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## *Feminine M(other) Nature in Jeanette Winterson's Oranges are not the Only Fruit*

**Keywords:** *mother, gender, other, lesbian love, stereotypes*

**Abstract:** *In Feminine (m)other nature in Jeanette Winterson's Oranges are not the Only Fruit my purpose is to show that although grotesque, monstrous and queer, the feminine character can overcome all the obstacles in creating the woman self in a highly religious society. In order to support these ideas, I will rely on the theoretical lines of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival, gothic and grotesque with as a literary trope with reference to the secondary meanings of the grotesque as a tool to explain the character's self formation in relation to society's norms, values, morals and beliefs. At the same time, I will refer to Paulina Palme's explanation on the coming out novel and issues related to same sex drives and love within postmodern feminine novel. My paper will attempt to show that all boundaries, either mental or physical can be crossed and fulfillment can be achieved for female sexuality and (m)other nature.*

Jeanette Winterson's first novel *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, published in 1985, marked the writer's debut winning the Whitbread Best First Novel award of the year. The novel, which was thought to be "the author's autobiography as an adopted young woman raised up by Pentecostal parents to become a missionary" (Parlog, 43) in a successful attempt to defend lesbian love and challenge gender stereotypes is indeed acclaimed as autobiography by the author in her latest novel *Why be happy when you could be normal?* (2011). As a postmodern feminist text, while challenging patriarchy, stereotypes, gender, sex, love, sexuality, it mingles rewritten and reinterpreted passage of the Bible and fairy tales and symbols as the color orange, the orange or the pink mackintosh in order to build the feminine characters to create the (m)other nature.

The present paper starts by explaining the meaning of the term monstrous and monstrosity. Thus, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary online<sup>1</sup>, the monstrous is:

1. Obsolete: strange, unnatural
2. Having extraordinary often overwhelming size: gigantic
3. **a: having the qualities or appearance of a monster**  
*b obsolete:* teeming with monsters
4. *a:* extraordinarily ugly or vicious: horrible

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/monstruous>, accessed on May, 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012, 19:25

**b: shockingly wrong or ridiculous**

5. Deviating greatly from the natural form or character: abnormal

6. Very great —used as an intensive.

Starting from the above definitions, in this article my focus will be on the secondary meanings of the term: shockingly wrong or ridiculous, deviating greatly from the natural form or character: abnormal. These meanings are sometimes associated to human nature, used with reference to the character's (m)other nature.

The first point related to monstrosity is not the physical monster per se but a shockingly ridiculous person or situation. In his work *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin relates carnivalesque from literature to the activities of the carnivals in popular culture, the manifestations of the Other, the freak, the different, the monstrous. For Bakhtin, the carnival refers both to the carnival entity and to grotesque realism as a way of writing. The focus of the present paper is on the literary mode. Thus, within the novel, things like cultural, political or social changes can resist the authority of the state, the society or the community. When used in literature, the grotesque body or ideas, acts and behaviour or sexual desires try and succeed in almost eliminating and minimalising the normal, the moral or the spiritual. In extending Bakhtin's analysis on Rabelais' work, the focus will be on the connection between human anatomy and drives to political, social, religious restraints. According to Katerina Clark and Mikhael Holquist the concept of gothic body is "a figure of unruly biological and social change" (Clark, Holquist 27).

Following this description, the novel *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (1985) is a narrative of feminine self-discovery. It is the journey of a young girl who turns into an out-of-the closed strong woman. The main character, Jeanette, and her childhood friend Melanie are part of a Pentecostal community where heterosexuality is the norm and the lesbian is the "Other", the outcast. Although a community led by independent women, their same-sex orientation is never obvious, admitted and neither regarded as defining their lives. Here, Jeanette has no interests in men and makes her own life choices, for which she never feels guilty.

In the novel, Jeanette is considered to be a "monster" as she is different in a sense that she tries to resist the community religious beliefs, values and morale. In this way that she is exorcised in order to take the "monster" out of her body and mind. In the community's eyes, Jeanette has the "monster" inside of herself so she needs to be exorcised, an exorcism which is performed by Pastor Spratt and where her mother is both a witness and participant:

"Still..." I was thinking..."Melanie is a gift from God and I would be totally unrightfully of me not to appreciate her for what she is". (*Oranges*, 123)

.....

