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Sexual De-Traumatisation to Liberation: Reading Jeanette Winterson's Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit as a Semi-Autobiographical Text

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the issues of representation of sexual trauma arising from a homophobic social attitude, thereby asserting the fact that semi-autobiographical novels serve a good purpose in mouthing the lived experiences of individuals with particular reference to the novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson applying the concepts of 'lack', 'loss' and 'absence' as put forth by the American historian and renowned trauma theorist, Dominick LaCapra. The paper further examines how the element of intertextuality weaves the plot and blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction by presenting a complex interweaving of religion with homophobia and thereby challenging the status quo and the inherent homophobic nature of Christianity as reflected in the Bible.

Keywords: Homophobia, Heterosexuality, Lesbian, Absence, Heteronormativity, Liberation.

With the genre of life writing occupying a large yet significant part of the present body of literature, there has been a marked increase in the experimentation of narrative techniques to accommodate this novel form and its nuances. The form has become the voice of the 'subalterns' in every field of discourse- gender, religion, caste, class and sexual orientation. These marginalized groups bring to light the traumatic experiences of their lives and thereby liberate themselves.

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit is the debutant novel of the British writer, Jeanette Winterson. Written at the age of twenty-four, and published in 1985, the book emerged as the winner of the prestigious Whitbread Best First Fiction award of the year. The novel records the life-events of the protagonist, Jeanette against the backdrop of the Pentecostal Evangelical church of which her orthodox mother is an ardent follower. Being a narrative which explores the protagonist's journey from childhood to adulthood through the crucial yet delicate period of adolescence, it becomes a coming-of-age novel.

Winterson, in *Oranges*ⁱ, deals with the boiling issues of 'compulsory heterosexuality'ⁱⁱ, the patriarchal agency, the religion as a means of social control and gender inequality and indifference. Jeanette is adopted into an Evangelical family in the North of England with an orthodox mother and a weak father who has an almost invisible narrative presence. Right from her childhood, her mother Louie, tries to instill in her a solid religious fervour since she wanted her daughter to become a missionary. However, to the mother's dismay, Jeanette grew up to become a lesbian, which was a taboo for the Church and the community. Consequently, she was thrown out of her house.

The novel begins with the pronouncement "oranges are not the only fruit" which is a quotation from the famous Restoration actress, Eleanor Nell Gwynn, mistress of King Charles I, who, "as a child, is believed to have sold oranges outside the Drury Lane Theatre in London" (Lopez 165). Winterson attributes her novel to her. The author's reference to this historical figure and event represents fact, while its accuracy points to the fictional side. Winterson is not sure whether Gwynn sold oranges; she simply assumes it to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction and to maintain a sense of ambiguity for the readers. She reveals her motive behind it in her introduction to the Vintage edition of *Oranges*: "I thought she might have said oranges are not the only fruit but she didn't. What is the point of being a fiction writer if you can't make things up?" (xi). This statement makes it evident that the novelist seeks to play with the limits of a genre to suit her taste and purpose.

The book presents a magical fusion of reality and fantasy which makes it a postmodern text. The novelist twists and turns facts to make *Oranges* border on fictional lines but at the same time, she draws parallels between her life and the protagonist Jeanette's life. Winterson explains her move in an interview with Vogue magazine, "I think of it [*Oranges*] as an experiment with

experience. She, further, questions the necessity of abiding by the rules of a generic makeup. She does not like sticking to any genre; rather, she feels an amalgamation of the two would serve the purpose equally: “But we live in the land of labels. Fiction? Nonfiction? I bring the same sensibility and the same skills to each. I want to affect people in whatever I write. This isn’t about true and false. This is about meaning.” (*Vogue*)

To achieve this objective, Jeanette Winterson adopts the method of “intertextuality,ⁱⁱⁱ” by weaving the narrative of *Oranges* with The Bible. The book is half occupied with Biblical quotes, hymns, stories, and characters. In fact, the chapters of the books are named after the eight books of the Old Testament.

