

Contrapuntal Travelling with Vita Sackville-West to Persia: Virginia Woolf's Orlando

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Abstract

Modern travel writing represents itself in the form of travel fictions constructing cultural, social, and somehow racial discourses in the ethnical life of various nations. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), by using intertextuality and an “ethno-methodological approach,” creates a bisexual adventurer or an in-between character, in *Orlando* (1928), in order to translate the discourse of travel through a gender analysis of the Eastern culture, customs and beauties for the Western world. Through Clifford Geertz's ethnographical and cultural studies, this paper focuses on illustrating Woolf's travelling eyes which move towards the Orient and on portraying Orlando who mirrors the transformation of women's sense of adventure in the twentieth century, extracted from the outlines of Woolf's friend, Vita Sackville-West and her experiences of travels in Persia. *Orlando* is the reflection of Woolf's telescopic view of the East reformulated by her based on ethnography. It includes the signs of her wide range of reading, particularly Sackville-West's *Passenger to Teheran* (1926), *The Land* (1926) and *Twelve Days* (1928). This travel writer loves the uncultivated nature so much that it fascinates her romantic desires; hence, she experiences and perceives the East in a romantic way by being a participant-observer of its nature or by decoding its cultural discourse. Undoubtedly, *Orlando* is part of a discourse through which Woolf, like an ethnographer, reads the traces of Orient, especially Persia, and rereads them “contrapuntally.”

Keywords: Travel, Adventure, Orient, Nature, Culture, Ethnography

1. Introduction

In *Orlando* (1928, O), as a travel fiction, Virginia Woolf highlights the impact of Eastern travel on the English female travel writers as well as the splendour and beauty of the Eastern landscapes on the spatial mapping and remapping of the female travellers' life and self, particularly Vita Sackville-West's.

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By using the technique of intertextuality, Woolf associates her travel narrative with a travel tradition and thus gives a consistent authority to her work. Through portraying a bisexual character or an in-between adventurer, Orlando, she translates the discourse of travel based on a gender analysis of the Eastern culture, its customs and beauties for the Western world. Orlando, a woman adventurer, realizes the mutual relationship between the Orient and the Occident, as a relationship of freedom, of natural beauties, of love and of domesticity.

Woolf selects an Oriental setting, Constantinople or Persia as a different space to strengthen Vita's and her own romantic desire for travel and adventure. Applying an "ethno-methodological approach," (Ashcroft et al 87), Woolf displays the different impacts on the symbolic, social and historical order. Ethno-methodology is a strategy of writing which enables Woolf to record life, culture and habits of the Oriental societies, being evidently distinct from those of the Occidental world. This style of writing helps her to describe the interesting places she visits and to record all minute incidents in her travel notes in order to illuminate the desire for travel in her work.

There are three momentous phases of travel in the structure of *Orlando*: firstly, the representation of travel abroad which refers to Orlando's ambassadorial travel to Constantinople. This adventure means her departure from the Western world and entering the Eastern world. Secondly, the signs of his/her vision and gaze create the chains of comparisons and contrasts in her mind, revealed in the form of her confrontation with the Turkish gipsies and the natural landscape of Turkey, which results in his metamorphosis, it means that a male ambassador is transformed to be a female ambassadress. Orlando's travel experience in Constantinople is a reflection of Vita's travel to Persia as well as Orlando's relationship with this new land while perceiving the 'Other.' It identifies a specific cultural and historical system of values which enable Orlando to interpret his/her knowledge of the East. At this point, Orlando recognizes not only his/her own self and culture, but also that of the 'Other.'

Thirdly, the most remarkable sign refers to the time of a traveller's return showing itself in the form of a round-trip journey of a woman-adventurer whose soul grows progressively and becomes at last more romantic in its confrontation with nature.

Every traveller may experience these three diverse phases of travel, including departure, transformation and return, and every writer of travel fiction may recreate these phases in his creative writing.

