



Femininity Representation in Jeanette Winterson's Postmodern Novels:

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1985) and the Passion (1987)

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Received: 05/06/2022

Accepted: 12/09/2022

Published: 30/09/2022

Doi: 10.53284/2120-009-003-032

Abstract:

This paper puts flesh on the bones of the question of femininity in postmodern British literature. Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are Not the Only fruit* (1985) and *the Passion* (1987) are the chosen materials through which the author tries to challenge the traditional way femininity is represented in literature. The paper attempts also to offer an inside insight into the complex reality of Winterson's female characters, and how they are torn between their femininity and societal expectations of women. Hence, with a vivid feminist consciousness, Winterson presents her female protagonists in an endless struggle to overcome gender norms and embark on their journey of self discovery. Conclusively, Winterson's depiction of her female characters as rebellious is, in fact, a way to show her revolt against all forms of women suppression.

Keywords: femininity; representation; gender; Jeanette Winterson; Gender Norms

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender, one of the most debatable and prominent terms in our age, is regarded as an important element of one's identity since it represents the conception of the individual's self (as man or woman/ a boy or a girl/ or some combination of both man /boy and woman/girl) that influences the person's interactions with other people as well as with the environment around him/her. Indeed, gender, particularly femininity has been a central concern in feminist theory which pilled a lot of ink to investigate and analyze the concept's meaning and explanatory power.

Gender is, then, a term with multifarious complications in content and structure; and a process that is continuously negotiated at different levels due to its differences and oppositions. These differences in fact widen the gap between the two genders: males and females, and frequently result in the hierarchy and oppression of one gender over the other (mainly male over female). Therefore, Feminist theorists have expended considerable effort in combating these differences and traditional gender ideologies and overcoming naturalizing claims about women's subordination and innate inferiority to men.

Despite the fact that women and their femininity portrayal have been a key preoccupation of literature in various forms, they have never been up to date than in today's multicultural world. Jeanette Winterson, one of the most outstanding British postmodern authors, demonstrates a wide range of topics and concepts in her novels, but her primary interest is depicting her female characters in a unique and a prototypical way.

As an adopted child, Winterson fought against the constraints of the prejudiced society she lived in, and, most importantly, her own self, which tried to conform to imposed norms on the one hand while aiming to follow personal desires on the other. As a result, the portrayal of her female protagonists as rebellious women is, in fact Winterson's struggle to reject the way society expects her to behave as a woman. This stereotypical portrayal appears to be a carbon copy of the author's life.

Winterson's female characters in these two works are presented as strong, resourceful, domineering, wise and make assertive choices. The protagonists try to challenge the stereotypical image of femininity as the 'other', the inferior or the subordinate as well as to subvert conventional gender representations and often seeks an alternative to escape the traditional image of womanhood.



2. Gender: A Philosophical Investigation

For most people sex and gender are quite similar: women are human females, and men are human males. In Western cultures, gender is an identifying aspect of individual identity; from the time they are born, people are treated separately based on their sex. While most people are born males or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviors including how they behave and interact with others from the same or different sex within the community.

Moreover, from an early age, male and female babies are dressed differently and in different colors. Stereotypically, society outfits *male infants* in blue and *girls* in pink, *even* appealing these *colors* as coded *gender* labels. Additionally, pink colored gifts are stereotypically given to baby girls while blue ones are given to baby boys. Hence, this act makes one puzzled to question if the babies have already preferred these colors.

As a matter of fact, gender has long been considered to be socially constructed, as explained by authors such as Millet (1971), Haslanger (1995), and Mikkola (2017), to name a few. This idea has been accepted as common knowledge for a long time and which automatically raises the question how does the construction of gender work? Gender was widely used to refer to masculine and feminine nouns, such as *le* and *la* in French.

Until the 1960s, the psychologist Robert Stoller, started employing the word *gender* to describe how much feminine and masculine behaviour an individual displays and the word *sex* describes the biological characteristics of a person. He began using the terms 'sex' and 'gender' to differentiate between biological qualities and the lot of femininity and masculinity a person reveals. Along with Stoller, Mikkola (2017, p11) gives a similar definition: Gender denotes men and women depending on social factors such as social roles, position, behaviour and identity and sex denotes the biological characteristics of someone's body.

