

2022

VIRGINIA WOOLF: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AS A WOMAN

م.د. محمود حسن زغير
المديرية العامة لتربية الرصافة الثالثة, mahmood.hasan@dr.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/midad>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

2022) (زغير, م.د. محمود حسن) "VIRGINIA WOOLF: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AS A WOMAN," *Midad AL-Adab Refereed Quarterly Journal*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 22.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/midad/vol26/iss1/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Arab Journals Platform. It has been accepted for inclusion in Midad AL-Adab Refereed Quarterly Journal by an authorized editor. The journal is hosted on [Digital Commons](#), an Elsevier platform. For more information, please contact rakan@aarj.edu.jo, marah@aarj.edu.jo, u.murad@aarj.edu.jo.

فـيرجـينـيا وولـف: البـحث عـن الهـويـة كـأمرأة

م.د. محمود حسن زغير
ثانوية العباقرة للطلبة المتفوقين. المديرية العامة لتربية
الرصافة الثالثة, وزارة التربية.
mahmood.hasan@dr.com

VIRGINIA WOOLF: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AS A WOMAN

Mahmood Hasan Zghair Al-khazaali.
Geniuses High School for Outstanding Students. The General
Directorate of Education-Al-Rusafa the Third. Ministry of
Education
mahmood.hasan@dr.com

المستخلص

تحاولُ الدراسةُ الحاليةُ جعلَ القراءةِ لفيرجينيا وولف محورا للبحث عن هوية المرأة وعلاقتها بكتابتها. يُقدّم القرن العشرون سيناريو قويا للانعكاسات الجمالية والنقدية من خلال تعزيز العلاقات بين المؤلفين على مرّ السنين السابقة أكثر من أيّ وقتٍ مضى والتي لم يتم تقديمها فقط في النصوص الأدبية ولكنها تظهر أيضا هدفا للتحليل النظري في العديد من المقالات في ذلك الوقت. قد يكون هذا التركيز على التناسق بسبب أزمة الهوية التي تمرّ بها هذه الفترة. هناك تجزئة قوية لإدراك العالم، وتفكك الهوية بسبب ظواهر مختلفة من بينها ظهور التحليل النفسي مع اقتراحه بالتزود بمستوى من الوعي وآخر من اللاوعي، والحرب العالمية الأولى التي تسببت بخسارة فادحة للخيال، خاصة للإنسان الحديث. وهكذا، يسود القرن موجة حيرة قوية. تحاول وولف حلّ مشكلة هويتها من خلال التقليد (تحويل هويته المفقودة على الكاتب المختار كـ "الأب")، أو الانتقاص، أو المحاكاة الساخرة (والتي ستشمل كلا العمليتين). إنّ الوجود القوي لـ "أنا" الذي ميز وجهة النظر الرومانسية حلّ محلّه اللا شخصية التي من خلالها يسعى وولف ككاتب إلى إفراغ الذات التي تسمح له بأن يكون كل شيء آخر، محاولاً أن يجد هناك الهوية التي يشعر بها بالضيق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية الذاتية، والنظرة الذاتية، والإحالة الذاتية، الشخصية الفارقة، فيرجينيا وولف

Abstract

The present paper tries to make a reading of Virginia Woolf as an axis of the search for the identity of a woman and its relation with her writing. The twentieth century presents a strong scenario of aesthetic and critical reflections through the relationships between the authors over the years are strengthened more than ever, which are not only presented in the literary texts but also appear as an object of theoretical analysis in many essays of the time. The emphasis on intertextualities may be due, in part, to the identity crisis that the period is going through. There is a strong fragmentation of the perception of the world, a fragmentation of identity because of different phenomena among which are the emergence of psychoanalysis, with its proposal of being provided with a level of consciousness and another of unconsciousness; and the First World War that generates a strong loss of illusions, especially to the modern man. Thus, the century reigns a strong wave of bewilderment. Woolf tries to solve her identity problem through imitation (turning his missing identity on the writer chosen as "father"), detraction or parody which will include both processes. The strong presence of the "I" that characterized the romantic point of view is replaced by impersonality by which Woolf as the writer who seeks an emptying of the self that allows him to be everything else, trying to find there the identity that feels fugitive.