The first chapter is named “Genesis” after the first book of The Bible. Genesis means creation. The Biblical Genesis describes God’s creation of man and the Earth. Similar is the case with the chapter Genesis of *Oranges* which describes the beginning of Jeanette’s story. She does not introduce herself straightaway; instead, she begins with the introduction of her mother, Constance Winterson, which reveals the importance of her mother in Jeanette’s life, and the fact that she had a strong hold over her daughter’s life. The mother is described as a woman of polarities: “She had never heard of mixed feelings. There were friends and there were enemies” (1). Her extremities were such that “she never was particularly fair; she loved and she hated” (4). Jeanette’s mother was a religious lady who preferred homeschooling and hence, taught her daughter the Bible since she raised the latter to become a missionary. Nevertheless, by the end of the chapter, the mother gets orders from the government to send her to school. Although she considered school to be a “Breeding Ground” of all vices and sin, yet she had to follow the order. The end of her homeschooling can be called the ‘devastating flood’ of her life, just as man’s sins caused the perilous flood in the Bible. On the other hand, Jeanette’s mother can be identified as Abraham. Just as Abraham acts as the covenant between God and the people, so also the mother becomes the covenant between God and Jeanette, initializing her entry into the world of Christianity.

The second book of the Bible is entitled “Exodus” and so is the second chapter of *Oranges*. Exodus means exit or migration. According to the Bible, Moses helped the Israelites to migrate from Egypt into Canaan thereby liberating them from their sufferings and thus, giving them a new life with the promise of a good future. The symbolism of the chapter works on two

levels. The first is the new world of Elsie Norris which Jeanette entered through friendship with her since she took great care of her during her ear surgery. On the other hand, the new world can also refer to the school, but it was Elsie's world to which she belonged because she could not fit into the walls of the school. Her overtly religious attitude was despised by everyone since she talked of "Hell to young minds" (44). Moreover, all her projects, conversations and games were based on her knowledge of the Bible. She describes the world outside her home and the Church as such: "The daily world was a world of Strange Notions, without form, and therefore void. I comforted myself as best I could by always rearranging their version of the facts" (51).

The third chapter is called "Leviticus", deriving its name from the third book of the Bible. This book enumerates the laws of God with concerning the offerings or sacrifices to be made to Him and the rules of living a life free of sins so that God can thrive with the people in the Tabernacle. Similarly, the mother, being a missionary, had taken up the task of spreading the word of the Lord and teaching His ways and rules to the ignorant, whom she called "The Heathen" (53).

The second part of this chapter deals with a sermon on perfection and Jeanette's response to it. It preached that perfection meant flawlessness. However, "it was at this moment that I [she] began to develop my [her] first theological disagreement" (62). Following this, Winterson narrated the tale of a prince to support her view. The prince was in search of a perfect wife but ended his quest when a beautiful woman taught him that perfection cannot be termed as flawlessness; instead, it is the equilibrium of one's strength and qualities. So perfection could be equated with harmony.

Thus, this chapter sowed the seeds of skepticism in Jeanette's mind which is her first step towards maturity and independence leading to her ultimate self-discovery. The author's use of "Leviticus" as the name of the chapter is ironical, since the events, along with the tale, aim at dismissing the fact that God is the epitome of perfection and flawlessness.

The fourth book of Moses is named "Numbers" which deals with the Israelites wandering through the forests or wilderness before reaching Canaan. It also signifies the period of transition that one has to pass through before reaching the destination. This is also true of the corresponding chapter where Jeanette starts her journey of self-discovery through her affair with

Melanie, which in turn, marks her knowledge of her sexual orientation as a lesbian. The wanderings also correspond to her initial feminist strands of thought owing to which she calls men as pigs; and also the confusion regarding her desires and preferences.

