

Psychological Androgyny in *Exit West* and *Home Fire*

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Abstract

Psychological Androgyny entails the blending, in a particular individual, of masculine and feminine traits, from traditional perspectives of gender division. It is a liberated state which allows individuals to express themselves in ways free of gendered restrictions. An androgyne, unlike sex-typed characters, displays a mélange of traits irrespective of their categorization as masculine or feminine. This research studies Psychological Androgyny in selected novels i.e. *Exit West* (2017) and *Home Fire* (2017) by Hamid and Shamsie respectively. It is qualitative and constructive in essence and takes up Sandra Bem's views on the nature of Psychological Androgyny to pinpoint and highlight the expression of psychological androgyny in selected characters of *Exit West* and *Home Fire*. The analysis of the texts is carried out on the basis of the conceptual framework which is grounded in the work of Bem on Psychological Androgyny. Main category for analysis is Psychological Androgyny while subcategories include assertive versus yielding, instrumental versus expressive and masculinity versus femininity.

Key Terms: Psychological androgyny, masculinity, femininity, instrumental, expressive, assertive, yielding

Androgyny: Origin and Background

The term Androgyny is a merger of the Greek words “andros” meaning man and “gyne” meaning woman (Prakash et al., 2010, p.119). An androgyne was one that possessed an amalgamation of both masculine and feminine traits. The concept of androgyny has been rediscovered and redefined to include “new possibilities for

individuals” that identify themselves as androgynous (Cook, 1987, p.471). Now the term androgyny is used to refer to a “blending” of characteristics that are traditionally considered to be either masculine or feminine (Cook, 1987, p.471). According to Prakash et al., androgyny leads to “sex-role flexibility and adaptability”

(2010, p.119). Therefore, an androgynous individual may behave in either a traditionally masculine or feminine manner or might employ both kinds of behaviors, based on the requirements and restraints of a particular situation.

Psychological Androgyny

A psychologically androgynous person according to Bem (1974) possesses characteristics ranging from assertiveness and instrumentality to expressiveness and communion and any of these traits will find expression when the need for that particular feature arises (p.155). She states that androgynous individuals and their “flexible sex-role self-concepts” accompanied by certain behavioral traits like self-confidence and adaptability, will delineate a different yet desirable “standard of psychological health” for humans (Bem, 1974, p.162).

Cook (1987) argues that positive traits, irrespective of being stereotypically attached to one particular sex i.e. either feminine or masculine, “exist” to some extent in individuals (p.473). These “positive trait dimensions” are characteristic of humans and not either men or women (Cook, 1987, p.473). Thus, humans can be described in terms of these traits depending upon the features that each particular individual endorses. This implies that a strict masculine-feminine categorization would be insufficient to correctly describe individuals because different individuals might possess varying degrees of the “positive traits” (Cook, 1987, p.473). The above mentioned human traits influence the psychological

functioning of an individual which is not “sex- specific” (Cook, 1987, 473). Hence, men and women benefit in a similar manner from these traits i.e. they can be independent and authoritative along with being sensitive emotionally. Therefore, an androgynous individual can function with various behaviors and attitudes and possess a variety of distinctive characteristics.

Research Objective

The aim of the research is to analyze the novels so as to achieve the following research goal:

- 1) To analyze Psychological Androgyny as manifested in the behavior of the characters portrayed in Hamid and Shamsie’s selected works.

Literature Review

The following portion discusses researches already done on the selected novels i.e. *Exit West* (2017) by Hamid and *Home Fire* (2017) by Shamsie. The discussion would aid in highlighting the gap in research which the current study will fill.

