

**The Myth of Normative Gender: Readings on Jeanette  
Winterson's *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* And *Sexing The  
Cherry***

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Jeanette Winterson

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**Abstract**

Gender fluidity and queer non- normativity is a debated topic in the post modern social and literary scenario. The exploitation of the weaker gender in the name of the binaristic, fixed nature of gender, i.e. the division of masculine/ feminine had begun from the ancient time itself. This fixity defined peculiar tasks for both the masculine and the feminine gender and put forward the notion that each gender has an essence and thus a boy and a girl should behave in a fixed manner which is part of their essential self. The postmodern era, in

its most revolutionary advancement in the social, economic and technological spheres questions the fixities of life and even the very essence of God and man. When post modernism presents human existence as incoherent, ambiguous and inconclusive, the very concept of gender fixities and binaries began to get questioned. With the emergence of Queer theory in the 1990s, gender began to be viewed as constructed and the queer theorists argue for non- heteronormativity. Jeanette Winterson is one of the daring voices among post-modern queer writers whose works celebrate gender fluidity and queer existence. Winterson abundantly alludes to myths and fairytales as vehicles to express the notion that gender also is constructed like a story or history and it is thus not fixed. This paper focuses on how Winterson adapts myths and fairytales in her two famous works *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* and *Sexing The Cherry* to portray her characters who strive to surpass the fixed gender roles imposed on them by heteronormative society.

**Keywords:** Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, *Sexing The Cherry*, Heteronormativity, Queer, Non- normativity, Gender fluidity

### **Jeanette Winterson**

Jeanette Winterson was born in Manchester on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1959 to unknown biological parents. She was adopted at the age of six weeks by Pentecostal parents, who from the very childhood itself tried to instill religious faith in her. Her mother Constance Winterson, a fervent evangelical Elim Pentecostal Christian, made her to believe that she belonged to God and had been chosen by God. She was grooming Winterson to a missionary. As she began to grow up, the textual experience she got were restricted to Bible, Crudenco's Complete Concordance to the Old and New Testaments, Malory's *Mort de Arthur*, etc. Winterson used to hide other literary works she managed to get from her mother. But, it was once discovered and all of them were burnt. Winterson was grown up in a house where there were no books, paintings or music.

As an adult, Winterson was forced to grow up in an ecclesiastical environment. So, she rediscovered and developed a sexuality which was entirely different from the society and religious dogmas around her. She, from the time of puberty itself had shown rejection for compulsory heterosexuality and discovered her sexual orientation towards women. When she came out to be a lesbian, the relationship with her mother and church began to shatter and she

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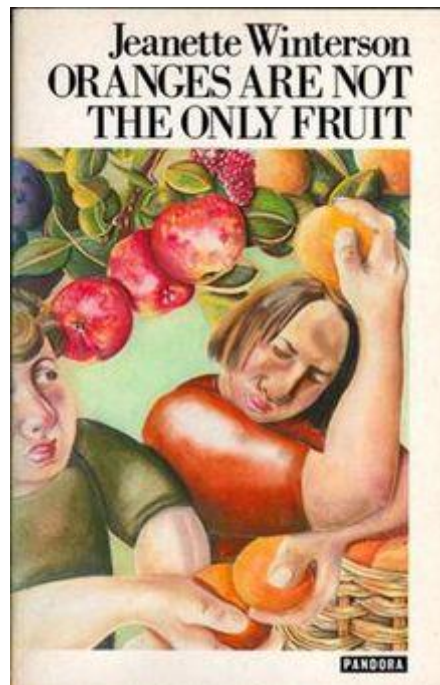
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left home at the age of sixteen. The rejection from her family made Winterson to emerge as a furious, rebellious and unconventional figure against social mediocrity, religious fundamentalism, and sexual false pretenses. Even though she left organized religion and Christianity, deep within she remained a true believer not of church, but of one's internal redemptive self. The public libraries and graduation at St. Catherine's College opened Winterson the great vistas of opportunity to discover her talent in literature. In her two works, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* and *Sexing The Cherry*, Winterson alludes to various myths and fairytales to celebrate the non- normative and fluid gender performances of her characters.

