

Quest for Self in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

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ABSTRACT

Jeanette Winterson, a modern British writer handles the lesbian themes in unique style in her novels. She is a feminist and a lesbian writer who brought to the forefront the issues related to female sexuality. In her novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette Winterson challenges the conventional thinking of binary oppositions which favors heterosexuality over homosexuality. Simone de Beauvoir implies that gender is “an aspect of identity gradually acquired. She states that gender is the cultural meaning and form that body acquires, the variable modes of that body’s acculturation” (Butler, 35). The novel rests on the idea of self-exploration against the religious dogmas imposed by society. This paper attempts to highlight Jeanette’s eternal search for freedom – freedom to express her, freedom to be her own self. The story of protagonist parallels the life of Winterson but it is chiefly analysed in the light of lesbianism... In her search for self, Jeanette finds escape from her Bible obsessed mother, and re-frames her life and gave a new perspective to her story. This paper attempts to reflect upon the issues of lesbian identity among the orthodox patriarchal discourse in the novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. The desire to move away from convention and normativity is the core of this novel.

Key words: patriarchy, dogmas, heterosexuality, sexuality, gender

Jeanette Winterson *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) is a novel which traces the journey of a girl named Jeanette towards self-realisation, individuality and her true identity. She is born in the

world of defined sexual identities and brought up under the ideological influence of her religious, orthodox mother and church community. Her mother, Louisa is a firm believer of truthful translations of the Bible, and interprets *the Bible* according to her own discernment and endeavor to influence all things around with her religious dogmas. She uses Jeanette as an instrument to accomplish her own religious goal and she generously uses religious oratory to hold her black and white view of analysing the world. She governs her daughter's life as per the heteronormative religious canons which act as an institution of religious patriarchy. Jeanette articulates "We had a lot of Bible quizzes and my mother like me to win" (Winterson, 1985, p.7) and exclaims "sometimes my mother invented theology" (Winterson, 1985, p.5). Louisa considers Jeanette a missionary child and wanted to frame her life according to her own desires and perceptions. Jeanette exclaims about her mother,

She had a mysterious attitude towards a betting of children; it wasn't that she couldn't do it; more that she didn't want to do it. She was very bitter about Virgin Mary getting there first. So she did the next best thing and arrange for a foundling. That was me (Winterson, 1985, p.3).

Jeanette's mother considers sex as a sin and an "unnatural passion" (Winterson, 1985, p. 83). She used to protect Jeanette from evils, particularly those which are connected to gender and sexuality. She forbids Jeanette to have any contact with two ladies who run a paper shop and live together, as "they dealt in unnatural passions" (Winterson, 1985, p.7). Louisa doesn't speak to her daughter about the tabooed issues of sex, gender, sexuality and the body, so Jeanette unpretentiously believes that "unnatural passions" are the indicator of the fact that the couple sells adulterated sweets. Gender theorist Judith Butler with her influential publication *Gender Trouble* (1990) has conceptualised the notion of gender as a "free-floating artifice" (p.6). She argued that masculine and feminine are artificial constructs supported by imposed heterosexuality. She begins her book with an attack

on one of the central assumptions of feminist theory that there exists an identity and a subject that requires representation in politics and language. Butler like de Beauvoir asserts that gender is a process which has neither an origin nor an end; it is something that we do, rather than we are. Butler dispenses with the difference between sex and gender, as sex was already a gender. Sex and gender are “phantasmatic” cultural constructions which contour and define the body. Sex and gender are “discursively constructed” and there is no implied freedom beyond discourse. Sex, gender and sexuality does not exist in relation to each other i.e. there is no possible link between one’s body and one’s gender. Thus, gender is not what one is rather what one does. Explicating further, Butler in *Gender Trouble* says:

Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal overtime to produce the appearance of substance of a natural sort of being.(p.33)

Butler’s particular interest lies in disrupting this appearance of natural continuity and making gender trouble. Louisa believes in the world of binary opposites, her world is only black and white. Helene Cixous’s reference of the binaries epitomizes the concept of gender dichotomy which is pervasive and persists across many dimensions:

Activity/Passivity
Sun/Moon
Culture/Nature
Day/Night
Father/Mother
Head/Heart
Intelligible/Palpable
Logos/Pathos
Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.
Matter, Concave, Ground – where steps are taken, holding and dumping ground.
Man/ Woman. (1989, p.101)

These binaries given by the French feminist thinker illustrate how the perception of gender opposition exists in the society of which Louisa is a part. Binary systems bounds and rules out those people and the stories that exists outside the standard norms. Jeanette's mother either loves or hates,

Enemies were: The Devil (in his many forms)
Next Door
Sex (in its many forms)
Slugs
Friends were: God
Our dog
Auntie Madge
The Novels of Charlotte Brontë
Slug Pellets (Winterson, 1985, p.3).