The fifth chapter is named after the last book of Moses, “Deuteronomy”. The chapter is subtitled “The last book of the law” which is true of the corresponding book of the Bible. It is the shortest chapter in the novel, and is presented as Winterson’s musings on time, history, storytelling, truth, memories and the past and bits of advice to deal with them in the appropriate way. The same can also be said of the Biblical book wherein, the laws of the Israelites are discussed. But the point of departure is the nature of such discussions. While the Biblical book lays down the rules to be followed, *Oranges* questions the nature of these laws of truth, history, time and the like thereby advocating the need for building laws of our own and interpreting the world in terms of them instead of mindlessly following the set notions of truth and falsehood, fact and fiction because history is also a social construct like gender and sexuality. Hence, absolute truth is but an illusion. To illustrate such a view, perhaps, her novel is designed in a way which collapses the boundaries of historical facts and fiction, thereby overlapping them and causing a mixture of both so as to reflect upon the fundamental nature of life and narration.

With “Deuteronomy” ends the books of the law giving way to the twelve historical books from the Book of Joshua to the Book of Esther to complete the Bible. This also indicates the end of the first part of the novel, the second part of which would include three eponymous chapters from the first three historical books: Joshua, Judges and Ruth.

The sixth chapter, “Joshua” is partly similar to its Biblical counterpart. The latter deals with the wars of the Israelites and the destruction of their enemies, and finally ends with Joshua’s warning that God’s obedience and the observance of His laws defines victory in its true sense. However, the chapter in *Oranges* defines victory as acceptance of one’s desires even if the desires are blasphemous. Nevertheless, the war motif brings in some similarity since; the chapter portrays the fight between conservatism and individual freedom, and also between religious restrictions and sexual preferences. Jeanette was exorcised to be saved from the demon of homosexuality or “unnatural passions” as the Church called it; but in vain. Though they took away Melanie, she found her partner in Katy and thus, came to terms with her sexuality, rubbishing all confusions and accepted her orientation whole-heartedly.

The seventh chapter is titled "Judges". In the eponymous book, the Israelites are defeated and punished because of their unfaithfulness to God. However, Winterson twists the tale by enabling Jeanette to have two faces – the masked one, which showed the world that she was still a child of God by her sincerity in performing the duties at Church; and real one, by which she kept her relationship with Katy intact. Nevertheless, towards the end, she musters up courage to leave the world behind which she never belonged to and ended up in a land of her own, liberated from the shackles of orthodoxy to pursue her interests and live life on her terms.

The last or the eighth chapter is named "Ruth". In the Bible, The Book of Ruth explores the depth of the relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. Following her husband's death, Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi in Israel. In *Oranges*, the chapter also deals with Jeanette's homecoming. When she returned home for Christmas, Jeanette found her mother a bit eased out on her sexuality, but equally pious and obsessed with religion. However, the news that Morecambe guest house which was the Society for the Lost had been turned into a hub of voodoo practices due to Mrs. Butler's alliance with an exorcist came as another blow to the mother, indicating the fact that the number of sinners was increasing with every passing day and that the Church could not suppress the desires of the people.

Thus, it can be inferred that the religious elements in the novel point towards the obsession of mother which she wanted Jeanette to imbibe as she had been raised to become a missionary. It is also a means of juxtaposing the world of Jeanette with that of the Church and in bringing to light the repressive norms of religion which allow little or no space for freedom of the individual.

This kind of narrative style contributes in deepening the generic ambiguity discussed earlier. The narrative is not continuous or presented as a chronological arrangement of events; it is chaotic and fragmented. This can be attributed to her view that "life is not a series of fixed points, but a narrative" (*Vogue*). In fact, it can also be partly linked to one of the incidents that took place in her childhood as she reminisces it in her memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* Since her mother did not like her love for literature, Winterson had to read books hiding them from her mother by placing them under her mattress. Once, her mother found out and it was even worse when it was D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* that she laid her hands on. Her knowledge of Lawrence being a Satanist and pornographer led her to throw all of Jeanette's

books and burn them. Then, “[i]n the morning there were stray bits of texts all over the yard and in the alley. Burnt jigsaws of books. I collected some of the scraps. It is probably why I write as I do – collecting the scraps, uncertain of continuous narrative. What does Eliot say? *These fragments have I shored against my ruin . . .*” (41)

An element of parallelism can be observed between the lives of the fictional Jeanette and the novelist Jeanette. In her introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Winterson asks the rhetorical question and answers it too: “Is *Oranges* an autobiographical novel? No not at all and yes of course” (Lopez 165).

