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LESBIAN ERASURE IN CONTEMPORARY REACTIONS TO THE LIFE OF VITA SACKVILLE-WEST

EL BORRADO LÉSBICO EN REACCIONES CONTEMPORÁNEAS A LA VIDA DE VITA SACKVILLE-WEST

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Abstract

This article focuses on the biographical facts that point to British author Vita Sackville-West's lesbianism, with the aim of identifying and questioning some of the modern discourses that define her sexuality in ambiguous terms, leading to a lesbian erasure based on sexist and heterocentric views. In order to do that, I will compare Sackville-West's own accounts and those of friends and family, with the conclusions drawn by those who have examined both her literary and social legacy. In order to expose and explain the heterosexist components of some contemporary reactions to Sackville-West's life, I will be examining some excerpts from blogs and websites dedicated to her while drawing mainly upon feminist and lesbian theory. The fragments from letters and diary entries are extracted mainly from Victoria Glendinning´s biography *Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West* and from Nigel Nicolson's *Portrait of a Marriage*, both of which I will refer to throughout the article.

Keywords: Vita Sackville-West, biography, female authors, lesbophobia, sexism, feminism.

Resumen

Este artículo se centra en los hechos biográficos que apuntan al lesbianismo de la escritora británica Vita Sackville-West con el objetivo

de identificar y cuestionar algunas de las perspectivas y discursos actuales presentes en páginas webs y blogs desde los cuales se aborda la sexualidad de la autora con términos ambiguos que han conducido a un borrado lésbico basado en perspectivas con sesgos sexistas y heterocentristas. Para ello, analizaré las propias declaraciones de Sackville-West, así como las de sus allegados, y estas serán comparadas con las conclusiones expuestas por aquellos que han examinado tanto su legado literario como social. Con el fin de exponer y explicar los componentes heterosexistas de algunas de esas reacciones contemporáneas a la vida de Sackville-West, procederé a examinar y discutir algunos extractos de blogs y páginas webs dedicadas a la escritora, apoyándome sobre todo en teoría feminista y lésbica. Los extractos de cartas y entradas de diario están recopilados principalmente en la biografía de Victoria Glendinning: *Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West* y en el trabajo de Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage,* a los cuales me referiré a lo largo de este artículo.

Palabras clave: Vita Sackville-West, biografía, autoras, lesbofobia, sexismo, feminismo.

1. Introduction

British writer and gardener Vita Sackville-West (Kent, England, 1892-1962) is best known in relation to the also British writer Virginia Woolf, with whom she had an affair that inspired one of the most famous and successful novels by the latter, *Orlando.* Vita Sackville-West had many female lovers and usually ran away with them, leaving her family behind. Her peculiar life has led some scholars and part of the public to define her sexuality and identity in ways that, as I shall argue, have contributed to lesbian erasure.

As Kaivola claims: "Like their contemporary counterparts, early 20th century women, necessarily made sense of their experience in the context of prevailing ways of thinking about sexuality and subjectivity. In the case of those for whom these discourses did not offer images that fit their lived experiences, the theories developed by their contemporaries, would have worked to obscure key aspects of that experience" (25). Defining historical figures in an accurate way -as much as the available data allows- is crucial to understand their writing and the subjectivities from which they wrote and handled their positioning in society. *Nightwood*, by Djuna Barnes, is a referential lesbian text in modernism and it is a clear example of the way in which lesbian writers managed to portray lesbianism in a way that may result evident for lesbian readers but palatable for the patriarchal one. Dianna Chisholm states

that "Nightwood's obscenity resists the proprieties of speech of an uncanny declaration of 'touching' profanation. In legal terms, *Nightwood* is a 'non-case'; yet it is defiantly obscene" (Chisholm 174). Although Sackville-West never addressed lesbianism directly in her novels, she definitely relied on her relationships with women as a source for inspiration for characters and plots, as it is the case of *Challenge*, in which the protagonist Julian is her alter ego and Eve is Violet Trefusis, Vita's lover. In relation to her Spanish gypsy ancestry, which she related to her unconventional character, Kirstie Blair argues that the gypsy figure served as a coded expression of same-sex desire among Sackville-West, Trefusis and Woolf, tied to Vita's gypsy ancestry and its association with "wayward femininity" and "deviant sexuality" (Blair 142–43). In a letter, Trefusis presents the gypsy artist as a split self, exiled from both bourgeois life into a shared symbolic discourse of transgression. Their invocation of gypsiness offered a way to speak of forbidden love and to resist the expectations of gender and class. In this sense, their relationships were not just intimate, but deeply political, disrupting dominant narratives of femininity and desire.

