) claims that the king was a supporter of science, art, and theater. When Orlando offers her a bowl of rose water, the queen recognizes him for the first time. Mazzeno (1995) believes that the rose motif represents the female gender and can also signify Orlando’s gender. Orlando’s fusion with nature and her independence from men are reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s character, who valued spending time in nature (Rosinberg, 2012).

According to Fauré (2003), women in the 17th century were still severely constrained by their husbands and the masculine sector of society to whom they were expected to submit. According to Gale (2017), the author mocks social conventions by portraying noble Orlando as married to Rosina Pepita, a gypsy dancer of uncertain background. In the case of Baldanza (1955), Pepita was a member of Vita’s close family, her grandmother, a dancer and a concubine. Orlando falls into a seven-day trance and awakens as a woman. She sees the change as a natural process, despite having the same intellectual and physiological characteristics as before:

> *“Orlando had become a woman, there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. […] Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (I) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. […] Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since.” (Woolf, 1995, p. 68).*

With a new identity, s/he joins the gypsy clan in the highlands and gazes out at the lovely Thessalian Hills, greatly moved by nature’s freedom. S/he lives among the gypsies as a neutral gender, wearing attire acceptable for either men or women.She has issues with her property in England, much like Vita Sackville-West did with her home in Knole, as a result of her “new” female gender and a marriage that she hardly remembers (National Trust, 2020). According to McMahon (1993), Orlando has a weird worldview and strange hobbies that are primarily materialistic, which makes the gypsies distrust her. Orlando was also a self-sufficient single woman living alone at the time, which was forbidden. Woolf expresses her pride in her new sex by saying, “Praise God that I’m a woman!” Woolf (1995, p. 78). She returns to England and makes out with the captain of the ship. She then understands what a powerful tool the female body is and isn't sure which sex she likes best. The author wishes to emphasize her hero’s social and financial independence. Orlando encounters great writers of the time, which was formerly reserved for men only. According to Burns (1994), he/she wanders through the centuries, even changing gender, but is unable to find a place in society. As a guy, he/she had to deal with a plethora of issues, and now he/she finally feels liberated. Her heart was broken in a male body because of Sasha, but as a girl, she feels whole again.

According to Steinfeld (1990), a woman was supposed to locate “an appropriate husband” during the Victorian era. Orlando is 30 years old, a time when girls were identified more by their appearances and beauty than by their character and intelligence. Orlando needs a husband to avoid the stigma of being an old spinster. She resolves to become nature’s bride and travels to the moor. She twists her ankle and collapses in the grass, ready to die. A random sailor finds and rescues her, and they are engaged within minutes despite not knowing each other’s names. She fulfils her feminine role according to Victorian society’s conventions by giving birth to a kid at the conclusion of the novel. According to Algweirien (2017), Woolf, a feminist writer, elevates the stereotype of women in the past society who were only educated at home and expected to be married and have children in order to be accepted by society. In spite of her feminist beliefs and support for the gay movement, Woolf, according to Humm (2006), saw the beauty in motherhood and the feminine position in society.

Greek Symbols Suggest A Gay Context

There are many sonorous language twists in Woolf’s descriptions of Orlando’s life and history, and she frequently uses the ancient Greek themes of beauty and carnal love that are prevalent in homosexual literature. According to Mondimore’s study from 1996, homosexuality is virtually always referenced in Greek references. In the context of sexual morality, Anders (1999) notes that mythological figures like Eros, Zeus, Aphrodite, and other gods, whose ambiguous sexuality was endorsed by Hellenic writers, are used to construct stories. According to Garry (2005, p. 58), androgyny was common in Greek literature, particularly in the form of the androgynous divinities Mother Earth and Father Sky, who stood in for the unity that underlies "all the duality and multiplicity in the universe".

"During the Great Frost, when everything was frozen and appeared to be from another magical place, Orlando met Sasha, the love of his or her life. It can be a reference to Arcadia, the Greek concept of paradise, which, according to Sharrock (2020), is a mythical region in Greece with a small population and pristine natural surroundings. Orlando is holding the Oak Tree text close to his chest, which has a potential connection to Arcadia. It is his own figurative area where he can exist regardless of the situation. He can experience his love for Sasha and its beauty all over again while writing and reading it. Detlof and Helt (2016) claim that the Bloomsbury Group, which Virginia Woolf founded with her husband, sister Vanessa, and close friends, was "Arcadia in London" that brought together modern artists from various fields with aesthetic, pacifistic, and LGBT ideals. The Bloomsbury Group, according to Dorothy Parker (in Elkin, p. 75), "They lived in squares, painted in circles, and loved in triangles."