While Miss Jewsbury advised me to stand up saying: "Keep calm keep calm", I was heading towards the priest with Melanie. I looked at her. She was extremely pale.

"These God's children", the Pastor began, "have become the victims of Satan". (123)

.....

"These children have become victims of their own sins".

"Wait...." I said, but he paid no attention t me.

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“These children have the devil inside”.  
“What are you talking about? I desperately asked him.  
“I am going to read to you the words uttered by Saint Paul about love”. (*Oranges*, 124)  
.....  
The next morning I was at home.  
At ten Pastor Spar sight and offered me a last chance.  
“I can’t. I really can’t”.  
“We shall return the day after tomorrow. Meanwhile do not allow her exit the room and do not feed her. She must lose her strength before she regains it.” (*Oranges*, 127-28)

Thus, in a patriarchal and conservative and religious community, there are two-sided protagonists: those who support Jeanette and those who are totally against her. Here, the secondary women characters do not actually act as supporters for a minority’s cause and they are not the expected suffragettes of the Liberation Movement.

Moreover, the cultural element in the novel is Jeanette’s relation to her mother and this is an interesting issue for feminism: the relation mother-daughter. Thus, the mother is considered as the first love object in the daughter’s life, so the daughter is not supposed to overweigh her. In this way, we actually realise that this is a primarily lesbian relationship which later on becomes heterosexual, in a heterosexual society. The mother explains to her daughter how to become a “woman” or how to be accepted. One of the key moments in this relationship - which might even be the last in the mother’s attempt to convert the daughter to a more girl-like attitude is the episode of the pink mackintosh: the raincoat is too large and has a bright pink colour. Jeanette dislikes it profoundly. For Jeanette, the pink raincoat is like a mask, something to keep the appearances, but her mother’s attempt for captivity is not relevant anymore. This is also a symbolic moment when feeling so sick wearing the coat, Jeanette looks around and sees Melanie, her first love:

“Try this one”.  
I put it on.  
It was huge.  
“Look, it has got a hat also”.  
.....  
“How do you close it?” I felt like I was caught in a trap.  
“It won’t shrink anymore”.  
I remembered a film I had seen: ‘The man with the Iron mask’.  
“It is a little too big”, I started to say.  
“It will also fit you after you grow up”.  
“But mum...”  
“We’ll take it”.  
“But mum”.  
It was bright pink.  
.....

I wouldn't have noticed Melanie if I hadn't looked to the opposite corner. (97-98)

In the novel, the leitmotif of the orange appears at key moments in the novel and is linked to sharing "of lovers and close friends" (Oranges are not the Only Fruit), which may lead to love or failure. The orange seems to be a sort of a salvation, an answer to the moments of crisis in her mother's opinion and a key point in Jeanette's struggle and confirmation of the right way in the formation of her different nature. Thus, in "Joshua" (Chapter 6), there is given the explanation of the colour orange. Here, it is linked to sharing of "lovers and close friends". In Jeanette's delirious moments, there is an odd apparition:

'Everyone has a demon as you rightly observed', the thing began, 'but not everyone knows this and not everyone knows how to make use of it'.  
'Demons are evil, aren't they? ', I asked.  
'Not quite, they're just different and difficult. You know what auras are?'  
I nodded.  
'Well, the demon you get depends on the colour of you aura, yours is orange, which is why you've got me. Your mother's brown, which is why she's so odd and Mrs White's hardly a demon at all. We are here to keep you in one piece, if you ignore us, you're quite likely to end up in two pieces or lots of pieces, and it's all part of the paradox. (106)