When reviewing some contemporary approaches that describe Sackville-West's sexuality as bisexual, pansexual, or queer, as I will reveal in the next pages, it can be observed how relevant information is omitted or undervalued in order to reinforce the idea that she liked men despite her undeniable exclusive attraction for women. In this article I aim to analyse and review some examples of recent cases of lesbian erasure in the life of Vita Sackville-West that appear in websites and blogs dedicated to the writer. The two main biographical sources are Nigel Nicolson's *Portrait of a Marriage* and Victoria Glendinning's *Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West*. In order to demonstrate that lesbianism is the most likely sexual orientation that can be attributed to Sackville-West, her own accounts and experiences with men and women will be contrasted. The texts I will be reviewing consider her bisexual or pansexual.

2. The life of Vita Sackville-West

Victoria Mary Sackville-West was born in England in 1892 at Knole House, Sevenoaks, Kent. She was the daughter of Victoria Josefa Dolores Catalina and Lionel Sackville-West, 3rd Baron of Sackville. The palace of Knole was the aristocratic home in which Vita grew up and where her ancestors lived. As Glendinning explains, Vita was fascinated by stories of her family on both sides, given that her maternal grandmother was a Spanish flamenco dancer called Pepita, born in Málaga, to whom Vita later dedicated

her book *Pepita*. As a consequence of that fascination, she travelled to Spain as much as she could and she felt a deep connection to the country: "It is my own country, you know, Harold, and my relations live there, and are swank, and poor, and proud, as I do..." (Glendinning 55).

Despite having always been immersed in lesbian affairs, Vita married Harold Nicolson in 1913 and gave birth to two children, Ben and Nigel Nicolson, who wrote *Portrait of a Marriage*, focusing on his parents' peculiar marriage and personalities. Vita and Harold's marriage was based on mutual affection and respect, but as she would later admit: "Men did not attract me in what is called 'that way'. Women did. Rosamund did" (Glendinning 42). In relation to her feelings, she also compared the kind of attachment she felt with Rosamund to the one she felt for Harold:

Similarly, Vita, in her 1920 autobiography, said it did not strike her as wrong that "I should be more or less engaged to Harold, and at the same time so much in love with Rosamund. The two feelings were unrelated. Harold was her dream 'playmate': Our relationship was so fresh, so unphysical, that I never thought of him in that aspect at all... Some men seem born to be lovers, others to be husbands; he belongs to the latter category" (Glendinning 48).

Vita started loving history and literature from a very young age and she took advantage of the huge library at Knole. While she was attending lessons at a school in London, she met the girl who was to become her first lover, Rosamund Grosvenor, and it was there too where she would meet Violet Keppel, the greatest love of her life (Glendinning 23–24). Since then, Vita and Violet became inseparable. In one of her escapades with Violet, Vita dressed in male clothes and called herself "Julian." They did this so that they could pass for a heterosexual couple (Nicolson 110). Vita describes the experience like this: "I looked like a rather untidy young man, a sort of undergraduate, of about nineteen. It was marvelous fun, all the more so because there was always the risk of being found out" (Nicolson 110).

As stated before, Vita found refuge in marriage stability, and a safe place to return to. However, when Keppel married Denys Trefusis, Vita was filled with rage and jealousy. As she admitted, "We both thought that she would gain more liberty by marrying, and Denys was prepared to marry her on her own terms, that is, of merely brotherly relations" (Nicolson 111). Despite this, when Violet's engagement was announced, Vita "nearly fainted" reading it in the papers (Nicolson 112). Out of jealousy, she did not attend the wedding. Later, she confessed having lost control: "I took her there, I

treated her savagely, I made love to her, I had her, I didn't care, I only wanted to hurt Denys, even though he didn't know of it" (Nicolson 114).

For Violet, marriage was torture and offered no benefits. For Vita, it was a tool that provided both stability and freedom. Violet would have left Denys; Vita would never leave Harold. Her paradox is clear: she gained freedom by adopting conventional roles, being "the wife of," one of the few ways women could move freely without suspicion. As Philippa Levine explores, non-conforming women often used marriage to their advantage:

> "Feminist women, married and single, were sharply attuned to the problems in which marriage might entrap them. Many chose not to marry, but for those who did, it was important that they enter their marriage assured of the position they would hold. To this end, many refused to promise obedience to their husbands, and many retained their own surname in addition to assuming that of their husband" (Levine 157).

When Vita feared the consequences of running away with Violet, Violet's reproach was: "They have taken you from me, Mitya. They have taken you back to your old life; you are so prone to take fakes for the genuine article, Julian is dead" (Nicolson 161). If anyone knew Vita well, it was Violet; her words reveal deep certainty that Vita's social image was not fully honest. This also frames Vita's letters to Harold, which may have been written with an outside reader in mind. As she confessed: "Harold was like a sunny harbor to me. It was all open, frank, certain; and although I never knew the physical passion I had felt for Rosamund, I didn't really miss it" (Glendinning 68). Nicolson also notes that Vita "has described her nature quite frankly... She was by no means frigid, but she came to look upon the 'normal' act of love as bestial and repulsive" (135).