Keywords: Identity, Integrity, Androgynous, Super-Personality, Virginia Woolf

I. Introduction:

The modern woman has more complex problem. Together with the confusion and fragmentation of the perception that she shares with the man, she has a series of extra problems due to her status as a woman. Her company is not to recover a lost identity but to seek and forge her true and unknown identity. This search will be closely linked to the search for her place as a writer. Writing will be one of the means to find its essence but also the search for her place as a woman in society will facilitate the encounter with her self-writer.

This paper will attempt to read Virginia Woolf through her search for identity as a woman and as a writer. It will be very important to take into account marked tendency to establish dualities, pairs of opposites that only through a harmonious cooperation relationship can they establish an ideal and full state. In the first place, the vision of women as a composite unit, a woman that must be thought poetically and prosaically.

Later, the relationship that women establish with writing will be analyzed. The material and immaterial difficulties presented to it, taking into account the patriarchal system on which society and culture are based and, therefore, the material of this art: language. Finally, the idea that Virginia Woolf presents as *Androginia*, a kind of harmonious marriage between the sexes, will be presented. The *Androgynous mind* is considered the ideal state of the writer where female and male components are found, the proportion between them will determine the predominant sex without this meaning the exclusion of the other. Right here we will expose the way in which Woolf extends this concept beyond sex to transport it, in her works of fiction, to other elements that are supposed to be contrary.

I.1. Women As a Composite Unit

For Woolf, women are composite beings that must be read poetically and prosaically at the same time. They occupy a central place in literature and a peripheral place in reality. The characteristics that carries within the one plane differ completely from those that correspond to it in the other. Thus, according to Woolf:

In the field of imagination, it is of great importance; in the field of practice, it is completely insignificant. It occupies poetry from end to end; it is little less than absent in history. In fiction, it dominates the life of kings and conquerors; in fact she was the slave of any young woman whose parents forced her to put on the ring. Some of the most inspired words, some of the deepest thoughts in literature come from her lips; in real life, she barely knew read, barely knew how to write, and was owned by her husband ¹

women in fiction appear endowed with strong personalities, their character are many times superior to that of men and the roles they occupy in real life are often inverted in fiction. This image of the poetic woman must be contrasted with the prosaic woman: the woman beaten, married not by affection but by family greed, the woman without education, without her own opinion, without belongings, without freedom. To give it life, according to Woolf, one has to think poetically and prosaically at the same time. However, this is very difficult if you want to think about the woman of the past. History has no place for her:

The middle-class woman, with nothing but intelligence and character within her reach, could in no way have participated in any of the great movements that, together, formed the vision that the historian has of the past. Nor will we find her in any collection of anecdotes. Aubrey hardly mentions her. She never

writes her own biography and hardly keeps a personal diary; we only have a handful of letters.²

In any case, that is possible to think that even if imagine is possible to reconstruct her real life and think the woman together with her poetic image, the true essence of women will not be discovered since both are nothing more than images created or "governed" by the masculine mind.

The woman of fiction is the construction of man, she is an idealization, she is also a woman created and manipulated by the mind of a male writer. In this sense Christina Rossetti writes: "my love was long/, And yours one moment seemed to wax more strong/; I loved and guessed at you/, you construed me And loved me for what might or might not be/ Nay, weights and measures do us both a wrong"³. Man's love for women seems to be built through his own creation, his poetics and his idealization rather than for what the woman is in herself. Also, the woman of reality is, in part, the construction of man. She is inserted in a patriarchal system that directs all spheres of her daily life, within the family she obeys her father and brother, later, and she dedicates her life to her husband who touches her in violation.

Therefore, a woman does not have her own voice in the literature that idealizes her or has an opinion in the world she inhabits. We must undertake a long and complex search for identity to be able to define, find, locate. Literature can be a searching path but it is also a hard road as long as it is part of a patriarchal culture, governed by a tradition and a system of rules outside the feminine sex. The woman writer must face a double search: that is characteristic of her status as a woman, that will lead her to define her place in society, and corresponds to her as an artist such a search is for her own forms and her own management of language.

