Chapter II

The Androgynous Self in Virginia Woolf’s Orlando

NANO: ....
Now pray thee, sweet soul, in all thy variation,
Which body would'st thou choose to take up thy station?

ANDROGYNO: Troth this I am in, even here would I tarry.

NANO: ’Cause here the delight of each sex thou canst vary?

ANDROGYNO: Alas, those pleasure be stale and forsaken;
No, ‘tis your Fool, wherewith I am so taken,
The only one creature that I can call blessed:
For all other forms I have proved most distressed.

---Volpone, Act I (1605/6) --- Ben Jonson

The above is an excerpt from the grotesque masquerade which is put up
for Volpone’s entertainment. Here Androgyno, (the name suggesting both
masculine and feminine traits), is one of the misshapen inmates of the voluptuous
Volpone’s household in Jonson’s comedy. Androgyno, along with Nano the
dwarf, and Castrone the eunuch, symbolize a squalid world deformed by disease
and debased by the seven deadly sins. Nevertheless, through the rehearsed play-
acting, Androgyno counters Nano’s lecherous overtures with the statement that
the soul is happiest within the fool, for his own soul is trapped between two sexes.
Therefore, what the figure of Androgyno projects is not only the abnormality of
being bisexual, but the agony of being an outcast in a society where one must be
either ‘male’ or ‘female’.

It was over three hundred years later that Virginia Woolf wrote Orlando
(1928), a lively biography portraying a character, made ‘unique’ (not normal
like Androgyno) by bisexuality of body and mind. In her feminist polemic A
Room of One’s Own published a year after Orlando, Woolf highlighted on the dangers of being simply ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ especially for an author. After observations and consequent investigations, she comes to the conclusion that women are not only deprived of education or any other career, but also of that confidence which men have, ‘which is freedom to think of things in themselves’ because male pursuits (in a patriarchal society) were given more status and importance than the labour of women. Woolf further delves into the condition of women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and unearths from beneath the complacent façade, the actual plight of women while quoting the noble lady Winchilsea:

How are we fallen! fallen by mistaken rules,
   And Education’s more than Nature’s fools;
Debarred from all improvements of the mind,
   And to be dull, expected and designed;
And if someone would soar above the rest,
   With warmer fancy, and ambition pressed,
So strong the opposing faction still appears,
   The hopes to thrive can ne’er outweigh the fears. 1

However, though Winchilsea’s mind was disturbed by unpleasant emotions as fear, hatred and insecurity, men too were ironically slaves of convention, and Woolf writes of a newly published raunchy book by one Mr.A, replete with sexual encounters where the man was the viewer, initiator and manipulator. In fact, even John Galsworthy and Rudyard Kipling are not free from the shackles of conventionality as they ‘celebrate male virtues, enforce male values and describe the world of men’, for, like most others, they were ‘writing only with the male side of their brains’. But finally, Woolf holds so-called ‘seducers’ and ‘reformers’ responsible for inducing this ‘state of sex-consciousness’ and argues that it is improper even for a woman to express any grievance or plead for a cause or to speak consciously as a woman because---
... 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. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; 
... for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It 
ceases to be fertilized. Brilliant and effective, powerful and masterly, as it 
may appear for a day or two, it must wither at nightfall; ... Some 
collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the 
man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of 
opposites has to be consummated.

In fact, Woolf's texts are engaged with the same problem as that 
articulated by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, namely, how is 
the feminine to be presented in British culture. Lacan's psychoanalytic theory had 
suggested that either 'woman' does not exist, or that 'she' is not 
represented/representable within the existing symbolic order. Cixous and other 
contemporary feminists have countered this by asserting women's positive 
difference from men, and by attempting to articulate a specifically feminine 
subjectivity. Woolf's writing seems particularly close to Hélène Cixous, 
especially in its use of fluid figurative language to evoke 'the feminine' as a 
potential, not yet released in/through language. Cixous has of course suggested 
that women inhabit a libidinal economy which is peculiarly open to difference and 
admission of the other. Such an economy she calls 'the other bisexuality', one 
which does not seek to annul difference, but which accepts and celebrates it:

Bisexuality— that is to say, the location within oneself of the presence of 
both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the 
individual, the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex.

Therefore, Orlando is not just a sort of wish-fulfilment for the writer, but a 
presentation of the ideal amalgamation of the masculine and feminine which is the 
basis of humanist writing.

Woolf began Orlando in the autumn of 1927 and initially intended it to be 
a mock-biography of Vita Sackville-West, whom Woolf first met in 1922 and
with whom she fell in love. Many of the characters and events in the book are in fact allusions to Vita’s life. But, unlike a conventional biography, the novel ranges over three hundred years and involves the central figure in a sex change.

The first part of Orlando which is more gripping in its intensity of passion, begins with the boy Orlando with his ‘shapely legs’, and then Lord Orlando as a young man in the sixteenth-century, but then proceeds after him to the Court of King James, where he has a relationship with the Russian princess Sasha (based on Vita’s affair with Violet ‘Lushka’ Trefusis), and the Court of Charles II, where, redolent of Vita’s bisexual husband Harold Nicolson, who also appears later in the novel as Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, he is appointed an ambassador. The turning point of the story takes place in Constantinople, where Orlando has a disreputable marriage with a gipsy woman Rosina Pepita (a character based on Vita’s Spanish grandmother) and undergoes a mysterious change in gender. As an ex-ambassador, Lady Orlando lives for a while among a band of gipsies (perhaps in a mock attempt to associate herself with these social outcasts as Maggie Tulliver does in George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss), whom she upsets through her very English admiration of nature, her poetry and her enthusiasm for English ancestral homes. Although in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Lady Orlando lives the life of a literary aristocrat, she continues to be estranged from the societies in which she finds herself. In the eighteenth-century she dresses as a man to meet London prostitutes and in the nineteenth-century she marries an eccentric explorer and sea captain. In the 1920s, she is a prize-winning author. The echoes of Vita Sackville-West’s life are continued throughout the novel in Lord/Lady Orlando’s travels in Eastern Europe, in her pursuit by the Duke/Duchess Scand-op-Boom and in her transvestism.
Woolf intended *Orlando* as ‘an escapade’ and described it ‘all a joke’, a ‘writer’s holiday’ with the ‘spirit to be satiric’ and the ‘structure wild’. As she remarked in her diary when getting out her first conception of the novel:

No attempt is to be made to realise the character. Sapphism is to be suggested. Satire is to be the main note— satire & wildness. The Ladies are to have Constantinople in view. Dreams of golden domes. My own lyric vein is to be satirised. Everything mocked. And it is to end with three dots... so. For the truth is I feel the need of an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered. I want to kick up my heels & be off. I want to embody all those innumerable little ideas and tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons. I think this will be great fun to write; & it will rest my head before starting the very serious, mystical poetic work which I want to come next.  