Orlando is, indeed, a biographical-ethnographical travel narrative of border crossings of space, gender and sex; it may reflect at the same time Woolf's telescopic view of the Orient. She orientalizes the women's desire for travel and textualizes her own diaries and letters, using Mary Louis Pratt's terms, by the "counterknowledge and counterhistory" (2); she also inter-textualizes the travelogues of Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962). Containing the cultural traces and polyphonic voices of many texts, *Orlando* undoubtedly includes the signs of her wide range of reading, particularly Sackville-West's *Passenger to Teheran* (1926, *PT*), *The Land* (1926) and *Twelve Days* (1928, *TD*). Both Woolf and Sackville-West love the wild or uncultivated nature so much so that it fascinates their romantic desires; hence, Woolf shows how Sackville-West experiences and perceives the East in a romantic way by reading its contrapuntal discourses or by being a participant-observer of its nature.

Orlando is part of a discourse through which Woolf—like an ethnographer—reads the Orient and rereads it "contrapuntally" (Said 1994: 59). It helps her to see her identity, or her Englishness better by virtue of interpreting the 'Others' and finding the cultural differences between self and the 'Other.' It refers to a sort of contrapuntal or polyphonic knowledge which, based on Edward Said's statement in *Orientalism*, "no longer requires application to reality," but this kind of "knowledge is what gets passed on silently, without comment from one text to another" (116).

Woolf experiences and perceives Oriental mystery and its "strangely familiar" (Pfister 484) representation in her own travel in 1906 to Turkey and re-experiences it through reading Sackville-West's *Passenger to Teheran*, which is the record of Vita's real journey to the Middle East, to Egypt, Iraq, Persia and Russia. The Orient in this paper mostly refers to both Constantinople and Persia to which Sackville-West travelled. By the visualization of Vita's journeys in *Orlando*, Woolf suggests that Vita owes her romantic sensations to her travels in Persia, recorded in her *Twelve Days*.

The myth of Orientalism imposes, as Said states in 1978, “limits upon thought about the Orient,” because an Oriental travel writing, even if in the form of a fantasy, might be “a political vision of reality” or a hyper-reality “whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar” (43) ‘us’ or the Occident and the “strangely familiar” ‘them’ or the Orient. No doubt, Sasha (the Russian Princess) is, in Roland Barthes’ words, “the *very presence*” (2001: 114-15) or the incarnation of the splendour of the East for the ambassador Orlando, a meaning transformed into a form, a signification transformed into a sign.

2. Method: Ethno-methodological and Contrapuntal Discourse

Although travel and travel writing have a long and varied history, the first traveller is not exactly known. Many groups of adventurers travel in order to acquire very complex sorts of knowledge, stories, social, political, contrapuntal, and intercultural information about the world around them. Some people travel for seeking pleasure, others for gathering knowledge to fictionalize their observations and passions in the form of imaginary writing, and some for scientific purposes. Travel writing is essentially a European and masculine mode. Barbara Korte (2000) asserts that travel writing is an attractive, but marginalized genre, particularly to women writers. Women have almost always travelled in different forms as companions to their husbands and visitors of relatives, such as Lady Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) in Constantinople, and Vita Sackville-West in Tehran. These women will gradually discover enough possibility to travel, witness, observe, narrate and describe the significant events and places of the world. The type of women’s travel writing is mostly concerned with spatial kinds of travel and with the emotional sphere, i.e., autobiography, letters and travel narratives.

Ethnography is a practice of modern travel, related to the reconstruction and representation of cultures and their various polyphonic discourses. It is organized based on direct observation of distant places, either geographically or culturally, particularly those areas far from the observer’s own country. Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) writes that what an ethnographer encounters “is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another” (10).

An ethnographer is, *de facto*, a participant-observer who participates in natives' daily lives for a long time, watches what happens, listens very carefully to what is said, and asks questions about their customs; such a traveller collects comprehensive data on various issues with which he/she as a cultural analyst is concerned.

Ethno-methodological kind of observation leads to a recognition of a particular social and cultural group. The ethnographer is a traveller who likes to stay for a long time in the host society and study the palimpsest layers of cultural codes profoundly; he tries to be a talented expert in different languages, to interpret and to decode the other societies' intercultural situations. In ethnographical decoding, a native person is the cultural figure and a traveller is the intercultural figure who encounters other cultures as the focus of his observation. Ethnographic fieldwork is concerned with showing "a cluster of disciplinary practices through which cultural worlds are represented" (Clifford 8). Its main purpose is to articulate a "deeper, *cultural* understanding" of "systematic observation and recording of data" (ibid 71). It represents, as James Clifford (1945-) writes, an "effective interlocution in at least one local language" (ibid) in a hermeneutic attention to implicit structures, hidden layers of meanings and complex webs of contrapuntal discourses of a particular culture.