Jeanette becomes deaf at the age of seven and she was unable to hear pastor's speech. Her mother didn't take her to the hospital but informed everybody that Jeanette is "in a state of rapture" (Winterson, 1985, p 23), and she could not allow anybody to speak to her. Miss Jewsbury, a closeted lesbian, brings Jeanette to the hospital for the treatment where she gets to know that the condition is due to biological problem rather than spiritual rapture. It is the moment of transformation for Jeanette where she begins to question the faultlessness and infallibility of her mother's hollow ideology:

Since I was born I had assumed that the world ran on very simple lines, like a larger version of our church. Now I was finding that even the church was sometimes confused. This was a problem. But not one I chose to deal with for many years more. (Winterson, 1985, p 27)

Her deafness allegorically represents her rejection to yield to the patriarchal notions that forces her to kill her authentic self. It is the moment when she realises that mother could not provide the answer to every question of hers. In the hospital, she met Elsie Norris who altered her cataracted vision about the world which portrays only one truth, one perception and one

world. Elsie emerges as an imperative figure in Jeanette's quest for life and to ascertain her gender identity. Elsie widens the horizons in Jeanette's life that "what looks like one thing may well be another" (Winterson, 1985, p. 30). Jeanette endeavors to arbitrate the things in her own way, distinguishing the internal world (her identity) from the external world (her mother, the church).

When she was admitted in the hospital, her mother frequently sends her oranges along with some "get better soon" letters. The only fruit that is given by Louisa to Jeanette throughout the novel is the orange,

The only fruit,' ... Fruit salad, fruit pie, fruit for fools, fruited punch. Demon fruit, passion fruit, rotten fruit, fruit on Sunday. Oranges are the only fruit (Winterson, 1985, p. 29).

In the later part of the novel, when Jeanette becomes ill again, her mother brings her a bowl of oranges, and the following situation takes place:

I took out the largest and tried to peel it. The skin hung stubborn, and soon I lay panting, angry and defeated. What about grapes or bananas? I did finally pull away the other shell, and, cupping both hands round, tore open the fruit. (Winterson, 1985, p 113)

Oranges act as a symbol of dominance of heterosexuality over homosexuality. Her mother has narrowed her choice of offering fruits to her which symbolises the restrictions that are put on her in terms of choice and preferences. She is not also comfortable in eating orange which also symbolises that she feels painful in making adjustment to the narrow, restricted, heteronormative view of the world. By considering "orange" as "the only fruit" (Winterson, 1985, p. 29), Jeanette's mother denies all the possible notions of sexuality to her daughter. In general, Oranges also represent the repressive ideology that hinders the growth of Jeanette. Her mother interprets the world on the basis of her binaristic thinking which is reflected in Jeanette's musing, "I remembered the famous incident of the man who'd come to

our church with his boyfriend. At least, they were holding hands. ‘Should have been a woman that one,’ my mother had remarked” (Winterson, 1985, p 127). This leads Jeanette to think that her mother despite of being compliant to the relation between the two men discards the fact and make believe that one of the men is a woman.

One day, when Jeanette visit to collect peas, she met an old woman who predicted her sexuality and utters “‘you’ll never marry’, she said, ‘not you’ and you’ll never be still” (Winterson, 1985, p.7). This incident throws light on the attitude, for not accepting anything other than compulsory heterosexuality. Butler in *Gender Trouble* writes,

[t]he cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’ and those in which practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” (1990, p.24).

Jeanette’s view about life and the church takes a radical change with the passage of time and she develops a romantic feeling for a girl named Melaine. She expresses her love saying,

“Melaine, I plucked up courage to ask at last, “why do you have such a funny name?” She blushed. “When I was born I looked like a melon” (Winterson, 1985, p.29).

Jeanette becomes conscious of her sexual orientation and valiantly challenges the binaries of male/ female bond of compulsory heterosexuality. Jeanette inquires about the nature of men and women, and the relations between them. Jeffrey Weeks has argued that sex, as an act, attains meaning in social relations. We make choices about sexuality by understanding its social and political contexts. Weeks asks us to move away from a moralistic approach to sex (treating it as good or bad) to look at the power relations that situate these acts, to see how coercive forces in society limit the possibilities of choice, autonomy and pleasure (1997, p. 81-82).

