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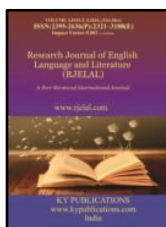
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## UNSEXING AND SUSPENDING GENDER IN JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *ORANGES ARE NOT THE ONLY FRUIT* (1985)

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### ABSTRACT

The period since World War II has seen a paradigm shift in attitudes to gender and sexuality. A cultural revolution has also taken place in terms of social attitudes to the make-up of the family, same-sex relationships and our understanding of sexual identity. Many literary stalwarts have explored the implication of these changes. Erotic fables intended to undercut and challenge conventional notions of history, gender and fixed nature of reality were produced. Jeanette Winterson, Britain's oft-talked about mainstream writer deals powerfully in her novels with the implications of the changed attitudes to gender and sexuality. The present study has chosen Winterson's, *Oranges are not the only Fruit* and aims to focus on gender and sexuality to see how they are effectively portrayed in the work of fiction.

**Key Words:** Paradigm shift, gender, sexuality, sexual identity, erotic fables, undercut, challenge, implications.

### Introduction

The period since World War II has seen a paradigm shift in attitudes to gender and sexuality. The sexual revolution of the late 1950s and 60s and the work of the feminist movement has profoundly changed the way in which men and women relate to each other socially, culturally and economically. A cultural revolution has taken place in terms of social attitudes to the make-up of the family, same-sex relationships and our understanding of sexual identity. One of the central theses of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was summed up by the line, "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one." (Beauvoir 102). This position recognized that although individuals are born as male or female, the development of masculinity and femininity is not determined at birth, but is learned through the process of socialization.

Femininity and masculinity, therefore, are a series of artificial constructs or codes of behaviour

that are maintained and reproduced by the dominant ideas and practices in society. It was also shown that the prevailing constructs of gender change historically. Identifying these codes as constructed and historically contingent, and not natural or essentialist, made it possible to argue for a resistance to the way in which society had conventionally demarcated roles for men and women. The cultural understanding of femininity and masculinity has changed significantly over the forty years or so since the 1960s and contemporary British novelists have explored the implication of these changes. Similarly, changed attitudes to sexuality have occasioned many late twentieth century writers to examine and express new ways of approaching sexual identity. Erotic fables intended to undercut and challenge conventional notions of history, gender and fixed nature of reality were produced.

Jeanette Winterson, Britain's oft-talked about mainstream writer deals powerfully in her novels with the implications of the changed attitudes to gender and sexuality. She is often described as one of the most controversial yet innovative novelists in contemporary English literature. An inventive lesbian feminist author whose fiction explores the nature and varieties of erotic love, Winterson is widely regarded as one of the most talented and provocative contemporary writers. She is the kind of writer who dared to disclose her open support towards the issues of gender and sexuality in general and lesbianism in particular. Winterson is commonly read and understood as a postmodern, post feminist and lesbian feminist author. The present study has chosen Winterson's *Oranges are not the only Fruit* (*Oranges*) and aims to focus on gender and sexuality to see how they are effectively portrayed.

Jeanette Winterson burst on the literary scene with her first novel, *Oranges*, a bildungsroman which examines the meaning of love and lesbian sexual identity and stands out as Winterson's most structurally conventional and overtly autobiographical story. The narrator Jeanette relates the story of her cloistered childhood and adolescence as the adopted daughter of working class Pentecostal Evangelists, who raise her to become a preacher and missionary. Most often first novels are thinly disguised autobiographies. *Oranges* clearly draws very heavily on Winterson's own experiences. The novel is divided into eight chapters and each chapter is given the name of a book of the Old Testament, from Genesis (the story of Jeanette's early life), through Exodus (her occasionally traumatic experiences when she ventures out into the world outside home and the church) onto Ruth (Jeanette's own love for other women reflected in the Bible which most movingly portrays the emotional commitment of one woman to another.)

#### Discussion

*Oranges* clearly tapped the increasing popular interest in the way in which gender and sexual identities are constructed in mainstream British culture. The novel broke down and challenged prescribed attitudes (especially religious ones) to sexuality and to the role of the nuclear

family in maintaining established gender roles. *Oranges* presents gender as irresolution. A close analysis of the text clearly reveals how gender is here done and undone. In *Oranges*, a masculine quality in a female character and a feminine quality in a male character are seen as a sign of strength and change. In the novel, male characters are represented in a variety of different ways. Jeanette's father is a weak figure and does not play a great part in family decisions or in the narrative as a whole. As Jeanette says of him: "Poor Dad, he was never quite good enough" (*Oranges* 11).

