

The Exploration of Gender and Sexuality in  
*The Voyage Out*

菰田 真由美

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Mayumi Komoda

## Introduction

Virginia Woolf was not just a distinguished modernist writer who experimented with the method of novel writing but also an earnest seeker of truth striving to criticize traditional gender roles and challenge societal expectations. Rachel says to herself in Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), "What I want to know. . . is this: What is the truth? What's the truth of it all?" (112) while reading Ibsen. Rachel, at the age of 24, starts to explore the new world through her first voyage from England to South America. The novel evolves with her spiritual and physical agonies in her struggle to get out of her small world. It was also a maiden voyage for Virginia Woolf as a novelist at the age of 33, who had just launched her ship on the vast troubled sea in search of truth in life.

Woolf felt herself bound and crippled by the fixed social conventions of masculinity and femininity in Victorian patriarchal society, and she problematized these concepts, projecting her thought processes and ideas into her works. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes: "It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (108) and continues, "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" (108).

That is to say, for Woolf, androgyny is the ideal state of being. In *Orlando*, the protagonist, Orlando, is born male and then biologically transformed into a woman, but his inner self remains consistent and he is portrayed as an attractive character with characteristics of both sexes. The work is said to have been written as a tribute to Vita Sackville-West, an aristocrat with whom Woolf had a romantic relationship, and can be seen as an expression of the artist's own lesbian tendencies as well as of her admiration for both genders. Woolf's ideas, which are not bound by any particular gender norms, are reflected in her works in the form of lesbian characters, such as Clarissa Dalloway, the protagonist of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Miss Kilman, the tutor of Clarissa's daughter, and Lily Briscoe, the female painter in *To the Lighthouse*.

In this paper, I will examine how the problems of gender and sexuality are depicted through the ideas of each character in *The Voyage Out* tracing the process of the protagonist's gradual awakening to the self after living in a conservative world and her struggle for freedom from the perspective of the plurality of the self that lies within ourselves. Given that this is Woolf's first novel, a deeper consideration of this issue will reveal the fundamental ideas that led Woolf to become a truly unique writer differentiating her writings from the contemporary

writers of her time.

### The Gradual Awakening

Published in 1915, this first novel by Woolf traces the spiritual development of a 24-year-old girl, Rachel Vinrace. She embarks on her father's cargo ship, the *Euphrosyne*, to Santa Marina in South America. She lives a closed life in Richmond with her two unmarried aunts, but the journey allows her to reflect on herself and grow spiritually as she encounters a variety of characters. Rachel's strong emotions and her fear of interacting with others may have caused her to escape into the world of music. She ponders, "To feel anything strongly was to create an abyss between oneself and others who feel strongly perhaps but differently. It was far better to play the piano and forget all the rest" (29). It could be said that she has given up on direct interactions with others and seeks an outlet for her emotions through music. "It appeared that nobody ever said a thing they meant, or ever talked of a feeling they felt, but that was what music was for. . . Absorbed by her music she accepted her lot very complacently, blazing into indignation perhaps once a fortnight, and subsiding as she subsided now" (29). She also becomes self-conscious after meeting the glamorous socialites, Mr. and Mrs. Dalloway, and begins to feel inferior about her appearance. "In the glass she wore an expression of tense melancholy, for she had come to the depressing conclusion, since the arrival of the Dalloways, that her face was not the face she wanted, and in all probability never would be" (33). She compares herself with the beautiful Mrs. Dalloway and is intensely self-deprecating: "Rachel thought with supreme self-abasement, taking in the whole course of her life and the lives of all her friends, 'She said we lived in a world of our own. It's true. We're perfectly absurd'" (38). She is portrayed as an inexperienced woman who lacks confidence not only in her inner self but also in her outer appearance. Rachel also has an interest in Mr. Dalloway, a Member of Parliament, and sees him as someone who can show her a new world, pleading with him in her mind, "Please tell me—everything" (48). After receiving an unexpected kiss and embrace from Mr. Dalloway in her own private cabin on the ship, she is greatly shocked, but at the same time awakens to her feminine sexual consciousness. That night she has a nightmare of "a little deformed man who squatted on the floor gibbering, with long nails" (68) and is unable to sleep in fear. "[T]he horror did not go at once. She felt herself pursued, so that she got up and actually locked the door. A voice moaned for her; eyes desired her. All night long barbarian men harassed the ship; they came scuffling down the passages, and stopped to snuffle at the door" (68).