Woolf also wrote another mock biography, *Flush*, the story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s dog. Although at times, *Orlando* does appear to be ‘a playful interlude’ rather like *Flush*, on careful perusal, it reveals itself as a more serious work interrelating between intellectual debate, innovation and politics. Satire and comic fantasy are therefore, only two of a number of strategies employed in the book, including mockery, ridicule, farce and the carnivalesque.

Also, on the other hand, *Orlando* seems an interesting subject for historiography. In defamiliarising the three hundred years over which *Orlando* ranges--- for example, the Elizabethan Age, the Courts of King James and Charles II, seventeenth-century Constantinopole, the eighteenth-century coffee-house society, London at the time of the Great Exhibition--- the novel encourages its English readers to consider their own cultural identities. Characters such as Elizabeth, Shakespeare, Nell Gwyn and the prostitute Nell, introduce alternative narratives to the ‘official’ histories, including literary histories, that call into question the nature of historiography.
But Woolf's interest was not just to portray historic events, but to use history and historiography as tools to 'free' the protagonist from the scythe of time. Thus, Lord Orlando's release from historical time permits him freedom from the imprint of his forefathers, escape from the self-contained notion of English cultural identity with which he has grown up, and an alternative to a (largely) masculine categorisation of both gender identity and sexual experience. The thaw that follows the Great Frost literally and metaphorically unfreezes historical time but also connotes through the suggestion of orgasm the release of female sexuality, and through the unfreezing of the 'ego' the release of the unconscious (the 'id').

In her book, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on her Life and Work* (1989), Louise De Salvo accounts for Woolf's 'choice' of a celibate life and lesbian love with Vita and Violet Dickinson to the sexual abuse inflicted on her by her half-brothers Gerald and George Duckworth. But then the implication which emerges from this argument is that lesbianism cannot be normal as it stems from some fault or aberration, thus undermining Freud's opinion that stories of seduction in infancy were mere fantasies. In fact, according to De Salvo, Woolf herself was at one point of time, inclined to believe in Freud's theory:

[Woolf] was ascribing her depression and her 'madness' to her abuse. [Freud] was describing reports of incest as fantasies which were wish-fulfilment. She wondered whose view was correct and there is evidence that, after a long time of struggle... she wavered, reconsidered, and accepted Freud. This meant that she would have to see herself as mad.5

Indeed, Elaine Showalter (in *A Literature of Their Own*) and Stephen Trombly (in *All That Summer She Was Mad*) have argued that major breakdowns were the outcome of her threatened female identity. Leonard Woolf, in particular,
overlooked his own decision not to have children, and blamed his wife for her own distress by calling her ‘mad’. But while American feminists relate Woolf’s ‘madness’ to social and cultural pressures, French feminists have interpreted it in terms of psychic processes by relying on new techniques such as free association, the use of dreams and symptomatic writing. Thus, Julia Kristeva sees in Woolf’s ‘madness’ something irresistible, inescapable and connected in the semiotic chain, women – writer – madness - death:

... I think of Virginia Woolf, who sank wordlessly into the river, her pockets weighed down with stones. Haunted by voices, waves, lights, in love with colours— blue, green— and seized by a strange gaiety that would bring on the fits of strangled, screeching laughter recalled by Miss Brown.  

In fact, since women writers are more likely than male writers to remain in touch with the ‘semiotic’, with early, pre-Oedipal experience, their texts are articulated across the interplay between the semiotic and symbolic— which on one hand brings richness and fullness to their work, but threatens its stability on the other. Thus, while critics as Sue Roe might argue (in Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf’s Writing Practice, 1990) that Woolf’s creative writing was damaged by her inability to confront or explore her sexuality, the readers also come across Sally Seton’s kiss in Mrs. Dalloway which may be taken as a coded description of ecstatic lesbian love:

Then came the most exquisite moment of her life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it— a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up...

But the questions arise— Is Orlando merely a public celebration of the woman Woolf loved? Or is Orlando a fictional manifestation of Woolf’s idea of the ‘androgynous self’, and in turn her own androgynous nature? No doubt, the
first edition of the novel contained several photographs of Vita posing as Orlando, and in the letter which Woolf wrote to Vita asking her permission to go ahead with Orlando, she seems already seduced by her own subject, caught up in erotic linguistic play:

But listen; suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and its all about you and the luts of your flesh and the lure of your mind (heart you have none, who go gallivanting down the lanes with Campbell)--- suppose there’s the kind of shimmer of reality which sometimes attaches to my people, as the lustre on an oyster shell... suppose I say, that Sibyl next October says ‘There’s Virginia gone, and written a book about Vita’... Shall you mind? Say yes, or No. 8

In fact, critics as Sandra Gilbert and Clare Hanson have attributed Woolf’s passionate and embarrassing attachment to her subject as the outcome of her own attraction towards her seductive companion:

I like her & being with her, & the splendour--- she shines in the grocer’s shop in Sevenoaks with a candle lit radiance, stalking on legs like beech trees, pink glowing, grape clustered, pearl hung. ... What is the effect of all this on me? Very mixed. There is her maturity & full breastedness: her being so much in full sail on the high tides, where I am coasting down backwaters; her capacity I mean to take the floor in any company, to represent her country, to visit Chatsworth, to control silver, servants, chow dogs; her motherhood... her being in short (what I have never been) a real woman. 9

Beyond the personal charisma that Woolf has described with such élan in a 1925 diary entry, what made Vita especially fascinating was the combination of erotic intensity and sexual ambiguity stemming from her notorious ‘Sapphism’, for she made no effort to conceal her attraction to, and affairs with, women. Following their meeting Virginia confided to her diary: ‘She is a pronounced Sapphist, & may... have an eye on me, old though I am. Nature might have sharpened her faculties. Snob as I am, I trace her passions 500 years back, & they become romantic to me, like old yellow wine10 ; and in one of her letters to Woolf written on 21st January 1926, on way from Paris to Milan, Vita writes:
I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia. I composed a beautiful letter to you in the sleepless nightmare hours of the night, and it has all gone: I just miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way.... It is incredible how essential to me you have become. I suppose you are accustomed to people saying these things. Damn you, spoilt creature; I shan’t make you love me any the more by giving myself away like this. But oh my dear, I can’t be clever and stand-offish with you: I love you too much for that. Too truly. You have no idea how stand-offish I can be with people I don’t love. I have brought it to a fine art. But you have broken down my defences. And I don’t really resent it. 