Ethnography is not just a regulative practice of foreign travellers or outsiders who visit or study natives or insiders. If ethnographers act as insiders in order to focus their gaze on analyzing home, they are considered as domestic ethnographers and the branch of knowledge they use is domestic ethnography. The negotiation of identities is another essential process which depends on a set of binary opposition between home and abroad having the signs of mobility. Home or *Heimat* is the place of native, it is also the purpose of a traveller who is at home, sharing race, root, culture, sameness; and abroad is the place of a traveller, being raceless, rootless, merged in modernity and difference. Domestic ethnography, appearing in the early nineteenth century mainly among the middle-class travel writers, in Billie Melman's words, develops mostly as a "female genre," and is originally aristocratic (111). Lady Mary Montagu's *The Turkish Embassy Letters* is the prominent prototype of this genre, collected during her journey to Constantinople or Istanbul. Her letters include detailed accounts of domestic and largely feminine spaces. Vita Sackville-West's *Passenger to Teheran* and *Twelve Days* are other noteworthy examples praised and studied by Woolf while writing her travel narratives; for instance, in *Orlando*, she uses such ethnographic models of travel.

3. Vita's Travels to Persia and Orlando's Eastern Travels

Orlando, beginning in the late Elizabethan period and ending in the twentieth century, in 1928, belongs to the gigantic history of adventure, exploration, travel, and particularly travel fictions about the East. In its structure, there are many intertextual and intercultural fragments quoted from the lives and travels of Vita Sackville-West, who travelled to Persia when her husband, Harold Nicolson, was the ambassador in Tehran. The last chapter of *Orlando*, setting in the present day, initiates the modern institutionalization of travel with quotations without quotation marks from Sackville-West's poem, *The Land*. Woolf's indirect quotations from Nicolson's diplomatic letters and reports, and Sackville-West's travelogues suggest the pageant of the English travellers' history.

Travel for Vita Sackville-West "is the most private of pleasures," she describes her feeling that there "is no greater bore than the travel bore" (PT 9). From her perspective, travel "is simply a taste, not to be logically defended," it can be described in a language that appeals to the senses rather than the intellect (PT 16-17). While reading her *Passenger to Teheran*, at first sight, we can recognize that her descriptions are not necessarily the historical facts or records of the local customs or cultures, yet they reflect a world of impressions about the places she visits and their romantic effects on her. Her travelogues introduce her as a sensitive woman who approaches and explores life like an adventurer who desires to observe particularities and to be observed particularly.

Sackville-West travels throughout Europe, to Paris, Russia, Poland, and Austria with the members of her family. After her marriage, she accompanied her husband, they travelled to Italy, Egypt, and then they set up house in Constantinople, where Harold Nicolson worked as a diplomat in the Foreign Office for one year. In 1925 after the Great War, the English government sent Vita's husband to Persia; at that time she followed him in an adventurous journey through the deserts of Persia. She describes Persia's beautiful landscape, the native people, the peasants' and nomads' simple lifestyle in the black tents; at the same time, she visualizes their wonderful close connection to the wild land. Her romantic and imaginary description of the land is recreated in her long poem *The Land* finished while travelling in Persia.

In *Passenger to Teheran*, she tries to express her strong feelings during her four days' travel through the Persian desert by car, and she believes that this wild desert is a vast untamed land or space which fills her heart with tranquillity and composure.

During her sojourn in Persia, particularly in Tehran, even though she knows that she can never be completely detached from her cultural preconceptions, she finds her position as a cautious outsider who is affected by her personal experiences and direct observations helping her to reconstruct her new identity: “If you are wise you will not look upon the long period of time [...] you may love to date the moulding of your character—that is, your very identity” (*PT* 108).