The fact that Rachel arrives in Santa Marina and is given a private room in a villa owned by her aunt Helen has a significant meaning. She needed to stay in "a room cut off from the rest of the house, large, private—a room in which she could play, read, think, defy the world, a fortress as well as a sanctuary" (112). This is precisely one of the two essential elements for women's independence that Woolf insisted on in *A Room of One's Own*: "It is necessary to

have five hundred [pounds] a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry” (109). Rachel reads Ibsen<sup>1</sup> in that private room, and asks herself “what I want to know. . . is this: what is the truth?” (112) as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. As she reads the drama, she empathizes with the female protagonist Nora, who lives in search of freedom, which implies her own awakening to self and realization of her inner desires: “she went on thinking of things that the book suggested to her, of women and life” (113). It is also symbolic of her spiritual awakening that she borrows *Cousin Bette* written by Balzac from her uncle, Mr. Ambrose in that the novel depicts the ugliness, shallowness and shameful aspects of human beings and entangled human relationships. Furthermore, Hirst sends her a copy of Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which awakens Rachel’s thirst for knowledge. She feels, “all knowledge would be hers, and the book of the world turned back to the very first page. Such was her excitement at the possibilities of knowledge now opening before her” (160) as she reads the book. On the other hand, it is worth noting that the private room for a woman as given to Rachel, could have a negative aspect of isolating a woman from the world and allowing her to shut others out as Showalter argues: “A room of one’s own is the first step toward her solution; more than an office with a typewriter, it is a symbol of psychic withdrawal, an escape from the demands of other people” (*Literature* 286).

It can be pointed out that her awakening was triggered by the synergy of her encounters with the two young men, Terrence Hewet and St. John Hirst. She ponders on “the origins of her exaltation” (160) and realizes that the two young men are the source of the exaltation. Along with the pleasure of reading which is expressed as “all life seemed to radiate; the very words of the books were steeped in radiance” (161), she gains physical pleasure of being alive or just being herself at the dance party celebrating Susan and Arthur’s engagement. People forget themselves and get lost in dancing to the piano played by Rachel. In other words, she is able to express herself through the power of music, and at the same time, she can bring people together and uplift their spirits. This joy would vividly come back to her the next day through her hearing and vision:

Her ears hummed with the tunes she had played the night before; she sang, and singing made her walk faster and faster... Faces of people she had seen last night began saying things over again or saying things differently, or among strangers in a long silk dress made it unusually exciting to stride thus alone. Hewet, Hirst, Mr. Venning, Miss Allan, the music, the light, the dark trees in the garden, the dawn, — as she walked they went surging round in her head, a tumultuous background from which the present moment, with its opportunity for doing exactly as she liked, sprung more wonderfully vivid even than the night before. (159)

She is experiencing the joy of life by freely exercising her own abilities for the first time as a woman artist. It is then that she has an epiphany when a tree<sup>2</sup> interrupts her walk. The tree

“was an ordinary tree, but to her it appeared so strange that it might have been the only tree in the world. . . Having seen a sight that would last her for a lifetime, and for a lifetime would preserve that second, the tree once more sank into the ordinary ranks of trees. . . (159-160). This epiphany is significant because it is the moment when her life actually changes from a closed, static one to an open, dynamic one. She then asks herself, “What is it to be in love?” (161). At the same time, doubt and melancholy overwhelm her. This scene represents her confused mind, and it is a true voice of her vivid life and excitement conveying her anticipation and anxiety of the unknown. In the scene that follows, she is compared to a soldier going to war, and the chapter ends, which seems to hint at the bitter “battle” she is about to encounter. It is also symbolic that she reads the lines from Gibbon, “The forests and morasses of Germany were filled with a hardy race of barbarians, who despised life when it was separated from freedom” (160) as it reveals her inner desire to live a life as an independent woman with a strong will, who does not let anyone take away her freedom.