This statement about Vita's view of heterosexual sex shows that her ability to have sex with Harold and have two sons does not necessarily mean she was bisexual or pansexual. Many lesbians initially enter heterosexual relationships due to social pressure, cultural norms, and internalized repression. This will be further explored in the following pages.

Although Vita had many female lovers, the most famous affair after Violet was the one she had with Virginia Woolf. Woolf knew of Vita's "sapphist" nature and the affair with Violet, which she would later portray in her novel *Orlando* (1928), inspired by Vita and described by Nigel Nicolson as "the longest and most charming love letter in literature" (Nicolson 214).

Virginia encouraged Vita to write for the Hogarth Press, and they ended up publishing many of her novels, which were met with immediate success. Virginia fell in love with Vita very soon, and as their relationship deepened, they managed to take a trip to Paris together. Unlike Sackville-West, Woolf did address lesbian themes in her novels and short stories, with *Mrs. Dalloway* being the most notable example. In this novel, Woolf explores a marriage marked by sexual incompatibility, where the wife, feeling she has failed her husband, finds herself more erotically drawn to young women (Lee 332). This subtle portrayal reflects Woolf's engagement with desire and identity, blending the personal and the societal in the exploration of female sexuality.

When Vita married Harold Nicolson, she was still too young and, judging by her own accounts, innocent and ignorant. Later in life, she admitted she wished she had known earlier that "such a thing existed":

> When we married, you were older than I was, and far better informed. I was very young, and very innocent, I knew nothing about homosexuality. I didn't even know that such a thing existed either between men or between women. You should have warned me. You should have told me about yourself and warned me that the same sort of thing was likely to happen to myself. It would have saved us a lot of trouble and misunderstanding. But I simply didn't know (Glendinning 47).

The ignorance coming from the lack of information and the assumption that sex can only be called sex if it occurs between men and women might have made Vita praise marriage even more. For her, marriage meant safety, a shoulder to cry on. As Kaivola observes, "Similarly, Vita's letter to Harold suggests the extent to which the science of sexuality eventually provided her with categories of thought that she did not have in 1920, despite the fact that by that time she had had what we would call lesbian experiences" (28). This lack of self-knowledge regarding sexuality causes many individuals to misinterpret their own feelings and desires, repressing a part of themselves that eventually leads them to unhappiness and discomfort without knowing how to address or solve that inner conflict.

Another aspect in Vita's sexual life that is often taken as proof of her bisexuality is the brief affair she had with Geoffrey Scott, also a writer. Nicolson describes how in 1923, "On a hillside, one lovely evening, when the moon rose above a sea of olives, he took her into his arms" (195). He also draws attention to the fact that he "cannot believe to explain ... what

reawakened her acceptance of a man's physical love ... but there is no doubt that for a few weeks at least it was absolute" (196). Geoffrey Scott, as Nicolson points out, was the exception that confirmed the rule, but even if we call this a passionate brief affair, it is important to consider whether it was relevant enough for it to be deemed as proof of her bisexuality. The affair lasted a couple of weeks and it was he who seemed to have taken the initiative, while eventually Vita wanted it to end:

> But behind it was a love that was strengthening in Geoffrey, as it weakened in Vita: When he returned to Florence in mid-February, he found a loving letter from her, written when he was still at her side. Then again, her letters began to cool ... and one can sense his anxiety in his attempts to fan her love into a fiercer flame (Nicolson 198).

In one of the letters Geoffrey wrote at that time, he declared that "You and I mean the same thing by love, something absolute and final. And if it needs be, merciless. You know you want it that way; you want me to love you like that" (198). But as Nicolson concludes, "The trouble was that she didn't. Her affair with Geoffrey Scott lasted for a few days. Her moderate love was killed by his greater love. It became for her something too demanding, too disruptive, and once she had begun to feel like that, her distaste gathered into disgust" (199). Given Vita's dating history and her attitude towards men, another interesting observation is related to the fact that being still relatively young and innocent, it must have been difficult for her to distinguish between romantic love or passion and what she had with Geoffrey, a relationship or affair that might have been driven by revenge, desperateness or even by a need of physical and/or emotional attention. Nicolson explained how his father "knew about the affair from the start, and in a curious way was rather pleased. He had an inner conviction that this was not a serious threat. He admired Geoffrey, liked him, and found him refreshingly different from Violet" (196).

