



The Gender Trouble and Body Narrative in Jeanette Winterson's Novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruits*

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Abstract

As one of “the 20 Best of Young British Writers” coined by the famous literary magazine *Grant*, Jeanette Winterson has been well-known for her lesbian themes. Her semi-autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruits* is the most controversial one. In this novel, Winterson deconstruct the binary opposition system dominated in the heterosexual world, reconstructed a liberated view on love in the homosexual world and presented her strong feminist thoughts through the exploration of the gender troubles. In examining these issues, the novel presents body as the object, content and medium of narration, and explores body narratives in constructing alternative views on love and gender.

Key Words: Jeanette Winterson; *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruits*; Gender trouble; Body narrative; Compulsory heterosexuality

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INTRODUCTION

For her radical writings of lesbian experience, Jeanette Winterson has already become one of the most

controversial and innovative novelists in contemporary Britain. Her works mainly deal with gender polarities and sexual identity, exploring female experience within a framework of post-modern feminism. Published in 1985, her first and also the most debated novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruits* is a coming-of-age story about a sensitive girl who was adopted and grew up in an English Pentecostal community. Sticking to be the real self, she transformed herself from a quiet obedient child heavily influenced by religion and her mother, to a brave independent new woman daring to challenge the authority. The unconventional story makes the author the winner of Whitbread Award for a First Novel of the same year.

Recently, Winterson study has been witnessing a critical turn from her lesbian, identity experience to her language, writing style and postmodern themes. The study of Jeanette is not popular in China because of the hysteresis of Chinese translation, the obscure religious overtone and the limitation of lesbian initiation story. As a semi-autobiography novel by lesbian author, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruits* has been always labeled as “lesbian novel” and judged from a feminist viewpoint. The theme of “love” plays an indispensable part throughout the whole story. It is with the love that she dares to doubt and challenge the truth and becomes the real self. It is love that contains her reflections of the world and her individual life. In our society, women are always kept in a passive position when dealing with the issue of love. Different from those stereotypical obedient women, usually getting numb and accepting intrusion of other male characters to their life, the brave and rebellious love that Jeanette insisted reveals her strong feminist belief. From a feminist viewpoint, the analysis is divided into two parts: the views on love in heterosexual discourse and in homosexual discourse. This paper aims to interpret the heroin Jeanette's views on love and the gender narrative implied in this novel. While in the meanwhile, it examines the double oppression of patriarchal society towards

lesbian, reevaluates lesbian pursuits of identity and their body narrative in the representation of experience and the construction of identity.

1. INTERROGATING THE NARRATIVE OF LOVE IN HETEROSEXUAL DISCOURSES

Set in a Pentecostal church in England, the novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruits* is set in the historical background of 1960s, the very time the protagonist Jeanette was adopted by her mother. Although Civil Right Movement of that age crashed barriers in race, gender and sex, the Stonewall Riot¹ by gay bar occupants in New York in 1969 has almost no impacts upon the small town where Jeanette grew up. In this town, heterosexuality was still the prevailing social norms. As homosexual relationship was coined as “unnatural passion”, the homosexual minority was believed to be the evils, and usually suffered irrational hatred and discrimination. Throughout the novel, “compulsory heterosexuality” represents the dominant views on the narrative of love in heterosexual discourses.

The concept “compulsory heterosexuality” is proposed by Adrienne Rich to “challenge the convention rooted in people’s minds that heterosexuality is natural and requiring no explanation unlike gay and lesbian sexuality.” (p.632) The dominant position of heterosexuality denies the rationality and even validity of any other options. These minority groups universally suffered from “homophobia” which means the prejudice, hatred or even punishment they suffered from society. Through the deconstruction of fairy tales, Winterson’s standpoint against compulsory heterosexuality is clear. In her reflection of fairy tale “Beauty and Beast”, she shows us the great hurt it can add to woman if they are deprived of the choice to love woman and forced to love man and marry man. In this story, the beautiful princess obeys her father and marries an ugly beast, she kisses the beast for her kindness and the beast turns to be a handsome prince. This kind of romantic heterosexual love story lures many women into fancy that they can get happiness if they are kind and that their kindness and sacrifice will be rewarded if they do as they have been told.