In Jago Morrison's work *Jeanette Winterson: Remembering the Body*, he argues that the orange demon is Jeanette's acceptance and internalization of lesbian sexuality as evil and deviant and partly why she initially turns against normalcy. The orange, which is present in the novel ever since the beginning in the title, represents the ideology that dominates Jeanette's world. Whenever Jeanette feels uncertain about something, her mother offers her an orange. The orange appears at different times in the novel, usually associated to Jeanette's mother or Jeanette's first lover, Melanie. At certain moments, these oranges seem to be the heterosexuality the mother's desires for her daughter, reflecting Jeanette's life in close relation to her mother. Thus, the orange seems to represent the answer to Jeanette's questions. It seems to be the way to become normal, it seems to be the only possible option in order to be part of the religious community. When offering the orange, Jeanette's mother seems to be offering Jeanette the chance to return to the "normal" heterosexual world. It is an answer to Jeanette's questions and quests, desires, drives. In her mother's opinion, the orange is the salvation from a lesbian desire to a "normal" desire.

Still, Jeanette's mother cannot manage the situation of her daughter's desire for other women. The scene with the book of memories, when Jeanette and her mother look at Jeanette's mother old pictures, is an interesting point in the story. While looking over the pictures, Jeanette's mother<sup>2</sup> hardly rapidly turns the page with the picture of her and another girl. She does not want to answer Jeanette's

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<sup>2</sup> We see that Jeanette's mother name is only revealed by the end of the novel

questions regarding the girl, she packs the book of memories never to open it again or discuss about it. At first sight, here, the mother may seem quite ridiculous in behaviour. Still, it is not to be regarded as such. This scene together with her marriage to a man she barely has a normal relationship –they do not have a normal family life as Jeanette’s father wakes up at 6 in order to get to work and Jeanette’s mother goes to sleep at 7 after preparing her church rituals, together with Jeanette’s adoption draw a rather different picture of her. This may be explained by the fact that we are witnessing another (m)other nature than she may really be or ants us to believe she is.

Later on, when Jeanette and her mother talk about love, Jeanette’s mother confesses she had never experienced love with a man. It was something she felt in her stomach and which later turned to be ulcer. It becomes clear that Jeanette’s mother never knew what love is, at least not with a man.

Melanie, Jeanette’s first love, offers Jeanette an orange when they finally meet after a few years following their separation. Jeanette turns down the orange. Her refusal represents her stance. She does not want to give up her desires, her inner self as Melanie had done. Jeanette wants to remain true to her becoming, and thus she has to leave the community and discover a new world.

Therefore, as described by Joseph Gixti (Gixti 123) when taking over Bakhtin’s theory, the Other is the one who does not comply to the norm. He or she is considered as abject, strange, and queer. In this respect, it is worth noting the distinction made by the postmodern feminist critics between heterosexual and lesbian women with focus on the needs, desires and problems of the lesbian women as separate from the heterosexual women. Towards the end of the novel, Jeanette becomes a strong lesbian woman. Unlike Melanie, who gives up her love for Jeanette and leaves to marry a man and rise children, Jeanette fights for her rights and fights for her desires. She does not comply with the society’s norms. She never admits to be doing something wrong –because she does everything naturally- and she is very determined.

Living in a religious community, represented by Pastor Spratt where Jeanette’s mother is highly involved, heterosexual love and desire are not accepted. The church is the source of prohibition; it tries to master all the community’s desires and drives. According to Jago Morrison, ‘The church’s prohibition on all non-heterosexual sex as “unnatural passion” and on non-procreative heterosexual sex as “fornication” forms part of a disciplinary framework in which *all* manifestations of the sexual body are more or less illicit’. Jeanette’s starvation and incarceration are less difficult to handle than the exclusion from the community and impossibility to preach. Even more, Morrison regards the Church as the source of identity creator:

Human history, from the Creation to the Last Judgement, is knowable and finite, and there is little time remaining before history comes to its ultimate end. At the same time, the meaning of life for the individual is defined as an intimate relation to a divine plan. Even one’s moment-to-moment progress through a lifetime is filled with a definite structure of prohibitions and obligations, by the constant expectation of judgement. The surveillance of an omniscient God is

total, and there is no place for secrecy, no sinful act, no impure thought or illicit desire for which one will not ultimately be called to account. (Morrison 95, 114)