In her *Twelve Days*, an account of a journey across the Bakhtiari Mountains in South-western Persia, she uses “thick description” (Geertz 10) and explains in details the report of her second visit to Persia during which she and four other Europeans, including her husband, Harold Nicolson; Gladwyn Jebb, the Third Secretary of English Embassy in Tehran; Copley Amory from the American Legation in Tehran; and Lionel Smith from the American legation in Baghdad, journey through an off-the-beaten-track mountainous area populated by nomadic tribes. The remoteness or inaccessibility of the Bakhtiari Mountains excites her very much as she writes, “I know, somewhere in my heart, that I want to be where no white man has ever been before, far from any place that has ever been heard of” (*TD* 27). Woolf possibly portrays Constantinople and the gipsy episodes with reference to Sackville-West’s experiences of the “Turkish capital during Harold Nicolson’s wartime posting there as well as on her more recent ramble in the mountains of Persia among the nomadic Bakhtiari” (*O Staple* xv). According to Pratt, *Orlando* defines Vita’s quest for “self-realization and fantasies of social harmony” (168). It can also control Orlando’s ephemeral desires, impressions and emotions by selecting domesticity and nature’s splendour thickly described as the power moulding her identity.

4. Vita’s and Orlando’s Flights of Sensations

Women have been almost always the best readers, writers, and interpreters of the contrapuntal discourses of nature, because they share the same sex like nature. For these women readers and travellers, nature “has innumerable beauties and defects” (*E1*: 157). The Barthesian codes of nature are “associative fields, a supratextual organization of notations” (1994: 288). These codes are deciphered by both sexes of writers, as a discourse creating a certain notion of romantic beauty.

From the outset of women's engagement in travel and travel writing, and at the turn of the century witnessing the change of traveller's objectives and leitmotifs, as Manfred Pfister (1943-) deals with, in travel writing "the parade of knowledge is replaced by, or incorporated into, a parade of the traveller's own delicate and unique self that completely upstages the outside world he or she confronts"; Pfister, at the same time, adds that the "aestheticist writing is, in its 'effeminate' softness and emotionalism, the very opposite to the heroic and masculinist adventure tradition" (471).

The coincidence of historical and stylistic change in the concept of travel writing and its genre reveals the persistently variable moods and flights of sensations, as a unique feature in the travel writers' "aestheticist writing." When Orlando, the man, experiences a kind of change into a woman, his sex change is revealed as a metamorphosis, even though this metamorphosis alters Orlando's, the man's and the woman's future, it does nothing whatever to alter their identity. *Orlando* reflects the transitional change of two sexes and two periods simultaneously, it means that Orlando's metamorphosis from a man to a woman offers the women's engagement in the world of travel as well as the emergence of "aestheticist writing" with all "its 'effeminate' softness and emotionalism." It is indeed Orlando's metamorphosis and the metamorphosis of the concept of travel, which reflect a change in the style of travel writing from the masculinist, adventure narrative to a more subjective, inward-looking style, exalting the beauties of nature. The female Orlando behaves mostly like Oriental people than Occidental ones, she assimilates herself to the Orient; for instance, she has washed, and dressed Turkish coats and trousers "worn indifferently by either sex; and was forced to consider her position" (O 82). When Orlando's ambassadorial life as the representative of Great Britain comes to its end, he left the Court of the Sultan and Constantinople.

Orlando's destination and desire are to live and to experience a natural nomadic life within the mountains, a place where she has almost always longed to be, such an experience gives a kind of dynamism to her romantic desires. Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), the German writer, had already pointed out, "[i]t is in the Orient that we must search for the highest Romanticism" (qtd. in Said 2003: 98). We can, based on this claim, see and trace the impact of travel in the romantic Orient on both Sackville-West and Orlando; this experience gives them a "new maturity," (TD 10) because their mind and soul will be more mature.

