

Androgyny and Virginia Woolf

Shruti Sharma

Research Scholar Singhania University, Pachheri Bari (Rajasthan)

OVER VIEW

The subject of this paper being “Androgyny and Virginia Woolf”, an attempt is made to underline the nature of androgyny, particularly with reference to this much-misunderstood concept of man-woman relationship. The radical feminists have denounced this baggage of androgyny, saying that it is an inane attempt to escape the pain of feminity on the part of Virginia Woolf. This criticism mainly comes from Elaine Showalter in her *A Literature of Their Own* (1978) in which she, as it appears in the very title itself of this book, mocked Woolf. The radical feminist generally feels that Woolf is not much of a feminist because feminism in its third phase, as defined by Showalter herself, pleads for sexual difference.

There is some misunderstanding in this regard in *A Room of One's Own* in which this concept occurs. Woolf states that “it is natural for sexes to cooperate” (92) In fact there is a basic misunderstanding about the whole essay. Most feminists have not understood the spirit of *A Room of One's Own*. The book consists of six lectures delivered at Oxford/ Cambridge universities. In the course of her last lecture, she refers to an incident she happened to watch from her window: a couple getting into a cab almost involuntarily, as if by the force of attraction. She realizes that, after being divided, their minds, what, she thinks, become one, as they came together in a “natural fusion” (92) It is then she finds that one has a profound, if irrational, instinct in favour of the theory that, “the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness.” (92) The sight of two people getting into the taxi makes her ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness?” (92)

The main source of misunderstanding on the part of Showalter and her fellow radical feminists is that they have not properly appreciated what Woolf means by the unity or harmony between sexes and the satisfaction it gives. She does not deny that sexes are separate but they also come together, and this is what gives satisfaction. We feel good, as Woolf does, in all relationships when after being parted, they come together. However, she does not know how it happens; it is something unknown and therefore perhaps

unknowable. But it somehow gives happiness and satisfaction. Woolf's view of human nature is based not on causal relationship. These were her impressions, which, as she says in her essay “Modern Fiction”, fall from all sides, myriads of them, and they shape themselves, but the way they do, is not conventional or customary. Instead the accent falls, as she says, differently from the old ways. The human mind operates upon these impressions, as it wants them to conjoin. Of course there is no logical necessity for these impressions to cohere, but we like them when they do. This is our psychological necessity, that when two people harmonize, we feel happy.

This is what she experienced when a man and a woman, coming from different directions entered the cab almost as a matter of attraction. She saw it happening from her window and then the taxi glided off as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere. This sight was ordinary enough; what was strange about it was the rhythmical order with which Woolf's imagination had invested it; and the fact that “the ordinary sight of two people getting into a cab had the power to communicate something of their own seeming satisfaction.” (91) The sight of two people coming down the street and meeting at the corner seems to ease the mind of some strain, Woolf thought. But unfortunately sexes, instead of uniting, tend to create differences between themselves. In this regard the male is more to blame than the female. The male in order to claim superiority, makes the woman inferior in social status by depriving her of equal opportunity. By doing so the male ego goes against the law of nature, the law of attraction between sexes, thus establishing an unnatural relationship. Nevertheless, he also damages himself. In creative terms, he writes from a partial mind. We know Mr. Ramsay was not able to produce or do any fruitful research after this marriage, because he always tried to humiliate Mrs. Ramsay, that she could neither write nor paint. His later life thus, as Woolf finds, is spent in pitting of his sex again that of the opposite sex, claiming superiority for himself, and imputing inferiority to Mrs. Ramsay.

Androgyny is thus not a mystique. Woolf is not a metaphysician. On the other hand, she is a creative evolutionist, believes as she does, that there is a natural harmony, not only between sexes but among all things, organic or inorganic. Her vision of reality is very wide. She

asks women to become comprehensive in their vision, and not merely be confined to breeding and washing. They do not have any excuse in this regard; they should not live in enmity with reality. Creativity lies in this all-embracing vision of reality, short of which men write for men and women for women.

According to Woolf, it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of his sex. "It is fatal to be man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly." (98) Therefore to write is to be a whole mind, to write for the whole mankind. A mind which writes for the whole humanity is a mind which is incandescent, resonant and porous. Such a mind was that of Shakespeare and Coleridge. Shakespeare writes from both sides of sexes, equidistantly. He has neither grudge against one, nor any bias for the other. His mind was androgynous. It is this aspect which Woolf explores in her novels. It was a mind open to reality. It does not mean Shakespeare had no grudges but then he consumed all to emerge free of all handicaps; therefore his poetry, Woolf says, "flows from him free and unimpeded... if ever a mind was incandescent unimpeded, I thought, turning again to the book case, it was Shakespeare's mind." (54)

A survey of Woolf's novels from *The Voyage Out* to *Between the Acts*, including her feminist treatise *A Room of One's Own* show recurrence of certain themes, which are important in the writer's vision of human life, such as the isolation of human beings, the rhythmic ebb and flow of love, the impulse to find and create beauty and significance. But in the ebb and flow of love, she is equally pained to see that love is unfortunately lost. The relationship of sexes is difficult, if not impossible to be put on an even keel.