### ***Oranges are Not the Only Fruit***



*Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* is the debut novel of Jeanette Winterson which was published in 1985. It can be termed a semi- autobiographical novel. The incidents and experience portrayed in the novel are taken from Winterson's personal life. Susana Onega, the contemporary European critic and writer, in her work, *Jeanette Winterson* says that "*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* remained the most popular and the most written-on of Winterson's novels" (58). The plot of the novel revolves around the life of the protagonist, Jeanette who was adopted at the age of seven weeks by Pentecostal parents. Her mother who was a fundamentalist wanted to make Jeanette a missionary. But contrary to the conventional

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norms, Jeanette turns out to be a lesbian in her adulthood. Consequently, she was abandoned by Church and her family. Jeanette, who attempted various jobs in the city, comes back to her mother finally, but Jeanette's mother continued her indifference.

### **Lesbian Identity**

Jeanette struggles to assert her lesbian identity throughout but finds herself torn between her sexual deviancy and the normative society around. The same struggle of her protagonist is symbolically represented by Winterson through various myths and fairy tales. In the chapter entitled Genesis, Winterson is incorporating the mythical story of a princess. The princess was a very sensitive person so that even the death of a moth could distress her for weeks. Nobody in the kingdom could find a solution for this. One day, the princess met a hunchbacked woman in the forest. The woman asked the princess to take over her duties and responsibilities. The princess agrees and the old hunchback dies. But, the princess continued her duties and responsibilities and never got sensitive and upset again. Winterson adopts the stream of consciousness technique to switch the narrative of Jeanette to that of the princess. Just like the hunchback occupied the princess in the myth with some duties and relieved her from pain, Jeanette, a similar sensitive girl is relieved of her pain and distress through her mother's religious preaching and faith. But she failed to realize in her childhood that the same source of consolation will be her great pain in the future. The same religion which in real is a great source of peace and solace becomes something stiffening and restrictive when it gets institutionalized and prevents an individual's gender performance and deviancies.

### **Symbolic Allusion**

*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* symbolically alludes to various journeys through the mythical characters in it. All these journeys signify Jeanette's own journey of self-discovery. Jeanette discovers her own self after leaving home and Church and experiencing the city life trying at different jobs. Sir Perceval in the mythical tale alluded in the novel discovers his self during his journey in search of the Holy Grail. Winnet is another fairytale character who appears in the novel and undertakes her journey through curious places and finally discovers her true self. The quest for self is a recurrent theme in the novel which stands in contrast to the binaries of gender. Sir Perceval who finds two contrasting aspects of firmness and delicacy in his both hands represents the idea that one's choice and preferences lie within

him/her and it is their duty to discover it. Thus, Perceval and Winnet's journey are the journeys beyond their gender fixities which helped them to discover their real identity. Similarly, Jeanette's journey after the expulsion from the church and home also is a non-binaristic journey to discover her fluid, lesbian identity.

### **Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego**

*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* alludes to the story of the three Jews named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the Biblical book of Daniel. They were the servants of King Nebuchadnezzar. The King ordered the men to pay homage to the golden religious idol. They refused since they were Jews. The king punished them by casting them into a fiery furnace to die. But the three men didn't die because God saved them for his faithfulness. The king realized his mistakes and freed them. Like the three Jewish men, Jeanette also refuses to pay homage to the ideal of normativity or gender fixity for which she was severely punished. But, she didn't die. Jeanette worshiped the God of her conscience who is far different from the God created by conventional religious institutions.

### **Constructed for Material Gains**

According to Winterson all stories are constructed for material gains. Winterson shows this constructed nature of stories through the various fantastic tales that she incorporates in her work. In the chapter Deuteronomy, Jeanette declares that one can never write a 'true' history that is purely based on fact. All history should be regarded with doubt since the historian can manipulate it to support the ruling political system. All stories, both in history and sacred texts are fiction according to Jeanette. If so what should be the reliability of laws and conventions created by religious and other social institutions and what should be the reliability of gender binaries and heteronormativity which is a product of such socio-cultural discourse? It is this very unreliable and relative nature of truth and history prompted the post-modern era to question the reliability of gender. This makes Winterson to invert mythological stories and fairytales and readapt it to her convenience.