Orlando recognizes that the gipsies are a group of people without having any centralized history or tradition, whereas she comes from a race whose history, tradition and civilization are very rich. Like Vita, Woolf is not interested in the history and race of the tribe; but rather she praises the gigantic beauties of nature and their effect on constructing her own identity. The quest for cognizing identity cannot be separated from the history and race of the tribes or the people. These ethnic questions are dominant motives for such people, because when a traveller chooses to remain in a group, all his attempts shape an identity that cannot be denied or taken away by others. Travel enriches Orlando and paves the way for him to experience a change; it means that, like Sackville-West in Persia, her “eyes could see a new colour which nobody else could see”; i.e. she feels a “personal possession” being “incommunicable” in words (*TD* 18).

There is, in fact, a reciprocal interaction between the traveller and the travellee; the gazer and the gazed; the observer and the observee during which they encounter each other, gain knowledge, and then return to translate and decipher each other’s culture. The love of nature and her beauties fills Orlando’s or Vita’s heart, especially when she stands above the mountains in sight of their high solitudes in the purity of an April day. At that time, she rejoices in the empty, incomplete sceneries, “where the imagination had room to move about, without stumbling over a multitude of objects, beautiful perhaps, but ready-made” (*TD* 28). Orlando’s understanding is now altered so much so that by living amongst the gipsies in the tents and mountains, her eyes can adapt themselves very swiftly “to the mountainous landscape” that she as an English citizen or woman has been shocked to see such a “flat expanse” (*TD* 36).

Orlando thinks of return, “one fine morning on the slopes of Mount Athos, when minding her goats,” then she observes nature conscientiously and praises her like a goddess, “in whom she trusted, either played her a trick or worked a miracle” (*O* 87). The miracle of nature is its mysterious and mystifying beauties. Orlando’s sensation reminds us of Vita’s while travelling in Persia: “Those who have never dwelt in tents have no idea either of the charm or of the discomfort of a nomadic existence. The charm is purely romantic, and consequently very soon proves to be fallacious” (*TD* 36-7). What matters is “the charm” of nature mixed with “the charm” or “the discomfort of a nomadic existence” understood only by a participant-observer.

The nature of the Bakhtiari Mountains in reality and the fictionalized nature in the travel narrative, articulated by virtue of an English gaze and imagination respectively, are at odds with the Western perception or even conception of the Orientals. At this point Woolf shows the change in Orlando's gazes, interests and attitudes. One of the mysteries of Orient, realized by the women travellers and made it very attractive for them, is the "fallacious," "alluring" and "inspiring" charm of its gorgeous nature (Pfister 484); thus, through reading nature and decoding its cryptograms, they experience a sort of self-reliance or independence.

The gipsies' camp in *Orlando*, similarly, brings to mind the nomads' black tents in the Bakhtiari mountains of South-western Persia where Sackville-West and her friends "came upon the nomads' camp. The black tents were pitched on a ledge overhanging the river Bazuft, which cut its jade-green way through a narrow gorge of rock hundreds of feet below" (*TD* 59). Vita's thick description demonstrates Orlando's and Vita's "love of Nature" (*O* 83), as if Mother Nature is able to speak to them. Orlando behaves like an Eastern woman, while being united with nature, she milks "the goats," collects "brushwood," herds "cattle," stripes "vines," and treads "the grape" (*O* 83); in fact, she is absorbed into the gipsies' lifestyle and culture. Orlando's connection with nature is to some extent different from the gipsies', since Orlando loves nature but the gipsies live in the uncultivated nature. Nature, with all her beauties and glories, awakens the English disease, i.e., "a love of Nature, was born in her, and here where Nature was so much larger and more powerful than in England," (*O* 83-4) Orlando gives up and falls into nature's hands. Like the European travellers, she has never seen such beautiful "mountains," "valleys" and "streams," hence she "climbed the mountains; roamed the valleys," and "sat on the banks of the streams" (*O* 84). In the Orient, everything is something else and her soul and her gaze are expanded.

In comparison to Sackville-West, Orlando understands "the charm of a pastoral existence," when the gipsies are at rest, and "the sense of their weary progress was suspended" (*TD* 68). She is amused by the natural life of the gipsies, for whom, as Vita writes, "any resting place becomes home," even though their mind intuitively rejects "the implication of transitoriness," sought "by an excessive adaptability, for compensation" (*TD* 70). She cannot interpret the mysteries of such a simple way of life nor realize the gipsies' self-directed nature and soul in an undomesticated nature.

