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## **TIME IN WINTERSON'S NOVELS: FEMINIZING HISTORY IN THE PASSION**

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**Abstract:** *Jeanette Winterson's novels problematize our established concept of time as linear temporality and are marked with the subjectivity of time. It can be argued that the conceptualization of time in Winterson's fiction challenges the conventional notion of linearity and brings about the unchronological narrative of her fiction which problematizes the distinctions between past, present and future. Viewing time in such a way in her novels as to accept the simultaneity between past and present makes it possible for Winterson to reflect temporality in an alternative way, "leaving us free to ignore the boundaries of here and now and pass like lightning along the coil of pure time" (Sexing the Cherry 89-90). This paper argues that Winterson's The Passion parodies historical temporality through mingling the historical narrative with fantasy and, rewriting history apparently with feminist concerns at stake, it attempts to deconstruct the conception of time based on the phallogocentric view and to reflect female voice in the alternative history that the novel offers through crossing temporal boundaries.*

When reading Jeanette Winterson's texts, the novelist's interest in and her ability to approach alternatively to the concept of time are the first things that strike her readers. In *Sexing the Cherry*,<sup>1</sup> Winterson gives a list of lies whereby she contradicts our general beliefs. Among these lies, number 2 disclaims the fact that "Time is a straight line" (*Sexing* 83). The writer's historiographic metafiction not only depicts the major historical events that they insert, but they display her philosophical reflections on time, particularly on the concept of time as a linear temporality and on the nature of historiography that depends on such a conceptualization of time. It is known that the writer's fiction tries to question our established understanding of time and that she employs postmodernist strategies to find means of portraying temporality alternatively in her novels. In *Sexing the Cherry*, this philosophical questioning is hinted at early in the text with Winterson's epigraph concerning the language of Hopi Indians. In the epigraph, Winterson states that Hopi Indians have no tenses to distinguish between past, present and future and she asks, "What does this say about time?" It indicates openly that our established concept of time as linear temporality neatly divided into time zones as past, present and future is a constructed reality and it signals the possibility of other alternative ways to approach time and history. In this epigraph in *Sexing the Cherry*, therefore, the traditional perception of time is put into question, and a time subjective and relative is experienced by the characters in the novel, particularly by Jordan through his journeys to different fantastic places. Winterson's concept of time as it is depicted in the novel has the effect of writing against our own criteria of time as a straight-line progressing forward. Seeing past, present and future intermingled with each other, "denying the calendar" as Jordan argues (*Sexing* 80), makes it possible to grasp past and present simultaneously.

In *The Passion*, the same questioning takes place in that "Winterson unsettles the taken-for-granted distinctions between past, present and future, in this place [Venice] freed from linear temporality" (Stowers 143). The pivotal character/narrator of the novel, Henri keeps reminding the reader that "there is only now" (*Passion* 29), an argument which shows the distinction between past and present as arbitrary and constructed. Similarly, Villanelle, the main female character who acts as the dual narrator in the novel, points to the constructedness of the conventional division between past and present by indicating that such a division is actually impossible and that there is only the present: "The future is foretold from the past and the future is only

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<sup>1</sup> The novels will be referred to as *Passion* and *Sexing* throughout the citations in this study.

possible because of the past. Without past and future, the present is partial. All time is eternally present” (*Passion* 62). Villanelle tries to deconstruct the linear concept of time in her narrative since it is at odds with female plurality. For her, there may be other ways of measuring time and she is aware that the traditional concept of linear time had been imported to Venice:

In Venice, a long time ago, when we had our own calendar and stayed aloof from the world, we began the days at night. [...] In those days (I cannot place them in time because time is to do with daylight), in those days when the sun went down we opened our doors and slid along the eely waters with a hooded light in our prow. All our boats were black then and left no mark on the water where they sat. (*Passion* 56)

Experiencing time in a relative way affects Winterson’s characters’ relationship with history, which shows itself as narrative discontinuity in her fiction. History cannot be told in linear, chronological narratives in Winterson’s novels; and in the author’s *The Passion*, an anti-linear view of time is reflected in the way history is represented through the novel’s narrative, past and present merging into each other. The conception of time as “fluid” is reflected in *The Passion*. Time is not a flowing water/river in Winterson’s fiction; rather, its fluid-like characteristics denote its borderless nature and it disrupts the chronological order in the text. As Pykett asserts:

The problems of mapping and measuring space and time are of course particular instances of the postmodernist problematization of knowledge and representations. How we know the present, how we know the past, and how we represent both or either are questions raised in and by Winterson’s novels. (55)

*The Passion* can be read as historiographic metafiction as the text combines historical material with metafictional self-reflexivity (Omega 56), and it parodies and rewrites history apparently with feminist/lesbian concerns at stake. Through parodying the historical narrative and mingling it with fantasy, the novel attempts to deconstruct the conventional historical discourse. *The Passion* narrates Henri’s admiration and passion for Napoleon as a great hero and the years he spent during the Napoleonic wars. While serving in the army, in order not to forget anything, Henri decides to keep a diary, to write everything down to shed light on the history of his time, including what Napoleon said<sup>2</sup> (*Passion* 30). A conventionally expected account in Henri’s diary would include Napoleon’s depiction as a great historical figure with his military triumphs, or defeats, an objective narration of the battles he fought, and the reasons for and explanations of some important events related with the Napoleonic wars. Thus, Napoleon and the traditional historical accounts of the Napoleonic wars, as they would be embodied in Henri’s diary, stand for an ideologically-shaped historical narrative that excludes female experience:

Napoleon personifies the masculine linear force of history-making, rationality and war, where the feminine, woman’s history, becomes charted out of sight, considered to have no place on patriarchy’s official map of world events. (Stowers 142)

Henri wants his diary to be a small-scale model for traditional history writing composed of past events, in a chronological order, and revolving around the great figure of Napoleon (*Passion* 13), creating a singular voice as the object of history. Nevertheless, *The Passion* problematizes history as a discourse by means of Villanelle’s fantastic narrative that disrupts Henri’s narration, and paradoxically by means of Henri’s diary again. For Villanelle, the realistic mode of narration is not adequate to convey the multiplicity that she depicts the city of Venice in and female experience. The narrative of the novel which mingles fantasy and history, and thereby upsetting the clear-cut distinction between fact and fiction, aims at an intentional deviation from the limits of a linear world that is represented by Napoleon to the city of mazes embodied by Venice, where every

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Pressler defines Henri’s diary as: “This diary, as a tool for redefining history, contains more than just the minor details of Henri’s life or a standard record of battles. He also writes down what Napoleon says. [...] This indicates that Henri was a reporter of his time, someone who met Napoleon and listened to him” (17).

boundary is denied. Villanelle's fantastic narrative challenges the objectivity of the discourse of history, and within the realm of fantasy, she is able to narrate the untold story of her lesbian love and of the Venetians under Napoleon's invasion, so her fantastic Venice makes it possible "to imagine the ways that traditionally neglected historical voices could add depth and texture to flat factual accounts" (Meyer 213). Villanelle's narrative disrupts the linear flow of the historical events that Henri narrates in his diary. Although history writing requires a chronological sequence of events, Henri's narration is far from being linear due to the deviations through stories about other people; but Villanelle's with a narrative composed of fantasy and magic realism disrupts it further by means of her deviation through story-within-the-story she narrates and she makes it fluid, without boundaries, like her watery city where "there is no such thing as straight ahead" (*Passion* 49). Therefore, *The Passion* can be said to resist the conventional linear narrative by introducing historical accounts in a non-chronological order. Thus, Villanelle's narrative tries to deconstruct the linear concept of time in her narrative since it is at odds with the plurality she aims at.