Arcadia defines the harmony between humans and nature, investigated in wilderness, contrasting urbanistic society, based on Smith's (1991) research in numerous literary writings from 19th-century England. It functioned as a haven for gays' prohibited desires, where they discovered a secure location outside of the obnoxious homophobic culture. Because animal impulses are a part of Arcadia, "sinners" are no longer required to repent of their "sins" there (ibid.).

> *"What woman would not have kindled to see what Orlando saw then burning in the snow—for all about the looking-glass were snowy lawns, and she was like a fire, a burning bush, the candle and the flames about her head were silver leaves; or again, the glass was green water, and she mermaid, slung with pearls, a siren in a cave, singing so that oarsmen leant from their boats and fell down, down to embrace her; so dark, so bright, so hard, so soft, was she, so astonishingly seductive that it was a thousand pities that there was no one there to put it in plain English and say outright: Damn it, Madam, you are loveliness incarnate…" (Woolf, 1995, p. 91).*

Woolf refers to the mythical tale of Narcissus, who spurned the nymph Echo and was punished by the goddess of vengeance Nemesis, in reference to the motif of the mirror, or rather a reflection in the water. So, Narcissus developed a romantic relationship with his own image before ending his life (Lieber, Bradford, and Vethake, 1853) after understanding his love could never be fully realized. A flower bearing his name sprouted where he was sitting by the lake, and it is still known today (ibid.). According to Grabes (2009), the motif of the mirror not only symbolizes vanity but also the transformation of a person's psyche as a result of cultural misconceptions about homosexual inclination. Death and despair result from not being able to understand love in its most basic and real form. In its most basic conceptions, water represents purity. It also represents an other universe that exists beneath the surface. According to Kalnická (2007), when water appears in writings, it is portrayed as the feminine aspect of life, sensuality, and the persistence of the natural cycle of life.Neimanis (Feldman, 2016) describes water feminism by examining the female body composed of water, creating a complex entity connected to every cell of the body, menstruation, and lactation, supporting Orlando's queer themes where he/she embraces women Temperament awakens important revelations, like the bowl of rose water passed down When Queen Elizabeth I was a little boy, realizing the beauty and power of women as she sailed back to England and flirted with her captain, or was instantly engaged to a sailor whose name she didn't even know, the Siren sat by the lake and in a flash The lost beauty is reflected in the water.Neimanis (Feldman, 2016) states that water is also an important part of nature, as it flows in rivers, oceans, and seas, filling lakes and human bodies with life, and giving rise to various mythological interpretations. Goldman (2006) states that on March 28, 1941, following years of severe depression, Virginia Woolf stuffed her coat pockets with stones and allowed the ebb and flow of the River Ouse to unravel of her life.As for explaining the myth of Narcissus (Lieber, Bradford, Vethake, 1853), some biographers cite Vita Sackville-West's unfulfilled love, Woolf's homosexual orientation, hisSociety's distrust and inability to fully appreciate the beauty that love has to offer. Enjoy, returning to her despair and death.

Dual Personality In Orlando

Plato (1999) considered love and homosexuality as a need at his symposium about the year 375 BC. Describing it as "double man" and "double woman" – a person with two split faces who spend the rest of their lives looking for their other half. Celis (2015) suggests that, in addition to their identical facial features and first letters of their names and surnames (Virginia Stephen Woolf; Vita Sackville-West), Vita and Virginia's life stories were also shared. According to Suyin (2019), both were writers married to men who sought fulfillment in romantic relationships with other women; Sackville-West's son Nigel Nicholson hailed the book "the longest and most charming love letter in literature" (Nicholson, 1999, p. 218).