These external experiences influence the adventurer's mind, so much so that, as Vita states, the only "goat-tracks one wants to explore are the goat-tracks of the mind, running up into the mountains," albeit "the only sophistication one really wants to escape from is one's own" (*TD* 79). Through reading these stories we can distinguish the profound influence of nature on the women travellers and their 'aestheticist' travel accounts particularly Sackville-West's and Woolf's.

5. Internal Illumination of Vita and Orlando

Orlando's travel to the East and her gaze at the landscapes change her horizon of expectations, which, according to Vita Sackville-West, results in an "internal illumination," or an intensifying of the "personal resources, personal and private enjoyments" (*TD* 79), as the impact of space on the traveller's mind and life. She observes the gipsies in their "slow and contemplative movement as could be performed on [their] own legs," yet through "flowing backwards and forwards," they can achieve no mental improvement, and their mind will instead "browse and brood; sow and reap" (*TD* 80).

It creates inevitably a feminine discourse, translated and written in the form of a travel narrative that might be shaped by Woolf's reading of Sackville-West's *Twelve Days*, in which Vita states that the Englishmen have not known or experienced such a natural leisure or at least, few English travellers have known it. It seems history is stopped in the Orient, and this pause in the life of travellers gives them an opportunity to travel through their mind, while reviewing and revising their feelings and thoughts recurrently. Sackville-West believes that travellers who achieve such a feeling are not only "eccentrics for their pains" but "among the wise ones of the earth" (*TD* 80). Hence, the travails of travel transform the travellers' mind and their horizon of expectations. As Vita remarks, "[n]othing is an adventure until it becomes an adventure in the mind" (*PT* 17).

Orlando's journey to Broussa is, like Sackville-West's journey to Persia, a kind of mental adventure, as Vita Fortunati claims, "a mental journey in search of her own identity, a way to explore her feelings and to refine her own sensibility" (69). To Sackville-West, travel is something more than mere sightseeing, rather it is "to reconcile the inner experience with the experience of *seeing, feeling* and *tasting* the *otherness* around them" (ibid 70), called "a private pleasure" (*PT* 16).

Through such “a private pleasure,” she maps, remaps, constructs, reconstructs or analyzes human being, or to quote Geertz, “peels off layer after layer” that is “complete and irreducible in itself, revealing another, quite different sort of layer underneath” (37).

Woolf has observed the “contours” of Constantinople, and has contemplated its “clefts” in *Orlando* (TD 82). Orlando’s domestic desires for returning home traces, as Vita believes, “the desire for escape will, after sufficient indulgence, be replaced by the desire for return,” hence to travel far away in the distance and to go far back in time give a new insight to the travellers about “what the past had been like; and what the world had been like” (TD 88, 90). Woolf, in her novel, gazes at life “as a language”; for her, “everything is culture,” as a “*field of dispersion*” of languages (Barthes 1989: 100-1). It is the impact of the division of cultures or inter-culturality of the East and the West, that through reading it, gazing at it, being influenced by it she acquires an insight contrary to the blindness of those “people,” who, in Robert Byron’s words, “travel blind” (202). She, eventually, understands her own self and the “Other,” as Pfister argues, her “own culture and the culture of the Other” (467).

Like Vita in Persia, Orlando searches for civilization in Constantinople “in the most violent contrast that lay ahead” (TD 119). Vita distinguishes it when she observes the black tents of the nomads that sprinkled the plain. Contrasting the nomads’ life with their own caravan, particularly the Englishmen’s, brings to her mind such an idea. Orlando experiences the same feeling while living among the gypsies: “She began to think, was Nature beautiful or cruel; and then she asked what this beauty was; whether it was in things themselves, or only in herself; so she went on to the nature of reality, which led her to truth” (O 85).

Orlando observes the beauties of “Nature,” but as she meditates, she turns “to the nature of reality, which led her to truth,” to the necessity of pen and ink. She draws a line between the two poles through the gazes of female travellers by distinguishing that the East and the West are different from each other, the former is natural, as Pfister writes, “alluring,” “inspiring” and “strangely familiar,” in contrast, the latter is “sublime” yet “trivial,” “alluring” yet “irritating,” “inspiring” yet “ludicrous,” “incomprehensible” and “strangely familiar” (484).