1.2. Women and Writing

According to Woolf, women have not been able to write because they have been busy bringing children into the world, if they still decide to face the difficult circumstances of life and dedicate themselves to writing, they will be forced to face both material and immaterial difficulties. Woolf solves the material difficulties by postulating the need for their own room and five hundred pounds a year, so that she can have privacy and independence on the one hand much more complex are the immaterial difficulties:, the hostility of the world , the use of a material that is alien to it and the lack of tradition on the other.

1.2.1. Material Difficulties

According to Woolf, the backbone of the writer is integrity to achieve this integrity, the writer's mind must be free from distractions and pressures at the time of creation. This intellectual freedom, according to Woolf, is closely linked to material issues: *"Intellectual freedom depends on material things. Poetry depends on intellectual freedom"*⁴. It introduces a class problem, denies the theory that the poetic genius blows where he wants to postulate that the poor poet has neither had nor had more chances than a dog. And here the woman comes back since:

... women have always been poor, not for two hundred years only, but since the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the children of the Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had more chances that a dog write poetry.⁵

Thus, the first step in the search for identity, so that this search can be undertaken freely, is economic independence and privacy, or what is the same: a quarter of its own and five hundred pounds a year.

1.2.2. Immaterial Difficulties

The indifference of men toward women and their domination against them lead them to strange feelings in the whole world that asserted by Woolf:

The indifference of the world, which Keats, Flaubert and other men of genius have found so difficult to bear was in their case not indifference, but hostility. The world did not tell the woman, as he said to men: "Write, if you want; I don't care. "The world told him, with a laugh: "Write? What do you want to write for? ⁶

This hostility does not only come from the outside world. The domination of men is already in the same consciousness of women. This carries within it the repression, limitations and the feeling of inferiority that man laid as the basis of social life. Thus, imagining a young writer at the time of creation, Woolf writes:

The young woman would let her imagination roam freely through all the reefs, through all the anfractuositities of the universe submerged in the deep waters of the unconscious.

Then came the experience ... His imagination set in motion. (...) And suddenly there was a rumble, an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination.....

I had hit something hard. The young woman woke up from her sleep in a state of unbearable anguish. Said without images: I had thought of something, something referring to the body and passions that is considered sickly if expressed by women. The men, reason recommended, would be shocked. The idea of what the men of a woman who would tell the truth about her passions would wake her up from her unconsciousness as an artist. I couldn't keep writing .⁷

In the same way that the social and cultural order is managed through masculine values, language is also filled with connotations of this patriarchal world. Thus, added to this double repression (of the world towards her and from her towards herself) the woman writer is working with a material full of connotations, with forms and senses that reproduce the values and forms of masculine thought and expression.

According to Monique Wittig, this woman feels dissociated⁸. On the one hand, one has to use an alien language, insert her/him in a culture that is not her/his, at the same time, she is are holding a struggle that tries to break with that same patriarchal culture. The truth is that the woman writer often feels that language is impotent to express her experiences. In Flush: Miss Barrett once exclaimed after a morning of intense work: "Write, write, write! "Perhaps you would think: After all, do all the words say it?

Can words express something? Will they not, on the contrary, destroy symbols too subtle for her?"⁹

For Woolf, female experiences differ from the male ones, therefore they need different forms of expression. It is here that the problem of lack of tradition appears. The woman writer has no tradition, has no models that serve as a reference, has no ancestors with which to dialogue. If the woman wishes to write she must forge her own family tree: "Without a doubt, freedom and fullness of expression being an essential part of art, that lack of tradition, that lack and impropriety of instruments, had to greatly affect the work of women."¹⁰

As a result of this lack of tradition, Woolf observes that the writer takes two opposite paths: she tries to copy exactly the masculine forms or strives to differentiate herself completely from them, reaching, in both cases, a happy ending. In this respect,

It is useless to go to the great male writers for help, no matter how much we turn to them for pleasure ... they have never helped a woman so far, although she may have learned some tricks from them and adapted them to use them. The weight, rhythm and quietness of the male mind are too different from yours to allow you to copy anything substantial from there.¹¹

A woman who writes as a man fails to release what she has inside, the masculine forms are unable to communicate their experiences. Nor do those women who try to differentiate themselves completely from them. These women write with resentment, with indignation. They write thinking about their sex and denouncing and criticizing the opposite sex.

