

Exploration Of Self Through Androgynous Cyclic Nostoi: A Feminist Analysis Of Virginia Woolf's Orlando

Dr. Bushra Siddiqui¹, Dr. Tabassum Saba², Dr. Syedah Sadia Kazmi³

¹Assistant Professor University of Management and Technology, Lahore.

²Assistant Professor University of Lahore, Lahore.

³Assistant Professor University of Management and Technology, Lahore

Abstract

This research contends that androgynous identities are presented and developed in Virginia Woolf's Orlando following the feminist perspective through cyclic nostoi. Androgyny includes the characteristics associated with the manifestation of dual genders traits that are based on stereotypical images of gender and become a symbol of recognition of the assigned gender roles in a patriarchal society. The selected text, Orlando, focuses on identity transformation through androgynous cyclic nostoi. This research includes the feminist perspective which leads to the evolution of the protagonist on geo-cultural and temporal axes. The nostoi of the protagonist determines the fluidity of his gender characteristics as the West and the East both create their influence on him and develop him into androgynous identity. The selected primary text not only encompasses the socio-culturally assigned gender roles but also explores their influence on the formation of knowledge of the androgynous identities through androgynous cyclic nostoi of the novice. This research proves that androgynous mind works in a multi-dimensional way and it also gets changed due to nostoi and other influential socio-cultural patterns.

Keywords: androgyny, geo-cultural, temporal, nostoi, gender roles, feminist, socio-cultural.

Introduction

The focus of this research is to investigate the development of androgynous identities in the patriarchal society within the restricted boundaries provided to the protagonist in the selected text Orlando. The androgynous development of the protagonist focuses on the stereotypically assigned gender traits in the patriarchal Western cultural in Orlando. The research focuses on the subject of enlightenment and exploration of 'self' through androgynous cyclic nostoi of the protagonist in the selected text.

Androgyny has its etymological connection with Greek mythology as Jyoti Parakash argues that it has "its roots in classical mythology and literature" and it "comes from the Greek word andros meaning 'man' and gyne meaning 'woman'" (Prakash 119). Hence, androgyny includes the characteristics

associated with both genders that are based on societal norms, which may appear as stereotypically attached images, and also influence the conceptions of knowledge. To understand androgyny, it is essential to understand the categorical masculine and feminine stereotypical gender traits and before that the concept of sex and gender. Christine Delphy

elaborates on the concept of sex roles that they are "socially constructed rather than biologically determined" (Delphy 3). Delphy clarifies the use of the terminologies: sex as the biological construct and gender as the social construct.

Another important terminology for this research nostos is defined in literature as a journey taken up by the hero where he returns home from the adventures successfully. Anna Bonifazi demonstrates Homer's nostos which "means first and foremost "return home from

Troy by sea". It refers both: to the return itself as experienced by the Achaean heroes and to the poetic telling of that experience (481). Nostos also exemplifies Odysseus and other Greek heroes who move from their homes to travel and in the end return to their origins. Their journey completes the circle because the starting and ending points are the same. The symbolic interpretation of androgyny is also a circle that resembles nostos. The research focuses, in detail, on the androgynous cyclic nostoi of the protagonist in the selected primary text, their influence on the life of the character, and also getting initiation to discover his true self. The selected primary text captures the nostoi of the protagonist and his transformation into androgynous being. In Orlando, the androgynous nostos appears in the West–East–West direction, completing the androgynous circle. Orlando starts his expedition from the West, England, as a man, enters the Eastern borders, Turkey, and transforms into woman and finally returns to the West with the dual characteristics of both genders.

In Greek literature, the homecoming, nostos, has been an important theme to deal with the transformation of characters. While discussing nostos, Marigo Alexopoulou elaborates on the importance of painting home as it helps develop the painter's own reality and it recreates the home (1). In taking up nostos, the home remains a constant reminder with the characters while completing their journey through water or land. The homecoming journeys are enriched with different stages of initiation on an intellectual, psychological and geo-cultural level. Alexopoulou demonstrates homecoming as a popular theme which occurs with changing emphasis and expansion in the initial literary tradition (2). Furthermore, in some of the Greek plays, nostos appears as a minor theme while at some places it captures the whole drama by transforming the lives of different characters. Alexopoulou accentuates the technique of adopting nostos in different Greek tragedies and in a narrow classification of plays in Greek drama, the nostos does not seem to be incidental or one component among numerous however, it is the elementary structure of their construction. Among the other living tragedies, Aeschylus' Agamemnon,