During the summer of 1918, when Vita and Harold had already been married for five years, he wrote a letter to her in the midst of the most passionate and complex moments of her relationship with Violet and he expressed his despair in the following way:

> Little one – I wish Violet was dead ... She is like some fierce orchid – glimmering and stinking in the recesses of life- and throwing cadaverous sweetness on I loved you, and you turned aside. Such

> a slight deflection... and yet it hurt me so, it sent me away so hurt, darling (Nicolson 94).

As this extract suggests, Harold had always seen Violet as the main danger in their marriage and the main cause of his jealousy and desperation. If she ever lost Vita it would have to be because of Violet, a woman. When diving into Sackville-West's diaries and correspondence we will find demonstrations of affection and complicity towards Harold Nicolson. These were not consistent but there can be no doubt that a certain kind of co-dependency and attachment existed on both sides. The issue with these affectionate letters and statements is that a sexist or lesbophobic reader may interpret them as an example of heterosexual love, even though there are no sexual or romantic undertones:

> Oh Hadji, my darling, darling, Hadji (you are my darling Hadji, because if it wasn't for you, I would go off with Violet), there is another thing. You say you want to make love to me again. But that is impossible, darling; there can't be anything of that now—just now, I mean. Oh Hadji, can't you realize a little? I can't put it into words. It isn't that I don't love you. I do. I do. ... But at least I love you with a love so profound that it can't be uprooted by another love, more tempestuous and altogether on a different plane (Glendinning 165).

In this case, she says she loves him but cannot be intimate with him because it would be an act of infidelity towards Violet. The use of the adjective "tempestuous" and the way she describes that other kind of love as being "on a different plane" shows that for her those forms of love cannot be compared because they are not of the same nature. If she cannot give him what he wants, and her passion and feelings of loyalty are directed towards Violet, then it can be assumed that her love for Harold is not romantic or sexual attraction, but rather based on codependence. Female homosexuality does not exclude lesbians from forming deep emotional bonds with men as intimate friends for whom they may have honest and tender feelings without these evolving into romantic or sexual ones. Meanwhile, it is Harold who insists on intimacy and who fears losing Vita to Violet. Her replies may be more acts of reassurance than honest declarations of love, given the context.

As Johnston points out, "Tracing modernist representations of lesbian sexuality exposes the controversy surrounding the figure of the Lesbian and also her culturally complicated visible and invisible figuring. An oftentimes-

invisible sexual identity such as modernist lesbianism expresses itself through discourses that require new reading methods" (3). This means that we cannot always expect a lesbian author writing at the beginning of the 20th century to clearly state and admit her lesbianism. The reader should not interpret that lack of directness as evidence of the impossibility to define their sexuality, insofar as there are many ways in which a lesbian narrative can be traced and identified within their texts, whether fictional or not. In those letters, Vita does not seem particularly concerned about being unfaithful to Harold or vice versa, as long as their marriage stays intact. This suggests something about her true feelings for him, especially considering her jealousy in the affair with Violet. Being public figures, Vita and Harold had to perform heterosexuality, at least to a certain extent. Johnston explains that "Woolf's own privacy was so guarded that her nephew Quentin Bell was able to deny Woolf's lesbian relationship with Sackville-West in his 1972 biography of Woolf" (15). She also adds that lesbian authors "at times they manipulate the audience and they frame texts in order to control their textualizations of unrepresentable lesbian sexuality" (19). That means that texts written by lesbian women during that time should be read with close attention to the literary and personal limitations that shaped their ability to express desire in fiction. This is especially relevant when considering the internal struggle many faced when trying to accept their sexual orientation. Recent research suggests that what is often described as "sexual fluidity" may, in some cases, be the result of social pressure and internalized denial rather than a reflection of actual sexual identity.

One study found a strong connection between identity shifts and external factors such as religion, ideology, and social conservatism. As the authors point out, "political conservatism may be associated with lower levels of change (or reporting of change) from a heterosexual to an LGB+ identity," while "religiosity may increase the number of identity changes among LGB+ people or may be associated with less sexual fluidity among heterosexuals" (Lilly et al. 1354). Understanding these dynamics can help shed light on Vita Sackville-West's case, particularly the psychological forces that might have contributed to her need to perform heterosexuality and publicly reinforce a socially acceptable version of herself. The pressure to conform could explain why she clung for so long to the idea of being "normal," only to later admit, more openly, her lack of attraction to men. These findings support the idea that widespread social ignorance around sexuality has real psychological consequences, often making it harder for non-heterosexual individuals to

accept or even recognize their own identity. They may as well believe that they can experience heterosexual attraction, even if they cannot, thus labeling themselves as bisexual, pansexual, or queer—or any other term available to them—sometimes interpreting tender feelings as romantic. Johnston emphasizes how it is expected that

> Lesbian self-representation will differ from self-representations of heterosexual women or gay men, in part because eroticism between women was not only a marginalized sexuality in the early 20th century and was defined through attempts to deny its existence, modernist lesbian writers manipulated discourse in order to express lesbianism (Johnston 3).