Moreover, it implies that the set of roles and responsibilities which are linked to being a man or a woman are clearly different, and they are correspondingly strengthened in society through political and educational systems. At the practical level, for example ideas and norms about which features (such as clothes, colors, and sports) are associated with a specific gender evolve over time. What was considered regular or normal for one gender at one particular moment in time may later be regarded atypical for the same gender. Pink, for instance, was once considered a typical color for boys, but in recent years, it has become a popular choice for girls. As we move forward, we may see changes in gender norms.

Moreover, Parents frequently treat their male and female children differently, and they even utilize clichéd language: girls are described as delicate and sensitive, whereas boys are characterized as strong, attentive, and coordinated. Gender roles in some societies are more rigid than those in others. They differ in different contexts and different periods. As an



illustration, in Iran, it is common for two men to walk in public while holding hands, whereas this is not the case in Europe or the Arab world. More so, it is also common to hear that boys should not cry because it is shame and weeping itself is a female feature. Simultaneously, girls are not expected to perform heroic deeds which are normally male's features since women are not characterized with heroism and courage.

Several scholars have written about how gender roles are formed. According to Rubin, gender differences are prompted by social interventions in which people are told not to act in a certain way. (Mikkola, 2017, p12). On a slightly related note, Millet, like Mikkola, contends that gender has a cultural character. In other words, the behavioral characteristics we associate with men and women are obtained culturally, implying that femininity and masculinity are socially constructed. For her, gender is "the sum total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression" (Mikkola, 2017, p31). In this context, Millet sees gender as a social learning process in which both men and women are socialized into particular roles.

2.1 Gender Socialization

Gender socialization means that females and males become women and men through a process in society whereby they acquire feminine qualities and get feminine behavior. Femininity and masculinity come to exist as a result of how individuals are raised by their parents; there are some social forces that give birth to gendered individuals and shape the way women and men exist. This explanation fits the claim of Simone de Beauvoir that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'; which evidently refers to gender socialization.

Judith Butler, inspired by J.L. Austin, believes that gender is performative, which implies that every act is a recitation (Butler, 1990, p187). When something is performative, it has a variety of effects. When someone says, "I promise you," they are saying this phrase while also making a promise and changing your expectations. The repetitious nature of the actions performed is a prominent characteristic of performativity (Butler, 1990, p xii). For Butler, Gender "is real only to the extent that it is performed, and is formed through a set of repeated acts.

To take an example, if young boys would start putting lipstick one day, and they would carry on to do so for the years to come, then our perceptions of what is appropriate for young boys to put lipstick would shift with time. To her, gender "ought not to be construed as a stable identity [...] gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts." (Butler, 1990, p179). With this in mind, we can understand that gender identity is unstable; since gender is performative then it clearly exists only when it is performed.



Equally important, Butler emphasizes the fact that there cannot be a gender identity before doing gendered acts. This is obviously echoed in her comment that there “is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 1999, p33). This plainly means that gender identity occurs while doing gendered acts, not before. All in all, gender identity is not a prerequisite for gendered acts. Gendered acts and gender identity seem to occur at the same time.

3. Femininity

It is worth noting that most gender research has not provided a thorough examination of femininity as a concept. Femininity is commonly conceived of as the 'Other,' the subordinate to males and masculinity. Hence, femininity becomes, to some extent, the polar opposite of masculinity, defined entirely in opposition to it. This way, man is guaranteed the dominant side while women are the weak and the subordinate. Connell solidifies this idea arguing:

Femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell, 1987, p94)

Since it is neither superior nor equal to masculinity, Femininity traditionally denotes the weaker, an existing entity, but unfortunate and less important that require masculine virtues to balance it out.

Many feminist theorists have been fascinated by an inherent femininity. In her essay "One Is Not Born a Woman," Monique Wittig (2007) emphasizes that if one must wonder how to be a woman, then being a woman is not a universal state of being. For her, neither biology, psychology, nor the economy identify femininity; rather, civilization determines and produces the process of femininity. As a result, femininity is a historical, social, and cultural occurrence in space-time. Anthropologists have long argued that femininity is rooted in a complex system of socio-cultural contexts rather than psychological characteristics..