Narration helps construct the self using several postmodern techniques. As a feminist postmodern text dealing with the main character's struggle for self discovery, the novel is a *bildungsroman* for the feminine character. It is a journey for discovering the m(other) nature for Jeanette. As a postmodern novel, it makes use of metafiction; it recreates and retells fairy tales and passages from the Bible. When analyzing the novel, Paulina Palmer (195) sees narration as the most important in creating the meaning and finds the fantasy part of the novel as one of the most important element in creating Jeanette's self. For Palmer, the way people understand their selves is constructed using stories which help define and characterize their identity. Palmer finds the mix of fantasy, myth and reality chapters as a way of expressing Jeanette's different identities inhabiting at times a princess or Sir Perceval. When referring to this, Palmer has definitely in mind the work of the French feminist Helene Cixous:

*Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, while rejecting a unitary model of subjectivity in favor of delineation of fantasy identity and multiple selves, also, in true postmodern spirit, envisages and depicts subjectivity itself in terms of narrativity. Jeanette, instead of uncovering a single, static identity, constructs for herself a series of shifting, fluid selves by means of acts of storytelling and fabulation in which she engages. Storytelling enables her to acknowledge, in the words of Cixous, the existence of her monsters...jackals...fellow-creatures...fears'. (194)

Continuing Palmer's ideas, we can say that Jeanette Winterson's narrative has several changes and shifts. As a postmodern feminist novel, in an attempt to reject masculine writing, it questions "the Old Testament, the master text of Western civilization". Winterson questions the Old Testament by rewriting passages and putting them in a lesbian coming out novel (Makinen 14). Also, Laurel Bollinger in his *Models of Female Loyalty: the Biblical Ruth in Jeanette Winterson's 'Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (Bollinger 193) states that the *bildungsroman* has mainly been masculine. Thus, the fairy tale, with its passive female protagonists, usually focuses on love and mother, daughter or stepmother relations. However, in *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, in the Ruth Chapter, and the last chapter of the book, Jeanette returns to her family after her realization as a lesbian woman and improvement of the relationship with her mother:

"When did you last see your mother?"

I do not know how to answer. I know what I believe but the words in my mind are like voices under water. They are distorted.

.....

"What would have happened if you stayed?"

I could become a priest, instead of a fortuneteller. The priest has a book with all the words he has to say.....The fortunetellers shout because they are bothered by demons. (188)

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I am going to enter the saloon and I hope everything is going to be fine. In the saloon, I see mother looking at a very strange thing...

"Hello mother, it's me. I lay down my bag and wait. She turns around in her chair waiving a musical part to my face. On its cover, it was written 'Glad Tidings'.

"Come and take a look at this". (191)

.....

My mother woke me up with a cup of hot chocolate and a shopping list. I was about to go in the city center instead of her; she had to write Pastor Spratt. The snow had become stiff, so my first stop was at Army and Navy, for a new pair of boots. (192)

Here, in the last chapter of the novel, Ruth's choice to remain with her mother-in-law was seen by feminist Bible critics as a critique of patriarchal societies and communities and a new way of considering women relationships. While interrupted by bits of dialogues between Jeanette and her mother, Naomi's conversation with Ruth can be seen as a similar quest for Jeanette in her relationships with Melanie and Katie. Ruth's words "Whither thou goest, I will go ... [till] death part thee and me", could represent Jeanette's own quest for passion and true love. At the end of the novel, Jeanette's return to her mother, who had treated her so badly, shows great female solidarity and maturity.

Thus, in a heterosexual society, where patriarchy prevails, human nature that defines a certain community is a motif of rejection. For her community, for her mother and Pastor Spratt, Jeanette's desire for the opposite sex is a sin, a reason for exorcism. Jeanette's newly discovered love for a young woman and desire for a same-sex relation is a "demon" in the eyes of the society. If this defines you, the only thing to be done is to follow your instincts, your other nature as this is the only path to take. Through the use of symbols, challenging patriarchy, using passages of the Bible and rewritten fairytales and myths, symbols, *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* succeeds in creating a character with a strong desire and will to discover herself and follow her instincts in order to become a fully accomplished woman because in the end the question is ... *Why be normal when you can be happy?*

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