Indeed, in the letters which the two women wrote each other, below the surface foam of snatches of gossip, polychrome snapshots of exotic travelogue, and little shared confidences of literary craft, we sense occasionally, the strange alchemy of love mixed with uncertainty and compulsion mingled with constraint. Also, when one takes into account the ten-year period (1925-1934) which witnessed the height of their intimacy, one discovers the most productive phase of their lives: Vita having published Seducers in Ecuador, Passenger to Teheran, The Land, Aphra Behn, Twelve Days, “King’s Daughter”, Andrew Marvell, The Edwardians, All Passion Spent, Family History, “Sissinghurst”, Thirty Clocks Strike the Hour, Collected Poems, and The Dark Island. Woolf in that time wrote “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown”, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, Orlando, A Room of One’s Own, The Waves, Flush, and A Letter to a Young Poet; published The Common Reader and The Common Reader: Second Series; and began The Years, while working as usual on scores of reviews and essays. Thus, neither had ever before written so much so well, and neither had ever again reached this peak of accomplishment.

Woolf’s interest in Vita was not surprising, for the Bloomsbury Group, in which Woolf had moved almost from her adolescence, had long been ‘radical in its rejection of sexual taboos’,--- (Woolf’s sister Vanessa, for instance, married Clive Bell but had a long affair with Roger Fry, and had a daughter by the painter Duncan Grant, with whom she settled into an amicable lifelong partnership).
Woolf however, was by contrast, sexually timid, but had depicted love between women in her novels as *The Voyage Out, Night and Day, To the Lighthouse*, and most strikingly in *Mrs. Dalloway*, when Clarissa Dalloway recollects the moment when her girlhood friend Sally Seton kissed her on the lips:

... she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman, not a girl, of a woman confessing, as to her they often did, some scrape, some folly... she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores!... 12

There were dangers of course in making such a public declaration of ‘Sapphic’ love, and in identifying Orlando with Vita--- which is why some critics have identified passages in the novel suggesting stasis and frozenness, regarding them as the outcome of the author’s guilt in textualising a living woman. Therefore, the following extract from the novel makes for interesting perusal:

Shoals of eels lay motionless in a trance, but whether their state was one of death or merely of suspended animation which the warmth would revive puzzled the philosophers. Near London Bridge, where the river had frozen to a depth of some twenty fathoms, a wrecked wherry boat was plainly visible, lying on the bed of the river where it had sunk last autumn, overladen with apples. The old bumboat woman, who was carrying her fruit to market on the Surrey side, sat there in her plaids and farthingales with her lap full of apples, for all the world as if she were about to serve a customer, though a certain blueness about the lips hinted the truth. 13

The old bumboat woman is like Vita (whose name of course signifies ‘life’ or ‘vitality’): fixed, frozen, pinned down by Woolf’s prose.

On the other hand, while taking into account, conventional sexual responses after her own sex change, Orlando voices Woolf’s concern regarding gender identities by reflecting on the distinction between the external (man’s) world and woman’s interior life:
Which is the greater ecstasy? The man’s or the woman’s? And are they not perhaps the same? No, she thought, this is the most delicious (thanking the Captain but refusing), to refuse, and see him frown. Well, she would, if he wished it, have the very thinnest, smallest shiver in the world. This was the most delicious of all, to yield and see him smile. ‘For nothing’, she thought, regaining her couch on deck, and continuing her argument, ‘is more heavenly than to resist and to yield; to yield and to resist. Surely it throws the spirit into such a rapture as nothing else can.’

Women freed from martial ambition and the love of power can, she thinks, ‘more fully enjoy the most exalted raptures known to the human spirit’. But ironically, on the other hand, Orlando begins to construct these responses not because she has become a woman in the biological sense, but because of the restricted opportunities offered to women under patriarchy. As she reflects, ‘women are not (judging from my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature’, seeming to echo Simone de Beauvoir’s view that ‘one is not born but rather becomes a woman’. Thus, in the famous discussion on clothing (often related to Woolf’s supposed advocacy of androgyny), Woolf/the narrator asserts unequivocally that Orlando’s identity is not changed by the change of biological sex:

But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity.15

‘Her’ psychological gender does, however, appear to change. Just as Orlando after becoming a woman, has to wear a (restricting) skirt and petticoats, so she must alter her behaviour in order to conform to the expectations which society has of those marked as ‘women’. So:

... all seems to hint that what was said a short time ago about there being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing to be altogether true. She was becoming a little more modest as [woman] are, of her brains, and a little more vain, as women are of her person... Orlando curtseyed; she complied; she flattered the good man’s humours.16

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However, as was typical of her, Woolf then contradicts herself. Having argued for the artificial construction of gender, she then seems to suggest that there is a ‘natural’ link between clothes and what lies beneath:

The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress and of a woman’s sex.¹⁷

Here, the suggestion seems to be that gender is not arbitrary but essential, the expression of a difference which is fundamental (‘one of great profundity’ ‘hid deep beneath’) --- an extremely apparent contradiction! What lies ‘beneath’ sex, gender and identity is, in Freudian terms, the ‘psychic bisexuality’ of the earliest phase of human life. Orlando’s choice of a different sex (and then concomitant gender/identity) might, then, signal a return in fantasy to this early stage of psychic bisexuality, or vacillation. This would accord with Woolf’s own suggestion in Orlando that:

Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above.¹⁸

Therefore, one way of reading the text would be to connect it with psychic bisexuality, and indeed Orlando can be interpreted as an allegory of the development of femininity which has several points of convergence with Freud’s account of such development. In Freudian thought, early childhood is marked by a condition of bisexuality, as desire shifts across ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ objects. Freud stated that ‘freedom to range equally over male and female objects’ is a distinguishing feature of early life. Lacan also sees ‘psychical bisexuality’ as one of the most important of Freud’s concepts, and connects this with the precarious nature of all subject-identification. On the other hand, in an essay

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published in 1986 (*The Impossible Referent: Representations of the Androgyne in Formations of Fantasy*), Frances Pacteau relates such psychic bisexuality to the ‘impossible’ ideal of androgyny, which she sees as representing a ‘dual sexual identity’. She argues that while the androgyne does not exist in the real, as a figure of fantasy s/he is attached to archaic memories of early childhood. Androgyny belongs to the domain of the imaginary, where desire is unobstructed; gender identity is that of the symbolic, the Law. The androgynous looking figure presents us with an impossibility, that of the erasure of the very difference which constitutes us as subjects. In the encounter with the androgyne, the adult is able to shift positions oscillating between the masculine and the feminine which recalls the undifferentiated sexuality of the pre-Oedipal period.

No less interesting is Sasha, Orlando’s seducer in the first part of the book:

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... But the skater came closer. 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. 