It is quite natural that Rachel is attracted to Hewet as she begins to seek freedom and spiritual independence. The following description expresses Hewet’s honest feelings toward Rachel or what he really wants from the relationship: “I worship you, but I loathe marriage, I hate its smugness, its safety, its compromise, and the thought of you interfering in my work, hindering me; what would you answer?” (230). He has negative views about marriage because it connotes restraint to him. When he realizes that he is certainly in love with Rachel, “He instantly decided that he did not want to marry any one” (228). He envisions marriage as a concrete image. For example, “the picture of two people sitting alone over the fire; the man was reading, the woman sewing,” or “He saw a man jump up, say good-night, leave the company and hasten away with a quiet secret look of one who is stealing to certain happiness” (228) and both images are described as “very unpleasant” (228) by him. His imagination continues further as he thinks of “the worn husband and wife sitting with their children round them, very patient, tolerant, and wise. But that too, was *an unpleasant picture*” (228, emphasis added). It is very symbolic that he describes the couple he knows as “walled up in a warm firelit room” (228). On the contrary, “he began to think of unmarried people, he saw them active in an unlimited world; above all, standing on the same ground as the rest, without shelter or advantage. All the most individual and humane of his friends were bachelors and spinsters: indeed he was surprised to find that the women he most admired and knew best were unmarried women. Marriage seemed to be worse for them than it was for men” (228). For Hewet, the priority in life is freedom, not to be bound by anything. In fact, “he had left Cambridge after two terms owing to a difference with the authorities, and had then travelled and drifted” (98). In a conversation with his friend Hirst, he likens himself to a free bird: “I’m not a hen in a circle. . . I’m a dove on a tree-top” (97). That is to say, what Rachel desires corresponds to what Hewet wants to preserve in life.

Another factor that attracts Rachel to Hewet is his feminist viewpoint. He talks to Rachel

with enthusiasm, “It’s the man’s view that’s represented, you see. Think of a railway train: fifteen carriages for men who want to smoke. Doesn’t it make your blood boil? If I were a woman I’d blow some one’s brains out” (201). Hewet has an impartial perspective, free from a male-chauvinistic vision, realizing that women have been seen as inferior to men and have been forced to make sacrifices. He wonders, “what on earth the women were doing inside” and asks Rachel, “Just consider: it’s the beginning of the twentieth century, and until a few years ago no woman had ever come out by herself and said things at all” (200) and continues:

There it was going on in the background, for all those thousands of years, this curious silent unrepresented life. Of course we’re always writing about women—abusing them, jeering at them, or worshipping them; but it’s never come from women themselves. I believe we still don’t know in the least how they live, or what they feel, or what they do precisely. If one’s a man, the only confidences one gets are from young women about their love affairs. But the lives of women of forty, of unmarried women, of working women, of women who keep shops and bring up children, of women like your aunts or Mrs. Thornbury or Miss Allan—one knows nothing whatever about them. . . It’s the man’s view that’s represented. . . (200-1).

Rachel seems to be a little behind Hewet in her feminism as she replies vaguely to his question about what she thinks about women’s vote, “The vote?” (196) and decides “Not to me” (197). However, this feminist aspect of Hewet is a requisite for her partner-to-be because it guarantees women’s equal status with men and the freedom and independence she seeks. She reflects on their married life to come:

She thought how often they would quarrel in the thirty, or forty, or fifty years in which they would be living in the same house together, catching trains together, and getting annoyed because they were so different. But all this was superficial, and had nothing to do with the life that went on beneath the eyes and the mouth and the chin, for that life was *independent* of her, and *independent* of everything else. So too, although she was going to marry him and to live with him for thirty, or forty, or fifty years, and to quarrel, and to be so close to him, she was *independent* of him; she was *independent* of everything else. Nevertheless, as St. John said, it was love that made her understand this, for she had never felt this *independence*, this calm and this certainty until she fell in love with him, and perhaps this too was love. She wanted nothing else. (298, emphasis added)