Salahuddeen (2017) argues that the narrative of the novel *Exit West* highlights various angles of humanity and the way humans from diverse backgrounds are “similar” in many respects (Salahuddeen, 2017, p.382). Some of the subjects highlighted in the novel are immigration and the resultant clash between the natives and the others, refugee problems and religion. Hamid does not take the easy way out by giving the refugees a negative cliché portrayal. Instead, he takes it upon himself to bring to light the problems that are faced, known and felt by the refugees and the

refugees alone (Salahudheen 2017, p.382). Correspondingly, Chambers using Spivak's idea of "Who will listen?", investigates the theme of "sound and fury in Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017). Sound functions as Shamsie's "violent weapon" as in the "torture scenes" and also at a metaphorical level where the narrative urges the audience to "listen" (C. Chambers, 2018, p.16). *Home Fire* raises another question i.e. "Can the oppressor listen?" while throwing light on the predicament of listening to or reprimanding the "jihadists" (C. Chambers, 2018, p.01). *Home Fire* has the unique feature of transcending reality and fiction while drawing together distinct historical eras, geographical regions and political perspectives along with maintaining a rigid "emphasis on people" (C. Chambers, 2018, p.02).

This study is different from the above mentioned researches as the focus of this research will be on the representation of androgynous women in the novels *Exit West* (2017) and *Home Fire* (2017). This thesis will focus on the way Hamid and Shamsie's selected novels represent psychologically androgynous characters in fictional worlds. It will study how Hamid and Shamsie create and portray androgynes. Some work has been done on the representation of androgyny in literature but not many have analyzed Pakistani authors and their work from this particular perspective. The present study aims at analyzing Psychological Androgyny as it is presented in the novels of contemporary British-Pakistani authors.

The current research is idiosyncratic in that it explores a different aspect which

has not been studied yet. While the previous researches revolve around issues like immigration and politics, this research concerns itself with a marginalized section of society i.e. androgynes. The focus of this research is on conceptualizing the term psychological androgyny in contemporary works of Hamid and Shamsie.

Research Methodology

The focus of this study is on analyzing androgyny as it is manifested in the selected female characters of these novels i.e. *Exit West* by Hamid and *Home Fire* by Shamsie. Androgyny will be examined from the perspective of a conceptual framework which is grounded in Bem's work on Androgyny titled, *The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny*. This study falls under the category of qualitative research and conducts textual analysis of the selected texts in order to examine the way Hamid and Shamsie have presented characters that exhibit traits irrespective of them being associated to one particular gender. Textual analysis allows for a description of the "content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in texts" (Frey & Kreps 1999, p.01). Bem's definition of Psychological Androgyny forms the basis of the categories for analysis which are *masculinity versus femininity, assertive versus yielding and instrumental versus expressive*.

Psychological Androgyny

The following section analyses Hamid's *Exit West* in the light of the research question which gyrates around demonstration of psychological androgyny

in the selected character of the novel, which is the female protagonist named Nadia.

Nadia as a Psychologically Androgynous character in *Exit West*

Psychological androgyny refers to the presence, in an individual, of traits that are according to the gender stereotypes considered to be either masculine or feminine. This entails that an individual can display traits, from agency to communion or from expressiveness to instrumentality depending upon the situation. One such character namely, Nadia, has been presented in *Exit West* by Hamid and is discussed below.

This portion of the analysis discusses instances where Nadia exhibits traits that are stereotypically attributed to either masculinity or femininity, as displaying both kinds of traits is the characteristic feature of androgynes. Nuances in the precise definition or rather conceptualization of masculinity and femininity prevail among cultures but agentic traits like “independence” are generally considered to be idiosyncratic of masculinity whereas communal attributes, like having an overall “emotional” demeanor, are perceived as archetypal of femininity (William & Best, 1982, p.513).

Nadia as an Assertive and Yielding Person

An androgyne, according to Bem, is “both assertive and yielding” as they possess traits which are, stereotypically, considered to be mutually exclusive (1974, p.155). Nadia can be said to be an androgyne if her character has both sides to it that is assertive as well as yielding.

Assertiveness according to BSRI is attributed to masculinity and it refers to the ability of an individual to act confidently and to say whatever one wants to (1974, p.157). Nadia’s assertive nature becomes apparent in the house in Dark London when Nadia insists on washing her clothes even after taking quite some time to shower. Saeed is reluctant to give her more time to wash her clothes but he does not argue and even if he had said anything, Nadia “felt a steel in herself which she knew meant she would have washed them anyway” (Hamid, 2017, p.122). Nadia’s response to Saeed where she clearly tells him not to tell her what to do is evidence of her assertive nature.

