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Reconciling the Mind and the Body in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*

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Abstract:

This paper argues that Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* reconciles the hierarchical binary constructed between the female body and the male mind. It deconstructs the duality between fantasy and reason in the text and shows how the Dog-Woman stands as a metonymic epitome of the intersection between the real and the fantastic. The paper further demonstrates how Winterson provides a corporeal history to the bodies of her characters, history which becomes 'herstory.' The text moves towards a third kind of feminism which opposes all forms of binary discrimination, which is embodied by Fortunata. Materiality and discourse, female body and male mind, are reconciled in *Sexing the Cherry*.

Keywords: Body, Binary, Corporeal, Patriarchy, Abject.

Introduction

The female body has conventionally been the locus of patriarchal inscriptions and, as such, always the devalued element within the binary that is constructed between the male mind and the female body. Patriarchy therefore assumes the right to make this body the receptacle of all its significances. And that is the unidimensional manner in which it understands women, and constructs their bodies. For there can be no female body within the heteropatriarchal matrix that does not subscribe to those inscriptions. This is 'the body' that feminists have for a long time disdained to analyze as it "had been so contaminated that women needed to aspire to intellectual, conceptual, and transcendental positions rather than to reclaim the bodies by which patriarchy had constrained them" (Grosz 270).

While this argument is not incorrect, it is now time to "re-evaluate the body beyond its biologicistic, essentialist, and universalist presuppositions" (Grosz 271), and in its materiality. This paper discusses how *Sexing the Cherry* by Jeanette Winterson does precisely that by rescuing the very corporeality of the female body from the mire of heteropatriarchy. This is

done by destroying the binaries that have conventionally existed between the body and the mind, sex and gender, fantasy and reality. She thus provides an example of how the body and the mind need to go hand in hand if women are to be truly liberated.¹

Discussion

The first argument that is put forth with regard to perceiving the mind and the body in a complementary relationship in the novel is that it is a fantasy, and fantasy is conventionally the opposite of reason. This binary needs to be deconstructed first. Fantasy is the basis of our myth-making process. Our common sense, which is the source of reason, is defined by this process of myth-making. It follows that fantasy itself is the foundation of our reasoning and perception of reality. This argument can be backed up by poststructuralist thought, which believes that there is no reality due to the absence of a transcendental signified. If there is no objective reality, then all that remains is fantasy and one's subjective perception of the world around them. Thus we cannot any longer view fantasy and reason as the two sides of a binary, and reason/mind can be equated with fantasy.

Winterson uses the element of fantasy in a transgressive manner in order to rewrite history, and in doing so subverts the heteronormative conventions that have ensnared both men and women since time immemorial. By undermining the authorized history and providing alternative versions of it, Winterson presents a challenge to the realist narrative as well as heteropatriarchal norms. This is evident in the epigraph itself, where she talks about the Hopi, an Indian tribe, as having a language that does not distinguish between past, present and future, and then goes on to say that the reality of the world is not what it used to be as matter has now turned out to be mere "Empty space and points of light."² (Winterson x) Thus one can say that *Sexing the Cherry* endorses a multiplicity of differences.

The novel puts forth a fantastical situation in real historical settings by making Jordan meet with John Tradescant who was historically the head gardener for the king, and thus plays with history. When Charles I was executed, Protestants had avenged him by killing Oliver Cromwell. Here, however, the Dog-Woman takes her own revenge by killing Puritans. The historical part of the story ends with the Great Fire of London in 1666 and then shifts to the present time of the twentieth century where the unnamed ecologist/feminist wants to burn down the factory polluting the river Thames, suggesting that these two Londons exist simultaneously. These instances from the story also disrupt the binary between fantasy and reason.

