

Chapter 14

Gender Roles Portrayed in *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*

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ABSTRACT

*Virginia Woolf has raised her voice through her works on the challenges of women and freedom of thought. This chapter focuses on the gender roles as portrayed in the works of Virginia Woolf, focusing on *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*. She states through *A Room of One's Own* that the strongest creative minds are the ones with the balance between masculine and feminine components, and through *Orlando*, she presents the idea of gender through an androgynous view, using a character who changes genders in their lifetime of 300 years. The theoretical focus of the chapter will be through Judith Butler's theory on gender, which relies on the action of gender interconnected with the identity of the person. The chapter will aim to present the idea of gender representation through a broader view for achieving wider acceptance for different gender identities.*

INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf often focuses on gender and its roles, and the challenges of a woman. She is undoubtedly one of the famous writers of the modernist era who wrote about women and their struggles in her works. Her feminist theory revolves around the need for freedom in every field for women. She states that the rights given to men in the fields of employment, wages, and education should be given to women as well

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(Koç, 2015). Her use of fiction to illustrate her point by using Judith Shakespeare brings focus on the need to redefine gender roles (Benthin, 2008)). She emphasises on how nascent talent and creativity will not develop until they are sculpted in adequate conditions (Koç, 2015). She mourns for the loss of geniuses due to the lower position given to women in the society.

Furthermore, it can be seen that her works not only reflect on the gender roles constructed by the society, but also that it creates a constant effort to effectively shape the rules and identity a woman had to go by in the Victorian era (Benthin, 2008). The Victorian woman was seen as an ideal woman, often staying mostly in the homes rather than being in the public spheres, where the majority of women have given themselves to their husbands and believe that they are inferior to men; hence their marriage becomes a major goal in life (Benthin, 2008). Education that women received was majorly centred towards domestic goals and housework, preparing them more towards marriage than their individual lives. This lack of freedom and individualism affected women massively.

While *A Room of One's Own* is a semi autobiography of Woolf's life and perspective over the roles women has to play in the Victorian society, *Orlando* focuses on a character who has been living for 300 years and changing genders throughout their long lifetime. These works present the idea of freedom, personal or artistic. Woolf preferred to create a character who possessed characteristics and secrets from both sexes, a "dual personality" (Knopp, 1988, p. 30) which she believes as the way to achieve the ultimate state of creativity. The idea of androgyny presented in both of these works shows Woolf's way of liberation from the patriarchal society.

Woolf uses her works to reflect the issues of gender roles, identity and begins to construct the idea of gender as a performance rather than an internal entity (Bakhtiar & Serveh, 2019, p. 12). Gender from the perspective of Judith Butler is a norm that can never be fully internalized, the internal is a surface signification and the norms are phantasmatic, impossible to embody (Leitch, 2001, p. 2388). Butler stresses on the idea that nothing is natural, not even the sexual identities created culturally and anatomically in the society (Leitch, 2001, p. 2382). She uses this to emphasise how the gender roles have majorly highlighted the 'natural way', and she argues that there is nothing natural about this as they are social constructs. She writes-

The possibilities of gender transformation are found to be precisely in the arbitrary relation of between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a deformity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction... if gender attributes are however not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal (Butler, 1999, p. 145).

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