

# Occident versus Orient in Virginia Woolf' *Orlando*

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, Virginia Woolf's (1882-1941) *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) is studied from Edward Said's (1935-2003) point of view, especially, his theory of 'Orientalism,' and Homi. K. Bhabha's (1949- ) hybridity and ambivalence for the main character and the cultural events which occur for him/her. Based on Said's opinion Orientalism is essentially the notion of the West toward the East through which the Westerners come to understand, perceive and define the Orient. Through this definition of the 'Other,' the West or Europe tries to define itself. *Orlando* is a typical example of Oriental work in which Orientalism is visualized through Woolf's own observation of Constantinople and her experience of their culture and their behavior. In this way Orlando, the main character, perceives their culture and makes a comparison between his/her own culture with that of the other. Specifically, the paper concentrates on the way by which Woolf portrays Orientalism, her own Britishness, and her critical view toward the East and its exotic and foreign culture. Through representing the main character in *Orlando*, Woolf demonstrates his/her nationalistic desires which portray the superiority of the Occident over the Orient. In addition, by clarifying Orientalism, the paper indicates how Woolf realizes the distinctions between Occidental and Oriental culture, lifestyle, habits and customs and how she locates Orlando in different layers of cultural clashes to investigate those distinctions which lead to the projection of the main character regarding the superiority of Occidental culture and civilization and inferiority and backwardness of Oriental people.

**Keywords:** Occident, Orient, Orientalism, Culture, Hybridity.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the effects of Orientalist mode of thinking on one of Virginia Woolf's (1882-1941) novels. It might be an initial attempt to explore some of the complicated views of Woolf on Orientalism through comparing the cultural distinction between West and East. The main theoretical focus will be on Edward W. Said (1935-2003), and his ideas about Orientalism. The paper also represents to what extent does Woolf portray Orientalism in the novel and illustrates how her observing eyes move toward the Orient and change her perspective. The main focus is on how this observation, which is full of Oriental signs and traces, has an effect on the main character's opinion, and in what ways the novel can give the readers such effects.

Woolf is considered as one of those writers whose writings became the focus of some critics. Her *Orlando: A Biography* (1928, O) with its strange subtitle can be a good example of Oriental studies; in which she portrays the life of an aristocratic nobleman, who lives for four centuries and falls in love with Russian princess, Sasha, then leaves England for Turkey as an ambassador, transforms from a male to a female in an Oriental land, lives among gypsies' groups and finally returns home. In *Orlando*, she illustrates different dimensions of an imperial society and her own understanding of Orientalism with great tendency for her Britishness, which creates the sense of love and pride for being British.

Woolf considers the Occident and the Orient as two separated worlds which are fictionalized in *Orlando*. In general the purpose of this paper is to represent Woolf as a British nationalist who indicates England as an imagined community through comparing the cultural distinction between Occident and Orient. Woolf's confrontation with 'Other' shapes her idea towards their culture.

This novel creates a discourse which discusses the concept of Orientalism through the experiences of an English male ambassador who goes to the East and illustrates some cultural signs which are in contrast with his or her own culture. Woolf's *Orlando* can be a good example of such challenges. This paper illuminates how Woolf illustrates the ideal of Britishness through historical narration; therefore, it aims to show how Woolf praises the ideals of Britishness and England and embarrasses the other nations and non-European countries as uncivilized and inferior.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The major concern of this paper is to find the effects of Occidentalism and Orientalism in *Orlando* by Woolf; therefore, theoretical framework is mostly based on Said, and Bhabha. The main purpose of this study is to revisit Edward W. Said's methodology and its application of Orientalism. This methodological framework is indebted to a body of foundational arguments posited by postcolonial theories, such as Bhabha's and Said's.

It focuses on Britishness, as a means of superiority over the 'Others' and also dishonoring non-European nations and countries as uncivilized and inferior. Illustrating the relation between Occident and Orient as well as clarifying post-colonial and cultural studies are important aspects of this paper. According to Said in his book, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), culture refers to "(t)hose practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realm" (xii). It includes "(t)he popular stock of lore about distant parts of the world and specialized knowledge available in such learned disciplines as ethnography, historiography, philology and literary history" (ibid).