Bem and Lewis further argues that androgynous individuals “exclude neither masculinity nor femininity” and thus they “remain sensitive to the changing constraints of the situation” consequently engaging in those actions which appear “most effective at the moment”, irrespective of the stereotypes which tag them as apt for a particular gender (1975, p.634;635). Nadia, upon being analyzed in the light of this statement displayed another rather contrasting personality trait which according to Bem’s definition of psychological androgyny, is a soft, non-rigid and thus a yielding disposition. Her soft and therefore compassionate nature becomes apparent when she passes “her family’s home once on purpose... just to see from the outside if they were there and well” (Hamid, 2017, p.66). Even though bad blood prevails between Nadia and her family due to the

incident of her leaving her parents' home, still the soft portion of her personality urges her to check on them and see if they are alright. Her gentle nature is not just restricted to her family but also to Saeed, who she considers to be a decent man and is "filled with compassion for him" (Hamid, 2017, p.162).

The above discussion brings to light the yielding as well as assertive side of Nadia's personality thereby endorsing the notion that Nadia is a psychologically androgynous individual and such individuals, according to Bem, are assertive as well as yielding.

Instrumentality and Expressiveness of Nadia

Bem argues that masculinity is linked to "an instrumental orientation" which she defines as "a cognitive focus on getting the job done" (1974, p.156). An instrumental orientation can be defined as the potential to pursue what one wants to achieve. Instrumentality finds expression in Nadia when she leaves her home after having a heated argument with her parents and sister and finds herself all alone. Realizing that she has to get through the situation she takes necessary measures which include securing "a job at an insurance company" and "a room of her own atop the house of a widow" (Hamid, 2017, p.19). Hamid (2017) says that since "she was determined to survive...she did" (p.18). Then as the situation changes and she migrates from her city of birth to the Greek Island of Mykonos, survival becomes her priority. She realizes that she needs to grab

any opportunity to escape to another, better place and this is the reason that Nadia fosters friendship with the "partly shaved-haired local girl who was a volunteer", gives her a contact number, visits "the clinic", has conversations and at times "coffee or a joint" with her (Hamid, 2017, p.114). Nadia appears as a proactive person who engages in necessary activities to get things done and in doing so, brings to surface the ambitious or rather instrumental aspect of her personality.

Femininity, according to Bem, is "associated with an expressive orientation" which is defined as the ability to show emotions and express sentiments; as well as with "an affective concern for the welfare of others" (1974, p.156). In view of the first part of this claim, Nadia turns out to be an expressive individual as she enunciates her sentiments for Saeed one night by playing "an album that she knew Saeed liked" even though "she was not overly fond of their country's pop music and so it was clear that she was playing this for him" (Hamid, 2017, p.133). Nadia, through this gesture is expressing her feelings for him. Her attempt is successful as on listening to the music Saeed becomes cheerful and it warms her to see him that way. As far as the second portion of the claim is concerned, Nadia in Dark London, exhibits concern for others i.e. migrants from other countries and therefore strangers, by helping an old woman from Nigeria in climbing "the stairs" (Hamid, 2017, p.143). These instances reveal Nadia's "sensitivity to the needs of others" and her warm personality, thus endorsing her as an expressive individual

(Bozionelos, N. and Bozionelos, G., 2003, p.423).