The text is structured as alternate narratives of Jordan and the Dog-Woman, and later their twentieth century counterparts. There are not only multiple narrators, but multiple versions of those multiple narrators. In doing all this, Winterson provides a history to their bodies, which Moira Gatens believes must be acknowledged so that an analysis can be undertaken of the methods in which bodies are constructed by power relations. The narrative of how the Dog-Woman takes her revenge on Puritans is a means by which she takes back her place in history. As ‘history’ is always ‘his story,’ now she tells ‘her story’. As Luce Irigaray says, “And that their history, their stories, constitute the locus of our displacement. It’s not that we have a territory of our own, but their fatherland, family, home, discourse, imprison us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep on moving, living, as ourselves... Their words, the gag upon our lips.” (Irigaray 86-87)

So now the Dog-Woman removes that gag, and acts on her desires. This also explains why Fortunata is in another world – it is entirely her own, uninterrupted by all these patriarchal discourses. There she can use her body freely to pursue her passion for dancing, and inculcate the same agency in others who come to her. Fortunata’s dancing is an expression of her refusal to be chained by the patriarchal norms that the society forces a woman to conform to. She articulates the freedom, the malleability of her body through her dancing. In a very material way then, she tells the readers that the female body speaks a language of its own that patriarchy can neither understand nor render mute. *Sexing the Cherry* breaks apart the spatial boundaries imposed on a woman’s body through Fortunata’s dancing as well as through Winterson’s use of the theory of parallel universes. Sandra Bartky accurately defines those boundaries as:

Woman’s space is not a field in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realized but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined . . . Under the current “tyranny of slenderness” women are forbidden to become large or massive; they must take up as little space as possible. The very contours a woman’s body takes on as she matures – the fuller breasts and rounded hips – have become distasteful. (Bartky 29-35)

The Dog-Woman defies each of these norms. The highly corporeal presence of her massive body, in all its “hideousness,” is in sharp contrast to all these imperatives. She reflects upon this so-called hideousness in the beginning of the novel: “How hideous am I? 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 smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas. But I have fine blue eyes that see in the dark” (Winterson 19).

She broke both the legs of her father as a child when he swung her upon his knees, yet her mother who “was so light she dared not go out in a wind” (Winterson 21) could carry her on her back for miles. This is why one can't pin her down – she is at once highly corporeal, and yet can't be particularized. Her body does not become an obstacle, instead it makes her powerful enough to take care of herself and become independent. This is not to say that she has no ‘feminine’ traits. She is a mother to Jordan in every possible way, although they are not biologically related. This is one instance where magical realism has been successfully used to subvert heteronormative stereotypes about women. This also offers a reworking of the traditional family structure which represses women in every possible way. The Dog-Woman therefore becomes a metonymic epitome of the intersection between the real and the fantastic in the text.

Through the Dog-Woman's character, Winterson counters the negative connotations associated with the concept of Julia Kristeva's ‘abject.’ The *abject* generates horror among its witnesses as it creates an ambiguity between what is human and what is non-human. Here the Dog-Woman's monstrosity leads to her empowerment. Her ‘feminine’ virtues of charity and maternity make her, as Elizabeth Langland puts it, “at once a site for the inscription of conventional meanings and a locus for their disruption” (Langland 99). Judith Butler's theory of the drag performance that highlights “three separate dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance,” (Langland 102) can be applied to the portrayal of the Dog-Woman here. Her biological sex is undoubtedly female, but the denotation of her body changes when no man is able to fully penetrate her vagina. This also takes away from her any chance of bearing a child, yet she is extremely maternal in her love for Jordan. Therefore, by the end of the novel, her ‘hideousness’ needs a thorough re-evaluation.