Sasha is not the amalgamation of the eternal ‘feminine’ as claimed by some earlier critics. Rather, she is a combination of both ‘male’ and ‘female’ aspects. To Orlando, she is ‘a melon’ (suggesting perhaps, the female breasts, and also passivity) and ‘a fox in the snow’ (suggestive of the phallus and of activity). Therefore, the image of their union allows for the possibility of an oscillation between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ positions (or ‘vacillation’, in Woolf’s word).
The 'indeterminacy of sex' in the first part of *Orlando* could, then, be linked with the psychic bisexuality of the pre-Oedipal period, and Orlando's change into a woman could be seen as analogous to the little girl's acquisition of gender in the Freudian account of female development. The difficulties which Orlando experiences in her progress through the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries could be linked with the difficulties which the little girl has in Freud's account, in adapting to her gendered role. Freud maintains that the girl has greater difficulty than the boy in passing through the Oedipus complex. When the little boy, threatened by the possibility of castration, must repress his early desire for his mother, he is able to do this by identification with the father-figure. Possessing the phallus, he can look forward to the day when he too will possess a woman like/in place of the mother. The little girl, on the other hand, must redirect her early desire for her mother, and orient herself towards a male rather than a female love-object. With the recognition of sexual difference and of castration, Freud suggests, the little girl begins to repudiate her (similarly castrated) mother. She turns to the father in the hope of deriving from him first a penis, and subsequently a baby to stand in place of the unattainable penis. The mechanism by which the desire for the biological father is then displaced and deferred remains unclear in Freud's account.

However, Adrienne Rich (*Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*) and others have objected to Freud's account of female development, arguing in particular, that there is no compelling reason why the little girl should ever direct her search for love away from her own sex. Therefore, in *Orlando*, the moment of castration--- Orlando's recognition of the fact that she is a woman--- is followed not by a repudiation of the feminine, but an intensification of feminine
identification which counters Freud’s view that it is not possible to desire the sex one identifies with—i.e. if one is a man desiring another man for instance. Thus, even after she has ‘become’ a woman, Orlando’s primary object of love remains a woman, and her feelings towards Sasha are not weakened but intensified:

... if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had as a man. For now a thousand hints and mysteries became plain to her that were then dark. Now, the obscurity, which divides the sexes and lets linger innumerable impurities in its gloom, was removed, and if there is anything in what the poet says about truth and beauty, this affection gained in beauty what it lost in falsity. At last, she cried, she knew Sasha as she was...  

Same-sex relationships are celebrated because they offer a greater possibility for communication. Heterosexual relations denote imbalance of power, and therefore marital relationships.

But, Woolf’s treatment of same-sex relationship is complex and varies through her fiction. Here there is a strong sense of an affirmation of ‘feminine’ identity through the doubling/mirroring of same-sex relations (as there is in Irigaray’s considerations of ‘female homosexuality’). What the ‘feminine’ might signify remains problematic: on the one hand, Woolf stresses the consecutive nature of ‘femininity’ in Orlando (and hence the possibility of its changing); on the other, she continues like Cixous, to celebrate its value, its fluidity and fertility, as she writes in a letter to Vanessa Bell:

You will never succumb to the charms of any of your sex--- What an arid garden the world must be to you! What avenues of stone pavements and iron railings! Greatly though I respect the male mind, and adore Duncan (but thank God, he’s hermaphrodite, androgynous, like all great artists) I cannot see that they have a glow-worm’s worth of charm about them--- The scenery of the world takes no lustre from their presence. They add of course immensely to its dignity and safety: but when it comes to a little excitement---! 21

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However, Orlando is forced to accommodate herself to 'normal' femininity, not out of love or desire for a man, but her submission to the new discovery of coupledom which leads to a process of insidious weakening:

At the same time, she began to notice a new habit among the town people... Couples trudged and plodded in the middle of the road indissolubly linked together. The woman's right hand was invariably passed through the man's left and her fingers were firmly gripped by his... 22

And as the nineteenth-century progresses, Orlando is brought to perceive herself as physically weak and in need of protection against the onslaughts of rapacious male sexuality:

So she strayed out into the park alone, faltering at first and apprehensive lest there might be poachers or gamekeepers or even errand-boys to marvel that a great lady should walk alone. At every step she glanced nervously lest some male form should be hiding behind a furze bush... 23

The contrast between the impetuous young Orlando and this timid creature suggests that this weakness is 'not natural' but 'constructed'. In Freudian terms, we might say that in Victorian society activity is assigned to men, passivity to women, to such an extent that in Orlando's case she comes to see death as the only way out of her position of helplessness. Therefore, going out onto the moor, she breaks her ankle (like Catherine Linton in Wuthering Heights, whose 'fall' can be linked with the onset of puberty), and falls into a passive trance:

'I have found my mate,' she murmured. 'It is the moor. I am nature's bride,' she whispered, giving herself in rapture to the cold embraces of the grass as she lay folded in her cloak in the hollow by the pool. 'Here will I lie.' (A feather fell upon her brow.) 24

It is at this point that Orlando is 'rescued' by Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. She marries and has a son, thus extending her family tree. She also completes her poem The Oak Tree, from within the safe haven of a marriage which just about conforms to convention.
Androgyny therefore, is one of the obvious themes in the novel and not surprisingly most critics have approached *Orlando* from this perspective. Orlando’s name itself reminds us of Orlando in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, as well as the French medieval *Chanson de Roland*, so associating her with masculine roles. But as an apologue, the novel can be seen as demonstrating the absurdity of conceiving male and female gender and sexual identities in fixed and absolute terms. Exploring how males and females are complicit in the way in which both genders are imagined, the novel suggests that meanings normally attached to sexuality lie outside the body itself. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler has opined that gender is not just a social construct, but rather a performance, a show we put on, a set of signs we wear, as costume or disguise—hence as far from essence as can be. Under the subtitle, “Reformulating Prohibition as Power” (in the section “Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix”), Butler feels that it is the incest taboo which not only forbids and dictates sexuality but creates heterosexual desire and discrete gender identity. Thus, the young man Orlando’s legs drive Nell Gwyn wild, while a sailor is almost killed because he catches sight of the ankles of Orlando as a woman:

‘To fall from a masthead’, she thought, ‘because you see a woman’s ankles; to dress up like a Guy Fawkes and parade the streets, so that women may praise you; to deny a woman teaching lest she may laugh at you; to be the slave of the frailest chit in petticoats, and yet to go about as if you were the Lords of Creation. --- Heavens!’ she thought, ‘what fools they make of us--- what fools we are!’ 25

--- revealing how social relations between the sexes involve strategies of disguise and recognition. Again, Orlando’s encounter with the prostitute Nell, is equally significant, for it takes place when Orlando is forced to return to her former (male) identity to escape the unwanted attentions of men. Nell, believing Orlando
to be a man, employs approaches and responses which she thinks he would expect of her. Orlando having recently been a man recognises that this is what Nell is doing. But the way she holds on to Orlando’s arm arouses feelings in her which, in turn, makes her feel masculine. As a woman herself, Orlando recognises that the prostitute’s behaviour is a charade. As soon as Orlando reveals herself to be a woman, Nell changes her mode of behaviour. In other words, both Orlando and Nell rid themselves of their disguises. The conversation between them, despite the differences in their backgrounds, appears to assert the primacy of the union of two female friends who can share in the delight of similar perspectives, again despite the differences between them. [Set within the androgynous frame of the novel, it betrays perhaps, a hidden desire for female love.]