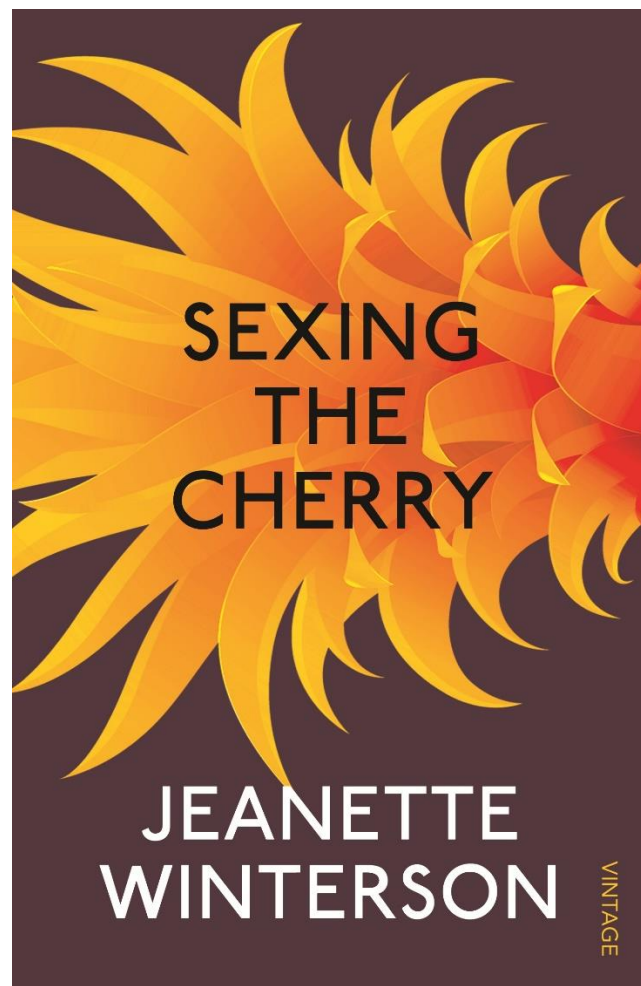
### **Juxtaposition of Myths and Legends with the Life of Jeanette**

The juxtaposition of legends and myths with the life of the main character Jeanette questions the reality of storytelling. According to Winterson, no reality is true. Reality is



subjective and fictional reality is more subjective since it is narrated by a subjective narrator. In chapter five of the novel, Winterson declares that no stories or histories are true because it is constructed by the subjective author. This states that no objective reality exists anywhere. This argument of Winterson and her abundant use of various tales in the plot again question the wrong notion that binaries are the ultimate reality. This subjectivity of reality again connotes to the subjective creation of gender identities too. If no objective reality exists in the world, gender also is a constructed, subjective reality. Hence, Winterson is using the convention of story within the story to justify the fluidity and performativity of gender.

### *Sexing The Cherry*



*Sexing The Cherry* is the third fictional attempt of Jeanette Winterson, came out in 1989. *Sexing The Cherry* deals with the story of Dogwoman and her son Jordan. They live in

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17<sup>th</sup> century England under Puritanism. The Dogwoman is portrayed as a huge, giant like woman who trains dogs for fighting as a means of livelihood. Jordan starts his voyage and expeditions with John Tradescant at his adulthood. He explores strange wondrous lands and brings exotic fruits and plants back to Britain. During his journey Jordan discovers the lands of wonders; one without gravity, one of words and one that has been destroyed by love. The dog woman fights against the Puritans, survive the plague and at the end Jordan and Dogwoman sets London on fire and leaves the city.

### **Celebration of Gender Fluidity**

*Sexing The Cherry* celebrates the gender fluidity of its protagonist Dogwoman. She is more masculine than feminine in her appearance and her actions. Dogwoman is a stark contrast to conventional notion of femininity and she uses filth as fashion and thus attributes to the Butlerian concept of gender as performance. She is huge, gigantic, murderous, filthy and monstrous in appearance. Dogwoman challenges all the ideals of female body accepted by the heteronormative society. She says, “My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy, I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had small pox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas....” (24). The fluidity of Dogwoman’s gender role is well portrayed by Winterson through the incorporation of various myths and fairy tales.