The Dog-Woman's body is huge – present in that sense – whereas no male body is large enough to penetrate her. The male body, then, is lacking here – in its size and in its power. This truly liberates her – in her very enormity, she does not remain a receptacle for anything, but is instead free to make her own choices. She is also then free to relate with men on an equal stand, as the typical power relations cannot be effected in her case. Here *Sexing the Cherry* counters the Lacanian psychoanalysis that Moira Gatens talks about:

The account of female sexuality offered by Lacanian psychoanalysis constructs female bodies as lacking or castrated and male bodies as full or phallic... Writing of a sexuality that is not simply the inverse or the complement of male sexuality presents a discursive challenge to the traditional psychoanalytic understanding of sexual difference, where difference is exhausted by phallic presence or absence. (Gatens 231)

There are several more instances where she intelligently uses her corporeality as a weapon to gain her freedom. One of them is when her father stole her as a child and tried to sell her to a one-legged man: "They had a barrel ready to put me in, but no sooner had they slammed on the lid than I burst the bonds of the barrel and came flying out at my father's throat. This was my first murder" (Winterson 124). Her body protects her. Even the women in the brothel, while serving their clients' lust through their bodies, rob them and "steal the ornaments supposedly safe on the wall" (Winterson 28). These are all examples of a complementary relationship between the body and the mind. They work together to survive, rather than acting as conflicting forces. Jordan also bridges the gap between body and mind: "To escape from the weight of the world, I leave my body where it is, in conversation or at dinner, and walk through a series of winding streets to a house standing back from the road" (Winterson 11). In fact, this is how he first encounters Fortunata. Even though we first see her in Jordan's mind, her presence in the story is as material as any other character.

Fortunata is a tightrope walker who achieves her balance precariously, thus personifying both reconciliation and disintegration. She signifies the transcending of the binarisms of male versus female and body versus mind. Jordan cross-dresses as a woman for convenience at first, but then chooses to continue as a woman for some time. He is not the only one who finds his body a limitation, as he has "met a number of people who, anxious to be free of the burdens of their gender, have dressed themselves men as women and women as men" (Winterson 29). He also has "a fear of confined spaces," (Winterson 47) hinting that he finds his social gender to be stifling and claustrophobic, thus signifying that men are also pressurized by the necessity of conformity. He is enticed with the idea of grafting so that something stronger and better can be produced that would have the qualities of both its contributors. The metaphor of grafting also suggests that taking account of both the waves of feminism so far, the text is moving towards a third kind of feminism that deconstructs all forms of binary oppositions. This third kind would be one that does not believe in the social constructs of masculine and feminine

genders, but moves beyond them to engender something entirely novel. Fortunata embodies that third variety which is not given but must be envisioned and contrived.

Sex and gender are also conflicting concepts within the framework of Western metaphysics. But as Judith Butler points out, one materializes as a male or female 'body' only once one has assumed a sex, so sex is a construct that forms 'the body' upon which the cultural imperative of gender is then imposed. This implies that one's identity is formed by one's 'sex' – these are not two separate entities, but mutually constitutive. Moira Gatens also puts forth a similar contention:

Significantly, the sexed body can no longer be conceived as the unproblematic biological and factual base upon which gender is inscribed, but must itself be recognized as constructed by discourses and practices that take the body both as their target and as their vehicle of expression. Power is not then reducible to what is imposed, from above, on naturally differentiated male and female bodies, but is also constitutive of those bodies, in so far as they are constituted as male and female. (Gatens 230)

And this is applicable to all the characters of *Sexing the Cherry*. This argument also resolves the problem of having to categorize the Dog Woman. The problem with calling her a feminist character has been that she's not constructed by Winterson as a 'woman' in the traditional sense of the word. But now one can call her a feminist character because the sexed body itself is not an essential or biological fact, but constructed through discourses.