Blend of Masculinity and Femininity in Nadia's Personality

A psychologically androgynous individual should be both "masculine and feminine" and therefore should exhibit traits from both categories depending upon the situation (Bem, 1974, p.155). Slight differences exist among various cultures' conceptualization of masculinity and femininity but generally agency and communion are fundamental to "cultural framing of gender" (Matud, 2019, p.02). Agency is associated with masculinity and suggests an independent approach which is seen in Nadia's demeanor in "Marin" when she decides to be on her own once again and leaves the "shanty" that she was sharing with Saeed to live at the food "cooperative" where she worked (Hamid, 2017, p.191; 215). She feels really good on moving out as she prefers living on her own and is "reminded of her apartment in the city of her birth, which she had loved, reminded of what it was like to live there alone" (Hamid, 2017, p.215). Communion is connected to femininity and therefore expressing concern for others which again is seen in the case of Nadia when she feels "worried" for Saeed as the mayhem in the city escalates (Hamid, 2017, p.63). It is thus safe to say that Nadia is an androgynous being as she possesses both agentic as well as communal traits and thus displays those traits that have stereotypically been associated to either gender.

Portrayal of Psychological Androgyny in *Home Fire*

This section of the analysis is concerned with analyzing the way in which psychological androgyny is externalized in the character of Aneeka from Shamsie's *Home Fire*. Psychologically androgynous individuals, according to Bem (1974), possess "both masculine and feminine attributes" in such a way that both types of traits are present in a balance (p.158-9). The following portion of the analysis focuses on instances where Aneeka, the female protagonist from Shamsie's *Home Fire*, displays an array of comportments, irrespective of their categorization as masculine or feminine, thus falling under Bem's definition of Psychological androgyny.

Aneeka as an Assertive and Yielding Person

Taking into consideration Bem's definition of Psychological Androgyny, assertiveness is categorized as a masculine trait as it implies the capability of an individual to deal with situations in a confident manner (1974, p.157). Aneeka displays assertiveness and evidence of her headstrong and confident nature is seen in her approaching the Home Secretary's son, developing a relationship with him so as to get him to talk to his father, Karamat Lone to let her brother Parvaiz come home (Shamsie, 2017, p.75). As far as saying what one believes in is concerned, Aneeka clearly states that she had approached Eamonn in the Tube station knowing that he was the Home Secretary's son and therefore "hope" for her brother (Shamsie. 2017, p.97).

Contrary to this, the yielding or rather soft and ergo feminine side of her personality surfaces when she gently strokes the “filthy square of fur” which the “man in bright red suit” was carrying thinking that it was his cat Mog (Shamsie, 2017, p.66). The man in the bright, red suit, named Charlie appears to be deranged since he believes that a piece of fur is his cat and once Aneeka says that she has met Mog and that she and Mog “are old friends”, he becomes really happy and leaves (Shamsie, 2017, p.66). The fact that Aneeka talks in an amicable manner just to make the man happy, which he becomes since he expresses his joy by uttering cheerful sounds, makes it clear that she had a soft, tender spot in her heart which urged her to be kind and to express warmth towards another human being who happened to be of unsound mind and in need of affection.

These instances question the authenticity of the claim that an individual can be one out of the two i.e. masculine or feminine, but not both and show that being “high in masculine traits” does not entail that a person has to be “low in feminine traits” (David, n.d, p.01). An androgyne therefore has a wide range of responses for various circumstances in life.

Instrumentality and Expressiveness
manifested by Aneeka

Androgyny entails an “instrumental” as well as “expressive” orientation in an individual and both these traits find expression in Aneeka thus making her psychologically androgynous (Bem, 1974, p.155). Instrumentality refers to an

individual’s persistence in seeking aims even if they have to be active in causing things to happen. Aneeka displays the ability to cause things to happen when she takes it upon herself to try and bring her brother back. Later, when her brother is “killed in Istanbul” and there is no hope for his corpse to be buried in London, Aneeka goes to Pakistan and refuses to bury Parvaiz’s body there (Shamsie, 2017, p.197). She uses media to convey her demand, of taking her brother’s corpse to London, to the government and her strategy is effectual as the High Commissioner of Pakistan says that “... the people and several opposition parties have decided to embrace a woman who has stood up to a powerful government and not just any powerful government but one that has very bad PR in the matter of Muslims” (Shamsie, 2017, p.228). These observations make it clear that Aneeka, even though in her teens, was confident “forceful and self-reliant” (Knoppers, 1980, p.185). Determination in pursuing aims is what makes her instrumental and efficient as an individual.