Ashcroft and Ahluwalia state, in *Edward Said*, the connection between culture and place does not mean simply connection to a nation or region, but includes "all the nuances of reassurance, fitness, belonging, association, and community, entailed in the phrase at home or in place" (40). It is in culture that we can search for the domain of meanings and ideas conveyed by the phrases belonging to or in a place. Bhabha begins to describe culture in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994) and states that:

Cultures are never unitary in themselves, not simply dualistic in the relation of self to other (...) the reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation, the place of utterance, is crossed by the difference of writing. It is this difference in the process of language that is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never mimetic and transparent. (35-6).

Bhabha's idea regarding the existence of cultural interaction between colonizers and colonized is a distinction between Bhabha and some postcolonial theorists like Said. Bhabha believes that in the process of colonialism both colonizer and colonized influence each other. He defines that this relation is a two-sided relation under the name of cultural interaction. Bhabha defines culture as "(a)n object of empirical knowledge" (34). He believes that culture is viewed as a way of life of a particular group of people. Elsewhere he defines culture as "a collection of beliefs, habits and traditions, shared by a group of people and learned by people who enter the society" (76). Culture comes to be associated, often "aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates 'Us' from 'Them,' almost always with some degree of xenophobia" (Said, 1994: 27-8).

Orientalism, as a discourse, is first described by Said, in his book *Orientalism* (1978) in which he defines it as "a school of interpretation whose material happens to be the Orient, its civilizations, peoples, and localities" (203). He defines it as a hegemonic "(w)estern approach to the Orient" (Said, 1978: 73). He explains that the Europeans used Orientalism to define themselves as the superior race compared to Orientals; thus, it is their duty to civilize the uncivilized world. Regarding power, hegemony and domination, Said writes, "(t)here are westerners and there are Orientals, the former dominate; the latter must be dominated" (ibid 36).

Said notes that Orientalism has also been used to refer to the representation of imaginary aspects of Eastern cultures by Western people. In addition, Orientalism has made it possible for the west and Westerner to dominate, colonize and reconstruct the East and Easterner. Furthermore, Said states the fact that Orient plays a crucial role in the construction of the Occidental culture as the powerful 'Other,' the western image of the Orient is different from the real Orient. The Occident has created dichotomy between the reality of the East and the notion of the "Orient." Thus non-European societies are described as uncivilized, barbaric and incapable of social and technological modernization.

Said, in *Orientalism*, puts emphasis on Occident's and Orient's relationship. He believes "(t)he relationship between the Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (1978: 5). As Jukka Jouhki states this relationship "is manifested in complex ways and in varying intensities" (25); thus, it is European's duty to civilize the uncivilized world. Said claims "the Orient was Orientalized by Westerners, not only because it was *found* to be Oriental, but also because it could be *made* Oriental" (ibid). Said defines the relationship between Western representation and knowledge on the one hand, and Western material and political power on the other hand.

The Orient “helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience” (Said, 1978: 1-2). The ambivalence of the West towards the East has a long history. This paper aims at studying the images of the ‘Other’ manifested in Orient and its counterpart in Occident. Jouhki refers to Said’s analysis which shows “the relationship between European colonialism and the intertwined discursive formations constructing the European experience of the Orientals” (32). His concern is most with Western attitudes toward Eastern people. Given his interpretation of Western attitudes toward the Orient, the inevitable conclusion is that “almost all writing on the Orient are biased, the bias being part of the Occident’s will to power over the Orient” (Graft , 48).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Orlando is a typical example of Oriental work. The fictional narrator in Orlando could be considered as the mask of a real person, Woolf herself. The main story, which has been injected into the novel, is Woolf’s own experience of East, especially Constantinople. The East remains for Woolf “the milieu in which she could locate the realization of Western sexual identity. The inner space of the Orient, (...) its women, (...) (or) its harem, (...) is the very ground upon which (a Westerner’s) identity is anchored and founded” (qtd. in Pawlowski and Eileen 133). Thus Woolf’s gaze in the novel is going to be clarified in details to achieve her concern with Orientalism and the improvement of her knowledge about Orient.

