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## Conflict between the Individual and Society in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*\*

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### ABSTRACT

### Research Article

Jeanette Winterson's novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) illustrates the story of a young girl, Jeanette, who experiences suppressive upbringing at the hands of her mother and her surroundings. Through the portrayal of her transition into adulthood, the novel touches on numerous challenging issues such as gender, identity, and the reliability of the mainstream patriarchal discourse. The main character's gradual transformation reveals the controversial aspects of her society juxtaposed with her sexual orientation as a lesbian and her oppositional stance against the ingrained doctrine of the Church. This study will, in this respect, discuss Jeanette's rebellion as an individual against her oppressive society in Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* through specific references from the primary source and relevant secondary sources in an ultimate attempt to reveal how identity, gender roles, and truth are all discursive practices.

**Key Words:** Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, gender, identity, patriarchal discourse

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## Jeanette Winterson'ın *Tek Meyve Portakal Değildir* Romanında Birey ve Toplum Çatışması

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### ÖZ

### Araştırma Makalesi

Jeanette Winterson'ın *Tek Meyve Portakal Değildir* (1985) başlıklı romanı, annesinin ve çevresinin baskıcı yetiştirme tarzına maruz kalan genç kız Jeanette'in hikâyesini anlatmaktadır. Roman, bu genç kızın erişkinlik dönemine geçiş tasviri aracılığıyla, toplumsal cinsiyet, kimlik ve baskın ataerkil söylemin güvenilirliği gibi birçok tartışmalı konuya değinmektedir. Ana karakterin kademeli dönüşümü, Jeanette'in içinde yaşadığı toplumun tartışmalı boyutlarını ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Bu süreçte, karakterin lezbiyen olarak cinsel oryantasyonu ve kilisenin kökleşmiş öğretilerine karşı muhalif tutumu önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu bağlamda bu çalışma, Winterson'ın *Tek Meyve Portakal Değildir* romanında lezbiyen karakter Jeanette'in içinde yaşadığı baskıcı topluma karşı nasıl başkaldırdığını tartışacaktır. Bu tartışma, birincil kaynaktan ve konu ile alakalı ikincil kaynaklara spesifik göndermeler üzerinden gerçekleşecektir. Çalışmanın nihai amacı ise kimliğin, toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin ve gerçeğin söylemsel pratikler olduğunu ortaya çıkarmaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Jeanette Winterson, *Tek Meyve Portakal Değildir*, toplumsal cinsiyet, kimlik, ataerkil söylem

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## Introduction

Jeanette Winterson's novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) deconstructs the patriarchal categorisation of gender by offering non-heterosexual alternatives alongside heterosexuality and questions the formation of identity by opposing the essentialist perspective that identity is fixed and is not open to change. This novel discusses the relative nature of truth as in the case of Jeanette, who experiences certain difficulties resulting from the mechanics of her society and its norms in her attempt to realise herself, and criticises binary thinking dependent on the patriarchal and phallogocentric discourse that confines women and men to certain gender roles and identities in society through its representation of Jeanette as rebellious.

Winterson's novel recounts the story of an adopted girl raised by a conservative mother and her transition into adulthood that challenges her ingrained notions of gender, religion, men, identity, and the Church (which imposes its dogmas on her). As an individual, she struggles to find and experience her sexual identity as a lesbian, which puts her in a difficult situation, as it does not conform to the established rules of society. In this study, therefore, the rebellion of Jeanette as an individual against her oppressive society in Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* will be discussed through specific references from the primary source and the relevant secondary sources. This will ultimately reveal how identity, gender roles, and truth are all discursive practices constructed by the dominant power.

### Jeanette Winterson's Brief Biography

Winterson was born in Manchester in 1959. Her adopted father was a worker and the mother was a housewife. Her parents intended her for the missionary field. Jeanette, however, found an opportunity to study in a girl's grammar school and later on, to study English at Oxford University. She left home when she was 16 after falling in love with another girl, and worked in various evening and weekend jobs such as a domestic in a psychiatric facility.