3. Lesbian erasure under modern perspectives and discourses

A clear example of how lesbian desire in Vita Sackville-West's life has been strategically downplayed can already be found in the earliest autobiographical materials published about her. The editorial mediation of these texts, often shaped by heteronormative and patriarchal concerns, set a precedent for the kids of erasures that continue in more subtle ways today. Nigel Nicolson's framing of *Portrait of a Marriage* as a tribute to his father's tolerance exemplifies how lesbian desire has been downplayed to preserve heterosexual respectability. . As Kate Lilley notes, he presented it as "a defense of the forbearance and understanding of his father," centering Harold rather than Vita's love for Violet (2019:12) Most of Vita's letters to Violet were also destroyed, reinforcing this erasure. Though Vita's manuscript survived its publication depended on editorial choices that softened its lesbian force, illustrating how lesbian narratives often reach us only through compromise and patriarchal mediation.

Moving on into the ways in which current discourses and biographical analysis on historical personalities act upon the lesbian legacy, I will be analyzing a few examples that can be found online in several articles and blogs dedicated to "queer" historical women. A clear example appears on the website Making Queer History, which includes an article dedicated to Vita Sackville-West. In it, her sexuality is described as unclear. On the contrary, Harold is defined as gay and not as bisexual, even though it is very likely that he actually felt romantic and sexual attachment to Vita, given his jealousy and sexual interest in her:

> This desire was reflected most obviously in Vita's rejection of traditional relationships. While her exact sexuality is unclear, it can be said that Vita was either bisexual or pansexual. She took many lovers over the course of her life, both male and female, and she loved them all with a fierceness that was essential to her identity ... Violet was naturally distressed by Vita's marriage and the seeming 'taming' of Vita that occurred post-marriage. In reality, Vita genuinely loved Harold but understood that her husband was gay.

The main conflict that arises with this analysis of Vita's sexuality is the way in which they propose bisexuality or pansexuality as the only labels that can define her sexuality. In contrast, Harold is defined as homosexual despite being the one who controlled Vita, feeling jealousy over her female lovers. As we have seen, he expressed in many occasions how much he wanted to make love to her despite her physical "coldness". Another important gap present in this analysis is related to the fact that the writer does not explain who were those alleged male lovers that she is said to have had, stating that she "loved them all fiercely" -men and women-. As mentioned before, there had only been one brief relationship Vita had with a man outside of her marriage and it did have no real impact on her. No other heterosexual relationship outside the marriage is recorded in any biographical text; meanwhile, her affairs with women are widely known to have been numerous and intense. Given that Vita Sackville-West lived during the first half of the 20th century, the labels available for people who were not heterosexual were stereotyped, so it is not surprising that the this might have made her feel confused, insecure and even reluctant to consider herself a homosexual woman. According to Karen Kaivola:

> Despite the social stigma of being labeled lesbian, some women clearly did consider themselves accurately represented by the image of the sexual invert offered by the sexologists, taking on this label as a sign of their own identity ... However, not all women who loved women self-identified as masculine or found in the representations of inversion images of the self with which they could easily identify (Kaivola 25–26)

At the same time, assuming that Vita knew and understood that Harold was homosexual might be problematical, for, in a way, both of them were innocent regarding this topic, at least during the first decades of their

marriage. It was not until they were older that they apparently gained that self-knowledge and learned more about both female and male homosexuality. As Glendinning observes, "she knew that there were 'effeminate' men (and Harold was not effeminate) but she did not know the physical realities of male homosexuality. Neither did she know that there was a name for the love she and Rosamund felt for one another, or that the Rosamund affair was too pale into insignificance beside the Violet affair" (47). Glendinning dwells into Vita's reaction to the first sexual encounter with Harold and how she presumably described it in '*Marian Strangways*', a fictional text that she wrote after getting married to him. She quotes the following excerpt:

> Then, rapidly, overwhelmingly, everything changed, and she knew nothing save that she lay crushed in his arms in the fierce night ... She knew that at last an irresistible cosmic force of nature, no longer to be denied, had flung their two lives together and shattered them into one. ... Her companionable love for Basil [Harold], half-friendship, half-playfellowship, had not sufficed. She lost all reason save of her primitive instincts ... he was her man and her master, and in her awakening womanhood she desired nothing but that she might yield to him the most abased subjection (67)