Jeanette's mother is the dominant figure in the relationship and controls her father either through ignoring him completely or making sure he adheres to the codes of behaviour set down within her religion. Her mother also takes on the household roles conventionally attached to the male; she is, for example, building a bathroom for the family. Their marriage appears to be one of convenience. It is explained that, Jeanette's mother "had a mysterious attitude towards the begetting 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 the Virgin Mary getting there first. So did the next best thing and arranged for a foundling" (3-4). And that is Jeanette.

Although Jeanette's family is not conventional, one of the alternative social units in the novel is the church group to which Jeanette and her mother belong. Women predominantly people this group and it is, in one sense, a kind of matriarchy, a contingent and localized form of female power. The social relationships Jeanette experiences in both her family and the church serve to disrupt conventional roles of masculinity and femininity and this extends to Jeanette's perceptions of gender codes around her. From an early age, she resists the prevailing codes of femininity that society tries to impose on her. Jeanette's sexuality offers another challenge to the traditional codes of masculinity and femininity. When Pastor Finch tries to account for the relationship Jeanette has with Melanie he argues that it is due to Jeanette subverting the established roles between men and women. Finch defines lesbianism in terms of Jeanette unnaturally taking the role of the man in her relationship with Melanie.

Jeanette feels particularly betrayed by the fact that her mother agrees with the pastor reimposing a patriarchal narrative onto Jeanette's behaviour. The character of the Pastor is shown to be typical of men who stand for authoritarian and tyrannical values.

Winterson outlines the sexist history of the church in the pastor's assertion that Jeanette's assertion arose because she acted beyond her gender's limitations. The pastor's position arises from a strongly sexist belief that women are biologically inferior to men. In *Oranges*, sexist notions seems ridiculous because Jeanette appears to be one of the most rational members of her church who is able to manage conflicts during their crusade while also preaching the gospel. With the exposure, Winterson condemns such sexist and homophobic rhetoric. In addition to challenging the idea that women are biologically inferior, Winterson raises her voice against the idea that men and women have set biological roles, or that they exist in a biological binary. For Jeanette, a woman is a woman and a man is a man. She sees the idea of gender as one that is socially constructed. In other words, Winterson feels that there is not a clear biological role for men and women, but that they act instead as society decrees that they should. The bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible, could be illustrated in a text like *Oranges*.

*Oranges* is an out and out lesbian text. It tells the story of an adopted girl called Jeanette, growing up a lesbian inside a strict religious community. It is the story of Jeanette's quest for subjectivity and (homo)sexuality. Through her struggle for autonomy and sexual identity, she sketches a counter-narrative of conventional masculine bondage that highlights female specificity and gender difference. Being an adopted child, Jeanette herself reports that from a very young age she always knew that she was special. Ironically, this specialness most obviously relates to her future as a lesbian, a group often categorized as special and different since as a lesbian she will not fit into the normal dualistic, heterosexual world. As Jeanette grows into her teenage years, she falls in love with a girl called Melanie, her first lover. When Jeanette

admits her passion for Melanie, all of the community's resources are mobilized to exorcise these deviant impulses. She is threatened with permanent exclusion from the community of the saved. The conflict between lesbianism and religion represents religion as a cruel and violent oppressor and lesbianism as its pitiful victim.

"Compulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real implies that being lesbian is always a kind of miming, a vain effort to participate in the phantasmatic plenitude of naturalized heterosexuality which will always and only fail" (Butler 722). Winterson argues that the cultural and social violence exercised against homosexual originates in part from the instability of heterosexuality, a fear that such identity may be a contingent construct that serves as a defensive bulwark against a potentially overwhelming reality of diverse, ethically neutral sexual choices and identity possibilities that exist simultaneously in the self and in society. It is against this reign of heterosexuality that Winterson raises her voice.

She comes up with the idea that sexuality and gender are variable and indeterminate; they do not align with simple multiple polarities and can take multiple, highly differentiated forms. She is more inclined to lesbianism which society stigmatized as a kind of deviant behaviour. She opines that the world is not made up of binary oppositions. She perceives lesbianism as an alternative way of existing within an apparently dominant heterosexual culture. According to her, lesbianism is an ordinary, a normal way for people to relate to each other. She stresses on the fluid nature of identity, that is, on its free-floating nature. She offers a world of multiple genders and sexualities and not a world without gender or heterosexuality.

Her aim is to disrupt and denaturalize sexual and gender categories in ways that recognize the fluidity, instability, indeterminacy and fragmentation of identities. The novel goes on to suggest that the reader's own identity may well be implicated in the uncertainty fostered in the text, and that in order to fill the ensuing void, an active, interrogative and creative reading is thus generated.

Winterson moves on to suggest: "I don't believe in happy endings. All of my books end on an ambiguous note because nothing ever is that neatly tied-up, there is always the blank page after the one that has writing on it, and that is the page I want to leave the reader. I too am leaving this page to the reader with the intent of inviting all possible explorations.

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