Orlando's homosexuality is revealed to the reader through either the male or female aspects of his personality. There is a description of his relationship with Queen Elizabeth, who views of him as having "violet eyes and the heart of gold" (Woolf, 1995, p. 10). Orlando's homosexuality is shown by his violet eyes. Orlando was well-known for his/her prolific dandy style, wearing both masculine and feminine attire and therefore representing androgyny, as did his/her girlfriend, Sasha:

> *"The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person. Images, metaphors of the most extreme and extravagant twined and twisted in his mind. He called her a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, and a fox in the snow all in the space of three seconds; he did not know whether he had heard her, tasted her, seen her, or all three together." (Woolf, 1995, p. 26)*

According to Celis (2015, p.2), Orlando was immediately drawn to it, despite not knowing if it was a man or a woman. Clothes are designed to differentiate the genders in society; yet, Orlando regarded them as equal (ibid.). Orlando almost has sexual relations with a prostitute while dressed as a woman. "When all was ready, out she came, prepared—but here Orlando could stand it no longer . In the strangest torment of anger, merriment, and pity she flung off all disguise and admitted herself a woman"(Woolf, 1995, p. 107).Orlando appears to be repentant about being a woman in this scene; nonetheless, she is dominated by her impulses. She wants to seduce the young girl but is frightened of being rejected, so she discloses her gender. Furthermore, the author implies the main character's bisexuality in several settings."For the probity of breeches, she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally." (Woolf, 1995, p. 108). He or she assumes both a masculine and female "role" depending on the circumstance by dressing androgynously. The reader is left in doubt regarding the hero's true gender throughout the entire story due to the ambiguity of the phrase.

Vita Sackville-West was a florist ten years Woolf's junior who was famed for her indulgence in masculine clothing while dating other women . Flowers are one of the most significant homosexual themes, according to Haggerty (2000). Floral decorations were fashionable in the 18th century and peaked in popularity throughout the Victorian era. Flowers were utilized in fiction by writers who were looking for euphemism methods to communicate their aspirations. However, by the end of the century, they had become a homosexual symbol, showing all the nuances that had previously been concealed. The Queen quickly nominates young aristocrat Orlando as treasurer and steward. She treats him with her unusual care until she notices him kissing another girl in her bathroom mirror: "For Orlando's taste was broad, he was no lover of garden flowers only; the wild and the weeds even had always a fascination for him." (1995, Wolf, p. 12). Without making a distinction between what is appropriate for a man or woman of his rank, the author illustrates the duality of his character, who tends toward all the societal layers that provide enjoyment. According to Cuddon (2013), the "garden of flowers" may refer to women who are "suitable" for Orlando and are from the nobility or another higher socioeconomic class. While "the weeds" stand for "the corruption and decay" (ibid., p. 700) that comes with living on the margins of society, "the wild" refers to girls from "unsuitable" social backgrounds, such as maids, servants, and prostitutes.

Woolf utilizes floral imagery in a variety of contexts. "Looking down, the red hyacinth, the purple iris wrought her to cry out in ecstasy at the goodness, the beauty of the nature."(Woolf, 1995, p. 70).The Greek-born hyacinth flower is a representation of fertility as well as passion and gay desire when combined with the color red (Pavey, 2011). As we've already established, purple represents the androgynous or "universal color" that homosexuals prefer. Iris was the goddess who embodied the rainbow and the mother of Eros, according to Anthon (1871), a scholar of Greek mythology. All around the world, gays have embraced the rainbow flag.Esquire Marmaduke Bonthorp Shelmerdine, referred to by numerous names throughout the novel depending on Orlando's mood (Bonthorp, Mar, Shelmerdine), is another character whose orientation is similarly questionable. He is the sailor who marries Orlando and is the personification of excellent character traits.

"'Oh! Shel, don't leave me!' [...] 'I'm passionately in love with you. [...] [...]

'You're a woman, Shel!' she cried.

'You're a man, Orlando!' he cried." (Woolf, p. 124)

It is reported that Vita's real spouse, Mar, a bisexual man whom she used to call, served as the model for this character. Although his gender is unclear throughout the novel,several biographers concur that Virginia Woolf chose the figure to allude to her husband Leonard, who was accepting of her bisexuality.

Conclusion

I looked into the gay themes in Virginia Woolf's novel Orlando. The author's feminism and her bisexual private life, which were reflected in the work, helped me focus on some of the queer components in the conversation. Numerous more instances of homosexuality-related motifs may be found throughout Woolf's works. I've listed the numerous gay themes that appear throughout Orlando and may be seen in many other literary works. The percipient's intuition and imagination are what provide the final touches to the context and general knowledge, therefore everything depends on them. The provided gay themes serve as a guide for readers, pointing them in the right path when they conduct studies of this and other literature dealing with related subjects.

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