It is fatal for a woman to add the slightest accent to a complaint; defend, even with justice, a cause; Talk consciously as a woman about anything. And "fatal" is not a rhetorical figure; because anything written with that conscious predisposition is doomed to die.¹²

This awareness of sex causes, according to Woolf, the tension in the mind and distracts women from their true objective: to find their true essence, their true identity. The woman must find her style, her identity as a writer. The woman must forge her own tradition, she must find a state of harmony within her so that, later, she can write liberated from that state of tension.

1.4. The Androgynia Mind

Woolf proposes an ideal state of being that calls androgynous mind. This implies the existence of two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes of the body. These elements are not antagonistic but are united in perfect harmony to give rise to the true state of fullness. In a room of his own he elaborates a scheme of the soul conjecturing that:

... in each of us they preside over two powers, one masculine and the other feminine; in the brain of the man, the male prevails over the woman, and in the brain of the woman, the woman predominates over the male. The normal state and comfortable is the one in which the two coexist in harmony, cooperating spiritually. In the male, the female part of his brain has to have influence; and the woman must also have a deal with the man in her. Perhaps that was what she meant Coleridge when he said that great minds are androgynous. When this fusion occurs, the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. It is possible that a purely masculine mind cannot create, just like a purely feminine mind.¹³

Woolf gives Shakespeare an example of an androgynous mind since he considers that he had the most propitious state of mind for poetry that ever existed. If he really managed to free all his work, it was thanks to his free and incandescent mind. The twentieth century marks more than ever gender awareness and hinders the formation of this ideal state of androgyny the sexes present themselves as two confronted sides: modern women fight for their rights, frustrated and angry at their limited experience. Modern men have lost their illusions after the First World War and feel challenged by the feminist conquest of the right to vote. Thus, many choose to write only with the male part of their mind. They protest against the equality of the other sex reaffirming their own superiority, their texts are full of the letter "I". Women cannot find there the source of life or the emotions they found in the writers that combined both parts of their mind: "It is not only that they celebrate masculine virtues, reaffirm masculine values and describe the world of men, but that the emotion that permeates those books is incomprehensible to women."¹⁴

The idea of androgyny thus contributes to the solution of the problems of the woman writer while explaining the reason for women's dissatisfaction when reading the literature of some modern writers: their writing is unilateral, they write only with their appearance male. In order for the art of creation to be expressed with absolute fullness, a marriage of opposites must be consummated in the writer's mind. This marriage of opposites will manifest itself in the works of Virginia Woolf's fiction but no longer referring exclusively to the sexual, but also extending to other pairs of opposites.

In *Flush* presents a very deep relationship between Miss Barrett and his dog (Flush) where the dividing line between the human and the animal is seen disappearing at times. Flush and Miss Barrett appear as splittings of the same mold, as if each was completing what the other lacks. Different elements appear that make them feel different: she talks, he doesn't. She is a woman; He a dog. Later Mr. Browning's staging also generates some distance between them. However, none of these factors can alter what they feel so natural when they look at each other:

They surprised each other. Mrs. Barrett had very dense ringlets hanging on both sides of her face; her big eyes gleamed and her mouth, big, smiled. On both sides of Flush's face hung her thickets and long ears, the eyes also had large and bright, and the mouth, very wide. There was a certain resemblance between them. When looking at each other, he thought the following: There I am ... and then each thought: But, What a difference! (...) Both faces seemed to come from the same mold, and having been unfolded later, would it be possible for each to complete what was latent in the other? (...) Thus, united closely, and immensely separated, were contemplated.¹⁵

Flush's hatred for Mr. Browning is later transformed into love, also dissolving the boundary between these two feelings: "*Mr. Browning was Miss. Barrett ... Miss. Barrett was Mr. Browning; love is hate and the hate is love*"¹⁶. Thus, he goes from being his enemy to being his friend by identifying him with his mistress. Towards the end of the story, when Flush's death takes place, two more dualities appear: life and death; and the mobile next to the immobile. (Mrs. Barrett had already married Mr. Browning becoming Mrs. Browning):

Mrs. Browning continued reading. Then, she looked back at Flush. But he was not looking at her anymore. An extraordinary change had taken place in him." Flush! "- exclaimed Mrs.