### **Questioning the Binaries**

*Sexing The Cherry* questions the binaries of gender identity system. Winterson is subverting the accepted notions of gender identity and questions the various roles assigned to males and females respectively. Winterson is incorporating various stories, fairy tales and mythology that deal with the main plot of Dogwoman. Winterson is readapting the story of *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* in *Sexing The Cherry*. In the original story a king lock up his twelve daughters every evening to keep them away from any contact with other men before their marriage. But, at night the princesses manage to escape from the room and go to the secret underground to dance with twelve princes until their shoes worn out and come back in the morning. So many people tried to find out the secret of the worn-out shoes but failed. Finally, an old soldier discovered their secret and informed the King. The princesses were

once again locked up in the room. As a reward, the King marries off his oldest daughter to the soldier.

Winterson's princesses, instead of underground castle, flee to a silver city where nobody eat or drink but dance. In *Sexing The Cherry*, the princesses tell their story by themselves which gives them an individual voice and identity and it is different from fairy tales that were dominated by male narration. So, Winterson's princesses transcend the gender binaries of authorial voice in narratives. The twelve princesses are now staying with each other after separating from their husbands who are not proper matches for them. They continued their flight at night and danced even after their separation. The oldest princess says, "As it says we lived happily ever after. We did, but not with our husbands" (48). This shows how Winterson tries to invert gender roles by inverting the ancient fairytale in which the twelve princesses were punished for their dance of liberation and gives a bold voice in her novel to the princesses who continue their dance of liberation and thus transcends their gender fixity.

### **Incorporating the Story of Goddess Artemis**

Similarly, in *Sexing The Cherry* Winterson incorporates the mythical story of Goddess Artemis, who begged her father King Zeus a bow and arrows, and a short tunic and an island of her own, free from interference, "She didn't want to get married, she didn't want to have children, she wanted to hunt..." (118). Artemis is presented as a tireless traveler by Winterson who wants to roam around and return glorious like men, "She had envied men for their long-legged freedom to roam the world and return full of glory to wives who only waited" (118). In this story Artemis is presented as a queer character who wants to be deviant from the traditional gender role imposed on her by society. She wants to subvert her feminine gender role of a waiting wife and instead to take up the more masculine role of adventures, expeditions and glory.

### **To Conclude**

Jeanette Winterson celebrates gender fluidity in her two works *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and *Sexing The Cherry* by incorporating various myths, fairytales, and magic realistic stories. Myths and fairytales are patriarchal construct which are based on gender fixities and binaries. Winterson is subverting these gender binaries through the

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reinterpretations of traditional myths and fairy tales. Unlike the mythical stories of ancient times, Winterson's characters are rebellious, and queer and they transpose their gender roles and binaristic fixities by breaking the imposed chains of heteronormativity. A myth or a fairytale is of ancient origin whose source is unknown to both who narrate it and enjoy it. Similarly, gender also is an age-old concept. The ancient society constructed gender binaries to make one group as weaker gender and the other to dominate over them. So, gender construction and binaries had a power politics of its own. Gradually, the feminine gender began to be viewed as the powerless and the most victimized and the masculine as the dominant and powerful. Just like a myth or fairytale of unknown origin, human society enjoyed the conventional pattern of gender binary which attributes fixed roles for both the masculine and the feminine. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the evils of gender binary continues in many forms and still the victimization of feminine gender continues in the form of rape, marital rape, female feticide, etc. An egalitarian society where everyone gets equal dignity and respect is possible only when the traditional gender binary will be broken forever and the various other grey shades of gender apart from the masculine and feminine, like gay, lesbian, transgender, cisgender, bisexual etc. will be accepted by the mainstream society. The two protagonists of Winterson, Jeanette and Dogwoman transcend these binaries of gender and assert their deviant identities owing to an optimistic future of gender equality.

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