Orlando's horizon of understanding is changed; she returns to her English blood and finds the Occident and its civilized life superior to the Orient. She sees England and its beautiful and desiring "roofs and belfries and towers and courtyards of her own home," (O 88) she bursts finally into a passion of tears, and decides to sail for England. Woolf glorifies the ephemeral desires, passions and emotions of the women travellers, when they are far from home.

Orlando gazes at the Orient, reads it, translates its culture and is influenced by its romantic nature; accordingly, the underlying will-to-write in the Oriental cultural text makes her begin creating a poetical structure. Orlando's "The Oak Tree," which is an imitation of Sackville-West's *The Land*, is the poetic description of the experiences of her travels to the Orient, i.e., a return to the land and what the land has given her. These two poems reshape the myth of Orientalism that transforms "a meaning into form," they are the stammering answers of a lover-traveller made during all the years of internal and external travels (Barthes 2001: 118). The poems refer to the experience of Orlando's Eastern travel and Vita's travel in Persia. "The Oak Tree," Orlando's "sea-stained, blood-stained, [and] travel-stained" (O 134) poem includes all Vita's beautiful moments in Persia and their impact on her power of creativity as a romantic poet of nature.

6. Vita's and Orlando's Desire to Return Home

For most women travellers, travelling means to gather a series of impressions and to make a succession of more or less conscious notations on the superiority/inferiority of other places and societies when compared with one's own home. Gathering these experiences, every traveller's heart desires to return home, as Vita Sackville-West states, "it is home which drags the heart; it is spirit which is beckoned by the unknown," she adds that her "heart wants to stay in the familiar safety," but her "spirit, pricking, wants to explore, to leap off the cliffs" (PT 25). After returning home, accordingly, Orlando is so much absorbed in wonder that her "eyes had been used too long to savages and nature not to be entranced by these urban glories" (O 96). Now she sees that home or "London itself had completely changed since she had last seen it" (O 97); indeed, both London and Orlando's gaze are changed.

Orlando's personality, worldview and identity are transformed from the time of his or her first departure from the Occident.

Orlando enters London, as an experienced Oriental woman traveller whose gazes and observations are completely changed, she finds "each sight and sound" differently and such feelings fill "her heart with such a lust and balm of joy" (*O* 100). Her identity is changed from a faithful male ambassador to a female lover of nature. As far as she has experienced the Orient, she comprehends that her British identity is based upon a notion of England's hegemonic white ethnicity formed by the men's rules from which there is no escape: "I am losing my illusions, perhaps to acquire new ones" (*O* 101). Woolf observes like Sackville-West, because her "eyes could see a new colour which nobody else could see" (*TD* 18), she uses a different contrapuntal discourse to discover, define, and reconstruct her identity.

Orlando owes the growth of her own self due to her own past, to her travel to the East and its experiences: "[y]et still for all her travels and adventures and profound thinkings and turnings this way and that, she was only in process of fabrication" (*O* 102). Undoubtedly, the temporal and spatial distance throws Orlando into the social differences that may interrupt her collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity. She experiences a sense of newness, a sense of not being part of the continuum of past and present, rather, as Homi K. Bhabha states, an "insurgent act of cultural translation" (7). This presence-absence or absence-presence of past-present is a part of the Cartesian duality that refigures and reshapes her identity. She discovers now on the one hand the superior order, rationality and symmetry of England; and on the other hand the inferior disorder, irrationality and primitivism of the gipsies, as the self-confirming parameters to motivate her to return.

Orlando does not forget the Orient, but the Orient plays a significant role in constructing her mind and gaze, her self-recognition as well as her social perception. In the nineteenth century, Orlando remembers her experience of life with the gipsies in Turkey and sees herself as "nature's bride" (*O* 140). Even though her soul is united with nature, such unification cannot satisfy her desire for the East. The new discourse of "absence" and distance is carried on, according to Barthes, by the woman who is "sedentary" and "faithful" (2002: 13-14). Woolf reads and translates the discourse of Penelopean, Barthesian (*avant la lettre*) meaning of absence, and as a result creates a bisexual adventurer who loves the East, its adventures, its beauties and, as Nigel Nicolson writes, its "emphatic landscapes" (164).