It can be said that the love between Rachel and Hewet is neither conventional nor male chauvinistic, which Rachel finds quite comfortable and ideal. The importance of spiritual independence and privacy for a married woman acclaimed by Rachel has much in common with that which is emphasized by Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway* when she recounts that she made the right decision not to marry Peter, who invaded her inner sphere without reservation. “For in marriage a little licence, a little *independence* there must be between people living together

day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him” (*Dalloway* 9, emphasis added). Also, this spiritual detachment seems to be enjoyed by Helen as she is experiencing “all the comfort of solitude without its loneliness” (179) in her marital relationship. When Helen notices a change in Rachel, who gets a sudden kiss from Mr. Dalloway, and personally talks to her for the first time, she tells Rachel, “now you can go ahead and be a person on your own account” (75), encouraging her to be spiritually independent as a mature woman. That is when “The vision of her own personality, of herself as a real everlasting thing, different from anything else, unmergeable, like the sea or the wind, flashed into Rachel’s mind, and she became profoundly excited at the thought of living” (75). She cries out her awakening and reluctantly stammers with some trepidation, “I can be m-m-myself” (75). In a later scene, when she is talking intimately with Hewet, she mentions the sea and the wind, suggesting that she sees them as symbols of freedom: “I like walking in Richmond Park and singing to myself and knowing it doesn’t matter a damn to anybody. I like seeing things go on—as we saw you that night when you didn’t see us—I love the freedom of it—it’s like being the wind or the sea” (203).

### The Survival of the Androgynous

Another character worthy of consideration is Evelyn Murgatroyd, who is portrayed as a female activist. She is keen to rid society of prostitution and is interested in the “Questions that really matter to people’s lives, the White Slave Traffic, Women Suffrage, the Insurance Bill, and so on” (235). She goes so far as to say she would give all she has “in the world to help on a revolution against the Russian government, and it’s bound to come” (303). When she is asked what her scheme is by Hewet, she answers resolutely that “she was going to found a club—a club for doing things, really doing them. She became very animated, as she talked on and on, for she professed herself certain that if once twenty people—no, ten would be enough if they were keen—set about doing things instead of talking about doing them, they could abolish almost every evil that exists” (302-3). She is a healthy, vibrant woman who is eager to be actively involved in social reforms, and for these reasons, she does not want to limit her future possibilities through marriage. Looking at Arthur and Susan, a young couple who are engaged to be married, Evelyn contemplates:

she could see in each the same look of satisfaction and completion, the same calmness of manner, and the same slowness of movement. It was that slowness, that confidence, that content which she hated, she thought to herself. They moved so slowly because they were not single but double, and Susan was attached to Arthur, and Rachel to Terrence, and for the sake of this one man they had renounced all other men, and movement, and the real things of life. (303)

It is clear that she is depicted as a progressive woman who refuses to be trapped in the mold of women at the time. Actually, she turns down the proposal of marriage from Mr. Perrott, a

barrister risen from a lower class, who adores her, saying, “You see, I’m not as simple as most women. . . I think I want more. I don’t know exactly what I feel” (345). She also rejects the courtship of Raymond Oliver, while she asks Hewet if it is possible to love two people at the same time. In other words, she wants to live a free and fluid life, unbound by the formality of marriage. She continues as she talks to the pitiful Mr. Perrott, “I sometimes think I haven’t got it in me to care very much for one person only. Some one else would make you a better wife” (345), thus confusing him absolutely. This preference for fluidity in life is also evident in Rachel as Hewet is depressed by the fact as he broods on: “It seemed plain that she would never care for one person rather than another; she was quite indifferent to him; they seemed to come very near, and then they were as far apart as ever again; and her gesture as she turned away had been oddly beautiful” (203).