If this is read from a feminist perspective, it can be assumed that the mind of the character is ruled by patriarchal and sexist views even though we are dealing with a female character created by a woman. There are at least two possibilities: that Vita actually felt that way regarding Harold, or that she believed that was indeed how a heterosexual woman feels when having intimacy with her husband. It could also be completely fictional, but given Vita's views on marriage, it is difficult to believe that there are no autobiographical references included. Therefore, it might be that she was writing from a feminist point of view trying to portray the way in which some women might feel and long to feel subjected to men. If she felt like that with Harold despite having admitted not feeling attraction for him, this might explain the way in which patriarchy and ultimately compulsory heterosexuality leads women to self-destructive thoughts and behavior. Adrienne Rich's concept of "Compulsory Heterosexuality" analyzes and criticizes previous feminist works that fail to highlight the importance of the imposed sexual behavior that is inherently related to the way heterosexuality is portrayed in society (Rich 631–660). As a consequence of that imposition, women are forced into a way of living that might not be natural for most

of them. Cheshire Calhoun discusses lesbian representation in literature and feminist theory and tries to find the reasons behind that lack of lesbian perspective

> Outside of literature whose specific topic is lesbianism, lesbians do not make an appearance in feminist writing except via an occasional linguistic bow in their direction executed through the words "lesbian", "sexual orientation", or "sexualities" ... The turn in feminism to an anti-essentialist, difference-sensitive frame promises to open whatever doors may formerly have been closed against lesbian inclusion ... In an effort to combat the racism, classism and other biases built into earlier feminist theorizing, "difference" has largely replaced "woman" as the category of analysis (Calhoun 7–9).

With this observation, Calhoun exposes the dangers of questioning the political subject of feminism, always assumed to be women, focusing instead on other identities while ironically reducing the lesbian identity as an exception and not as an alternative to the oppression inherent to heterosexuality that all women are driven to, even lesbians. This view turns the word "woman" into a condition incompatible with "lesbian", separating both realities. While queer theory might interpret Vita as bisexual, emphasizing the fluidity of sexuality, this perspective becomes problematic when viewed through a feminist lens. In cases like hers, it is essential to seriously consider the role of compulsory heterosexuality in shaping women's choices, especially given that she lived in a sociohistorical context where marriage, motherhood, and heterosexual love were not only expected, but demanded. Whereas for some people sexuality can actually be fluid, the idea that it generally is or could be for anyone, can contribute to lesbian erasure and increase that social pressure or expectations that still nowadays see heterosexual relationships as the norm. Since being a lesbian means not feeling attracted to men at all, but to women, the idea of sexuality being fluid or unstable, can increase insecurity and guilt in lesbians, especially those who are still fighting social pressure and looking for referents in their journey to self-discovery and acceptance. This is one of the reasons why lesbian erasure needs to be discussed within a socio-historical context.

In her famous novel *All Passion Spent,* Sackville-West also uses her female protagonist as an example of how women's personal decisions can sometimes be based on a desire or longing to be submissive as a way of avoiding reality: This is portrayed in a conversation that the widowed Lady Slane maintains

with her male friend FitzGeorge, who becomes aware of how some women surrender themselves to patriarchy, something that Deborah Slane admits to be true:

> 'My dear Mr FitzGeorge!' cried Lady Slane. 'You really mustn't talk as though my life had been a tragedy. I had everything that most women would covet: position, comfort, children, and a husband I loved. I had nothing to complain of – nothing. 'Except that you were defrauded of the one thing that mattered'... Your children, your husband, your splendour, were nothing but obstacles that kept you from yourself ...'Don't scold me any more,' said Lady Slane, looking up and smiling; 'I assure you that if I did wrong, I paid for it. But you mustn't blame my husband.' 'I don't. According to his lights, he gave you all you could desire. He merely killed you, that's all. Men do kill women. Most women enjoy being killed; so I am told. Being a woman, I daresay that even you took a certain pleasure in the process ... 'No,' said Lady Slane; I think it is rather a relief to have been found out.' (125-126)

In blogger.com[1] there is a section called Biography in which Sackville-West is included and referred to as a bisexual woman. Again, the text dedicated to her does not mention any heterosexual relationship aside from her marriage, not even the affair with Scott; but her relationship with Violet is mentioned. It is therefore impossible to tell why she is assumed to have been bisexual while admitting and exposing her lack of sexual and romantic interest in men within a paragraph titled "Personal life, marriage and bisexuality":

> Also, the two women had made a bond to remain exclusive to one another, meaning that although both women were married, neither could engage in sexual relations with her own husband. Sackville-West received allegations that Trefusis had been involved sexually with her own husband, indicating she had broken their bond, prompting her to end the affair.