Overall, identifying femininity has always been linked to gender roles, which are practices that people are expected to perform simply because of their gender. Women are no exception; roles in society have long been affected by gender roles. According to Goodman (1996), femininity is defined as a set of roles and responsibilities associated with the biological sex, as well as concepts based on these functions such as motherhood, marriage, and childbearing (Goodman, 1996, p44) She also affirms that these ideas about women wrongly presented them as weak, inferior, and subordinate, which automatically broadened the conception of masculinity's great cultural value. This stereotypical view has always been

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taken for granted and considered as obvious and needs no comments. Patriarchy also emphasizes this stereotype, institutionalizes male's hegemony and adheres societal gender roles. All in all, femininity is the outcome of disciplinary activities that result in a body that has a distinctively feminine appearance. As a result, regardless of we are born male or female, patriarchy's disciplinary methods and rules shape us into masculine or feminine individuals.

4. Transgressive Femininity in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985)

Winterson's first novel, *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit* (1985), has been classified as a bildungsroman and viewed as autobiographical. It follows the development of an adopted young girl named "Jeanette" as she struggles to accept her own femininity. The protagonist recounts her life story beginning at the age of seven, when she is obligated by the church and her mother to follow the oppressive rules imposed on her. Jeanette's life is dominated by her Christian fundamentalist mother, Louie, who dominates Jeanette's life as well as the life of the absent father. Jeanette's mother had educated her at home until the age of seven, mostly through reading the Bible and following its guidelines.

Winterson's first novel, "*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*," which was embedded in her autobiography, achieved enormous fame and success, as did many of her subsequent literary works. This 'portrait of a woman as a young artist,' as critics have dubbed it, depicts femininity and masculinity in reverse. It defies the binary systems of active versus passive, power versus weakness, and superior versus inferior by exploring the sophisticated interplay of masculine and feminine voices.

Winterson makes an attempt to destabilize and surpass the binary frame that introduces the multiplicity and flexibility of sexuality and gender in this novel. Her work dissolves the conventional understanding of gender as well as the perception of the derogative binaries male/female, man/woman, and masculinity/femininity.

Jeanette gradually realizes that there are differences between her own opinions and those imposed by the Church. She realizes that everything that has been imposed on her can be called into question. Jeanette's mother believes that "oranges" are the only fruit throughout the novel. Jeanette's mother offers her oranges whenever she is unsure or feels uncertain. In fact, these "oranges" have seemed to represent the actual constrictive system or patriarchal ideology that prevents Jeanette from finding her true self.

Nonetheless, Jeanette succeeds to be a nonconformist woman due to her rebellious attitude toward her mother and refusal to conform to expectations of society. As a result, Winterson's protagonist is ascertained enough to cross boundaries and violate the sacred in order to begin her journey of self-discovery.



4.1 Rebellious Femininity

Winterson introduces a new type of character, "Jeanette," who accepts her sexual orientation by disrespecting the sacred. Winterson speaks out against the notion that men and women have predetermined biological roles or that they exist in a biological binary. Despite the fact that the text is woman-centered, the female characters are ironically patriarchal. All of the religious women in the story are staunch supporters of oppression: "The women in our church were strong and organized." If you want to talk about power, I had more than enough to keep Mussolini happy" (Winterson, 1987, p124). Jeanette's comments in this section provide a proper understanding of Winterson's female characters. Her entire environment becomes an authoritarian source.

Jeanette is aiming to perform some gender roles by using religion as her guide in life despite the fact of having an authoritative mother presented in a female patriarch. Religion, on the other hand, has a specific sexual ethics belief that mandates that there should be only one type of sexuality, which is heterosexuality or religious, which denies any fluidity or plurality of sexual domains. Religious teachings assert that gender is derived from sex, and thus gender roles are derived from biological sex. This heterosexual sexuality system rejects the possibility of other sexualities

Jeanette, at the start of the novel, becomes a submissive girl on whom her mother inscribes specific cultural acts. Jeanette becomes aware of her nonconformist attitude early in the novel. As a child she frequently listened to neighbors' conversations as she hears a lot about men and marriage, particularly from the ladies who run the paper shop: "If they're not careful folk will think they're like them two at the paper shop" (Winterson, 1987, p74). These two women live together and they even share the same bed.