Woolf locates Orlando, the main character, in different layers of cultural clashes to indicate the diversities between Oriental and Occidental culture which lead to the projection of the main character regarding the superiority of Occidental culture and civilization and inferiority and backwardness of Oriental people. She believes the relation between Occident and Orient is an inevitable relationship. She states that “when we come to consider the question of the West & the East—then indeed—we lay down the pen, & write no more” because Orient speaks itself (qtd. in Baradaran Jamili 197).

She is proud of her noble and aristocratic culture. She signifies the British people as civilized, ordered and structured in comparison to the other people and nations which are uncivilized, disordered and barbaric. She expresses the national history of England as the construction of her Britishness and demonstrates how British culture and history construct Orlando’s identity and performance. Illustrating Occident/Orient, civilized/uncivilized, West/East, and dichotomies between West and East, which are the outcome of Woolf’s nationalistic tendency and recognition of her Britishness, in Orlando, are other purposes of this paper.

Woolf shows how main character’s personality reflects a contemporary English identity in each century although his/her English identity remains changeless. She reveals her tendency to Britain by constructing a biography of a great man (and a woman) and by portraying the history and literature of England. She indicates the relation between history and identity and emphasizes the role of the main character to maintain his/her own British identity in exotic spaces. In the process of searching for the identity, Woolf shows Orlando as a British male/female observer who preserves British national identity in every situation through centuries.

Additionally, she stresses the distinctions and differences between the East and the West by explaining Turkey as a polar opposite of England. Eastern culture is defined in contrast with its English counterpart. Woolf locates the main character, Orlando, in a land totally unlike and dissimilar to his/her motherland, in Turkey the place in which East meets West. This paper shows how Woolf uses the main character’s experience of going to exotic space as a means of perceiving the ‘Others.’ She criticizes the ‘Others’ to describe the superiority of her own British culture.

### ***Orientalism: History and Definition***

The word Orientalism was generally used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to refer to the work of the Orientalist. It is a term coined in 1978 by Edward W. Said which refers to Western perceptions of Eastern cultures and social practices. Orientalism is “a kind of western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient” (1978: 95), it is basically the notion of the West about the East. In this way Europeans used Orientalism to define themselves as the superior race compared to Orientals; therefore, it is Westerners’ duty to civilize the uncivilized world. Said states:

Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient, translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text—all of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient and finally representing it or speaking in its behalf. (Ibid 20)

In this way, Said focuses on Orientalism, and demonstrates the cultural distinctions between East and West. He declares, it is “(a)s a kind of form of thought for dealing with the foreign has typically shown altogether regrettable tendency of any knowledge based on such hard-and-fast distinctions as ‘east’ and ‘west’ to channel thought into a west or an east compartment” (ibid 46). Through Orientalism Said emphasizes the notion that the world of Orientalism is a “textual” one; knowledge about the Orient is a “second- order” one (ibid 52). In this regard he explains that the

world is divided into two halves, Orient and Occident. Said continues to write that Orient and Occident are completely relative to the place of the observer. He describes West's claim that Oriental is "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different" while Occidental is "rational, virtuous, mature and normal" (ibid 40).

### ***Orientalism in Woolf's Orlando***

Orlando was not Woolf's most famous work but rather it is the most famous Oriental work, which is written based on Woolf's own personal experiences of going to Constantinople. Woolf considers the Occident and the Orient as two separate worlds, and visualizes them in Orlando's (the man's and the woman's) reaction while encountering the Eastern culture in Constantinople. The novel portrays a male aristocrat's life and adventures which begin in sixteenth century and continues till twentieth century.

Orlando's very first description of the Orient, more precisely his first glance and impression of Constantinople encompasses this psychological process of inferiority, of 'other'-ing, of condescendence towards the 'different' Eastern urban world. Looking out of the mirror of his ambassadorial palace, he notices a blurred, mysterious city that seems unreal, and mysterious. The novel illustrates the noble Orlando who falls in love with the Russian princess, observes foreign lands, turns into a female in exotic space, lives among different groups, and consequently comes home. Orlando considers Occidental habits and culture as civilized and Orientals as uncivilized. Therefore, he/she makes prejudices about the Oriental habits and rituals:

That reminded Orlando of a scene some nights since, when he had come upon her in secret gnawing a candle end in a corner, which she had picked from the king's table; but it was tallow, and she gnawed it, was there not he thought handing her onto the ice, something rank in her, something coarse flavoured, something peasant-born. (O 30).