Henri's intention to keep a diary to note down what happened without blurring (*Passion* 28) brings the idea of objective history writing in the novel. Henri declares his intention "to convey to you [the reader] what really happened" (*Passion* 103), to record events as they happened,<sup>3</sup> as he says, unlike "the old men" who blurred and lied while making the past (*Passion* 28). However, Henri is unable to focus on the material reality because he is much more concerned with his own feelings in the face of events; as he emphasizes, he does not care about the historical past but what he wants to represent is emotions (*Passion* 29). Therefore, the outcome is a parodic imitation of conventional historiography. *The Passion* rewrites history this time from the eyes of Henri and Villanelle, both of whom are victims and losers of the Napoleonic wars since Villanelle lives in Venice, which has been invaded by Napoleon's army (*Passion* 52), and Henri experiences the irrational side of the war as a soldier when he falls victim to the unquenchable passion of a ruler for victory. Besides the references to "factual" historical events and personages, *The Passion* is also marked with self-reflexive discussions on history and time itself, and on the validity of the historical records that Henri keeps in his diary. When Henri reveals his intention to write his time, "something clear and sure to set against [his] memory tricks" (*Passion* 28), his fellow-soldier Domino raises objections to the truth-value of Henri's recording, first by uttering that "The way you see it now is no more real than the way you'll see it then," and later by questioning Henri's character as a historian:

Look at you, [...] a young man brought up by a priest and a pious mother. A young man who can't pick up a musket to shoot a rabbit. What makes you think you can see anything clearly? What gives you the right to make a notebook and shake it at me in thirty years, if we're still alive, and say you've got the truth? (*Passion* 28)

In order to defend himself, Henri claims that he is interested in his own memories<sup>4</sup> only, not in the material reality of the war: "I don't care about facts, Domino, I care about how I feel. How I feel will change, I want to remember that" (*Passion* 29). This utterance suggests that the history he is writing is far from objective history writing, and far from being chronologic. On another occasion, Henri refers, in a self-conscious way, to the difficulty he faces while writing his diary, the difficulty of "trying to convey to you what really happened.

<sup>3</sup> Henri sometimes gives exact dates for certain important events such as the date and the number of soldiers who died in the storm during the war out of a commander's passion for victory. He writes: "July 20, 1804. Two thousand men were drowned today" (*Passion* 24). Or on another occasion, he refers to the Coronation with accuracy in terms of its date and social implications (*Passion* 34), or to the battle of Austerlitz, one of Napoleon's greatest victories destroying the coalition against the French Empire (*Passion* 79).

<sup>4</sup> In *The Passion*, in bringing the past to life, the memories of characters become more important than the past events, and the real historical events are interpreted from the view of the novel's characters who are unimportant individuals when compared to great men populating history. In her introductory note to the novel, Winterson writes that "*The Passion* is not history, except in so much as our lives are history" and thus she puts the individual memory of her characters as the basis for history instead of objective documents, which challenges its objectivity but makes the ex-centric the center at the same time. The past is reinterpreted from different angles by means of the characters' individual stories.

Trying not to make up too much” (*Passion* 103). These self-reflexive and ironic comments on the nature of history create a critical distance between history and Henri’s imitating this discourse.

The inclusion of the process of history writing/rewriting in the novel that Henri’s diary makes possible brings the self-reflexive questioning of history as a metanarrative. The characters of the novel keep reminding us that history is a construct by their references to the fictionality of what they narrate with the self-reflexive phrase repeated through the novel, “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” (*Passion* 5, 13, 40, 69, 160). By uttering this after narrating something hard to accept as true, the characters want the reader to believe what they relate, but at the same time they make it known that it is constructed. This metafictional aspect of the novel, therefore, problematizes the validity of the historical representation in the novel and foregrounds the fictionality of history by self-reflexively playing with the artificiality of the text. The blurring of fact and fiction through this self-reflexive playing complicates the veracity of the historical accounts that the novel refers to.

These self-conscious remarks of the characters shed light on another equally significant side of Henri’s narration. His narrative is distinguished by revelations of the feminine aspects of his character, such as his distaste for killing that Domino mentions. Henri is portrayed as a character who obviously lacks the masculine qualities that a soldier supposedly has. This issue on gender turns into an even more crucial topic in the hands of Winterson as a feminist writer, because the whole idea of identity based on gender is problematized in her novels. *The Passion* exposes how gender is a construct through the pivotal characters in the novel and tries to deconstruct the binary opposition between masculine and feminine by reversing the characters’ gender roles and identities. On the one hand, Henri is attributed with feminine qualities, and on the other, the main female character of the novel, Villanelle exhibits masculine traits. In contrast to Henri, she is shown in the public sphere as a woman who works in casinos, and like Henri, she challenges the accepted gender constructions as the masculine woman (*Passion* 102). Gender boundaries are further deconstructed by Villanelle’s cross-dressing, which is seen as a subversion of gender identities by leaving the character’s gender in ambiguity. Villanelle transgresses the traditional gender boundaries with her unique bodily features, too. In Venice, boatmen are born with webbed feet which enable them to walk on water. Villanelle’s father as a Venetian boatman expectedly had this unique quality but what is unexpected and unwanted is that Villanelle as a girl is born with these masculine webbed feet. In this respect, her masculine body<sup>5</sup> works like her cross-dressing.