*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is her first novel, and she wrote it when she was 23. In addition to this novel, she wrote *Boating for Beginners* (1985), *The Passion* (1987), *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), *Written on the Body* (1992), *Art & Lies* (1994), *Art Objects* (1995), *Gut Symmetries* (1997), *The World and Other Places* (1998), *The Powerbook* (2000), *The King of Capri* (2003), *Weight* (2005), and *The Stone Gods* (2005). Today, she writes on a regular basis for certain newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Guardian*. At present, she is living in Gloucestershire and London. This biographical information is relevant because it is possible to find certain parallels between the circumstances of Jeanette, the protagonist of *Oranges*, and the writer Jeanette as both were adopted as children into religious, conservative families.

The political atmosphere of the specific time represented in the novel is also quite significant in that it helps understanding the newly emerging sexual identities in the novel. The 1960s is a period of protest that challenged meta-narratives in terms of gender roles, religious beliefs, political stances, and institutions such as marriage, on which Beaujouan and Bhrolchain comment as follows:

Insofar as marriage and overall partnership have declined, it has to be remembered that comparison with the levels of the 1960s and early 1970s is with the peak level of marriage in twentieth century Britain. For example, the period mean age at marriage reached an all-time low in 1970 in England and Wales. It is, therefore, unsurprising in a statistical sense that marriage rates should decline and marriage age should rise in the 1970s. (2011, p. 18)

As can be seen, it is a period of social, political, and cultural upheaval that had a significant impact on people's understanding of identity, religion, and sexuality. Homosexuals started to show their identities explicitly although they were still faced with harsh criticism. Thus, the

society started to transform itself with developments, riots, and protests for the acceptance of these newly emerging sexual identities, political rights, and religious beliefs, the influence and repercussions of which can be observed in Winterson's novel, *Oranges*.

### **Plot Summary of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit***

*Oranges* is divided into eight chapters named Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth. In relation to the titles of these chapters, Yakut comments on it as follows: "Eight chapters named after eight books of the Old Testament recast the wanderings of the Chosen People and the construction of the Law as the wanderings of Jeanette seeking her Promised Land and the writing of her own history" (2011, p. 78). The novel retells the story of the young girl Jeanette who is adopted by a woman called Louise, a conservative Christian, and a man who is presented as a weak, passive, and almost absent father figure. Until she is seven years old, Jeanette is brought up by her mother at home and learns to read the Bible, which shows the impact of the religious sources as inspirational, as Winterson "relies heavily on the Bible and particularly on the Ruth story to construct" the novel (Bollinger, 1994, p. 377). The reason for Louise's adopting Jeanette is that she wants to make Jeanette a servant to God, and train her for missionary work. The young girl does not know anyone else apart from the members of the church until she is sent to the school when she is seven years old.

Religious conservatism prevents Louise and the other members of the church from realising that her daughter has become deaf at the age of seven since they believe that she is in a state of spiritual meditation. It is Miss Jewsbury, one of the church members, who realises that she has a physical problem, upon which she is hospitalised. Elsie, another church member, befriends her at the hospital and teaches Jeanette about poetry and the nature of truth in a way that is different from Louise. When Jeanette starts school, she becomes an outcast due to her beliefs; however, in time, she finds herself conflicting with the teachings of the church. She realises her sexuality as a lesbian and has sexual encounters with two girls, Melanie and Katy, after which she is exorcised by the church and asked to leave home by Louise. She works as an ice cream truck driver in a funeral parlour and at a mental hospital. When she comes across the members of the church, she is not warmly welcome by them. Her mother has not changed. In the end, we see Louise still listening intently to the missionary reports on the radio system and strongly believing that oranges are the only fruit.