present as a basic component of their plots (28). Due to the importance and overwhelming factor of nostos, the tragedies are named after them. Alexopoulou declares Taplin as the first person who "first traced the use of the nostos-pattern in Greek tragedy and discussed briefly which of the surviving tragedies should be called nostos-plays" (28). Alexopoulou argues that Taplin also designated certain features of nostos-plays such as the return of the hero from some expedition or mission; he may return securely to certain catastrophe at home, or it may be so that he returns from a catastrophe (28). The selected primary text of this research, exhibits the aforementioned pattern of nostos plays. The situations in the text are different but the transformation of the character comes through nostos which appears as one of the major auctorial device used by the author. Another major characteristic of the nostos device is "nostos is flexible and multiform" (Alexopoulou 28). It may be adopted for the participation of the characters in a war or for the purpose of studying abroad or any other reason to migrate from one place to the other. However, the essential element is the return of the character who adopts nostoi and the research focuses on his transformation and development.

This initiatory journey has been an essential element in all cultures, literatures and religions, carrying the meanings of the protagonist's initiation: The Epic of Gilgamesh (2100 BC), Homer's The Iliad (760 – 710 BC.), Sophocles' Oedipus Rex (429 BC), Virgil's Aeneid (29

– 19 BC), Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (1342 – 1400). It also includes the entire 18th century British literature: Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719) and Moll Flanders (1722), Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels (1726), Alfred Lord Tennyson's Ulysses (1833). The fairy tale protagonists also appear as a part of the nostos tradition: Little Red Riding Hood (10th century), Cinderella (1697), Hänsel und Gretel (1812), Snow White (1812), mythological figures

Aeschylus' Persae, and Sophocles' Trachiniae may correctly be titled as nostos-plays, since nostos is

such as Hercules or Isis and religious figures such as Sufis and also Buddha. Regardless of their age or social status, they all travelled as novices, to complete their initiatory nostoi. The initiatory journey gives enlightenment to the novice by successfully passing through different phases of initiation. Each event appears unique in itself and provides a clearer picture of the unconscious and finally, of the Self. It helps the novice to attain a greater awareness of the other,

too, lying at the opposite extremity. Initiation and knowledge, about the actual realities, come through the nostos of the novices at a micro level. In the selected primary text, the protagonist takes up circular movement journeys, encompassing double axes: geo-cultural and temporal.

During the journey, the character experiences certain stages of initiation that are elaborated in the given table:

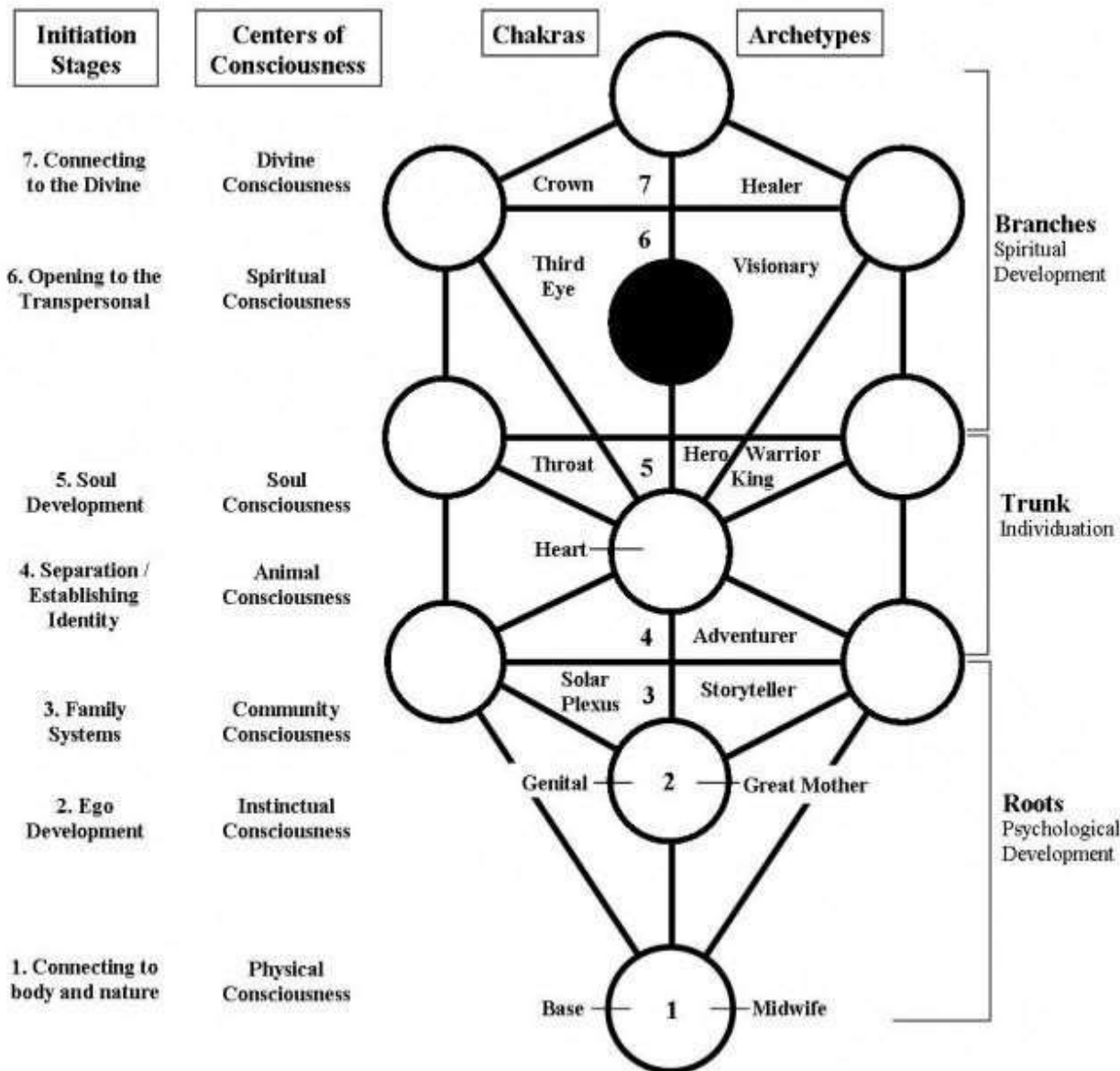


Fig.1 Wagner, Megan. "7 Stages of Initiation", Sapphire Staff: Walking the Western Mystical Way: The Ancient Path of Healing Called the Tree of Life, 2004. retrieved from http://www.meganwagner.com/personal_mastery/7stagesofinitiation/

Methodology

To investigate the androgynous identities and stereotypical gender icons, in the selected text, the researcher has utilized feminism as its foundational tool. For the (re)presentation of masculine, feminine and feminist gendered discourse, the researcher has employed the most relevant authors of the feminist literary criticism. The research focuses on Christine Delphy's

Rethinking Sex and Gender and to focus on the androgynous of identities the research

incorporates June Singer's *Androgyny: The Opposites Within*. Singer claims that maleness and femaleness must be separated first to understand their traits and "before they were separated they were bound together in one body, and that body was the Primordial androgyny" (5-6). Singer

elaborates on the significance of androgynous elements in one's being and they existed prior to the identification of masculine and feminine traits in a person. Primordial androgyny indicates the genetic presence of dual characteristics in one body, male or female. Later, according to the societal or philosophical requirements, the dual gender characteristics are categorized as masculine and feminine. In addition, the term sexuality is also important to define as "normative sexuality fortifies normative gender" (Butler 18). American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Pamela Butler elaborates on the sexual desires forming gender identity however that maybe static.

The research focuses on the descriptive critical qualitative analysis which indicates that the content and themes are under investigation. Qualitative analysis appears as a philosophical

statement that "provides a discussion of the paradigm or worldview guiding the research project" (Leavy 128). The main goal of descriptive critical research is to analyse a phenomenon and its features. Descriptive research investigates the reasons for how and why something has occurred (Nassaji 129). The critical approach focuses on "to prioritize the experiences and perspectives of those forced to the peripheries of a hierarchical social order, and they reject grand theories that disavow or erase differences" (Leavy 13). In this research, critical textual analysis is used in order to investigate the development of androgynous identities through nostoi of the characters, using feminism as its theoretical frame work. The selected text classifies the data into discrete groups and the researcher has applied this data of the selected novel in the investigation of the development of androgynous identity through nostoi. The descriptive critical study not only describes the texts rather it also critically evaluates the data through feminist mode. The research includes double layer of investigation. On the first level, it describes the surface meaning while, on the second level, it critically evaluates the text for the hidden interpretations and exploration of self.