I would like to suggest that Evelyn is employed as an androgynous figure in the novel who has masculine characteristics. It is noteworthy that she worships Garibaldi, an Italian general who contributed to Italian unification and craves for “Fighting—revolution” (119). She also has a desire to be a man, which is explicitly confessed by herself: “How it makes one long to be a man!” This is when she hears Mr. Eliot and Mrs. Thornbury talking about “navies and armies, political parties, natives and mineral products” and concludes that “South America was [is] the country of the future” (124). She then confides her ambition to Mr. Perrott: “If I were you. . . I’d raise a troop and conquer some great territory and make it splendid” (124). Obviously, she has a desire to bring about social change and to take political leadership. She craves for these roles, which are traditionally considered male ones, which means that she has a lot of masculine elements within herself. Still, we should notice that she is described as a sufficiently attractive woman who has been proposed by as many as 10 men, which is hinted at in a conversation with Hewet (175). It is therefore reasonable to assume that Evelyn is an ideal being for Woolf with both masculine and feminine qualities. In terms of this androgynous feature, Weil’s explanation may be much to the point: “Terms such as *man* and *woman* lose any necessary relation to identity, functioning instead as conventional masks that conceal the multiple divisions of man and woman within self—as Orlando’s transformation makes apparent” (Weil 157). Also, it is important to bear in mind that Evelyn wants friendship with men without being romantically involved as she tells Hewet, “I want a friendship. . . I want to care for some one greater and nobler than I am, and if they fall in love with me it isn’t my fault; I don’t want it; I positively hate it” (177). In other words, she wants to have a comradery-like relationship with a respectable other, regardless of sexuality. Thus, it is quite reasonable that she refuses a proposal of marriage from Mr. Perrott in the end saying, “we’ll go on being friends, whatever happens. . . we’ll be great friends, won’t we?” (346) and wonders “I never see why one shouldn’t go on being friends—though some people do. And friendships do make a difference, don’t they? They are the kind of things that matter in one’s life?” (346) for which Mr. Perrott is thrown into complete confusion.



Another example of this androgynous feature can be found in Hewet. He ponders over his relationship with Rachel comparing it with the ones with other girls:

But he was not in love with her. Did love begin in that way, with the wish to go on talking? No. It always began in his case with definite physical sensations, and these were now absent, he did not even find her physically attractive. There was something, of course, unusual about her—She was young, inexperienced, and inquisitive, they had been more open with each other than was usually possible. (169)

That is, he sees Rachel as a friend to whom he can talk to freely and comfortably. And later he concludes, “it was not the love of man for woman, of Terrence[Hewet] for Rachel. Although they sat so close together, they had ceased to be little separate bodies; they had ceased to struggle and desire one another. There seemed to be peace between them. It might be love, but it was not the love of man for woman” (298). It can be said that Hewet is depicted as a person who is not constrained by what we can call normal gender norms generally allotted to each sex. In fact, Evelyn is keenly aware of this idiosyncrasy of his when she confides to Rachel that “There’s only one man here I really like. . . Terrence Hewet. One feels as if one could trust him” and continues, “I felt we really were friends after that [the talk with Hewet]. There’s something of a *woman* in him” (234, emphasis added). In this way, she concludes, “the finest men were like women” (234) verifying that androgyny is the ideal state of human being. That may be the very reason Rachel “realised with a great sense of comfort how easily she could talk to Hewet, those thorns of ragged corners which tear the surface of some relationships being smoothed away” (196). It is very natural that Hewet and Rachel agree on “an outline of the ideal education” for their future children:

their daughter should be required from infancy to gaze at a large square of cardboard, painted blue, to suggest thoughts of infinity, for women were grown too practical; and their son—he should be taught to laugh at great men, that is, at distinguished successful men, at men who wore ribands and rose to the tops of their trees. He should in no way resemble (Rachel added) St. John Hurst. (278)

In short, this couple lives up to the ideal of not being bound by conventional gender constraints. On the contrary, St. John Hurst is portrayed as a figure directly opposite to the androgynous figures. He is a young man with an outstandingly clear mind and a male-dominated mindset. As a natural matter of course, his sexist remarks infuriate Rachel which is described, “Her eyes swam with tears of rage” and exclaims “Damn that man! . . . Damn his insolence!” (141). Furthermore, he has an aversion to the female body. He pours out his heart to Hewet, “What I abhor most of all. . . is the female breast” and concludes “They’re gross, they’re absurd, they’re utterly intolerable!” (168). This may be why he cannot be happy in his life. He compares himself with Hewet and Rachel and thinks about his “isolation” (294). As he walks with the happy couple, he ponders, “These people were happy, and in some ways he

despised them for being made happy so simply, and in other ways he envied them. He was much more remarkable than they were, but he was not happy. People never liked him” and keeps on thinking, “Happiness, happiness, what was happiness? He was never happy” (294).