The rewriting of the story of the twelve dancing princesses is a marvelous success on Winterson's part in helping women to escape the restrictions of their typecasting. The Grimm Brothers ended the story where all the twelve princesses got married and lived happily ever after. Winterson however, individualizes each of those princesses and narrates how they reached their happily ever after. She extricates the princesses from the fairy tale and turns them into the characters of a novel, thereby giving them individual subjecthood and agency. It enables them to document and relate their own stories, which had so far been represented and misrepresented by patriarchal authors: "we were all given in marriage, one to each brother and as it says lived happily ever after. We did, but not with our husbands" (Winterson 48). There is a grotesque defilement of the husband figure by the princesses in most cases, consequently disrupting their clichéd image of being submissive and passive. The violence here can be seen in tandem with a writing style resonant of the Bakhtinian Carnavalesque that makes the reader

enjoy the breakdown of inhibitions and the sabotaging of all morality. In defiance of all heteropatriarchal norms, the readers get an extremely corporeal account from the seventh princess of her 'husband': "I never wanted anyone but her. I wanted to run my finger from the cleft in her chin down the slope of her breasts and across the level plains of her stomach to where I knew she would be wet. I wanted to turn her over and ski the flats of my hands down the slope of her back. I wanted to pioneer the secret passage of her arse" (Winterson 55).

This husband is in fact a woman, who has presumably cross-dressed all her life as a man in order to escape the social bars behind which a woman is forced to live all her life. And now that she is married to a woman, she enjoys all the fruits of this institution, at least until they are discovered. Once they are forced to come out, the princess kills her husband to save her from the cruelty of a homophobic society. They want to burn the husband, which suggests in itself how afraid they are of the body that has discovered it does not need men to survive. That is the reason that women need to rise above the imperatives placed on them by heteropatriarchy. Irigaray too faces this problem: "How can we speak so as to escape from their compartments, their schemas, their distinctions and oppositions: virginal/ deflowered, pure/impure, innocent/ experienced ... How can we shake off the chain of these terms, free ourselves from their categories, rid ourselves of their names? Disengage ourselves, *alive*, from their concepts?" (Irigaray 87). This is where the Dog Woman and Fortunata come in – they solve this problem of expression in two different ways. The Dog-Woman has completely accepted her material body and learned to use it as a weapon whenever needed, and Fortunata expresses her freedom from these chains by dancing which is her corporeal body's language.

None of the female characters in *Sexing the Cherry* exist absolutely as their gendered identities at all times. The Dog-Woman, as it has already been discussed, is not a conventional female character. In fact, her most 'feminine' moments are perhaps those in which she tries to have sex, whether penetrative or oral, but even those moments are subverted by the hugeness of her body. Fortunata bends all possible limitations of space, time and identity. Many of the twelve dancing princesses violently murder their husbands. Jordan finds his masculine gender claustrophobic and therefore prefers to cross-dress as a woman. One of the princes cross-dresses as a man for her preservation. This proves that "the gendered division of human life into bodily life cannot be adequate or absolute. Only at times will the body impose itself or be arranged as that of a woman or a man" (Riley 222).

Conclusion

Materiality and abstractness are therefore reconciled in the text. In the city where people “knock down their houses in a single night and rebuild them elsewhere,” (Winterson 43) Jordan discovers that “the inhabitants have reconciled two discordant desires: to remain in one place and to leave it behind forever” (Winterson 44). *Sexing the Cherry*, hence, is an articulation of what Trinh T. Minh-ha talks about: “We do not *have* bodies, we *are* our bodies, and we are ourselves while being the world...We write – think and feel – (with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds or hearts”³ (Minh-ha 258). The corporeality of the female body, which had so far been devalued, becomes subversive in *Sexing the Cherry*.

Endnotes:

1. Feminists so far have placed emphasis on either the intellectual or the material aspect of women. However, taking one side in this debate cannot provide the answer, rather these two need to be perceived as the two halves that constitute a whole. They are not two polar opposites, rather they complement and supplement each other.
2. It must also be noted that these are not independent themes in the text, rather they coexist and fuse into each other so that it is impossible to separate any one from the others.
3. She points out that it is not men but women who claim to speak from their womb: “Their site of fertilization, they often insist, is the womb, not the mind...The mind is therefore no longer opposed to the heart; it is, rather, perceived as part of the womb, being ‘englobed by it’...thought is as much a product of the eye, the finger, or the foot as it is of the brain” (Minh-ha 259-261).

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