In reality, there were also other sides to Vita which Virginia seems to have detected almost from the beginning. One of them was the indomitable woman who took charge of one’s life and charted one’s destiny, whose arrogance flattened obstacles and whose vanity refused to acknowledge shabbiness, poverty or familiarity. This was the exalted woman who strode her own private acres and lived in castles and who spoke her mind with devastating simplicity. Then there was the compassionate woman who understood life’s miseries and dispensed her bounty on the world’s downtrodden, who ‘in the unaccustomed freedom of breeches and gaiters’ went into ‘wild spirits’ like a schoolboy; and there was also the heroic Vita who worked like a slave and played like a prince and saw the whole world as her personal challenge. All of these Vitas, wrapped into one, held Virginia magnetized in a bright circle of high romance and adventure. Thus, in much the same proprietal spirit as Browning’s jealous Duke, preserving for himself his ‘Last Duchess’ in a portrait, so Virginia preserved for herself the Vita
she loved (despite the latter’s various amorous affairs) in the spectacular world of Orlando. As Nigel Nicolson said, Orlando was ‘the longest and most charming love letter in literature....’

However, Woolf’s ‘androgyne’ was much more than the mere outcome of her feelings for Vita. She was writing at a time when there was great interest in and investigation of the phenomena and determinations of sexuality and sexual identities. Instead of being taken for granted, or rather for natural, that men and women were simply different, with whatever consequences followed from the specific form of the assumption (from the merely physical to those that encompassed the whole of emotional and intellectual life as well), now the very origins of masculinity and femininity and the forms of sexual interest that might accompany them were being perceived in some quarters as being in need of explanation. It is likely that like other Bloomsbury members as E. M. Forster and G. Lowes Dickinson, Woolf too was influenced by the ideas of Edward Carpenter. An open homosexual, Carpenter argued in the 1890s, for what he considered the utopian existence of a ‘third’ or ‘Intermediate Sex’, whom he called ‘Urnings’ (from Urania, meaning heaven) because they were able to achieve a kind of androgynous transcendence of the narrow limits of heterosexuality. Relating his views of these privileged beings to the growing movement of women’s rights in which Woolf was herself involved, he declared in 1896 that:

in late years (and since the arrival of the New Woman amongst us).... there are some remarkable and (we think) indispensable types of character, in whom there is such a union or balance of the feminine and masculine qualities that these people become to a great extent the interpreters of men and women to each other.

(Edward Carpenter, Love’s Coming of Age, 1896) 26
--- which Woolf extends in *A Room of One's Own*, while imaginatively resurrecting the lost woman poet Judith Shakespeare, --- a theme which was echoed by George Bernard Shaw, who commented --- 'People are still full of the old idea that woman is a special creation'. Thus by 1933, Havelock Ellis, a theorist of 'sexology' and a friend of both Carpenter’s and Shaw’s, could succinctly summarize such new ideas of gender in his book, *The Psychology of Sex*:

> We may not know exactly what sex is, but we do know that it is mutable, with the possibility of one sex being changed into the other sex, that its frontiers are often uncertain, and that there are many stages between a complete male and a complete female.  

It is interesting to note that shortly after *Orlando* appeared, Radclyffe Hall’s controversial *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) characterised its female protagonist Stephen Gordon as a man trapped in a woman’s body. An avowed lesbian herself, Hall regularly cross-dressed, was called ‘John’ by her intimates, and moved in the Sapphic salons of Paris and London whose other habituees included such sexually rebellious women as her aristocratic lover Una Troubridge and the painter Romaine Brooks, as well as the writers Natalie Barney, Gertrude Stein and Vita Sackville-West. However, while Hall lends a tragic cast to Gordon’s story, Woolf presents Orlando’s change of sex in a light-hearted vein. Nevertheless, both works reveal an assumption of gender, fostered by the theories of Carpenter and Ellis, which radically contradicts Freud’s famous assertion that ‘Anatomy is destiny’.

Woolf however, was not the only one among the Bloomsbury intellectuals in her desire to dissociate anatomy from destiny. Quentin Bell notes that just before she was inspired by her romance with Vita to begin producing her own fantastic portrayal of the latter as what can be now called a transsexual, she had
become fascinated by sex change at a social event where gender fluidity was virtually thematic:

... early in September [1927], Maynard and Lydia Keynes gave a party at Tilton. Jack Sheppard enacted the part of an Italian prima donna, words and music being supplied by a gramophone. Someone had brought a newspaper cutting with them; it reproduced the photograph of a pretty young woman who had become a man, and this for the rest of the evening became Virginia’s main topic of conversation. 28

Thus, when Woolf decided that the ‘writer’s holiday’ devoted to her friend Vita’s life as ‘Orlando, a young nobleman’ should be simultaneously ‘truthful’ and ‘fantastic’, she was quite accurately articulating a particular vision of gender as well as of history. For if it was ‘fantastic’ to conceive of a ‘parentless’ creature living for 300 years, from the age of Elizabeth to the present day, it was, according to Woolf, perfectly ‘truthful’ to imagine Vita changing her sex as easily as she might change her clothes. Equally important is the fact that Vita herself had grown up feeling like a boy, and posed as a wounded soldier named ‘Julian’ during the height of her affair with Violet Trefusis. In response to Vita’s anxiety about her ‘dual’ sexuality and the hope she expressed in her (then unpublished) autobiography that ‘as centuries go on... the sexes [will] become more nearly merged on account of their increasing resemblances’, Woolf reassures her--- ‘Different though the sexes are, they intermix’, and where Vita is barred from inheriting Knole, the Sackville estate because of her sex, Woolf grants her perpetual possession of this house with 365 rooms and 52 staircases--- an extravagant account which implies that Orlando/Vita has inherited not just a place in time, but time itself.

On the other hand, in a study entitled *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (1989), Elizabeth Abel has opined that ‘Woolf’s two versions of the genesis of her text depict different parental inspirations and distinct
compositional processes that reproduce the psychoanalytic disputes over the narrative priority of each parent.  