Orlando occurs mostly in exotic spaces rather than in homeland. As a Western ambassador when Orlando enters the Orient he concentrates on the distinctions and differences between these two separate worlds. Woolf also emphasizes the authenticity of English culture through portraying English ambassadors especially an English woman like Orlando. The Orient helps her to define the Occident and to reach a kind of self-understanding. In this way she indicates the superiority of her own culture over the 'Others'.

The main point, which Woolf in Orlando wants to indicate, is the history of culture and civilization and power of the Occident as male; in contrast with sensitivity, weakness and inferiority of the Orient as female. Thus Orlando, both as a man and a woman, experiences these two different worlds and recognizes that the relationship between these two worlds is an inevitable relation of superiority and power of the Occident over the Orient, like the relation between colonizer and colonized nations. When Orlando returns to England she discovers that it changes as centuries pass but her Britishness remains as she has been.

### ***Western Orlando versus Eastern Gypsies***

There are obvious differences between Orlando as an aristocratic and wealthy person with gypsies as backward wandering people. From early moment in the novel in confrontation with foreigners, Orlando begins to notice many differences between them with herself. Shortly after her unbelievable transformation, Orlando goes to live with the gypsies on their grounds outside of Broussa, "which was then the chief camping ground of the gipsy tribe to which Orlando had allied herself" (O 84). Among the gypsies, Orlando as a British woman is not able to understand the dominant cultural ideology in gypsies because their culture is totally different from her own British culture and is in a hybrid situation which Bhabha called it the "third space of enunciation" (45). Because Orlando as an aristocratic and noble man is grown up in England with British culture after entering Constantinople and transforming gender she is surrounded by Oriental culture; thus, her cultural ethnicity becomes somewhat hybrid.

She observes Turkish people and gypsies with their exotic culture from the point of view her Englishness. The first moment Orlando was confronted with gypsies' life she was surprised by their strange and simple lifestyle in the black tents and by their close connection to the wild land. When she met the gypsies she has found out that they are people without any history and tradition but she comes from a "civilised (sic) race" (O 87).

Among gypsies Orlando becomes depressed, because she finds that the East and Easterners cannot be intermingled with the West and Westerners. The gypsies behave as the foreign uncivilized inhabitants; whereas Orlando has her own civilized behavior. Hence Orlando considers these nations (gypsies) as marginal race. In other words, she constructs them based on her own self-understanding. The narrator explains Orlando:

who was English root and fibre, should yet exult to the depths of his heart in this wild panorama, and gaze and gaze at those passes and far heights, planning journeys there alone on foot where only the goat and shepherd had gone before; should feel a passion of affection for the bright, unseasonable flowers, love the unkempt, pariah dogs beyond even his elk hounds at home, and snuff the acrid, sharp smell of the streets eagerly into his nostrils, surprised him. (O 72)

Orlando is located within a group of gypsies and has to be confronted with their otherness on a daily basis. The wealthy, English Orlando assumes her culture's superiority to these "ignorant" and "savage" people; she insists on the fact that she stems from "an ancient and civilized race whereas these gypsies where an ignorant people" (O 88, 87). On the other hand, the gypsies are also confronted with Orlando's strange Englishness. Confronting with gypsies, Orlando quickly begins to see that she is much different from the gypsies. In fact little by little Orlando distinguishes some differences between the gypsies and herself. Orlando perceives the Gypsies in Turkey are "ignorant people, not much better than savages" (O 87). The Gypsies, with whom Orlando is newly companion, in Turkey are such people. If Constantinople is considered as home for gypsies, it might be an 'exile' for Orlando. In Orlando at first one can trace a privilege for the Western Orlando in contrast to the Eastern gypsies. The main point is to find the socio-economic differences between the gypsies and Orlando. Growing up as a nobleman, Orlando learned that wealth (big houses, nice clothes etc.) mattered in life, which is in opposite view with gypsies who live on camp grounds:

(A)n old woman making a basket, a boy skinning a sheep, would be singing or crooning contentedly at their work, when Orlando would come into the camp, fling herself down by the fire and gaze into the flames. She need not even look at them, and yet they felt, here is someone who doubts; (we make a rough-and-ready translation from the gipsy language) here is someone who does not do the thing for the sake of doing; nor looks for looking's sake; here is someone who believes neither in sheep-skin nor basket; but sees (here they looked apprehensively about the tent) something else. (O 87)

This passage proves the fact that gypsies are completely different from Orlando. This fact is making the claim that money is important in life in determining what one values. If one is wealthy, they learn to value material things such as big houses and fine clothes, such as Orlando. On the contrary, if people do not have much money, they learn to find value in other things like "milking, cheese-making," "basket-weaving, stealing, bird-snaring," and "flock of goats," such as the gypsies (O 85, 87, 89).

Orlando was confused when gypsies ask her questions about his ancestors. Sometimes, she asks them about the reasons which make them live in mountain instead of living in convenient houses, and a lot of questions like this come to Orlando's mind. When she tells them of the enormous house in which she was born and of her ancestral lineage that is five hundred years old, she senses their unease. Rustum, the oldest man of the tribe, takes her aside and tells her not to be ashamed of her background and she should not be embarrassed for having so much of what she does not need. Orlando realizes then that five hundred years of lineage is nothing to these people "whose ancestors helped build the pyramids" (O 88). Orlando is upset that she and the gypsies have such different values. For Orlando, gypsies are excellent thieves and bird-snares, simple, intuitive, and anti-materialistic. They even have a horror of pen and ink; their vocabulary is so limited that they do not have "a word for 'beautiful'" (O 85).

Such a comparison brings a kind of testing through which Orlando sees the British people, as a race, more superior than gypsies and paves the way for her to reach a kind of self-understanding. This makes her put gypsies in the margin and she comes to this conclusion that they are a nation with no civilization; thus he/she locates himself/herself in the center and a higher position. In this way, Woolf indicates the relation between Orlando's and gypsies' cultures and paves the way for understanding the distinctions between 'Us' and 'Them.' She expresses that the Occidentals' cultures and their values are superior to the Oriental ones. Indeed, she glorifies Occidental culture in comparison to the other nations.

## CONCLUSION

The paper, through Orientalism, depicts how Woolf distinguishes the cultural differences which lead to the process of Otherness. It shows the way through which she portrays the main character's confrontation with Oriental culture which leads to his/her defense of Occidental culture and the way she uses the Oriental culture to define Occidental habits and traditions. Therefore, the paper indicates the contradictory relation which exists between Occidental and Oriental cultures and paves the way for understanding the distinctions between 'Us' and 'Them.' It explains that the Occident and Occidental cultures are related to civilization whereas the Orient and Oriental cultures are associated with savagery.

Furthermore, the paper explains the way through which Woolf glorifies Occidental values and traditions and love of Britain in her main character and shows how Orlando is proud of being British, especially British noble citizen. Indeed it represents the way that the Occident/West ignores the Orient/East's history and race by showing 'Us' as civilized and upper-class and 'Them' as uncivilized and lower-class and the way through which the European generalizes the ideas about the non-European as inferior, deformed and less intelligent. It regards how Woolf signifies the Orient and 'Others' as uncivilized, deformed, crude and untrustworthy.

The paper also clarifies that the British history and identity are related to one another and that Woolf through a biography recuperates the British national history. It proves the process of Woolf's concentration on British blood and race which constitute Orlando's Britishness. She depicts that understanding of an Occidental citizen may change, but his/her British identity and love remain changeless.

It indicates the processes through which the non-Europeans are known as 'Others' and foreigners and they are "viewed racially inferior and backward" (Bakhshandeh 89). This paper also indicates the Occidental projections against the Orient and 'Others.' Woolf presents that "the natives consider the main character as an 'Other' and different phenomenon" (ibid 77). As a result of comparison between Occident and Orient, Woolf demonstrates the Occident as the progressive, ordered, civilized and the Orient and 'Others' as backward, deformed, uncivilized, and untrustworthy.

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