### **Discussion**

This brief synopsis of the text demonstrates that Jeanette is subject to a binary, dualistic approach to life from early childhood on. Accordingly, she says:

Enemies were: The Devil (in his many forms)  
Next Door  
Sex (in its many forms)  
Slugs  
Friends were: God  
Our dog  
Auntie Madge  
The Novels of Charlotte Bronte  
Slug pellets. (Winterson, 1985, p. 3)

As can be seen, sex is presented as her enemy in life since Louise does not want her to indulge in worldly and sexual affairs, as she believes she should be engaged only in missionary work. According to Louise, Jeanette should follow the path of God in order to find salvation. She is referred to as the sacrificial lamb: "One of my earliest memories is me sitting on a sheep at Easter while she told me the story of the Sacrificial Lamb" (Winterson, 1985: 3). She is brought

up with the conservative values of the society, and especially with those of her mother, which shapes and problematises her life as an individual striving to fulfill herself.

Jeanette is exposed to the discourse of the small evangelical society when she is made to take part in the rituals and Sunday masses of the Church. Furthermore, she learns almost all the stories in the Bible. Her language and discourse become full of biblical and religious allusions. Due to her mother's wish, she is taught that men are beasts and she should not approach them, as her sole mission is to be a servant to God. Thus, she is not supposed to transgress her boundaries, and her domestic roles, which are expected from her by the dominant mainstream discourse. Louise supports the maintenance of these roles, as she takes the role of a man in the absence of the father figure in the novel, which is evocative of Gayle Rubin's approach to women in a phallic culture:

The phallus is more than a feature which distinguishes the sexes: it is the embodiment of the male, status, to which men accede . . . It is an expression of the transmission of male dominance. It passes through women and settles upon men . . . It leaves 'penis envy,' which acquires a rich meaning of the disquietude of women in a phallic culture. (1975, p. 192)

Louise, who is a strong, dominant, and oppressive woman, hinders Jeanette from the quest for her truth. Therefore, the constructed truth does not allow Jeanette to form her identity because whatever she does is watched by the other members of society, which functions like Foucault's surveillance society and panopticon that puts the individual under constant control. When she has a sexual affair with Melanie, a bisexual girl, they are caught by Louise and the church members and taken to the church to ward off the evil spirits from her soul so that she can be saved.

An essentialist insight into identity formation can have a radical impact on individuals. Louise, an example of such an individual, has an essentialist perspective towards her daughter and how her body can be a means of satisfying her desires, and wishes over her daughter's body. In relation to this point, Fuss expresses that "the body occupies a pure, pre-social- pre-discursive space. The body is real, accessible and transparent; it's always there and directly interpretable through senses" (1989, p. 5). Thus, Louise as a representative of the patriarchy attempts to make Jeanette's body "pure" without sexual desires and passions, and does not leave an open space to change and fluidity (emphasis added).

As can be seen, Louise believes in the essentialist understanding that there are certain roles assigned to women. She argues that women should obey and perform these roles, which is possible to observe even in her colour choice for Jeanette while buying a coat. Jeanette does not want to have pink mac but has to buy it in the end due to her mother's pressure. The conversation between Louise and Jeanette exemplifies this situation as follows: "It's a bit big . . . But Mum . . . We'll have to it. But Mum . . . It was bright pink" (Winterson, 1985, p. 79). Thus, Louise believes that pink suits girls better and that they should not trespass their roles.

This might be due to the fact that "[p]erhaps she [woman] stands as a sign of something in man himself which he needs to repress, expel beyond his own being, relegate to a securely alien region behind his own definitive limits" (Eagleton, 2008, p. 133). Louise feels the need to repress Jeanette and does not allow her to go beyond the definitive limits of her gender roles, which she rejects through the adoption of her sexual identity as a homosexual, lesbian that is forced to lead a devout life under the pressure of her mother and her society, which also demonstrates how "Winterson's women are allowed to inhabit categories often open only to men" (Burns, 1998, p. 387).