Abel was of course taking Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* into consideration—where, according to Sandra Gilbert, Woolf was intending 'to exorcise the ghosts of her own parents' Leslie and Julia Stephen, her own past, through the presentation of the traditional upper middle class Victorian family. *Orlando* however, portrays a figure with an inheritance but without a family, a figure (like the determinedly single artist Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*), who undergoes a sex-change. It is in fact, the first Woolf novel which is not structured around the typical heterosexual couple. Rather, it tries to answer those questions raised in *To the Lighthouse*—viz. what would Lily's life be had she been allowed to roam freely through history and discover that the 'universal law' of marriage (which determined the sex roles) was a sham as the clothes she wore? And what would Lily's life had become if she were to suddenly discover history as a 'free' space where she could easily be woman or man? More, how would the engendering of history appear to such a radically new kind of being? Also, Woolf was perhaps trying to give shape to her initial venture of writing a fantastic story which she may have conceived in its preliminary form when a mere child. As Vanessa Bell recalls:

I think it must have been a good deal later that she sent a short story to *Tit Bits*, keeping it a deadly secret from all but me. *Tit Bits* was our favourite weekly, which we used to buy together with 3d worth of Fry's Chocolate, taking both to Kensington Gardens to read and eat together, lying in the grass under the trees on summer afternoons. The story was refused--- as far as I remember, it was a wildly romantic account of a young woman on a ship--- and the secret kept till this day.  

Therefore, the historical organisation of *Orlando* is really a means of showing how Orlando stays the same, not how she changes. In her quest for the true self (which transcends all outward trappings, social or psychological), she becomes
the ideal spokeswoman for the androgynous movement, along the lines of the more direct chronological account of women through the centuries beginning with the fantasy of Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own*:


But what proves interesting is the fact that Orlando is more a critic of men than of women, and though she is described as an androgynous personality, her female character seems to dominate. The emphasis in the novel, is at times definitely on the ‘feminist’ which has caused Hermione Lee to remark that ‘Only if Orlando had ended up as a man would the enthusiasm for the hermaphrodite mind be absolutely unbiased.’ In fact, according to Lee, the ‘closest analogy’ between Orlando and Woolf is that both are ‘struggling to find a way of expressing life’ (or truth, or reality: the terms are frequently interchangeable) in art; which is perhaps why Orlando ends up on ‘Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen hundred and Twenty Eight’ as the New Woman, who after considerable doubts whether to conform to norms, finally falls victim to the nineteenth-century matrimonial instinct, and marries the flimsy, fantastic, and to some extent effeminate, Shelmerdine. In fact, the playful shifts and changes of perspective is really something more rather than a wilful desire to irritate the serious-minded feminist critic. As Toril Moi writes:

Through her exploitation of the sportive, sensual nature of language, Woolf rejects the metaphysical essentialism underlying patriarchal ideology, which hails God, the Father or the phallus as its transcendentnal signified.
Nevertheless, the question which inevitably crops up as an outcome is whether it is really possible to achieve androgyny in fiction as Woolf tried to establish through the concrete presentation of the central figure in *Orlando* and in *A Room*. In the latter text, Woolf obviously underlines the arbitrary nature of gender difference and explores the ways in which male dominance is expressed and secured institutionally. In fact, as Clare Hanson opines, she indulges in a 'Cixousian celebration of the feminine principle, and of feminine sexuality' when she describes the gardens of Fernham '[lying] before [her] in the spring twilight, wild and open,...' which in turn recalls women's *jouissance* in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. But on the other hand, *A Room* does not simply extol female values, but rather calls for a multiplication of different perspectives as she seeks to move beyond binary oppositions between the two sexes:

> It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only? Ought not education to bring out and fortify the differences rather than the similarities? For we have too much likeness as it is, and if an explorer should come back and bring word of other sexes looking through the branches of other trees at other skies, nothing would be of greater service to humanity.34

--- and such a view, it may be argued, springs from Woolf's 'Sapphism' which endeavours to 'break the sequence' of phallocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality, thus problematising their [re]production in physical, psychical and textual terms.

It is however, the final chapter on androgyny (which has provoked greater commentary), as the narrator, moved by the sight of a couple getting into a taxi, begins to speculate about the androgynous mind of the artist, contrasting the 'androgynous' Coleridge and Shakespeare with the exclusively 'virile' Galsworthy and Kipling. In *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) Elaine Showalter
contends that Woolf’s vision of androgyny is not merely ‘inhuman’ but also represents an escape from, rather than an exploration of ‘femaleness or maleness’.

However, in a different reading of the text, Sue Roe remarks on the moment in the last chapter when a single leaf is seen to fall from a tree:

The fall of the leaf seems to symbolise a new order of things, but not only that: it seems suggestive of an entirely new mood. A feeling of peace and containment prevails; the pause feels pregnant...  

These lines reminiscent of the feather falling on Orlando’s brow seem to touch the unconscious--- which in turn gives birth to what Clare Hanson calls, the fantasy of androgyny which in reality envisioned the ‘masculinist women’ as reported by the science magazine Focus (17th March 1998), in Rosalind Coward’s Is Feminism Relevant to the New Millennium? :

‘Women will take over the world’,.... ‘Females are both psychologically and physically stronger...They are smarter, more sociable and kinder to themselves than boys and when they grow up, they get further along the career ladder, earn more and manage their families better. The findings suggest that the world could soon be under control of some remarkably superior beings’. 36

This is not at all, as Showalter had claimed earlier, a flight from fixed gender identities, but a recognition of their falsifying metaphysical nature. Far from fleeing such gender identities because she fears them, Woolf rejects them because she has seen them for what they are. On the other hand, Nancy Toppin Bazin reads Woolf’s concept of androgyny as the union of masculinity and femininity---especially when she opines that the androgynous solution of To the Lighthouse consists in a balance of the masculine and the feminine ‘approach to truth’. It was perhaps such a dream of an ideal ‘union’, the creation of a ‘new’ history and a desire for engendered education that made Woolf write (in the words of Hélène Cixous), ‘the other history’/ biography not of ‘Great Men’, but of women.
Therefore, Orlando raises an important and contentious issue, viz.— the question of the relationship between author, sex and text. In fact, the question more specifically is whether the sex of an author determines the sexuality of a text. In The Sexual Fix (1982), Stephen Heath argues on the basis of his reading of passages from novels describing the sexual act that there is no qualitative difference: ie. stereotypical codes and patriarchal images are used by men and women authors alike. From this, Heath concludes that it is the inscription of feminist subject positions in texts, which can be penned by men as well as women, that determines their potential radicalness and not the author's biological sex. But while Heath offers the feminist reader a non-essentialist way of theorising the relationship between sexuality and textuality, the question of authorship poses various problems especially on the issue of 'men in feminism' which raises two major questions— first, should feminists willingly use poststructuralist theories whose chief proponents were men? Second, how should feminist theorists react politically to men who write about issues pertinent to feminism from a sympathetic vantage point? In response to the first question, Rosalind Coward and Chris Weedon have argued that it is possible as well as beneficial to appropriate poststructuralist theories of language, sexuality and subjectivity for feminism, even if their founding fathers have no declared feminist interests. It is the second question, on the other hand, which appears to be more problematic. As Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore feel:

To insist that men should not be involved 'in' feminism maintains a crucial political distinction: feminism is a politics of struggle by women on behalf of women. But it also carries essentialist implications: 'only women can theorise their oppression because only women experience it.'