Her own life under her father's domination was not a happy one. She visualised the oppressive phantom of Leslie Stephen, who alternatively encouraged her to write and insisted on her adherence to strict standards of womanly conduct. With his death in 1904, she was freed both from the requirement of keeping his house and from the need to please him. She recognised that either of these demands would have destroyed her art. She felt that her imagination was liberated by his death.

Woolf knew that within her lay a rich harvest of feminine experience, locked and inaccessible. This, she found, was the case with all women. If a woman is able to express herself, men feel shocked. Woolf still urged upon women to look within and write. Critics have found absence of sexuality in her novels. In her writings, sexual passion becomes a masculine property, as for example, is the case with Clarissa and Mrs. Ramsay. They could not be thought of having their sexuality, because the male has killed it. There is no other way of explaining this absence, such as

her sense of purity, refinement or even renunciation. And she was perhaps happy to renounce it unless the woman in her was treated as equal. Nagged by the shade of her father, and conscious of the power of male disapproval might have developed in Woolf's mind the literary theory of androgyny, which had the effect of reminding the male that in disapproving the female, he also suffers in his creativity. Androgyny, of course, had a long history, going back to Plato, who in *Symposium* put it across, as it fitted in his philosophy of Form or Ideas, because he wanted an ideal form of sexuality, composed, of course, by its opposite genders.

Androgyny is one of the biggest and most controversial idea: whether there exist two separate and opposite genders – masculine and feminine, or whether they are one. This gender dualism and monism has been hotly debated. Gender dualism, according to the monist, is false and without any factual or scientific support: it is equally very harmful. One strategy to overcome this dualism is the idea of androgyny, by which masculinity and femininity are conceived not as opposite ends but as two which are conjoined, if they cannot be connected. It is thus that the two sexes could be considered separate and yet united.

In the light of this theory, that there is a constant conjunction of sexes. We, in brief, will examine various other theoretical positions vis-a-vis Woolf's conception of androgyny. We have already made reference to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in this regard. Critics of various persuasions, mainly psychoanalytical critics have seen Woolf's ideal state for a creative mind. But they have not been able to come up to her ideal. For example, most of them read androgyny as a balance of a union between opposites, but it is difficult for them to posit how this balance is to be achieved. Woolf's distracters, Showalter the foremost among them, traces in her androgynous relationship a sexist myth in disguise, while Julia Kristeva finds in her androgyny an insipid form of homogeneity that lacks zest and energy. However, Woolf does neither mean to avoid her femininity nor propose homogeneity without zest and energy. For her two sexes, when separated, suffer isolation, as they are cut off from their natural selves. They suffer from splitting of consciousness. It is not that the two sexes always seek oneness but if they respond spontaneously to each other's appeal, they do feel more comfortable than those which deliberately pull themselves apart.

Virginia Woolf's emphasis is obviously on what is easy and comfortable, and therefore, spontaneous. It is a different matter when sexes repress their naturalness, peace and satisfaction in not coming together. Androgyny is a state of mind in which "one could continue without effort because nothing is required to be held back." (92) Woolf's theory of androgyny is thus aimed to offer men and women a chance

to write without consciousness of their sex, realising that the attraction between the two is natural. We have already quoted Woolf in this regard. When she saw a couple getting into the taxi-cab, her mind felt as if there were a natural fusion. She used the word natural in the very next sentence, saying that the obvious reason would be "that it is natural for the sexes to co-operate." (92) In addition to the natural attraction, it gives both man and woman also the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness. Besides, it offers happiness to those, who like Virginia Woolf, watch them come together.

The foundation of Woolf's androgyny and Bloomsbury's sexual liberalism can be found in the past, beginning with the 18th century, particularly with the shift from rationalism to empiricism. This shift was significant because it brought in the reign of feeling, in place of reason; it was conducive to the view that not only our impressions cohere but we also feel happy when sexes unite. This view has the double advantage, that, as for example, when Woolf saw the union of men and women, it was not only natural for them to do so, but also provided happiness to the on-looker. In the 19th century and the early 20th century, androgyny came to be interpreted variously, with a common denomination that there is a third sex in which masculine and feminine characteristics found together in a single body. This concept of the third sex, as we have noted earlier, goes back to Plato, who, in a *Symposium* through the voice of Aristophanes wrote that the human nature was not only like the present, but different. The sexes were not as they were now, but originally three in number – the man, the woman and the union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double nature which had once a real existence but now is lost.