Miss Allan is another illustration of an androgynous character. She is “engaged in writing a short *Primer of English Literature—Beowulf to Swinburne*” (93) and during her stay at the hotel in South America “finished her book” on English literature (299). Considering that she is an independent single woman who makes her living by teaching, she is also free from fixed conventional gender norms at that time. This female figure reminds us of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, an artist who seeks freedom and immerses herself in her own creative work: “she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from the dilution. She would move the tree<sup>3</sup> rather more to the middle” (*Lighthouse* 138). It is noteworthy that Miss Allan “resemble[s] an elderly man rather than a woman” (*Voyage* 163). Both Miss Allan and Lily Briscoe can be said to be portrayed as fluid sexual figures, so to speak, who achieve self-realization through their creative activities just like Woolf herself tried to attain through her life.

The other character we can refer to as an androgynous figure is Mrs. Flushing, who is “a woman of forty perhaps, very well set up and erect, splendidly robust” (181). She is depicted as a strong woman who is opposed to the Angel in the House. She “spoke too loud. . . crossed her legs, and. . . accept[s] a cigarette that Hewet offered her” (186) as Ridley, Rachel’s uncle observes reproachfully. She is “an eccentric lady, who certainly was not pale, who looked as if she ate meat,” while her husband “would not eat meat because most animals bleed when they are killed” (181). She also “forced him[Mr. Flushing] to do all the things he most disliked” (182). Thus, we can say that in this couple, Victorian gender roles are inverted. It is noteworthy that Mrs. Flushing is also an artist who paints pictures and the act of painting “serve[s] her as speech serves others” (221). All these attributes of Mrs. Flushing signify that she is another androgynous figure in the novel. We may recall here that Mr. Dalloway is referred to as an androgynous figure by Mrs. Dalloway: “He’s a man and woman as well” (52). He is an established MP fully enjoying his life with his beautiful wife, which implies that being happy realizing oneself requires being androgynous or not being shackled by one sex or self. Hargreaves argues:

Woolf’s engagement with the ideals (and imperatives) of androgyny also constitute a decisive shift in an early twentieth century representations, moving androgyny away from its pathologized, degenerative and decadent incarnations to consolidate instead a relationship with feminism, polymorphous sexuality, writing and creative literary criticism. (Hargreaves 77)

It should be emphasized that Woolf played a pivotal role in British literature by handing over the baton to the next generation that she had received from George Eliot. Showalter confirms:

George Eliot, whose real name was Marian Evans, had played virtually every role of

Victorian gender herself. On the feminine side, as one critic observed, “she had created herself first as a daughter, then as a sister, and finally as a mother figure for countless younger men.” Yet the male pseudonym, the masculine authority she commanded as a writer, and the range of her intellectual, philosophical, and scientific interests also placed her in the role of father; in the popular imagination, she might have had, as well as have been, a wife. Eliot thus functioned in the history of the English novel as both man and woman, a hybrid with the mixed attributes the Victorians described as “man’s brain and woman’s heart.” (*Sexual Anarchy* 59-60)

In fact, Woolf was greatly influenced by George Eliot, and her devotion is evident in her letters to Lady Robert Cecil while reading her biography<sup>4</sup>:

I am reading through the whole of Gorge Eliot, in order to sum her up, once and for all. . . So far, I have only made way with her life, which is a book of the greatest fascination, and I can see already that no one else has ever known her as I know her. . . I think she is a highly feminine and attractive character—most impulsive and ill-balanced. . . and I only wish she had lived nowadays. . . It was an unfortunate thing to be the first woman of the age. But she comes very well out of it so far. (*Letters* 321-2)

The concept of androgyny could be just a starting point for Woolf to explore the human sexuality.