Moreover, her mother, as a stern representative of Catholicism, never approves of the women and will not allow her daughter to accompany them to the beach. She soon discovers, however, why her mother dislikes the women. She just believes these women are dealing with 'unnatural passions'.

Her mother, in fact, is one of those mothers who raise their daughters to be the women society expects. However, Jeanette is a woman whose femininity is transgressive and rebellious apparent in her refusal to conform to societal expectations to the point that she cannot categorize the social and romantic heterosexual relationships around her. Her sexual tendency is totally in opposition to her social environment. In her recurrent dream, she saw herself getting married in a white dress with a golden crown and when she reaches her future husband, she finds that he either has become blind or a pig (Winterson, 1987, p71). Jeanette's dream reflects her fears about marriage and urges her to think about relationships between men and women.

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Accordingly, Jeanette's self discovery is accomplished through transgression. She crosses the boundaries on the way to pursue her femininity as a lesbian. Transgression also occurs when Jeanette rebels against the fruit 'orange' which is considered by Louie as the only fruit. In some circumstances, by taking orange as the only fruit, the mother tries to repress Jeanette's desire from flipping out of the heterosexual route. However, for Jeanette, oranges are not the only fruit" (Winterson, 1987, p29).

5. Unconventional Femininity in *the Passion* (1987)

The *Passion* (1987) by Jeanette Winterson is a metafictional novel that rewrites the story of Napoleon Bonaparte's War through two main characters: Henry, a mal French soldier cook, and Villanelle, a female who is sold to the French army as a prostitute. It is set in the historical context of the French Revolution (1789) and the Napoleonic War (1803). The story centers around the negative impacts of the Napoleonic war on a disillusioned young man who eagerly joins the army, only to be physically and spiritually destroyed by Napoleon's tyranny, thirst, and patriarchy, as well as the roughness of military life in general.

In this novel, Winterson not only presents the patriarchal framework of society, but also provides a woman who transcends this system.. I can be seen as a feminist novel through Winterson's cleverness of subverting gender stereotype and roles. The female character's identity is a good example to show the author's opposition to patriarchy and the oppressive social order. Villanelle is then a woman who does not conform to society's expectations of women.

The female character is represented by Winterson as unconventional heroin. She is naturally born with webbed feet, a distinctive feature which is a genetic mistake since this particularity is traditionally masculine attributes (because only men and precisely boatmen can have webbed feet in Villanelle's society). In spite of being a woman, Villanelle trespasses gender stereotypes in the novel: " my feet were webbed. There never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen" (Winterson, 1988, p51). This female character is therefore, androgynous and dares to go beyond categories of physicality and gender; she becomes as an intruder in her society that dresses as a boy: "her body crosses over the boundaries of binary opposites, too, her identity being fickle for it is a conflation of a man and a woman a human and animal, and the double identification is encoded in her body and sexual orientation" (Front, 2009, p 103)

In the *Passion*, Winterson scrutinizes a stereotypical approach to gender roles. She interrogates the discourse of identity and the portrayal of women. Through this approach, she wants to show that human identity is multifold so that many identities can blur. The main character comes to manipulate herself and her identities the way she aims as she changes her physical appearance frequently through different masks. More important still for our discussion, Villanelle "gains... the power to choose gender" as a result of her



physical transformation (Front, 2009, p103). She has two faces and two identities, allowing her to create illusions about her true self. Villanelle deftly switches between costumes and masks because, as she puts it, "dressing as a boy is part of the game" (Winterson, 1988, p 54).

Her dresses serve as a form of disguise, while her body defines contradictions and a denial to her identity that, when combined, form an androgynous harmony. Villanelle's duality restructures her identity, which is caught between both femininity and masculinity. She has numerous affairs while disguised as a boy, both with men who are attracted by her sensual delicacy and physical appearance and with women who are drawn by her obscurity and mystery. Thus, the life of Villanelle is characterized by her quest for femininity that is not easily sought and represent an obstacle in the protagonist's path to discovering one's self. In one of the passages, Villanelle asserts:

I looked at my palms trying to see the other life, the parallel life. The point at which my selves broke away and one married a fat man and one stayed here, in this elegant house ... Perhaps our lives spread out around us like a fan and we can only know one life, but by mistake sense others ... Sometimes, drinking coffee with friends or walking alone by the too salt sea, I have caught myself at that other life, touched it, seen it to be as real as my own ... Perhaps I would never have sensed other lives of mine, having no need of them. (Winterson, *The Passion*, p. 144)

The protagonist tries to question and search for herself as a woman who is hidden under the sophisticated face and smile and among the pile of clothes asking: "what was myself? Was this breech and boots self any less real than my garters?" (Winterson, *the Passion* 65–66). Successfully at the end of the story, Villanelle decides to set up her womanhood and avoid hiding herself under any appearance. The following quotation illustrates well the protagonist's decision to take control of herself : "I don't dress up any more. No borrowed uniforms. Only occasionally do I feel the touch of that other life, the one in the shadows where I do not choose to live" (Winterson, *The Passion*, p.150).

Winterson attempts to question femininity and identity which represent a problem to the character, suggesting a possible approach which usually has not been considered : the idea of embracing the duality. Therefore, the idea of formulating the female protagonist whose femininity is troubled is Winterson's technique of managing to give way to an enigmatic and full of endless possibilities to femininity. Consequently, the character is given sufficient space to exist as a human being with her weakness, strength and desires without conforming to social stereotypes of gender that naturally limit her actions.

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The novel is then empowering to women in many ways, in the sense that all of the women in the story are strong and have the freedom and choice to do whatever they want. Women have created their own kingdom; even the heroines of fairytales are portrayed as brave, strong-willed, educated, and self-sufficient.

Overall, Winterson's goal, like many other feminist authors, is to rewrite femininity, expose it as socially constructed, and free it from the chains of masculine colonizing discourse. She portrays her protagonist, Jeanette, as a rebellious woman who seeks her true self and values her identity as a lesbian despite being raised in a religious household with the intention of turning her into a missionary.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to decipher the notions gender/femininity from a philosophical point of view, and the way they become a trouble for the characters of Jeanette Winterson's novels: "*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*" (1985) and "*the passion*" (1987). In *Oranges* Winterson presents the story of her own life through her protagonist who appears to be her alter ego- a girl who not only bears the same name as her, but also seeks a life beyond society's norms. Refusing the law and defying religious edicts Jeanette becomes a rupture in the prevailing discourse; she disrupt gender binaries and reveals that gender/femininity is not a closed system, rather a continuum which therefore opens up the possibility of multiplicity.

In common with many other feminist authors, Winterson aims to question traditional gender views, rewrite femininity, expose it as socially constructed and liberate it from being fettered by masculine colonizing discourse. She portrays her protagonist Jeanette, who is raised in a religious environment as a transgressive female who ventures to seek her true self and cherish her individuality as a lesbian.

Furthermore, through *the passion* (1987), Winterson manages to search for the true self and attempts to stabilize her identity which is hindered by the imposed norms and societal standards. Winterson's woman character in this piece of work is presented as strong, resourceful, domineering, wise and makes 'assertive choices' trying to challenge the stereotypical image of femininity as the 'other' or the subordinate.

Hence, the character demonstrates her immense desire to pursue a free self that is multiple, diverse and not clear to determine. Consequently, Winterson gives her characters sufficient space to exist as just an ordinary people with human desires, needs and weakness without conforming to any social constructs of gender. On the whole, both works might be seen as an evident comment on the established perception of women and femininity.



As a final comment, one can say that Winterson destabilizes hegemonic patriarchal gender ideologies by inserting nonconforming female characters and seeks to declare that gender is fluid and femininity is thus performative. Furthermore, the author deviates from traditional depictions of women as unimportant, passive, inferior, and naturally irrational, instead portraying them as active, powerful in relation to their lives and destinies. The analysis revealed that the perception of sexuality is a very important aspect of female identity and should not be interfered with by the patriarchal discourse's orthodoxy.

The different depictions embraced by her female protagonists challenge the dominant male discourse and directly reflect the 'real women experience', which not only enhance the female experience, but also free it by disturbing the different taboos set by patriarchy. In the *Semiotics of Sex*, Winterson states that her work is "always pushing at the boundaries we thought were fixed" (Winterson, *the Semiotics*, p.116).

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