Melanie chooses to repent immediately when she is forced to, whereas Jeanette does not repent. She is not given food for thirty-six hours and is threatened. Faced with abusive treatment by her mother and the other church members, she pretends to be repenting; however, deep inside, she still believes that to love someone is not something sinful, which can implicate

that Winterson “promotes love unquestioningly as a transcendent theme” (Ellam, 2006, p.81). Therefore, her relationship with Melanie comes to an end with the intervention of societal rules and oppression over the individual that does not make room for freedom, free will, and individual choice.

Through this novel, Winterson questions “the gendered power structures that are ingrained in fundamentalist readings of biblical and other narratives,” and this allows her “to embrace a new identity and provides a language through which to express herself and her desires” (Reisman, 2011, p. 24). Jeanette challenges the conventional understanding of marriage as a lesbian and poses a threat in this regard to the patriarchy with her sexual identity from the point view of the leading power. This is also foreshadowed by the old woman, whom she meets while collecting the black peas, as follows: “You’ll never marry, she said, not you and you’ll never be still” (Winterson, 1985, p. 7). As can be seen, from the start of the novel, it is obvious that she is not a stereotypical woman conforming to the patriarchal values and norms; but a rebellious figure as an individual against the repressive norms of her society.

Her oppositional reaction to marriage can also be observed in her dream, in which she wears a pure white dress and a golden crown. The dream starts in a patriarchal manner; however, it gradually develops into a story against the patriarchal rules:

Somehow I made it to the altar. The priest was very fat and kept getting fatter, like bubble gum you blow. Finally, we came to the moment, “You may kiss the bride.” My new husband turned to me and here were a number of possibilities. Sometimes he was blind, sometimes a pig, sometimes my mother, sometimes the man from the post office, and once, just a suit of clothes was nothing inside. (Winterson, 1985, p. 71)

As can be seen, she does not conform to one single truth but is open to alternatives and plurality of perspectives.

Jeanette in this respect accentuates and draws particular attention to the fluidity of the identity and flexibility of gender roles. She is not a stereotypical female character with her stark opposition to the patriarchal outlook on marriage and rejection of having a son. Hence, she opposes the phallogocentric ethos that supports the dominance of the male over the female and treats heterosexuality as normal. Jeanette demonstrates how the discourse is constructed and therefore not natural. The artificiality of the patriarchal discourse is thus reflected through the protagonist, Jeanette. Accordingly, Rubinson argues that:

Winterson’s fiction focuses particularly on refusing lies related to sex and gender roles, she attacks various artificial sources of sexism which disseminate and perpetuate lies about what is natural behaviour for men and women, religion and scripture, androcentric, political, economic, familial hegemony, romance novels; and scientific discourses about bodies. (2005, p. 115)

In this respect, *Oranges* reveals the constructed nature of identity, truth, and gender roles, highlighting the fact that behaviours and attitudes may also be constructed by the dominant discourse. The powerful agent in Winterson’s novel has the authority to form the truth and accordingly shapes gender roles and identity.

As the story progresses, the main character realises that the teachings of the Church do not illustrate the reality on which she comments as follows: “Since I was born, I had assumed that the world ran on very simple lines, like a larger version of our church. Now I was finding that the church was sometimes confused” (Winterson, 1985, p. 26-7). These remarks reflect her critique of the church and prove how she gradually becomes defiant of the established instructions of her mother and the church.

The Church in the novel does not allow Jeanette to experience her lesbian affair with Melanie. When they are caught, it leads to Jeanette’s marginalisation and excommunication. Similarly, the Pastor criticises Melanie and Jeanette harshly in front of people and makes them confess their sins: “These children of God have fallen under Satan’s spell. These children of God have fallen foul of their lusts. These children are full of demons” (Winterson, 1985, p.

104). Thus, the authority figure, the Pastor severely criticises them and tries to absolve their souls from the evil spirit. However, as an individual, Jeanette does not yield, as she does not see anything wrong in loving someone.