Jeanette does not consider love as an “unnatural passion” and for her love of any type is not a sin Jeanette converses with Orange demon and inquires that “Demons are evil, aren’t they?” (Winterson, 1985, p. 106) and the demon reciprocates

Not quite they are just different, and difficult. ... We’re here to keep you in one pieces, if you ignore us, you’re quite likely to end up in two pieces, or lots of pieces, it’s all part of the paradox.” But in the Bible you keep getting driven out”. “Don’t believe all you read” (Winterson, 1985, p. 106).

Jeanette’s unveils the curtain that world is not just binary and her journey of self-exploration has started. When the Church and her mother came to know about her love-affair with Melaine, both were asked to regret and repent publically at church for their evil conduct. Under the sway of religious patriarchy, Melaine succumbs but Jeanette flees to the house of Miss Jewsbury, who is herself a lesbian. Jeanette was in dilemma between the real world and the reality projected by her mother. The next day, authorities of church started the exorcism process of purifying the demons from Jeanette. Jeanette was imprisoned into a closet for 36 hours without anything to eat and the priests members stay there, “praying over [her], laying hands on [her], urging [her] to repent [her] sins before the Lord” (Winterson, 1985, p.107) and due to physical distress she then repents for the sake of her freedom. Mary Mackintosh explores in the famous essay, ‘The Homosexual Role’ (1968) that society constructed itself as pure and safe by labeling some persons as ‘deviant’ and criminal. Any person adopting homosexuality would be considered a demon and thus punished accordingly. Homosexuality and criminality attracted the same punishment from society (2009, p.187). Jeanette always feels that she had not committed any sin by loving Melaine.

Jeanette again gets involved in the church affairs as she passionately delivers her own sermons and Melaine becomes invisible in her life. Jeanette again falls in love with Katy, a recent convert. Jeanette’s mother abandoned her, as she would bring

evil to the house. She consequently liberates herself from the clutches of church and begins her journey towards self-love and self-exploration. Jeanette exclaims "I knew my mother hoped I would blame myself, but I didn't" (Winterson, 1985, p.134). Jeanette defies all the rigid patriarchal norms that rely upon only binary truths and labels her mother a hypocrite, "If there's such thing as spiritual adultery, my mother was a whore" (Winterson, 1985, p.135). Jeanette questions the interpretation of Bible like the mythical stories in the Deuteronomy Chapter. With her strong desire and will-power, Jeanette battles throughout the story between her mother, the church, and her sexual preference. When Melaine appears in Jeanette's life after their love-affair was over, Melaine proffers her an orange and Jeanette expresses her anguish saying, "No, don't do that. ... Don't waste it" (Winterson, 1985, p.29). Her denial symbolises her refusal to surrender under dominion of religious patriarchy which considers lesbianism as an evil.

In her quest for self, Jeanette takes courage to break the popular notions of sex and gender. In the journey of life, Jeanette dictates,

I miss God who was my friend. I don't even know if God exists,
but I do know that if God is your emotional role model, very few
human relationships will match upto it" (Winterson, 1985, p.170).

In the novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette destabilises the notions of gender identity by labeling them as a socially constructed ideology. Jeanette asserts in the novel, "walls protect and walls limit" (Winterson, 1985, p.112) and it is "in the nature of wall that they should fall" (Winterson, 1985, p.36). Her view of self transcends the hierarchal boundaries that have long suppressed the sexual relations. Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy* calls gender a "costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance" (1986, p.238). Throughout the novel, there occurs a dispute related to sexual roles and gender subjectivity Jeanette exposes the

prevalent conventional ideology like religious hypocrisy and heterosexual politics and emerges as a triumphant in the race of self-exploration and sexual identity.

The end of the novel gives an astonishing revelation: Jeanette's mother has started her missionary service for the blacks and she serves them pineapple because "she thought that's what they ate" (Winterson, 1985, p. 172) and she also claims that "oranges are not the only fruit" (Winterson, 1985, p.172). She has also made pineapple as a part of her meal which portrays that she has broadened her scope of choices. Now, the white and black communities exist together in the mother's church, likewise that the mother's black and white perception about the world has also started to smudge.

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