Orlando feels the discourse of absence and its “two ideograms”: “*Desire*” and “*Need*” (Barthes 2002: 16). The fabulous outcome of Orlando’s travel to the East is to realize that the East and the West desire each other. *Orlando* reflects the myth of the English travellers’ life, joy, diplomatic experiences, romantic sensations, and their travail.

7. Conclusion

At the end of *Orlando*, when Orlando marries Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, she calls him “Mar,” probably a reference to Vita’s sobriquet, “her mother’s name [Mar] for her,” in her letters to Harold, or it may suggest the meaning of “Mar” in Persian, a title for saints, as “Harold’s father’s pet name for him,” “Hadji,” meaning a religious man who goes to Mecca or a “pilgrim,” which was Harold’s Persian name, and “Vita adopted it for the rest of her life” (Nicolson 60n). Orlando loves a man who explores the East, she, symbolically, marries the masculinist exploration of the East; in this sense, *Orlando* unites Orlando with the exploration and femininity of the East. Shelmerdine, who is a feminine-like-masculine for Orlando, is the incarnation or the embodiment of Orlando’s desire for the lost East.

Through poeticizing and aestheticizing the East, Orlando imagines the East in “the Oak tree,” the same as Sackville-West, who translates the East culturally and poetically in *The Land*. The thick descriptions of cultures reflect the influence of those parts of the East visited by the women travellers, and such explanations underscore the profound influence of the East and the Oriental women on both Orlando and Vita to confirm how the beauties of nature and its femininity attract their attention.

Rejecting an inert life of sitting still in a chair and thinking, Orlando is, innately, a traveller; thus, only travel and movement can bring all the joys and pleasures of the East. At the end, “the eleventh of October” in 1928, Orlando becomes a twentieth-century traveller, as Woolf writes in her *Diary* “Vita should be Orlando,” (*D3*: 157), who sees the mountains and a girl in Russian trousers but in “Turkey? India? Persia?” she “sees her now preparing to get into her motor car with her eyes full of tears and visions of Persian mountains” (*O* 173). Orlando becomes Vita who remembers the Bakhtiari Mountains, recorded in *Twelve Days*.

Orlando, having various selves, experiences different identities made during the years of his or her travel; she is changed far more than any other traveller has been able to find room for her conscious self, her true self “compact of all 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” (O 176). Suggesting that by means of travel a new self emerges, Woolf confirms it by portraying Orlando's different selves. Orlando is in quest of her single self or, in Barthes's words, “an always present *I*,” or a new identity, a sense of Englishness, “constituted only by confrontation with an always absent *you*” (2002:13)—being Oriental. Her gaze is changed and her eyes become so exact that it seems “she had a microscope stuck to her eye” (O 181). Travel and travail train her penetrating eye/I to observe thickly like an ethnographer and to show, in Geertz's terms, her critical “microscopic” (21) eye/I.

Woolf, in *Orlando*, fictionalizes a journey in the history of the travellers' life in the East and the impact of their cultural interaction to map three phases of travel as departure, transformation and return. Orlando paves the way for this confrontation of the self and the ‘Other,’ and offers, as James Buzard states, a fantastic “dialectical play of cultural ‘belonging’ and ‘homelessness’” (25). Woolf's purpose is to reveal that travel can broaden a person's horizon of expectations, without any gender boundaries, it enables him to be “a citizen of the world” or at least, as Buzard claims, “a better citizen at home, confirming the superiority of British social arrangements over those found elsewhere” (100). After visiting Constantinople, and the gypsies' life, Orlando discovers England, her own world and the mysteries of life at home. When she departs, after seeing the English society by contrast with other societies, especially the Orient and Persia, she finds herself a better Englishwoman or adventurer, and realizes that “being far away makes one fairer to England than when one is at home and worried with all the pettiness and ignorance” (qtd. in Buzard 8). This knowledge metamorphoses his/her mummified British identity and opens the doors of a global world to the travellers.

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