The word androgynous is composed of: andro (man) + gune in Greek (woman). As we have submitted, this union of opposites was part of Plato's ideal of human beings, having opposites integrated into one. Thus, following Plato, Havelock Ellis wrote that "each sex ... is latently hermaphrodite." (71) Similarly others followed suit, asserting that there are masculine and feminine element in every human being, though one sex in person is incomparably more strongly developed than the other. It was Carl Jung whose concept of Anima, that is, the female within the male, and animus, that is the male within the female was taken as the healthy balance of the two. Medically, it is also proved that a male has certain pronounced female characteristics, and he can change his sex and vice versa.

For these men of science the correct preponderance of one set of characteristics over the other leads to heterosexuality while the incorrect preponderance to homosexuality. To be an invert (Freud's term for homosexual) is still to be degenerate in the eyes of the

majority and likewise to be lesbian was equally to obnoxious in the eyes of most people. The debate on 'inverts' is endless. Woolf wished not to indulge in this controversy. In her opinion, as she put it in *A Room of One's Own*, it was an amateurish attempt to sketch a plan of the soul so as to show that in each of us two powers preside, one male and one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman and vice versa. Her purpose was not to see them eternally united, the man in woman and the woman in man. All that she wished was (and not only wished, but saw it happening) that the two live better in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. Her plan has nothing of Platonism, nor is it worked up with any psychoanalysis, whether Freudian or Jungian. Some psychologists such as Adward Carpenter visualised an ideal world in which the two sexes lived the common life in the bond of personal affection and compassion. It is assumed that the Bloomsbury group read and discussed this vision of the masculine and feminine found in hermaphrodite and homosexual. Nevertheless Woolf's proposition of androgyny is based on a common sense view.. a way of liberating the sexes to respond to each other as they have done in the past more naturally, particularly when males felt less the pull of conventions of patriarchy.

Androgyny was for Woolf and many feminist critics a way of liberating women from the negative forces placed by patriarchy on their sex. However, feminists have also offered many variations, to which we have already made some references. It is mainly because the concept of androgyny has too often escaped the grasp of critics, giving room to misconceptions, as if it were meant to avoid polarizations of sexes. Woolf's view does not seem to avoid polarization of sexes. Infact she shows sexes at war with each other. But that is perhaps not a happier situation. Nor are women in the proposed androgyny closer to it, because the woman inherits no tradition as Minow-Pinkney Makiko (60) feels. Women could be as closed as men. Clarissa chose Richard, while she loved Peter Walsh because she wanted her privacy, which she found was not possible with the latter. She is not an outsider, nor is her mind already divided into halves, similar, though not exactly akin to the androgynous ideal. When not responded to, a woman could be as adamant as Mrs. Ramsay. This is not to say that the woman is not often "surprised by a sudden splitting of consciousness... when from being the natural inheritor of that civilisation, she falls, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical." (92) The last word shows Woolf's attitude, that though the woman may find herself outside civilization, she is none the less, critical. Pinkney's view, however, is backed up by Helene Cixous who writes, "in a certain way woman is bisexual – man having trained to aim for glorious phallic monosexuality." (30) In other words, phalliccentrism keeps

man homogenous, leaving women, as outsiders to develop heterogeneously. Jane Marcus clearly states her view that Woolf has leant on the heterogeneity of the female in her theorizing, calling women a "collective sublime", while men, trained to aim at glorious phallic homosexuality, are trapped in an 'egotistical sublime.' (10) Marcus's construction of the male and female are respectively Jungian and Freudian.

There are numerous other critics of Woolf's androgyny who allege that androgyny offers a design for the mind which subsumes female into the male. Thus androgyny which appears as liberation actually achieves the opposite result. Similarly, it is said that the concept of androgyny is a male ideal of wholeness that, by subsuming the feminine, obviates the need for interaction with the actual woman – a way to avoid confrontation with the male by the female. It is therefore self-destructive. According to Julia Kristeva, "the androgyny does not love, he admires himself in an another androgyny and sees only himself, rounded, faultless, other less.." (367) While androgyny has come to be seen by some feminists as male centred, others have seen it as female centered. There is a third set of opinion that Woolf implies in androgyny the forgetfulness of sex – a way of thinking that would enable women and by implication men to write as themselves, still in a sexed body, but without the attendant prejudices and discriminations that are connected to the body by society. To write without consciousness of sex is to see the piece of work for itself not as its author. To be successful the mind must possess an ignorance of sex.