By representing Henri as a character with feminized aspects belonging to the private space, and Villanelle’s reversely belonging to the public realm, Jeannette Winterson makes the problematization of history writing more heightened in the novel. All these feminine qualities make Henri’s narration and its focus distinct from traditional history writing. Although Henri serves in Napoleon’s army for a long period of time, he can only provide us with Napoleon’s passion for chicken but nothing in the way of conventional historical accounts. Since Henri does not follow the tradition of history writing but parodies it only, his focus is on Napoleon not as a great Emperor but as a short man who pushes chickens into his mouth (*Passion* 4). The very opening sentence of the novel verifies that we will find a different Napoleon than we know from the history books:

It was Napoleon who had such a passion for chicken that he kept his chefs working around the clock. What a kitchen that was, with birds in every state of undress; some still cold and slung over hooks, some turning slowly on the spit, but most in wasted piles because the Emperor was busy.

Odd to be so governed by an appetite, (*Passion* 3)

The fact that Henri is a male narrator whose gender role is reversed becomes an important determiner in the selection of events and the accounts he narrates, too, and this may be seen as one way of gaining the voice of the marginal in history because the focus moves from the masculine army life to the army prostitutes and experiences of individual soldiers. Thus, what we find in Henri’s accounts of the war is the untold stories of

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<sup>5</sup> Villanelle says: “My feet were webbed. There never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen” (*Passion* 51). When she is born, they immediately want to “cut off the offending parts straight away” (*Passion* 52) but they are well able to stand firm against the knife; and as a result, Villanelle’s grotesque body remains hidden in her boots and becomes a means of blurring gender identity in the novel which patriarchy defines in terms of body.

soldiers and prostitutes, and the historical events interpreted from their subjective views. This is in contrast with the kind of history that makes its primary concern the triumphs and failures of Napoleon as the great national figure. After Henri returns to the camp, leaving Napoleon in Paris for the Coronation, he provides the reader with the accounts of the camp life but rather than concentrating on the war, he records about the prostitutes serving the army whose story would be lost if Henri were to narrate the Coronation instead. In this way, Napoleon and the patriarchal view as the centre of history are pushed out of the centre, and the untold stories of individual subjects become significant.

The more acute way of challenging the monologic discourse of history and opening it to multivocality is the fantastic and the magic realist narrative of the novel which is interwoven by the stories told by Henri and Villanelle as the dual narrators of *The Passion*. Although the novel seems to be unfolding neatly one narrator after the other, still a linear narrative is not possible because both Henri and Villanelle include deviations and report stories of other people embedded in their stories. Moreover, they disrupt the linearity by interrupting each other's stories. Thus, the narrative of the novel takes a form which can be put in opposition to the narrative of conventional historiography. The opening part of "The Zero Winter," for instance, where Henri is documenting the marching of Napoleon's army to Moscow, seems relatively realistic and it is in accordance with the reflection, on a realistic level, of the historical material it includes. However, Villanelle disrupts this with the story of a lesbian love relationship, which must be seen as an attempt to include the personal stories of women in the past silenced by the hetero-patriarchal history writing, and she is able to insert the fantastic elements of the novel by turning Venice into a city of mystery where you can easily lose, or find, your way, at the corners of which you are told your fortune, your heart can really be stolen, and boatmen have webbed feet and can walk on water: "This is the city of mazes," utters Villanelle (*Passion* 49). Therefore, the novel can be said to fight against the features of the realistic depiction with the elements of magic realism and fantasy, which serves as a threat against historical objectivity and helps to show history as a construct.