Browning-. But he did not answer. He had been alive, now he was dead. The lounge table - that was weird - remained absolutely still.¹⁷

Herbert Marder, in making an analysis of this idea of androgyny in the works of Virginia Woolf, writes:

The feeling of conflict and the search for liberation through the marriage of opposites remain a constant factor, but the dramas themselves take place at different levels.¹⁸

This ideal of conquering a harmonious state through the reconciliation of opposites applies both socially, in the search for a dynamic balance between the two halves of humanity; as at the individual level, the search for an individual balance that generates an internal harmony. Through the idea of androgyny, Virginia Woolf reconciles both her desire for a social regeneration to take place, as well as an individual regeneration. Through this utopian conquest, women would find their place in society as much as their place in literature and in art as a whole.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf starts from the problems that are established between women and literature to extend, from there, to a more comprehensive level: the problems of women within society. These two levels are closely linked since the search for identity as a writer implies the search for identity as an individual and as a member of society. From her ideal of the androgynous mind, she proposes a solution that encompasses each of these planes, the individual's internal harmony; harmony as a writer, since it supposes a mind without tensions that allow the creative force to be released; and harmony between the two parts of humanity.

This utopian ideal of the androgynous mind starts from discovering the feminine values where they differ from the masculine ones to later move on to the dissolution of gender consciousness. Although they have different characteristics, they are not exclusive. In this theory, both men and women, possess elements of both natures, the only thing that varies is the proportion in which they are. Thus, one might think that this relationship with the world that Woolf poses would no longer be a relationship with a world of men and women as opposing sides, but as men and women from the same mold and later split. Like Miss Barrett and Flush, these would be "closely united and immensely divided"¹⁹.

Notes:

- 1- Woolf, Virginia, "A Room of its Own", *A Room of its Own and Other Essays*, page. 61/62. Buenos Aires, A-Z Editor, 1993.
- 2- Ibid-63.
- 3- Packer, L. M. (Trans.). (1963). *Christina Rossetti*. page.228 .
- 4- Woolf, "A Room of its Own", page 138. Buenos Aires, A-Z Editor, 1993.
- 5- Ibid
- 6- Ibid-72.

- 7- Forrester, Viviane. *Virginia Woolf: The Absurd vice*, page. 62. Spain, Overseas Editors, 1981.
- 8- Ibid
- 9- Woolf, *Flush*: page 34. Argentina, New Century Editions, 1995.
- 10- Woolf , "A room of its Own". 101.
- 11- Ibid -100
- 12- Ibid 133/134.
- 13- Ibid 126.
- 14- Ibid 131.
- 15- Woolf, *Flush*, page. 23.
- 16- Ibid 58.
- 17- Ibid 126/127.
- 18- Marder, [Herbert](#) . (1968). *Feminism & Art; A Study of Virginia Woolf*. University of Chicago Press . p129.
- 19- Berman, J. *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Page. 164. (1st ed.). 2019.

Bibliography:

- Berman, J. *A Companion to Virginia Woolf (Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture)* (1st ed.). Wiley-Blackwell. 2019.Print.
- Engler, B. *Personality Theories: An Introduction*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009. Print.
- Forrester, Viviane. *Virginia Woolf: The Absurd Vice*. Spain, Overseas Editors, 1981.Print.
- Marder, Herbert. *Feminism and Art: A study on Virginia Woolf*, Feminist Grandstand, Debate Editorial Feather. 1968.Print.
- Packer, L. M. (Trans.). *Christina Rossetti*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1963.Print.
- Rossetti, Christina, "Monna Innominata", Translation by Laura Cerrato for the Chair of English Literature at the U.B.A., Buenos Aires.2000.Print.
- Woolf, Virginia, "A Room of its Own" in *A Room of its Own and Other Essays*. Buenos Aires, A-Z Editors, 1993.Print.
- , *Flush*. Argentina, New Century Editions, 1995. Print.
- Wright, E. *Feminism and psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell,1992. Print.