4. Conclusion

The main conclusion that can be drawn from the perspective of the person who wrote this while defining Sackville-West as a bisexual woman,

1 https://biographies123.blogspot.com/2008/01/vita-sackville-west.html

is the existence of internalised patriarchy and heterosexism in which the idea that a woman not interested in men beyond a friendship is not even considered. From this perspective, the sexual and romantic implications with other women would most likely be interpreted as a result of choice and not of a natural sexual and romantic attraction towards women. If that is the case here, we are definitely faced with an example of a lesbophobic discourse in the present day.

The psychological pain that compulsory heterosexuality causes on most women—even those who identify as heterosexual—has been avoided or not addressed as much as it should have been, and it has led many to think and speak of lesbianism as a personal decision or a matter that has nothing to do with sexism and the oppression of women as a whole. In *"Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"*, Rich observes:

> In none of them is the question ever raised, whether in a different context, or other things being equal, women would *choose* heterosexual coupling and marriage; heterosexuality is presumed as a "sexual preference" of "most women", either implicitly or explicitly. In none of these books, which concern themselves with mothering, sex roles, relationships, and societal prescriptions for women, is compulsory heterosexuality ever examined as an institution powerfully affecting all these; or the idea of "preference" or "innate orientation" even indirectly questioned (Rich 633).

This debate should encourage us to reflect on how the imposition of heterosexuality infiltrates women's lives, restricting not only their freedom to act but also to think. This phenomenon must be recognized as a form of patriarchal control and explored thoroughly within feminist texts and discussions. When no alternative forms of love or relationships are acknowledged and life is filtered through a heterosexual lens, it becomes difficult to foster critical thinking or to truly explore one's authentic desires. Lesbian feminists therefore insist on the importance of a lesbian perspective, considering lesbianism not merely a sexual preference but a liberating feminist statement: "Published during the 1970s and 1980s, *The Coming Out Stories, The Lesbian Path, and the New Lesbians* narrate a lesbian identity heavily influenced by the emergence of lesbian feminism, particularly its view of the lesbian as the truly woman-identified woman" (Calhoun 10). Referring to the times in which Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf lived, Kaivola notes how the lack of information and actual lesbian referents affects self-

definition, even if the chosen label doesn't fully reflect one's feelings or ideas: "Although Woolf and Sackville-West lived in a different historical moment, one in which the new scientific/medical category of the 'lesbian' was taking hold and changing how women related to one another, they occupied just such unsettled and luminal territories" (Kaivola 25). Despite social progress regarding sexuality and identity, wrong assumptions are still made today about historical lesbians like Woolf and Sackville-West. Kaivola affirms that assumptions common in their time persist and remarks that "[t]he co-existence of heterosexual and homosexual intimacies in their lives has understandably – perhaps inevitably – led to a wide range of views of and assumptions about their sexual identities" (Kaivola 22). The previously quoted fragments in which Vita insists on her lack physical attraction to men and describes Harold as a "playfellow" or "sunny harbor to return to" are also relevant.

In the website Fronds with Benefits which focuses on LGBTQ stories we find an article dedicated to Sackville-West titled "LGBTQ Botanists in Pride Month: Vita Sackville-West". Although it covers the aspects regarding her marriage and her affairs with women, in one of the last sections, the author takes for granted Sackville West's bisexuality and explores this issue under the subtitle: *Bisexual liberation*. In this part, they argue that "despite writing the memoir for scientific purposes in order to present bisexual people as normal, in it, she describes herself as having "unnatural" and 'perverted nature' because of her bisexuality". The author also points out that "however, she also describes in it her acceptance of her bisexuality as a 'liberation of half [her] personality'". The conflict here arises with the unjustified opinion that Vita Sackville-West was bisexual and that the uncomfortable feelings she felt towards herself had to do with her loving both sexes rather than with her social face and role of wife versus her "wild" lesbian nature.

As an example of how this tendency of assuming Vita's bisexuality has already made its way through popular opinion and discourse, we see an example in a blog called Stories of Her, dedicated to remarkable women and their life stories. The blogger, Ally, has included the life of Vita Sackville-West focusing on her sexuality, and gave this text the following title: "The Baroness and Her Legacy of Ingenious Mockery: Vita Sackville-West". In this case, the allusion to Vita's sexuality is already made in the introduction: "She was more than Virginia Woolf's lover. Vita Sackville-West was a wild, bisexual baroness who rose to prominent for her ingenious mockery of 1920s

stereotypes". We can also find a similar contradiction to the one we saw in the website Biography, for the author also alludes to Sackville-West's lack of interest in men while still referring to her as a bisexual woman: "[H]er mother did everything she could to pair up her daughter with potential suitors ... [b]ut Vita didn't like rich, noble men. Or men at all, come to think of it". Again, the blogger gives evidence that makes the reader think we are dealing with the life of a homosexual woman, but that label is evaded and erased under the term "bisexual" without any justification. More information is given about her preference for women: "What Victoria didn't know is that Vita wasn't interested in the men Victoria lined up for Vita because Vita was smitten with a *woman* named Rosamund Grosvenor".