In contrast to a grand narrative-style history, what Villanelle narrates, and the way she narrates it, is transgressive in nature and enables one to perceive and understand the many-layered reality of the past. Villanelle uses her fantastic tales within a text which is supposed to convey objective historical facts, but she, in a sense, challenges the "notion" of history writing embodied in Henri's notebook as a source of truth at the same time by proposing her magic realist explanations. For readers, her storytelling becomes more trustworthy and reliable than facts themselves, leaving the distinction between fact and fiction uncertain. The mingling of fact and fantasy in Villanelle's narrative is first provided by the mysterious story of webbed feet that the boatmen in Venice hereditarily possess: "Rumour has it that the inhabitants of this city walk on water. That, more bizarre still, their feet are webbed. Not all feet, but the feet of the boatmen whose trade is hereditary" (*Passion* 49). Villanelle, despite her sex, is born with webbed feet and she is well able to walk on water like any other boatman in Venice<sup>6</sup>. Another fantastic element that should be referred to is Villanelle's stolen heart which is depicted as a separate entity and beating on its own out of Villanelle's body. When Villanelle falls in love with the Queen of Spades, who habitually visits the casino where Villanelle works, the Queen of Spades possesses her heart and it is left in the woman's house when Villanelle is sold by her husband to the army. Villanelle asks Henri to help her to take her heart back by looking for it in the house of the Queen of Spades (*Passion* 115). Yet, Henri does not believe that such a thing is possible. He utters: "you'd be dead if you had no heart. [...] It was fantastic" (*Passion* 116). Nevertheless, when Henri breaks in the house, he realizes that Villanelle's heart is really beating in a jar and she is able to live without it. In order to make Henri believe the veracity of such a thing, Villanelle has to reveal to Henri the other fantastic event in the novel. The icicle that Domino gave to Henri before he abandoned the camp in Russia is still "cold and hard as the day [Domino] plucked it from the canvas" (*Passion* 116), even in the warm climate of Venice.

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<sup>6</sup> This unusual moment is narrated by Henri who realizes, in astonishment, that their boat is moving without anyone rowing: "We were moving. How? I raised my head fully, my knees still drawn up, and saw Villanelle, her back towards me, a rope over her shoulder, walking on the canal and dragging our boats. Her boots lay neatly one by the other" (*Passion* 129).

The existence of alternating narrators in the novel makes it possible to grasp events from different perspectives and in a fragmented way, which poses the postmodernist distrust of the validity of historical knowledge. Villanelle's narrative interrupting that of Henri's makes fragmentation possible in the novel because she brings different interpretations to the events, exposing the limits of history. Villanelle's narrative proposes multiple explanations by narrating events from her perspective, hence fracturing the past. Reality cannot be grasped through a single perspective; we need multiple perspectives as in the copper pot Henri mentions to get rid of the totalizing historical discourse:

I see a little boy watching his reflection in a copper pot he's polished. His father comes in and laughs and offers him his shaving mirror instead. But in the shaving mirror the boy can only see one face. In the pot he can see all the distortions of his face. He sees many possible faces. (*Passion* 26)

Winterson's fiction should be read as texts which allow female voices to be heard in history. The writer inserts historical material in her fiction and she turns it into a playground where she can foreground the suppressed histories in the postmodern text of her novels. In an interview, she relates this:

I wanted to use the past as an invented country. So I knew I was going to land on some moment of history and rediscover it. [...] We are continually understanding our past in a different way because we are continually reinterpreting it. And fiction does that very well. But you can only do it well if you let some freedom in for your imagination. You can't do it well if you are trying to lock yourself slavishly into your notion of the past – which will not be true anyway. Or if you're making the past into the present, but in a silly wig and a different costume. (qtd. in Reynolds and Noakes 18, 22)

To Winterson, history is simply a series of continual reinterpretations of the past, and this makes it possible in her fiction to write feminine subjectivity into history, or rather a her-story which denies any easy definition. As a result, her fiction opens up new possibilities with regard to historiographic representation where the voice of the repressed or marginalized "Other" will be heard.

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