Nostos Leading to the Exploration of Self in Orlando

The research focuses on the overlapping, androgynous nostoi of the characters and their continuously enlarged enlightenment and exploration of self with the effects on the development of androgynous identities on both temporal and geo-cultural axes. The technique of nostos was mostly used in Greek literature which is enriched with a whole matrix of its stories, poems and images that harmonized in the archaic era and even earlier (Alexopoulou 2). The hero or the protagonist used to adopt a home-coming journey which was a result of bringing a change in his life and Self. In Greek society, it was a tradition that the individual was accustomed to leave home both in wars and athletic contests. The practice of competitive exploration for achievement and glory was constant (Alexopoulou 3-4). The benefit of

nostos was to bring initiation which followed certain stages of transformation as shown in fig-1.

The first stage of consciousness, as given in the aforementioned figure, is Physical Consciousness' which is connected with body and nature. The opening sentence of Orlando introduces the realization of his gender as Woolf describes that there could be no suspicion of hissex (8). In the very beginning of the novel, Woolf clarifies his biological sex for further realization that follows certain stages of initiation. In Greek and ancient literature, nostos and initiation are treated as major themes with certain stages to help develop the life of the protagonist with knowledge of self. There are five steps that help develop the rest of the stages of initiation and that are: "Absence, Transition and Wandering, Return, Retribution and Reunion" and certain themes of the story cluster around the aforementioned five elements (Alexopoulou 10).

The second stage of initiation leads to the psychological perspective of Ego Development which leads to instinctual consciousness. In the novel, Orlando was well aware of "the distraction of sex, which hers was, and what it meant" (98) from the beginning of the story. However, he was aware of his Western traditions and felt attraction towards the East, the opposite cultural binary. He led a full life of male for thirty years and then faced a melancholic mood and finally, left for the East where he developed the egoistic patterns that remained with him for the rest of his life.

The third stage of initiation brings awareness of the existing family systems and the norms and conditions associated with them by adopting nostos. Orlando dissociates himself from the old relationships without any regret and forms newer ones. His meeting with Sasha and his involvement with her to have his own family lead to the fulfilment of the third stage. However, his relationship with Sasha also carried threat for him and he compares her with a fox for her softness and teeth of steel, that could bite savagely (25). Later, this relationship could not sustain and ended up in treachery and remorse. Alexopoulou demonstrates nostos as a journey that carries a similar, fixed pattern consisting of the stages of leaving the

home, wandering and coming back. It also consists of an era when the absent figure dissociates himself from the social stratum to which he is associated. In a nostos story, this time period is symbolized by the journey and is considered a period of transition. The transitional phase is a common fact of human life though it is very challenging to comprehend (10-11).

Orlando's realization of existing family systems leads him towards the next and fourth stage of Separation/Establishing Identity. Orlando not only gets separated from Sasha but his internal journey of Self exploration also leads him to the external journey of the exploration of the opposite cultural binary, the East. Symbolically, Orlando's journey also brings a better understanding of the Other /oppositional binary – be it the territorial boundaries or the gender ones as he/she was censuring both sexes alike (Woolf 94). Orlando starts his life, of an adventurer, in the East where his gender gets transformed from a man to a woman and she appears contented and satisfied by thanking God for being a woman. Orlando feels proud of hersex and is unable to realize which sex is more distressing, being a woman or a man (96). At another place, too, Orlando manifests her internalization of the gender traits associated with women of not possessing the formality of a man, or his passion for power rather she appears excessively tender-hearted (112). Orlando's quick acceptance of the stereotypical gender traits of the opposite sex indicates that he already possessed them but manifested them openly after his transformation. In a similar context, Delphy elaborates on the progress of the notion that both genders are liberated of both sexes, and the features of sexual situations and sex roles which are known to be socially fabricated rather than biologically constructed have grown (3).