Her change is fostered by the teachings of Elsie Norris, who values the plurality of the truth and perspectives, which can be understood in her following remarks: “[W]hat looks like one thing may well be another” (Winterson, 1985, p. 30). Elsie’s remarks leave room for alternatives as opposed to Louise’s remarks that deny any textual room for alternative possibilities: “Oranges are the only fruit. I filled my little bucket with peel and the nurses emptied it with an ill grace. I hid the peel under my pillow and the nurses scolded and sighed” (Winterson, 1985, p. 29). As can be seen, Louise does not see other alternatives as a single-minded character that is not open to change with her fundamentalist religious views that put Jeanette into certain moulds.

Considering these aspects of the novel, it can be argued that Winterson challenges the representation of men and women in *Oranges*. The novel presents a strong, dominating mother, and a weak, passive, and almost invisible father, which demonstrates how she reverses the traditional domestic roles attributed to men and women. Hence, it is evident that Winterson does not portray a cliché representation of gender roles in *Oranges*, but women contributing to the functioning of patriarchy in the novel. Regarding the absence of the father figure, Jeanette refers to it while talking to Melanie: “Melanie talked about the weather and her mother, that she had no father. I haven’t either. I said, to make her feel better. Well, not much. Then I had to explain about our church and my mother and me and me being dedicated to the Lord” (Winterson, 1985, p. 83). They do not talk about the father figure that much. Instead, Jeanette chooses to touch upon her dedication and staunch devotion to Jesus Christ.

In relation to the reversal of these stereotypical, traditional expectations, the novel refers to certain myths and indicates how they are recounted from a different perspective. To give an example, when a princess rejects the proposal of a prince, she needs to be killed. Accordingly, Bailey points out that,

[t]he perfect woman has to die because she will not perform the script written for her and because she can (and does) point out the flaws in its assumptions. Anyone who might have witnessed her challenge the prince’s narrative must die as well, their deaths acceptable losses in the struggle to keep the text pristine and its meanings stable. (2006, p. 63)

The princess’ not conforming to the patriarchal expectations of the prince ultimately leads her to be killed by the dominant discourse. Moreover, there is a reference to Sir Perceval, the Arthurian knight of Round Table (discovering the Holy Grail). Onega argues that Winterson “establishes parallelism between Jeanette’s quest for individuation and Sir Perceval’s mythical quest, thus adding a mythical overtone to Jeanette’s individual life-story and so turning it into the archetypal representative history of lesbian women at large” (1995, p. 147). Thus, by drawing on such influential sources, Winterson challenges the stereotypical representation of gender roles and myths bringing new perspectives to their depiction through demythologisation.

The title of the novel has tremendous significance in that it stands for the opposite of what Louise supports. She argues that oranges are the only fruit and she constantly gives oranges to Jeanette, rejecting other fruit, through which Winterson “deconstructs the normative equation between sex and gender---a gesture that works especially well in the context of the grafting trope” (French, 1999, p. 243). In this sense, oranges represent “Louise’s single-mindedness, bigotry and entrapment in the binary frame” (Yakut, 2011, p. 52). Thus, for Louise who does not welcome the multiplicity of perspectives, heterosexuality is the sole form of sexuality since men and women should come together in order to form marriage and a family living under the teachings of religion.



### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that Winterson's novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* deconstructs gender roles, illustrates the influential factors in the formation of identity, and questions the reliability of the dominant patriarchal discourse through the representation of the lesbian girl, Jeanette. Through her confrontation with the deeply ingrained values of her society, the main leading character, Jeanette challenges the phallogentric, male-dominant discourse with her sexual orientation and oppositional attitude, which reveals the constructed nature of gender roles as well as the significance of plurality of perspectives. In this regard, Winterson portrays Jeanette as a resisting individual against the repressive norms of her society, the Church, and her mother, which is disclosed through what she experiences with Melanie and Katy. This depiction ultimately reveals how the formation of identity, the construction of gender roles, and the shape of truth are contingent upon discursive practices, which Winterson challenges throughout her novel, *Oranges*.

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