



New Women in Jeanette Winterson's Selected Novels

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Abstract

One of the contemporary post-modern feminist writers i.e. Jeanette Winterson whose name has become synonyms with the lesbian writings, has left indelible mark in the literary arena with her bold depiction of women's issues. Her works revolve around the depiction of love, art, time, self-discovery and the mastery over the art of narration. The paper studies her three novels *Written on the Body*, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruits* and *Passion*. She has tried to represent the self in her novels from the point of the lives of characters and herself. It's important to delve into her life experiences which she has directly or indirectly depicted in her works.

Key words: Jeanette Winterson, identity, New Women, Self-discovery, sexuality *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, *The Passion*, *Written on the Body*

Introduction

In early 80s and 90s, there was a huge political, social and economical transformation in Great Britain. There was massive influx of emigrant population towards Europe from colonies shaping multicultural territories from almost white society. During 1960s and 1970s, there was a great transformation in sexual outlook in the society. Winterson's childhood was very challenging that made her strong and self-confident. She had very few books at home

including the Bible. She reveals “I wake and sleep languages. It has always been so. I had been brought up to memorize very long bible passages.” She used to read her small collection of books secretly. During her teen years, she started reading books on literature and history at public library. When she discovered her sexual orientation towards, she turned out to be a lesbian who stood her against her parents and Orthodox Church. She left home at the age of 16. As a researcher, I have noted that Jeanette Winterson gives vent to her feelings more than her imagination. In *Oranges are Not the Only Fruits* she makes the character speak on her behalf.

“I cannot recall a time when I did not know that I was special” (*Oranges 1985: 3*).

Lesbianism is one of the novel concepts in post modernism duly exploited by Jeanette Winterson in her works. She has very boldly expressed her views on this controversial issue as conservative society does not regard this as ethical practice. One of her first novels *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruits* was published in 1985 and is a semi-autobiographical novel, it records the story of an adopted orphan namely Jeanette who is struck between her love for God and her love for women. Her adopted parents are orthodox catholic Christian. Despite all the problems, she has very good terms with her religious family until the revelation that she is a lesbian. The writer has portrayed the narrator’s sexuality very positively in the conservative society with lot of restrictions.

Many critics find similarity between this novel and Winterson’s life but one of the well-known scholars writes “*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (2005)* is more than just a realist autobiographical text” (p. 30). She wanted to portray a very strong character in the text which she seems to have done quite successfully. Winterson seems to have strong aversion to the religious realities. She believes that religious is ideal and provides supernatural and miraculous solutions from God. Jeanette learns in the church that God is generous to his obedient people and punishes the bad people who are indulgent in evil deeds. But in the novel, the protagonist, Jeanette feels that God is pitiless to her and doesn’t favor her. Through these sort of episodes in the novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruits* Jeanette Winterson portrays rebellious character who relies more on logic than religion. Winterson attaches a biblical story of *Moses* with the story of Jeanette in the novel, She compares *Moses’s* sense of betrayal by

his people to that of Jeanette's suffering who was expelled from her house and abandoned by the church. Jeanette says that,

I was in trouble. Picking up my bible, the hill seemed the only place to go just then. On the top of the hill is a stone mound to hide behind when the wind blows. The dog never worked it out; used to pee against, or to play hide and seek with me, but still stood ears flattered and water-eyed till I slung her up in my jacket and warming both of us. (p. 127)

Another important text i.e. *Written on the Body* also revolves around the themes of love and loss. The unnamed narrator loves a cancer specialist Elgin's wife Louise. There is a very concrete reason behind not revealing the gender of the storyteller. She wants readers to assume themselves whether the story is centered on heterosexual or homosexual relationship. Louise abandons her husband and lives with the narrator who is oblivious about her being seriously ill. Jeanette Winterson uses poetic form and flashback technique to describe Louise's leukemic body with minuscule details with the addition of humor. Winterson does not reveal the real gender of the protagonist in the novel because she does not consider sex as the benchmark of one's identity. According to Susan Lanser the novel *Written on the Body* falls under the category of queer text. The writer gives too much attention to modern viewpoints rather than stereotypical notion of considering the body as taboo in the society. The narrator prioritizes the body narrative in the text,

"Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there." (89)

Another important novel of Jeanette Winterson i.e. *The Passion* was published in 1987. It is centered on the disastrous romance between a couple during Napoleonic Wars. This novel is also evaluated in terms of gender, sexuality and androgyny. The protagonist of the novel Villanelle likes to look like male and female by dressing up that way and has no issue at all

with this sort of unique way. She falls in love with a woman and kisses her who is dressed as a boy. She is also the one who inherits boatmen's webbed feet purely related to the boy. In this novel, Jeanette Winterson does not socially and religiously stigmatize sexuality and bisexuality and considers them as normal thing.

“The Blessed Virgin's a woman too, for all that she's Holy, and there's no man I know can get his own way with her. You can pray all day and all night and she won't hear you. If you're a man, you'd much better stick with Jesus himself. Go straight to Jesus, I say (he's got a statue near by), but they don't heed because every man likes to think he's got a woman listening to him.” (41)

In the above quote, Jeanette Winterson shows the readers how the religion is also gendered. She also points out how people choose their faith as per their conveniences and experiences. Winterson also raises the pressing issues of women in her novels.

Conclusion

Though the paper studies her novels at micro level, from the pertinent deliberations, the objective of touching upon the topic of the study has been met with regard to the depiction of women in her novels. Her women characters are super modern who defies all unconventional and stereotypical notions of defining the gender. She openly endorses the homosexuality in her major works. The texts under study i.e. *Written on the Body*, *The Passion and Oranges Are Not The Only Fruits* are the perfect examples of the imputation of strong women in her novels. The main features of Winterson's writings are her strong narratives and the language. She creates an atmosphere that suits her characters and their development in the direction she wants. Her novels, right from the very first one, are directly inspired by her own life.

Her novels encompass multiple layers of meaning that are subjected to the readers' multivalent analysis of narratives. Hence, they offer abounding opportunities for the researchers to expand the horizon of their studies.

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