## Conclusion

From what has been discussed above, we could safely conclude that *The Voyage Out* can be read as the first launch of Woolf’s long journey in pursuit of the truth of human sexuality which is closely related to the happiness of each human being. By presenting a diverse range of characters and their interactions, Woolf provides a platform for contemplating the fluidity and variability of human sexuality. In *Orlando*, she attempts to explore her own sexuality reflected on the protagonist. The “biography” of this androgynous character chronicles the trajectory of the sexual fluidity or liberation from the confines of particular sexuality. The author celebrates gender diversity and fluidity of self as follows: ““Orlando?”. . . For she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand” (*Orlando* 294-5). Moreover, Woolf was proposing a conception of the self that transcends the binary opposition of male and female, as the thirty-six-year Orlando as a woman contemplates in her car:

. . . changing her selves as quickly as she drove—there was a new one at every corner—as happens when, for some unaccountable reason, the conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire, wishes to be nothing but one self. This is what some people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we

have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all. Orlando was certainly seeking this self as the reader can judge from overhearing her talk as she drove. . . (295-6)

Weil acutely points out, “Through a fantastic ability to change selves with a change of wardrobe, Orlando discovers that being a woman need not mean not being a man, or not being a number of selves yet to be discovered” (159).

Rachel’s failure in completing her ideal self-realization owing to her death can be explained that she had no way to escape from the constraints of marriage which confines her to the traditional female role of a wife and then a mother. It is symbolic that her mother died young considering that she was married to Willoughby Vinrace, who “was a great dim force in the house” and Rachel “had always taken it for granted that his point of view was just, and was absolutely more important than the life of another, and that in that scale they were of much less importance than he was” (201). Obviously, Mr. Vinrace is a typically male chauvinistic man while his wife was a submissive angel in the house. The reason why Rachel gets petrified when Hewet says he is interested in Rachel and her life “partly because [she’s] a woman” (200) is distinctly explained by Rachel: “When he said this, Rachel, who had become oblivious of anything, and had reverted to a childlike state of interest and pleasure, *lost her freedom and became self-conscious. She felt herself at once singular and under observation, as she felt with St. John Hirst*” (200, emphasis added).

We can suggest that Hewet’s embodiment of the naturalness and peacefulness of death may have unintentionally and ironically allowed Rachel to realize her escape into death. This is expressed in Hewet’s assertion when he pretends to be dead:

‘I don’t think it [to be dead] would be awful. It’s quite easy to imagine. When you go to bed to-night fold your hands so—breathe slower and slower—’ He lay back with his hands clasped upon his breast, and his eyes shut, ‘Now,’ he murmured in an even, monotonous voice, ‘I shall never, never, never move again.’ His body, lying flat among them, did for a moment suggest death. (133)

This idea of his unexpectedly but foreseeingly became a call to Rachel’s death.

It should be concluded, from what has been said above that to live in freedom and to live happily in the fullness of one’s self, it is essential to be androgynous, or to live with multiple sexuality or selves that are fluid and not confined to one. That is why Evelyn as a survivor in life refutes vehemently Hewet’s concept of death ejaculating, “it would be awful—to be dead!” (133).

It would be useful to quote from Weil, “Sexuality, like writing a biography, is a continuing process of construction and destruction that never reaches a unified end—like Orlando’s poem (157). In other words, a person like Evelyn, who lives with fluid sexuality, can live in truth and continue the never-ending search for sexuality, which is what it means to live.

In this sense, Rachel’s voyage out, which plunges her to the bottom of the ocean of death,

ends up in an abandonment of the search for the self, just as Woolf plunged herself into the River Ouse.

#### Notes

1. Ibsen proposed that women be allowed to vote in the meetings of the Scandinavian Club in Rome in the spring of 1879.
2. Achtelstetter argues "The image of the tree is in each of these [Woolf's books] closely connected with the characters' androgynous visions. . . and their growth towards androgyny" (21).
3. Here again, we can say that the image of trees associated with androgynous visions is employed by Woolf.
4. The biography, *Her Life*, was written by J. W. Cross whom George Eliot married at the age of 61 in 1880.

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