Orlando's biological transformation, in his initiation journey, brings him to the fifth stage of awareness which focuses on 'Soul Development'. Despite his biological transformation, Orlando fundamentally reflects in a similar way as earlier (139). The consciousness of the soul and its constant patterns, represent Orlando as a warrior against the gender stereotypes of a patriarchal

society. For example, authority and positives are generally associated with men and submissiveness and negativity with women. In this regard, the French feminist philosopher, H  l  ne Cixous points out, "woman is always associated with passivity in philosophy" (64). The designation of higher ranks of the hierarchical division to men generated the oppressed, women. The categorization of men and women as superior and inferior respectively started a trend, to designate all positives for men and negatives for women, and the gender based social categorization is termed as masculine and feminine. Orlando realizes the existing gender patterns and norms in a patriarchal society and he expresses his concerns that a man looks at the world completely in the face as it were manufactured only for his usages and shaped to his liking.

Contrarily, the woman glances at it in a sidelong direction that is full of delicacy and even of suspicion (112). After the biological transformation, Orlando's androgynous being starts fighting with the masculine and feminine gendered stereotypes and manifests openly the presence of dual gender traits. At this stage, Woolf's androgynous perspective also seems to be a contest with the already existing conventional trends where males and females occupied fixed gender patterns instead of the fluid ones. The androgynous mind of Orlando examines the world and its divides constructed by the stereotypical fixed patterns of societies and perceives a new way where androgynous identities are workable and appreciated.

Orlando's initiation leads him towards the sixth stage of Opening to the Transpersonal which is also symbolic of being visionary and imparts spiritual consciousness. It is also for the first time in her life that she turns against nature with violence (162). Orlando, on her return to England as a female, starts visualizing the glimpses of the East in the West and he envisions the mountains of Turkey as well as of India and Persia (181). In literary tradition of nostos, the returning figure is an ambiguous figure since he is in a transitional phase. Once he returns to his homeland, he does not remain the same person as he used to be when he first got alienated from his environment. In a

similar situation, waiting for the absent figure may also introduce transformation to his household (Alexopoulou 7). Orlando's vision expands and she starts manifesting the binary oppositions simultaneously as she appears "uncertain whether she was alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity" (100). Orlando's openness to the transpersonal phase removes the boundaries of the binary oppositions.

After the sixth stage, there comes the culmination stage of her initiation. The seventh stage marks the Connection to the Divine which acts as a healer and Orlando gets ready to settle down in the West, her homeland. He successfully completes his journey and returns home after getting initiation. The nostos carries the theme of homecoming with the sequence of disguise and recognition (Alexopoulou 10). On her return, Orlando meets Sasha again and her wounds are healed by the realization of her pathetic plight and she is contented to start a new life as an androgynous being. Orlando's androgynous nostos starts from the West, takes him to the East, where his sex transforms and she reaches the West, completing the circular androgynous nostos, with a better understanding of the Self.

The research proves that the selected primary text, Orlando, uses the identical literary device of nostos that leads the protagonist to self-discovery. The research highlights that the protagonist adopts androgynous cyclic nostoi that helps him to have better understanding of his own self and also of others. Orlando not only starts living a better life but also helps and supports others to resolve the conflicts of their lives. The androgynous cyclic nostoi helps the protagonist to complete the circle of his life with better understanding of Self. The research focuses on the double axes, geo-cultural and temporal, as presented in the selected primary text. It also elaborates on the West-East geo-cultural axes with the androgynous nostoi of the novice on West-East-West axes by encompassing both Western and Eastern trajectories. On temporal axes, Orlando covers a time span of almost five centuries and finally, he returns to his homeland with a change in his biological sexual identity while manifesting androgynous gender traits.

The text under discussion is replete with literary mapping that makes the geographical context vibrant for the readers. The maps also make strong trajectories for the protagonist that develop and eliminate boundaries. Firstly, the protagonist feels attracted to the opposite realm and afterward he is attracted back to his own homeland with an improved and better vision of life. Orlando represents the dual, Western and Eastern, trajectories and boundaries simultaneously. With the representation of dual trajectories and dual gender traits, the research has explored the androgynous nostoi of the protagonist and their effects on the continuously enlarged enlightenment and exploration of self with the development of androgynous identity on both temporal and geo-cultural axes.

The intellectual significance of this research lies in the importance of nostos in achieving a true knowledge of the 'Self' and getting initiation and enlightenment. These are not only the cultural, literal, mythological, and religious figures that adopt nostoi to get initiation but the subjugated people, too, who may belong to any field of life, need the enlightenment for a better understanding and performance in their practical lives. The attained initiation by the figures also bestows them with the true awareness of their roots that is unconsciously nurtured in the blood waiting for the realization.

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