



Review Article

## Autobiographical Elements in Behn's *Oroonoko*, Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Woolf's *Orlando*

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### Abstract

Biographies are classified as diverse kinds of the genre that is combined with various elements. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* Aphra Behn becomes the first professional woman writer, Mary Shelley is considered to be the foremother of science fiction and gothic genre, finally pioneer feminist writer Virginia Woolf created a fictional, gender-bending biography that paid tribute to the British literature. These three significant women writers have become pioneers throughout three centuries. This article reviews the autobiographical elements in Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) and Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) considering the sociocultural backgrounds of each period in Britain as well as regarding the authors' contributions to the British literary canon.

Keywords: Aphra Behn, Mary Shelley, Virginia Woolf, women writers, autobiography

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### Introduction

In order to understand and analyze the Western literary canon, one needs to comprehend the importance of the life writing as a genre and as a concept. Life writing developed within different aspects of literary methods and ideas. The first literary texts which are biographical are sagas of the great kings and heroes like Hercules or Odysseus from early history. These heroic epics are intended to inspire and warn others while memorizing the past and illuminate the present, which becomes a reflective aspect of biography or historical writing (Glendinning 1994). Since, until the end of the seventeenth century, biography as a genre was considered to be a part of history. But in the contemporary literary understanding, biography is classified as a diverse genre that is combined with various elements in it. This article intends to analyze the autobiographical elements in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) while considering

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the sociocultural backgrounds of each period in Britain and their writers as a woman and their contributions to the British literary canon.

### **1.1. Historical and Theoretical Background**

Before analyzing these three literary works, it is important to explain the chief characteristics and examples of the life writing so as the biography. According to Ira B. Nadel in the article "Narrative and the Popularity of Biography", biography uses fiction as a medium in order to arrange and present the material as a work of art: "Biography is a veritable fiction. One can confirm its facts through documents and records but the arrangement and presentation of material is often impelled by fictional, i.e., novelistic, impulses" (Nadel 1987). For instance, in order to give a brief example of life writing, the memoirs are records of events and the incidents are recorded according to a person's own life or of a person whom he or she has known. It is different from an autobiography because it is less formally organized. Life writing uses materials like letters, reminiscences, journals and diaries in order to narrate the text. The written story as an autobiography or a biography requires a certain period of time and a definite person as the main character in the text. As an another example of one of the sub-genres of life writing, mock biography is defined as an imitation of life while using biographical methods and creating make-believe autobiographies or biographies. In the "Glossary of Terms in Life-Writing by Donald J. Winslow, Part II", Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) is defined as the most remarkable example of a mock biography because it ridicules traditional methods of biographical techniques. (Winslow 1978). On the other hand, according to Victoria Glendinning in her article "Biography: Choice and Gender" Woolf's *Orlando* can be considered as a fantastical biography, which is an inspired flight of a love-letter to Vita Sackville West (Glendinning 1994).

In the article entitled "Reading in the Content Areas: Fictionalized Biographies and Diaries for Social Studies" by Dee. C. Storey, it is asserted that fictional presentation of biographical texts or diaries of a real person which is narrated in the first person narration, brings history to life on a more personal level than other nonfiction materials. Accuracy and authenticity becomes the main concerns in these representations and the first person narration is used as a medium for creating an air of reality and intimacy while the third person narration creates a distance in literary works which used biographical elements in the text (Storey 1982). Writerly authenticity requires transcending the boundaries between the self and the other and as a reader, one reads biographical works their own perspectives concerning the context of the period that includes the belief systems, prejudices, limitations of gender and age. This kind of biographical reading becomes reflexive and reflective because it includes these limitations of different periods or different people whom understand biographical elements in various meanings. While the writer narrates the biographical elements in the text, he or she actually investigates the society's ideological subtext and searches for a meaning of the self and the other in that sense. Because, once a reader begins to read a book which has biographical elements in it, he or she begins to realize the dynamics of society that is similar or different to his or her own ideological background (Glendinning 1994).

### **2.1. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave. A True Story***

According to Ina Schabert, both factual and fictional biographies are made up, thus they both can be considered as fictions. They both base their plot on biographical facts but fictional

biographies “create” lives from facts like Woolf’s *Orlando* while the author of the factual biography emphasizes the biographical data and particularity of actual events (1982,7-9). Factual autobiographical elements can be traced in Aphra Behn’s short novel *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave. A True History* (1688). *Oroonoko* is published in the second part of the seventeenth century during the Glorious Revolution or Bloodless Revolution in Britain. During the Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689, the king James II was dethroned. His protestant daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange became the successors of the British throne with the joint monarchy who were crowned as Mary II and William III. This revolution symbolizes one of the keystones in the British political history since it remarks the victory of the Protestant opposed to Catholic succession. Moreover, during her lifetime Aphra Behn was considered to be a spy for Charles II. Josephine Donovan in her book *Women and the Rise of the Novel, 1405-1726* reminds the reader what Virginia Woolf said about Aphra Behn in *A Room of One’s Own*: “All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn...for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds” (Woolf 1957, p. 91) and concludes that Aphra Behn was the first professional woman writer in English who certainly becomes a pioneer for the English women’s literary tradition (1957, p. 91).