Conversely, she expresses warmth, affection and care, all of which according to Bem are stereotypically associated to femininity, when the matter of Isma’s PhD is mentioned in *Home Fire*. Upon seeing the “serious look” on Isma’s face, Aneeka “reached out to put a hand on their sister’s wrist” and later, “wrapped her arms around her”, as she sensed that something might be troubling her elder sister who was more like a mother to her (Shamsie, 2017, p.118).

Psychological androgyny entails the presence of any trait irrespective of its

classification as masculine or feminine. This is seen in Aneeka's character who displays masculine traits i.e. assertiveness and instrumentality as well as feminine traits i.e. yielding and expressive nature.

Aneeka as an Amalgam of Masculinity and Femininity

Masculinity is a concept that is deemed to be completely opposite to femininity and hence the presence of "Instrumental/agentive" or masculine traits is presupposed to imply an absence of "expressive/ communal" or rather feminine traits (Cook 1987, p.472; Bem, 1974, p.155).

Traits that are deemed to be opposite ends of a continuum are displayed by Aneeka Pasha. She is a character whose masculine as well as feminine sides are fully active and she engages both facets of her personality as and when required. Where getting things done is involved, she acts in a business-like manner and keeps emotions at bay. This is the reason that she is able to develop a close relation with Eamonn while keeping her actual purpose of approaching the guy fresh in her mind. She knows that if her family and friends get involved in their relationship, she might have difficulty in achieving her goal and might not be able to get her brother back at all. This is apparent from the following textual evidence according to which Aneeka did not want her sister Isma to think that she could use Eamonn "as a conduit" to her (Shamsie, 2017, p.73). She makes it clear that she does not want any of those things that happen.

On the other hand, her feminine side becomes apparent in her dealings with her

siblings as well as with Eamonn. Hugging her sister Isma and providing comfort to her brother Parvaiz by the "accompanying sound of her heart beat", by touching his "arm" when she sensed that he was worried and being affectionate to Eamonn are evidence of her soft, compassionate and thus, feminine nature (Shamsie, 2017, p.139; 152). It is therefore evident from the discussion that Aneeka demonstrates a mixture of traits ranging from being "sharp-tongued to considerate", from "serious minded to capable of unbridled goofiness" as well as "open to absorbing other people's pain" while at the same time being unfeeling and cold when it comes to her father, in different situations (Shamsie, 2017, p.23). This "equal endorsement of masculine and feminine attributes" and the resultant multifaceted personality make her a psychologically androgynous being (Bem, 1974, p.158-9).

Conclusion

The detailed analysis and discussion show that masculinity and femininity (instrumentality, assertiveness, agency and expressiveness, yielding disposition and communion) are present in human beings irrespective of their gender. Associating particular traits with specific categories i.e. masculine/ feminine and then labeling individuals as belonging to either category based on their biological make-up does not do justice to the unique meld of behaviors that are present in human beings. Men can be as macho as they want to be along with being tender while women can be as expressive as they desire along with being assertive. Behavior reconciles with whatever

the requirement of any particular situation is. Nadia and Aneeka are psychologically androgynous characters since they display traits and behaviors which belong to traditionally pegged, distinct categories that is to say masculine and feminine. The different behaviors that are displayed by Nadia and Aneeka assert that showing any trait whether stereotypically masculine or feminine, depends upon the need of the situation and not on one's gender, which serves to confine people within the clichéd restrictions. Therefore, psychologically androgynous individuals can be masculine if it is the demand of the situation and they can be feminine when the need arises.

Both Hamid and Shamsie deal with psychologically androgynous characters in a similar manner. However, they differ at one point which is the attention to physical appearance given by Aneeka from Shamsie's *Home Fire*. Nadia, on the other hand, does not give much attention to the way she appears or more appropriately to wearing make-up. What I have concluded from this instance is that psychological androgyny is a state of mind and does not have anything to do with physical appearance. Androgynes feel free to display whatever appearance they are comfortable with.

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