But for Jeanette, she finds more in this fancy, and makes a careful consideration significant in her growth. She argues, “there are women in the world; there are men in the world. And there are beasts. What do you do if you marry a beast? Kissing them didn’t always help. And beasts are crafty. They disguise themselves like you and I.” (Winterson, 1985, p.98) From feminist perspective, Karen Rowe notes that “fairy tales...respond to the need for both detachment from childish symbioses and a subsequent

embracement of adult independence”, while she also emphasizes that “this evolution dooms female protagonists to pursue adult potentials in one way only: The heroine dreamily anticipates conformity to those predestined roles of wife and mother.” (p.214)

The compulsory heterosexuality normalizes female subjectivities in ways of ideological indoctrination of male-dominated society. On this topic, Millett (2000, p.85) argues that ideological indoctrination as much as economic inequality is the cause of women oppression. Lesbian feminist theory interrogates heterosexuality as an institution central to the maintenance of patriarchy and women oppression within it. Therefore, the rebellion against “compulsory heterosexuality” also shows Jeanette’s efforts to write against the heterosexism and the patriarchy institutions it brings, and to achieve the real independence and freedom of women.

Moreover, “compulsory heterosexuality” suppresses the nature of women and makes them the victims of tragic marriage with male. There are many heterosexual love depicted in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruits*, but none of them can be described as happy. In the chapter “Numbers”, Jeanette overhears the chat between two women. In this one page dialogue, we can find three tragic marriages: the first one ignores her husband’s affair for fifteen years for the sake of the children; the second does nothing in bed with her husband; and the third one doesn’t go to the police though drinks every penny. At the end of “Beauty and Beast”, Winterson (1985, p.98) writes, “there were a lot of women, and most if they got married. If they couldn’t marry each other, and I didn’t think they could, because of having babies, some of them would inevitably have to marry beasts”.

2. RECONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVE OF LOVE IN HOMOSEXUAL DISCOURSE

As Caro Guess argues, “*Oranges* is not the story of a girl’s discovery and acceptance of lesbian identity and community; rather, it is the story of a girl’s discovery of her alienation from religious and familial identity and community.” (p.30) When Jeanette meets Melanie or Kate, she only drops her religious and family identity instead of finding her gender identity. However, these two love experiences actually quicken her pursuit of gender identity. In the affair with Melanie, Jeanette tastes the unknowable joy of love, endures betray of her beloved and finally become mature. This experience forces Jeanette to recognize her gender identity, inspires her feminist thoughts, especially the confinement and destruction of male-dominated discourse. Their secret discloses in the church scene in chapter “Joshua”.

The church people headed by Pastor Finch claimed that these two girls were fallen under Satan’s spell and should be saved by praying, locking in the dark house

¹ Stonewall riots: A series of riots between homosexual people and the police in New York. It is a landmark in the development of gay liberation.

and eating no food and water. These church people represent the male repression on women, the harshness of "compulsory heterosexuality", but it further shows the male's dominance at discourse and truth. The dominance in discourse increases the reliability of their words so that all the people would believe in such absurd and cruel method. Another clue appears in the chapter "Judges" where the pastor claims the evil of Jeanette comes from their break of St Paul's teaching that women power should not be allowed in church.

The church scene actually becomes the watershed of Jeanette and Melanie. Melanie is tragically suppressed by the male discourse, she fades quickly in a heterosexual marriage from a girl with "grey cat eyes" to "a bovine" and finally almost "vegetable". She is confined in the truth claimed by male-dominated discourse and loses her gender identity. While Jeanette sees through the hypocrisy and so-called truth of the church people, insists "pure things are pure" and to be the real self. Mara Reisma put that

her love for women and her refusal to submit to the church's authority represent dangerous and disruptive elements to the church and to her community, because her actions implicitly question the dominant power structures. Jeanette's sexual relationships become, in Armstrong's terms, a site of struggle over "changing power relations between classes and cultures as well as between genders and generations". (p.27)

The discovery of her lesbian identity does not end her self-pursuit.

As Judith Butler points out,

if I claim to be a lesbian, I "come out" only to produce a new and different "closet". The "you" to whom I come out now has access to a different region of opacity. ... Before, you did not know whether I "am", but now you do not know what that means. (p.14)

Through the contrast of different lives of two lesbian girls, the idea that one should and must be honest to oneself and accept who you are as "one" but not "other" is fiercely presented. When they reunite after so many years, the dumbness and self-deceiving of Melanie "made me want to shake her, to pull off all my clothes in the middle of the street and yell, remember this body?" (Winterson, 1985, p.237) Through the blatant words and violent emotions, the author called on those marginalized "other" to break through heterosexism and all kinds of male oppression, to relocate their gender identity and to be the real self.