On the other hand, in order to begin analyzing the autobiographical elements in the *Oroonoko*, one needs to look Behn’s text itself. In Vernon Guy Dickson’s article “Truth, Wonder, and Exemplarity in Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*”, Dickson searches for a truth within Behn’s work and claims that Behn emphasized the importance of recording the history of a great man like Prince Oroonoko whose character can be served as a medium for showing the ideal example for “nobleness” and “heroism”. That is the reason, Behn recommends Prince Oroonoko to her sponsor due to his exemplary personality (1988, pp. 573-575):

This is a true Story, of a Man Gallant enough to merit your Protection; and, had he always been so Fortunate, he had not made so Inglorious an end: The Royal Slave I had the Honor to know in my Travels to the other World; and though I had none above me in that Country, yet I wanted power to preserve this Great Man. (p. 3)

While narrating this “true” story as becoming an “eye-witness” (p. 4) of it, Behn shares both factual details and moral description of the truth as a concept. She uses the truth to transcend the actual meaning of it and creates a fictional meaning which serves for her moralist and royalist perspective. She gives references from the society she lived in as she mentions “England’s withdrawal from Suriname in 1667” and describes the culture and people vividly in the colony (Dickson 2007).

Furthermore, her vivid descriptions of the colony and the British society she lived in raised a question about the autobiographical elements of *Oroonoko*. Similarly, Robert L. Chibka asks a question about Aphra Behn’s life’s impact on *Oroonoko* in his article “Oh! Do Not Fear a Woman’s Invention”: Truth, Falsehood, and Fiction in Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*”: “Do we in the twentieth century so fear the presence of a woman’s invention that the autobiographical basis of a work of fiction takes on moral overtones none would think to apply to the product of a man’s invention?” (1988, p. 512). Chibka continues his argument that Behn’s situation can be regarded as the reflection of the sexism in the career choices in woman who dared to write as a professional writer. Chibka also mentions Virginia Woolf’s so as the second wave feminists’ focus on Aphra Behn who tries to find a precursor of a strong woman of letters in the English literary canon. So, Aphra Behn as a professional woman writer becomes a

storyteller who draws a general description for the mixed kind of colonial society while the men from the colonies were in charge with religious matter and administration. The autobiographical elements in *Oroonoko* are apparent, since this work of art is critically argued for a long time, whether it is real or not and the literary critics and the historians use this short novel as a source for understanding Aphra Behn's period as it is argued in the article " 'Others', Slaves, and Colonists in *Oroonoko*" in the *Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*: "While Behn scholars argued for decades about whether *Oroonoko* was based on first-hand experience, historians drew on its passages as a valuable collateral source" (Lipking 2006, p. xvii).

## **2.2 Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818)**

Secondly, similar to Aphra Behn, Mary Shelley becomes another important woman writer in the British literary canon who lives nearly after one and a half century later. Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) can be considered as an another example of a literary work which has autobiographical elements in it. Rebecca Baumann in her book *Frankenstein 200: the Birth, Life, and Resurrection of Mary Shelley's Monster* describes *Frankenstein* as Shelley's "own entirely unique intellectual child" in which she combined various elements of different genres like autobiography, travelogue, ghost stories etc. :

Mary Shelley, almost from her birth, was a voracious reader, and *Frankenstein* is a mad experiment of piecing together autobiography, travelogue, ghost stories, folklore, and sorts of science, philosophy, and poetry that she had read, discussed with her circle of eccentric friends, digested, and repurposed into her own entirely unique intellectual child. (p. xvii)

So, considering this quotation above, it can be derived that Mary Shelley similar to Aphra Behn, becomes a pioneer literary figure who dared to write in the literary field which was generally male-dominated. Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* in an early age of twenty-one and she felt inadequate as a writer. The first and the most important autobiographical element in her novel is the parallel between herself and the monster itself. As she expressed in the "Introduction" of *Frankenstein* that her husband can embody his ideas with a brilliant imagery and well-adorned language, but she produced a work which is her "hideous progeny". Similarly, Devon Hodges in her article "*Frankenstein* and the Feminine Subversion of the Novel" asserts that Shelley's inadequacy is embodied in the monster: "But the monster becomes the one who is neither fully inside nor outside the culture while feeling the misery of it. Like Shelley herself, the monster does not desire to be a rebel, they both desire to conform to the expectations of society" (1983, p. 161). Likewise, throughout her lifetime, Mary Shelley as a woman in a patriarchal society, tried to be accepted as a person since being a woman equates being an alien, a monster or the other. She was a woman writer who also felt the monstrous burden of being an alien in the literary field, that is the reason Shelley's novel challenges the privileged position of the man in the patriarchal system, but it also narrates the anxiety of a woman like Shelley who tries to take a part in this alien system (1983, pp. 160-163).