In fact, French feminists, especially Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have raised the possibility of a specifically 'feminine' discourse with special reference to Dale
Spender’s book *Man Made Language* (1980). By extending the Lacanian psychoanalytical concept of a symbolic phallocentric order of language, from which women are excluded on account of their penis envy, Cixous and Irigaray have emphasized on the use of a language by women which will challenge the effects of a patriarchal symbolic order. Irigaray calls this liberating mode of speech and writing ‘womanspeak’ and Cixous suggests that by writing herself in the discourse of ecriture feminine, ‘woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her’ by patriarchy--- which only goes on to show that in both Irigaray’s and Cixous’s theories, language/text is closely bound to sexuality. But what is common to both theorists is the lack of any sustained attention to history and culture. Language is regarded as a universal structure that subjugates all women in the same way, which in turn fails to provide feminism with a theory of social change. This is why, feminists as Mary Jacobus have used psychoanalytic theory within a historical framework. Thus, in her readings of nineteenth-century women’s novels, Jacobus employs Freud’s theory of the unconscious as a way of uncovering a series of textual omissions, contradictions and uncertainties,--- all of which in turn ‘return’ at various moments in the text to render the text’s official discourses fundamentally unstable. The return of a text’s repressed ‘unconscious’ meanings also calls into question the possibility of a unified omnipotent authorial self. Which is why, one of the potentially liberating effects of poststructuralism for feminism is that it enables the feminist reader to uncover the discursive production of all meanings, to pinpoint whose interests they support, and to locate the contradictions which render them fundamentally unstable and open to change. Therefore, Alice Jardine (of America) and the French feminist Julia Kristeva argue that language no longer guarantees identity,
or meaning: all figuration is chaotic, disorganised and non-transparent. But out of the chaos resulting from the collapse of the master-narrative a new space is produced— a space on which the sexual opposition man/woman is undone; for, asks Kristeva, "what can "identity", even "sexual identity", mean in a new theoretical... space where the very notion of identity is challenged?"--- which demands further exploration of the space and looks for a different narrative from the 'male' stories women and men have been forced to live.

Thus, now we have even male authors exploring androgyny--- as in Yann Martel's Self (1996) where the narrator undergoes several sexual transformations--- beginning as a boy, then mutating into a woman and then into a man,--- all of which owes something to Woolf's Orlando, but reads more like a gender-bending manifesto than a breathtaking fantasy raising complex questions of gender and time. Also, a recent work, Norah Vincent's Self-Made Man: My year disguised as a man (2006), is an exemplary study in impersonation, where the writer disguises herself as a man in New York city. Though the book is more of a personal account than a fund of fresh discoveries about gender, Vincent doesn't feel any sympathy towards her female subjects as does Orlando, but rather betrays her mistrust when she compares the 'beauty of male friendships' to meanness in females:

No fellow female athlete ever tried to help me with my game or give me tips. It was every woman for herself. It wasn't enough that you were successful. You wanted to see your sister fail. 38

The visit to the strip club aptly named The Lizard Lounge worsens her perspective during her sordid encounter with the sex worker and has none of those intellectually illuminating disclosures Orlando experiences during her encounter with the prostitute Nell. Even so, Self-Made Man is an exhilarating book, perhaps
because Vincent never takes herself very seriously in her zeal to refute, even as she corroborates every sexist cliche and stereotype in pop culture.

Therefore clearly, what is now demanded of women writers is much different from the mere desire for recognition which had found expression in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. Woman is now no longer the 'Other' in terms of Foucault, the 'unthought' which in *cogito* becomes a synonym for the Other of Western rationality (the 'man'). Also, until recently, feminist and postcolonial theory have followed 'a path of convergent evolution'. Both bodies of thought have concerned themselves with the study and defence of the marginalised 'Other' within repressive structures of domination and, in so doing, both have followed a remarkably similar theoretical trajectory. Feminist and postcolonial theory alike began with an attempt to simply invert prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race, and they have each progressively welcomed the poststructuralist invitation to refuse the binary oppositions upon which patriarchal/colonial authority constructs itself. In fact, the most significant collision and collusion of postcolonial and feminist theory occurs around the contentious figure of the 'third world woman'. Indeed, some postcolonial feminist theorists have cogently argued that a blinkered focus on racial politics inevitably elides the 'double colonisation' of women under imperial condition while labelling the third world as the 'minor' zone of non-culture and underdevelopment. However, it is now impossible to ignore the third world women and their writings--- where surprisingly we find almost the same rejection of 'malestream' traditions and stereotypes. As the Bengali poetess Mallika Sengupta writes in "Freudke Khola Chithi" ("Open Letter to Freud")---

..............
During my childhood I felt no penis envy
My self assurance was total
Even today I am a confident, complete woman
A sensitive dark girl of the Third World
Shall stand against you from today
Who is inferior who is superior which is more or which is less
Who has given you the responsibility of solving
Such a diplomatic debate Mr. Freud?

(Translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta) 39

But what is to be noted again, is that in the effort to renounce the conventional trappings of motherhood, heterosexuality and marriage, the movement is unconsciously towards androgyny.

Indeed, the idea of 'androgyny' is nothing new. In Book IV of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells of the beautiful boy Hermaphroditus whose body is grafted with that of a nymph against his wishes. Again, the androgyne may be a physical hermaphrodite who has both female and male sex organs. In her essay “Androgyny in Search of Modernity”, Sukrita Paul Kumar quotes the definition of ‘androgyny’ from *The Woman’s Encyclopaedia of Myths and Secrets*:

Many Indo-European religions tried to combine male and female in the Primal Androgyne, both sexes in one body, often with two heads and four arms... Shiva and Shakti-Kali appeared as the androgyne *Ardhanarisvara*, the right side male, the left side female. Rudra the older form of Shiva was known as “the Lord who is Half Woman”... Chinese Taoists held the mandala of Yang and Yin to represent the androgyne. Western myths also assigned androgyny to the elder gods or the first human beings. The Orphic creation of the first born deity was a double-sexed Phanes or Eros, whose female half was psyche, the soul... 40

--- a symbolic concept made famous in Dan Brown’s bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). 41

This symbolic duality between the male and the female captured in the iconographical image of ‘ardhanariswar’ not only evokes a sense of both awe and wonder, but is a concrete manifestation of a philosophical imagination, a
rendering of an ideal mythopoeic vision rather than a historical reality. There is no room for any hierarchical positioning of the sexes, and 'the penultimate stage of perfect cognition' and 'dynamic harmony' is achieved with the dismissal of the idea of the Other (see Plates II, III and IV, pp.240, 241, 242 respectively).