The protagonist in *Oranges* is also named Jeanette. This has created confusion among the readers and critics. It is this feature that leads them to consider the novel as an autobiography. However, in an interview with Margaret Reynolds, the author justifies this choice:

In *Oranges* the narrator has my name, because I wanted to invent myself as a fictional character. There has been some confusion around this, because people have thought, ‘Well, it must be autobiography’. In part it is. Because all writing is partly autobiographical in that you draw on your own experience, not in a slavish documentary style, but in a way that transforms that experience into something else. (Lopez 166)

Thus, we can call *Oranges* a semi-autobiographical novel instead of an autobiography. In fact, in an interview with *Vogue* magazine, Jeanette Winterson reveals that she considers *Oranges* a “cover version” of her life as well as her memoir. What is the point of being a fiction writer if you can’t make things up?” (xi) With this statement, she clarifies that she seeks to play with the limits of a genre to suit her taste and purpose.

The novel’s focal point is the sexual orientation of the protagonist Jeanette. She is a lesbian and her real journey begins with this discovery. She comes out of the cocooned shell of the Church to realize that “the world is [not really] a larger version of [the] church” (26). It is this journey of conformity, sexuality, liberation and “self- actualization,”^{iv} that the author seeks to explicate.

The heterocentric^v nature of the society and its non-acceptance of homosexuality is hinted in the initial pages of the novel wherein the two women at the Grimsby’s paper shop, who

were lesbians, were considered to be dealing with “unnatural passions” (6). This brings home the idea that heteronormativity is the law of the world and lesbians are discriminated because they fall outside the confines of conventional sexual behaviour. When her affair with Katy gets exposed and she is asked to move out of the house, she contemplates her actions to arrive at her mistake: “It all seemed to hinge around the fact that I loved the wrong sort of people. Right sort of people in every respect this one; romantic love for another woman was a sin” (129).

She further criticizes her mother's forbidding her to have both male and female partners since she had warned Jeanette against her closeness with Graham, a new convert from Stockport, whom Jeanette gave lessons on guitar.

Such an attitude of the mother can be attributed to her Evangelical roots. Following the theological doctrines of St Paul, the Evangelists despise heterosexual marriages, let alone homosexual relationships. They prefer celibacy the best. As Jago Morrison rightly observes: “Within this [Evangelism's] perspective, indeed, marriage's ‘carnal’ implications are only grudgingly endorsed as a means to ‘avoid fornication’ (1 Corinthians 7:2). Thus, within the world of the church to which Jeanette belongs, not heterosexuality but sexlessness is the ideal” (97).

However, Jeanette was a maverick. She openly accepted her lesbian desires. She could not be constrained by the impositions of the church. When Pastor Finch accused her and Melanie of being possessed by demons, Melanie was afraid to admit her love for Jeanette and was ready to repent for her sexual act while Jeanette was not. She insisted: “I love her” (105). She accused Pastor Finch of being a demon because he was misinterpreting their love as a sin: “To the pure all things are pure... It's you [who is a demon] not us” (105). Jeanette does not consider her homosexual desires as a sin, because it is the expression of her love. She ponders over the point how love could belong to the demon.

Even after being exorcised to get rid of the so-called evil that had possessed her, she does not suppress her desires like her first lover, Melanie, who married a man. Jeanette expresses her displeasure: “I didn't object to Melanie getting married, I objected to her getting married to *him*” (127). Nonetheless, Jeanette did not let go of her passions as Melanie did. She was confident that she was not sinning. Moreover, if she did, she did not care. What was more important to her was

her self-discovery: “If I let them take away my demons, I’ll have to give up what I’ve found” (109).