As an adopted child, Jeanette is the gift sent by the god in her mother's eyes and never gets the real love and care from family. Her illness can be ignored as the spirits from the god, she is prevented to see and know anything about her real parents, and things became worse when her lesbian identity was disclosed. The lack of love and the sense of belonging in the family makes she requires more in her lovers. Laurel Bollinger cites the story of Naomi and Ruth in *Bible* to illustrate Jeanette's pursuit

for loyalty. Bollinger notes that both Melanie and Katy are evangelized to the Pentecostal church by Jeanette, so "Jeanette seeks the faithfulness expressed in the Ruth story: Ruth the convert showed complete devotion to the woman who led her into faith; perhaps Jeanette could find such loyalty in a woman she brings to faith." (p.369)

For Jeanette, Melanie represents betrayal while Kate loyalty. As her first love, Melanie is special for Jeanette, so her betrayal hurt Jeanette deeply. Winterson keeps mentioning "betray". In Jeanette's eyes, betrayal does not mean the death of love, but to negate and oppress the real self. Compared with Melanie, her inks put on the love experience with Kate is gentler, more peaceful but warm. Kate's love is for loyalty and companion, representing the maturity of the author. Bollinger believes that "Ruth's determination to choose Naomi does not represent an explicitly lesbian decision; however, it does represent one of the unusual instances where the Bible depicts profound female solidarity." (p.366) The final return of Jeanette to her mother and family proves this point. Different from the conventional female initiation stories where daughter should leave mother to gain independence and adulthood, Winterson insists to tackle the lesbian initiation story on the basis of female/ family loyalty. Therefore, the hatred for betrayal and the longing for loyalty in *Oranges are not the Only Fruits* all reflect the author's strong wishes to build a lesbian community. She calls on the solidarity in this community to break down the dogmatic heterosexual society and fight for their own rights.

3. GENDER TROUBLE IN HOMOSEXUAL NARRATIVE OF LOVE

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruits is famous for author's bravery and frankness in depicting the affections and sex experience of lesbians. Winterson embeds body into narrative, exquisitely depicts the awareness and growth of the heroin. In a religious family, Jeanette grows up in the story like Virgin Mary. For "sex", mother and the people around seem to have a great aversion towards this topic. While Jeanette was actually no longer the traditional kind of woman who worships virginity; instead, she is open and free towards "sex". Her love experience reflects the importance of female experience in her maturity and, moreover, "the function of body narrative in pushing the plot development" "the function of body in reshaping oneself and rewriting one's identity" (Wang, 2012, p.71). In the love affair with Melanie, body narrative plays a huge role in reshaping identity. The author put most ink on her sex experiences with Melanie. The first sexual experience was drove by their instinct, "she stroked my head for a long time, and then we hugged and it felt like drowning. Then I was frightened but couldn't stop. There was something crawling in my belly. I had an octopus inside me" (Winterson, 1985, p.121).

For the interrelation between body and narrative, Wang points out that “body is the object, media of narrative as well as the content, the substance that constructs narrative.” (p.75) The words like “drowning” “frightened” “crawling” “octopus” vividly depict a fresh but not erotic view of these two girls who come to realize the real self. Different from Melanie and Kate, her relationship with Miss Jewsbury is not based on love; at least there is no love for Jeanette. Her description of this affair distinguishes her from some extreme feminist or lesbians who claim for total free in sex, “we made love and I hated it and hated it, but would not stop” (Winterson, 1985, p.146). The awareness of body brings the awareness of subconsciousness, the location of identity intensifies its conflicts with the conventional world, thus pushing the development of plots and the realization of “initiation” theme.

The negation of female sexuality actually spoils the completeness of female experience and blurs the distinction between two sexes. Winterson’s embedding of body into narration again shows her feminist standpoint. The obvious autobiographical tone in this novel also shows her courage and confidence in women freedom and liberation. The different perspective and poetic language adopted by woman writer break the dominant male discourse and directly reflect the real lesbian (women) experience, which not only enriches female experience but also liberate female by challenging the taboo set by male.

As a feminist, Winterson’s rebellion against “compulsory heterosexuality” and her deconstruction of patriarchal centrality are realized by deconstruction traditional binary oppositions. Most of the male characters are weak, passive while women are strong and independent. While, after the deconstruction of binary oppositions, the definition of female identity becomes another vital problem for female writing. Liu puts “the fluidity of female identity decides that the subject remains in the process of self-constructing, which

makes it harder to define ‘women’”. To define “women” by force will easily “fall into the trap of existentialism, strengthen the binary thinking pattern that women long against, thus forming a new gender opposition which is contrary to the principle of gender equality that feminism advocates.”(p.38) To avoid this trap, the characters Winterson creates are always obscure in identity and gender. Through the fluidity and uncertainty of gender, Winterson treats all characters as “people” that has no connotation in gender, which expresses her overall breakthrough of binary opposition pattern, her revolt against any forms of women suppression and her longing for a complementary, blending and equal relationship between two sexes.

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