Thus, this literally bisexed figure often has mythic and mystical meanings. It may symbolize fertility, an organism powerful enough to create new life on its own. It may symbolize balance, reconciliation, and the unity of such binary opposites as female and male, earth and sun, dark and light, cold and hot. Or, it may symbolize wisdom, a creature able to grasp the totality of the experience of both sexes. In "The Waste Land", for example, Tiresias, the old man with the wrinkled breasts, while watching a carbuncular clerk making dull love to a bored typist, says:

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed;
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead.) 42

But unlike Tiresias, upon whom the worst of both sexes has been inflicted, Orlando has the best of both sexes in a happy multiform. Also, with Woolf, the androgyne becomes the classic citation for speculative neurology, though it must be noted that the constellation of modern theory that has most legitimised the androgyne as psychological hermaphrodite is that of Jung. He postulates that the objective psyche of each male contains an anima, or feminine principle; that the objective psyche of each female contains an animus, or masculine principle.

The androgyne is therefore, nothing more, or less, than an idea. Moreover, the ironic tragedy of androgyny is that it has itself kept a patriarchal bias. John Crowe Ransom, for example, believes that male poets, to be poets, must be womanly. He also admits that female poets, like Marianne Moore, can be manly.
Yet his rhetoric implies that men are more apt to be good poets and to take on the mental habits of women than women are to be good poets and take on the mental habits of men. Popular culture is more apt to produce an Alice Cooper, a man who flaunts certain feminine characteristics, than a Marlene Dietrich, a woman who puts on top-hat and tails from time to time.

But happily, some women writers are now working to correct this male bias in the tradition of androgyny. In her poem “Report from Inner Space: Seagoddess, muse”, Alicia Ostriker begins by listening to two male poets--- Allen Ginsberg and Robert Creeley--- say how much they want to return to their mother s‘bodies and to grow ‘more feminine’. Ostriker claims equal psychic time and declares that she wants the traits and prerogatives of a man:

   Let me out, man, I do need  
   To evolve lungs & legs & give it a try---  
   I want some cold wheels  
   and a technological freeway  
   I want a gun like everybody else.43

On the other hand, in her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. LeGuin envisions a new sexual order by presenting an androgynous world whose inhabitants (the Gethenians), embody both ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ traits.

Even, the eminent Indian author Rabindranath Tagore had envisioned an ideal androgynous figure in *Chitrangada* in the nineteenth-century (and Tagore himself was deeply sensitive about women’s issues). Mention must also be made of Vishnu Prabhakar’s novel *Ardhanarisvara* (1992) in which Ajit, while speaking of his wife, defines ‘ardhanarisvara’ as a positive and liberating concept:

   ‘I will give Sumita her freedom from being my slave. And I will free myself from her slavery. Only then, can we truly become man and wife.’ 44

The trend therefore, is definitely to find a neutral space beyond sexual identity. In fact, to enable feminism to deflate patriarchal formulations of gender
discrimination, androgyny can prove a liberating conceptual intervention. In this sense, Orlando then is a utopia, a revisionary biography of society not as Woolf thinks it is but as she believes it ought to be. It must be remembered that the victimisation of one sex denotes not only an imbalance of power but a degenerate society. The motto ought to be to attain "the bliss of togetherness and integrality for individual nirvana" which the icon of 'ardhanariswar' suggests. As the noted Bengali author Nabaneeta Dev Sen had once stated,---

In order to make the fullest use of our talents, I genuinely feel, we women writers need to be androgynous in our hearts. In order to be good womanists, or even good humanists, we need to follow the Hara-Gauri image as our motto. Great art demands androgyny. It is one thing to be gender-conscious, another to be gender-bound. Being gender-bound by choice is a self-defeating act today. Our lives have made us androgynous in many ways. We, the writing women, are not the kind of helpless homebound females that we read about in old novels, and in the newspaper shock stories. In the practice of literature we need not be imprisoned by our gender. If we want men to be free of their chains of masculinity, we too need to look beyond our gender identity.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. Ibid., pp.98-99.


15. Ibid., p.98.

16. Ibid., pp.131-132.

17. Ibid., p.132.

18. Ibid., pp.132-133.


20. Ibid., p.115.


24. Ibid., p.170.

25. Ibid., p.113.

26. Ibid., p.xvii.

27. Ibid., p.xviii.

28. Ibid., p.xx.

29. Ibid., p.xxxv.


The concept of 'Ardhanarishwar' was also prevalent during the rule of the Gupta dynasty in India. In *Malavikagnimitram*, the poet Kalidasa refers to Shiva as 'half-woman'. This androgynous form can be seen engraved in various dancing postures on several temples dating back to the seventh century, in Bhubaneshwar (in Orissa).

(Excerpts translated by me from *Bharatkosh*, vol.1, p.138).
41. See Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, Doubleday, NY, 2003, pp. 39-40— where the protagonist Robert Langdon speaks of the ancients who 'envisioned their world in two halves--- masculine and feminine... when male and female were balanced, there was harmony in the world. When they were unbalanced, there was chaos.'

42. T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land", (from Manju Jain ed. *Selected Poems and a Critical Reading of the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*, Oxford UP, Delhi, 1992, p.52). According to the ancient Greek myth, after having observed two snakes coupling, Teiresias (or Tiresias) killed the female and was, temporarily, turned into a woman. Queried later by Zeus and Hera as to his then well-informed opinion about which of the sexes obtains the greatest pleasures in love, he responded unhesitatingly 'the woman' and was punished by Hera with blindness but compensated by Zeus with gifts of prophecy and longevity. Thus, Teiresias, taken as an interpretive metaphor, might well serve as a primary signifier for a host of dualisms in our constructions of both art and psyche.


46. From the *Journal of the Dept. of English*, Vol.xxviii, No.2, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 2002, p.134. This is an extract from the keynote address delivered by Nabaneeta Dev Sen at a seminar entitled "Women and Literary Imagination" in 2002. In ancient Hindu mythology 'Hara' is the male power who rules over the universe, and 'Gauri' is the embodiment of all that is...
feminine and female and essentially denotes the giver of birth or the Mother figure. Dev Sen drew the parallel to emphasize on the necessity of androgyny in the perfect author.