Referring to Portrait of a Marriage and Nigel Nicolson's work, the blogger explains how "[m]uch later, Vita's son Nigel uncovered thousands of letters detailing Vita and Rosamund's intimate moments. Nobody had a clue. But Vita never categorized herself as 'gay'. She followed her instincts in life. Pursuing Rosamund was as natural to her as beating up all those boys". The fact that the blogger proposes Sackville-West's lack of self-identification as a way of justifying the label "bisexual" confirms the resistance to acknowledge the existence of homosexual women. Obscuring these tendencies from a feminist point of view might lead to the conclusion that some women are afraid of acknowledging the relevant gap between women who like men and those who do not. Accepting this may lead to unease about their own relationships with men, as it confronts them with the idea that lesbians may represent a more genuinely woman-identified existence. The persistent reluctance to acknowledge lesbian identity in public and scholarly discourse, such as the blogger's justification, can be read through Judith Butler's concept of the "exclusionary matrix" (*Bodies that Matter*). Butler argues that identity categories are formed through the production of a "constitutive outside": that which must be excluded for coherent subjecthood to emerge. In this case, lesbian identity becomes the abjected position, rendered unintelligible unless filtered through more culturally palatable frames like bisexuality. The blogger's need to sidestep lesbianism confirms the ongoing discursive regulation of women's same-sex desire, aligning with Butler's claim that normative identity formation depends on the erasure of what threatens its boundaries. This discomfort makes it challenging to fully recognize that relationships between women are not only valid but can also offer deep personal fulfillment. Such recognition has the potential to impact feminist thinking and challenge

the patriarchal system at its core. This aligns with Calhoun's argument, who concludes the following:

> It is not true that "each part of my identity is separable from every other part, and the significance of each part is unaffected by the other parts." Nor can heterosexist oppression be cleanly isolated from gender, race, class, and ethnic oppressions. But it is surely equally wrong to eliminate lesbians and heterosexist oppression from the picture. And this is exactly what has happened. The one difference that is not allowed to appear as such is the difference between lesbians and heterosexual women. The one structural and institutional barrier between women that is not allowed to appear is institutionalized heterosexist oppression. (Calhoun 11)

With this analysis, Calhoun addresses the importance of acknowledging lesbianism as a reality that many women identify with or could potentially identify with. Lesbian love should not be disregarded, seen as a mere choice, or placed at the same level as identities that do not challenge heterosexism in the same way. Following this train of thought, Johnston observes how "The autobiographical texts by these women outline and alternate tradition in psychology, literally, and offer and alternate tradition in autobiography" (Johnston 25). It is also important to highlight that it is not their love or passion for women that is being erased, but the fact that those feelings were exclusive towards women.

To conclude this discussion, I would like to draw special attention to the previously exposed facts that point to the existence of a specific kind of lesbian erasure happening even within feminist and LGBT-friendly discourses. This occurs mainly while exploring the legacy of some historical women like Vita Sackville-West who did not have at her disposal all the information and education that exists in the twenty-first century regarding sexuality and particularly lesbianism, something that might have led those women to regard themselves as weird and to define their own needs and personalities in negative ways. Having this in mind, it can be said that the main cause of lesbian erasure in the present has its roots in a deeply established sexist view of women in which lesbianism is not compatible with womanhood. The concept of "women" as being inseparable from the supposedly natural and innate attraction towards men often relegates lesbians to the margins within feminist discourse, therefore ignoring or refusing to address those personal

and political differences between women who like men and those who do not. The interesting phenomenon that leads some people to avoid the word or term "lesbian" in the present day also needs to be examined within feminist studies. Lesbian relationships and their political and liberating power are frequently reduced to mere friendships or as a "passion" secondary to the bonds with men. This lesbian erasure results in a lack of referents for new generations of women in general, and lesbians in particular, who might be seeking reassurance in the lives of women of the past. If the lesbianism of women like Vita Sackville-West is erased, it will be more difficult for other women to identify as lesbians because of the lack of awareness about how the time in which people live can shape and condition their actions and hide their real identities, away from prejudices and social punishment. On the other hand, the literary and political legacy of these women cannot be fully understood or appreciated if their lesbianism is denied or detached from the powerful messages and radical ideas conveyed through their extensive and valuable body of work. Erasing this aspect of their identity risks distorting or diminishing their contribution, allowing lesbophobic readings to obscure the depth and significance of their voices.

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