As an another important autobiographical element, Nora Crook in her article "Mary Shelley, Author of *Frankenstein*" in *A New Companion to the Gothic* discusses the importance of the family relations throughout Mary Shelley's lifetime and its effect on *Frankenstein*. As both her parents are important literary figures, social philosopher and novelist William Godwin and feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, she felt the pressure of being related to Godwin and

Shelley family. Her mother died after giving birth to her, similar to the monster in the book, she was an orphan. In the book, also Walton's sister whose name is Margot Walton Saville has the same initials as the author Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. The monster's first victim is named as William, who has the same first name as her father, her infant son and her half-brother. Also, Mary Shelley's first baby died prematurely and there are parallels between Victor's revision on Walton's ship and Mary Shelley's real dream of snuggling her dead baby by the fire and trying to bring the baby back to life (2012, pp. 111-112). To sum up, Mary Shelley's own alienation as a woman, writer, her orphanage, miscarriages and her dead children affects her writing in *Frankenstein* that is the reason the reader can trace the autobiographical elements in the plot.

### **2.3. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando A Biography* (1928)**

Finally, it is my intention to analyze Virginia Woolf, similar to Aphra Behn and Mary Shelley, who becomes one of the pioneers of British literary canon as a woman writer in the twentieth century. She was an exceptional writer who used stream of consciousness as a modernist writer and throughout her lifetime, she was a devout advocate of feminism and androgyny of the human mind. She used androgyny and the gender fluidity as a medium to create her fictional autobiography *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). In her book *Writer's Diary*, Woolf herself explained the reason behind the writing process of *Orlando*:

*Orlando* was the outcome of a perfectly definite, indeed overmastering, impulse. I want fun. I want fantasy. I want (and this was serious) to give things their caricature value. And still this mood hangs about me. I want to write a history, say of Newnham or the women's movement, in the same vein. The vein is deep in me- at least sparkling, urgent. (p. 134)

Considering this quotation, it can be derived that Woolf attempted to create a carnivalesque atmosphere in the book while creating her own fun and fantasy. She used British history as the setting in the plot and the reader traces nearly three-hundred-year period of Britain, which includes Renaissance, Enlightenment, Victorian period and Edwardian Era.

In *Orlando*, Woolf uses parody, irony and her text has metafictional elements. The text consciously forces the reader to question the patriarchal narratives and its values both in fact and fiction. While creating *Orlando* as an example of a fantastic biography, Woolf used definite autobiographical elements from her lover Vita Sackville-West's history. For instance, in the book, the male biographer sees a portrait of Sackville-West and he observes Orlando's shapely legs, handsome body and candid face while feeling lucky for finding such a captivating subject to narrate (Boehm 1992):

Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach what ever seat it may be that is the height of their desire. Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career. (p. 14-15)

In *Orlando*, Woolf parodies the traditions of biography while questioning gender conventions in this tradition which limits the historical biography to the male gender. In the plot, the protagonist is male until the end of the seventeenth century. Orlando's sex change can be a symbol for "the entrance of women into the literary canon" as Gubar and Gilbert asserted

(qtd. in Boehm 1992). This experimental biography is based on Woolf's life, especially her lesbian partner Vita Sackville-West while Woolf experiences the different style of writing of the life of a man and that of a woman (Wiley 2004). To sum up, in the book, the reader experiences the fluidity of gender identities while Woolf subverts the dominant male tradition in the fictional biography. As she noted in *A Room of One's Own* that "biography is too much about great men," she subverts androcentric paradigms in this literary tradition while using her lesbian lover's life.

### **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, these three significant women writers have become pioneers throughout three centuries in the British literary canon. They used autobiographical elements in their works: Behn's *Oroonoko*, Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Woolf's *Orlando* while struggling to survive in a patriarchal society and they tried to raise their own unique voices as authors. Aphra Behn, Mary Shelley and Virginia Woolf's fictional and gender-bending biographies still encourage and spirit women through their personal development as well as contributing to the British literary canon.

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