This view is closer to that of Woolf who in *A Room of One's Own* writes that the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire work that is in him, must be incandescent. For Woolf the enemy of androgynous thinking, that is, of creative thinking, in all fields of human enterprise, is the mind fully aware of his or her sex. It could be due to the age as for example the Victorian age or it could be just the male ego. Creativity, according to Woolf should have both a mother and a father. It is as simple as that. The woman is not the only sufferer in this regard; the male also becomes the victim of a separate mind. Woolf leaves the reader in no doubt that the androgynous mind is the creative ideal, but what makes a text as the production of an androgynous mind? How do women avoid writing as women constructed by patriarchy, as for example Charlotte Bronte or George Eliot? How do men prevent themselves from writing from a separate mind, pompous and egotistical about themselves? Woolf's critics have advanced their views against her because of their misunderstanding. According to Woolf the coming of sexes together should be as natural as the "smooth gliding of sentence after sentence." (36) Woolf seeks similar gliding moments in all human relations,

as for example when at the end of Mrs. Dalloway, Richard and Elizabeth glide towards each other as if drawn by some force; Mrs. Rossester then says: "what does the brain matter compared with the heart?" (207) There is a similar spontaneous coming of Mr. Ramsay and James together, the father and the son. Androgyny is not in Virginia Woolf a relationship between man and woman but also between the whole circumambient universe. At the end of *A Room of One's Own* too, Woolf enjoins upon women to live 'the common life', which according to her, "is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think..." (109) A little later, she again asks women not to shut out the view, further imploring them, 'if we face the fact, for it is the fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down.'" (108)

Androgyny is thus a significant conception of our relationship to what Virginia Woolf calls 'reality', born out of facts but extendable to their possibility. As a writer, we have, according to Woolf "the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality." (104) It is the writer's business "to find it and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us." (104) A slightly earlier she questions the narrow conception of reality. It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable – "now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun, it lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying." (104) So when Woolf asks women to earn money and have a room of their own, she asks them "to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life.." (105) Such is the vaster conception of reality that Woolf wants women to relate themselves to, and not merely to men and women. Most of the controversy regarding androgyny is because we have narrowed it down to merely man-woman relationship. In order to relate ourselves to it, we need to have intuition, rather than be slaves to intellect. Woolf's emphasis on creativity is again based on vital impulse. The correct approach to reality of this denomination is a ceaseless flow of consciousness, which is not to be gained through anything like reflective thinking, but through intuition that is immediate perception, that women should broaden their outlook. They should go for higher education, and just not be satisfied that they have "borne and bred and washed and taught, perhaps to the age of six or seven years..." (106) They should be up and doing. They have no excuse for not having an excess to higher education. There have been at least two colleges for women in England since the year 1866; that after the year 1880, a married woman was

allowed by law to possess her own property. These figures Woolf supplies only to encourage women that they should not shut themselves in, nor should they seek males' protection, for they have to go alone and that their relation to the world of reality is not confined to men and women but to the whole sisterhood in the past. They owe it to themselves to wake up and realize themselves, for this, they have to look within, and to understand themselves, and see that their life, their inner life is not spatial. As Woolf would say, inner life is not in space at all, but in time, in flowing time – not the clock-time but that of duration. Her novels confirm that androgyny is a creative view of life, not subject to scientific laws of causation. So when she argues for androgyny she posits this inner life of duration, wherein “the mind is always altering this focus and bringing the world into different prospective.” (92) Woolf's emphasis is, therefore, on continuing efforts on the part of the women but these efforts should be so spontaneous that through them the mind remains unimpeded. Such minds alone come together in a natural fusion. This is what she saw happening from her window when the couple got into the taxi cab. She felt happy that after being divided, the couple had come together again in a natural fusion. The obvious reason she finds would be that it is natural for the sexes to co-operate. The writing that comes to such mind as that of Shakespeare is not sexless writing. Preserving the differences between the sexes may not be an important part of the creative process. Minds feel divided only when they become slaves to intellect, when they refuse to flow. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay do not make an androgynous whole simply because they are the embodiment of patriarchal binary thought and are conveniently married. Woolf seems to propose a creative evolution akin to that of Henri Bergson. In the flowing current of life, Woolf does not see any cracks and joints, except when intellect predominates life and divides it into compartments as William James also does in his conception of the stream of consciousness.

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