It was indeed Jeanette’s choice to yield to her temptation because it was her truth. It was her sexual identity and she happily accepted it without hesitation. She describes the journey to acceptance as such:

At first, for me, it had been an accident. That accident had forces me to think more carefully about my own instincts and others’ attitudes. After the exorcism, I had tried to replace my world with another just like it, but couldn’t. I loved God and I loved the church, but I began to see that as more and more complicated. It didn’t help that I had no intention of becoming a missionary” (130).

Her trauma was not just the discrimination she faced due to her sexual orientation, but also because of the ‘absence’ of a companion, one who would understand her and her desires. Her mother was more concerned about her duties in the church than her duties as a mother. Even after knowing about Jeanette’s condition, she does not seem to be worried about her. When the doctor took Jeanette for examination, instead of being with her, the mother headed home to get her pyjamas.

The mother’s absence during her stay at the hospital seems to be justifying this observation. In fact, on the morning of her operation, she was all alone. Her mother had left her with a bag of oranges on the bedside cabinet. Though her mother “knew all about illness and operations”, Jeanette never got benefitted by her knowledge bank. It seemed to be reserved only for the duties of the church. Elsie stood beside Jeanette during this time: “My mother couldn’t come till the weekend, I knew that, because she was waiting for the plumber to check her fittings. Elsie came every day, and told me jokes to make me smile and stories to make me feel better” (28).

The part which the mother had to play was being played by Elsie, while the mother was busy doing trivial chores. She went to see Jeanette towards the end, which seemed to be more of a formality than motherly love. Even then, she failed to visit her regularly, so she sent Jeanette’s father “usually with a letter and a couple of oranges” (29). However, Elsie was never a part of Winterson’s life. Elsie is just a fictional appearance. Winterson confirms this in her memoir *Why*

Be Happy. “There was no Elsie. There was no one like Elsie. Things were much lonelier than that” (2) Elsie is a kind of substitute gratification for Winterson as Dominick LaCapra points out in his article, “Trauma, Absence, Loss”, “Lack nonetheless indicates a felt need or a deficiency; it refers to something that ought to be there but is missing.” (703) Jeanette always yearned for the support of her parents or at least any one of them. Her father was too weak to help and the mother, never bothered to.

By installing the element of objectivity amidst subjectivity, Winterson further strengthens the complex web of fact and fiction allowing the text to speak for itself. Jeanette Winterson brings to light the reason behind her interweaving of fantasy and reality along with historical facts and myths:

I never wanted a literal reading of *Oranges*. If I call myself Jeanette why must I be writing an autobiography? Henry Miller calls his hero Henry. Paul Auster and Milan Kundera call themselves by name in some of their work. So does Philip Roth. This is understood by critics as playful meta-fiction. For a woman it is assumed to be confessional. Is this assumption about gender? Something to do with creative authority? Why shouldn't a woman be her own experiment?” (Winterson xiv)

Thus, Winterson rightly describes *Oranges* as “a powerful novel that challenges the way people think and experience the world, that questions certainties and invites the reader to see things anew, from another perspective” (Lopez 157). Winterson not only criticizes and rejects binaries of all kinds but also makes an appeal to and an attempt at accepting both the ideas in pairs like heart/mind, masculine/feminine, heterosexuality/homosexuality, which is reflected in Elsie's words: “‘There's more to this world than meets the eye...There's this world,’ she thumped her chest. ‘If you want to make sense of either, you have to take notice of both.’” (32) Jeanette liberates herself from the sexual trauma through assertion of her position as an independent individual with her ‘different’ sexual identity without the support of anybody because as LaCapra rightly indicates, “Absence is... inherently ambivalent-both anxiety producing and possibly empowering, or even ecstatic.” (707)

ⁱ*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* will be abbreviated as *Oranges* hereafter.

ⁱⁱ As derived from Adrienne Rich's essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”

ⁱⁱⁱJulia Kristeva coined the term

^{iv}Ellen Barker coined the term.

^v Rich's coinage

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