

**Quest for Self-fulfillment in Jeanette Winterson's  
*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit***

**Sushma**

Assistant Professor  
University College  
Kurukshetra University

**Abstract**

*Jeanette Winterson, being a versatile writer of repute, has produced novels, short stories collections, film scripts, essays etc. Love, sexuality and story telling are the dominant themes in her works. Winterson questions the traditionally accepted feminist roles and deals with issues regarding distinct gender and sexuality. Her primary interest in the novel is to show how the dominant roles of behaviour and ideologies were used to fix traditional gender roles and sexual conventions and how these roles have fixed and specified women's roles and behaviour. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit is concerned with the protagonist's quest for self-fulfillment. The novel is also a lesbian Bildungsroman tracing the development of the narrator from early childhood to late adolescence. This paper tries to trace how Jeanette, the protagonist struggled hard to find her true self and her quest for self-fulfillment. The protagonist strongly believes that there is nothing wrong in being a lesbian. She asserts her individuality and identity strongly. The novel ends on a optimistic note and shows how the protagonist is successful in her quest for self-fulfillment.*

**Key-Words :** *Heterosexuality, Lesbianism, Self-Fulfillment, Identity.*

Contemporary literature reflects the current trends and preoccupations in literature that all the contemporary writers share in their writings. These writers experiment with previous genres, toy with literary theory, question traditional character representations of a stable personal identity. Some of these writers feel fascinated in exploring issues associated with gender transformation and issues such as cross-dressing, bisexuality, transsexuality and gay and lesbian studies.

Jeanette Winterson, being a contemporary writer questions traditionally accepted feminist roles and deals with issues regarding distinct gender and sexuality. Her females characters struggled hard to achieve liberation from the traditional gender specific roles. Being a versatile writer of repute, Jeanette Winterson produced novels, a collection of short stories, a children's book, essays and has adopted work for film and television. In addition, she has written articles for various newspapers including a column for *The Guardian*. Love, sexuality and story telling are the dominant themes in her works. Although the novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* was not well received in the beginning but now it has a wide readership and is



studied in schools and universities. Her novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) won her a Whitbread Award. Jeanette Winterson writes in an introduction to a later edition of the book;

*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is threatening novel. It exposes the sanctity of family life as something of a sham; it illustrates by example that what the church call love is actually psychosis and it dares to suggest that what makes life difficult for homosexual is not their perversity but other people's. (Winterson 12)

Like many of Winterson's novels it is a hybrid of a realist narrative and fantasy, In this book she uses realism, fantasy, folktale, poetry, rhymes and quest romance to weave a multiplicity of parallel narrative. Jeanette's 'love for her mother god and her girl friend Melanie is told with wry humor and with the assistance of layered fairy tales'. Winterson replicates most of the events from her early life in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, her first novel. The book is semi-autobiography but Winterson claims that it is more than a biography. She herself has stated that "Oranges is the document , both true and false, which will to serve for my life until I went to Oxford, and after that I dare say that whatever I tell you will be another document, one that is both true and false".

It is coming of age story about a lesbian girl who grows up in an evangelical matriarchal society. This is also a lesbian *Bildungsroman*, tracing the development of the narrator from her early childhood to late adolescence. In this novel, the protagonist, Jeanette tries hard to assert her individuality identity and tries to get a place in the society by enjoying homosexual relations instead of heterosexuality. The novel deals with;the confusion and self-consciousness of the adolescent girl who must deal internally and externally with a maturing body and self-consciousness of her own difference, causing her to engage in the struggle to retain her identity in spite of the hostile environment. (Preda 228)

The structure is not consistent with that of a traditional novel. Her story is not always told in chronological order and she narrates various tales that appear to have nothing to do with the life of the main characters and the result is multi-layered narrative that appear confusing to the reader She writes in the tradition of post Modern writers as her technique reflects the ideas of such theorists as Michel Foucault, Julia kristeva, Roland Barthes and Jaen Lacan. Her uses of myths and fables in her novel creates metafiction that attempts to question the nature of fiction instead of just recounting a simple plot. Winterson's primary interest in the novel is to show how the dominant rules of behaviour and ideologies were used to fix traditional gender roles

and sexual convention and how these roles have fixed and specified women's roles and behaviour.

The author emphasizes the fact that the structure of the novel is experimental by relating the main linear and chronological narrative of Jeanette's coming of age with the other stories; fairy tales, dream sequence, Arthurian legend and reference to other text such as *Bible* and *Jane Eyre* (1847) to view a multiplicity of parallel narrative. She titles the eight chapters of her book after the first eight chapters of the Old Testament. At the same time, the theme of Winterson chapters roughly corresponds with the biblical books. The stories of the eighth book from the beginning of the Bible are used to trace Jeanette's early life from her origin in 'Genesis', through her going out to school in Exodus, to her decision to leave her old life behind her Ruth. This paper tries to trace how Jeanette, the protagonist struggled hard to find her true self and her quest for self-fulfillment. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is about a girl named Jeanette's adoption and her early life from the age of seven to twenty one. Her mother exercised a powerful influence on her. But she is a hypocrite through and through. She keeps a wine glass in her house although she deplores drinking. She has a picture of a woman on her "Old Flames" page, although she deplores lesbianism. Jeanette's mother lives blindly professing to follow something that she does not keep in her heart. Her mother buys a pink "mackintosh" for Jeanette but she hates it. The raincoat symbolizes a final attempt by Jeanette's mother to force her into something that she is not. Its pink color suggests the femininity that her mother wants her to maintain. This pink raincoat symbolizes the ideological mask that her mother is trying to keep on her, it requires that Jeanette becomes a heterosexual and follows her mother's ideas. Her mother's attempts to imprison her in traditional convention fail every time. Jeanette's mother can only see the world as good or evil friend or foe. Jeanette's lesbianism defies the binary gender roles that traditionally dominate society. Jeanette is a woman who does not act as a traditional woman because she does not love men. The writer wants to suggest that people are not simply black and white but also line the many shades of gray in between. While the novel arguably presents her mother as asexual through most of its narrative, it becomes clear she pours her sexual energy into the church. As Jeanette remarks: if there is such a thing as spiritual adultery, my mother was a whore. (Winterson 132)

According to her mother oranges are the only fruit when Jeanette t get slightly ill ,her mother brings her a bowl of oranges, and the following scenario takes place. "It took out largest and tried to peel it. The skin hung stubborn, and soon I lay panting, angry and defeated. What about grapes or bananas? I did finally pull away the other shell, and , cupping both hands



round, tore open the fruit."(Winterson 113) Under the influence of her dominating mother, she believes that she will emerge as a Christ-like figure who will help to save the world. As she grows, she begins to understand that her true quest is simply to find and accept her self. This task is not an easy, however, Jeanette realizes that her homosexual desire contradict the regulation that she has believed all of her life. To accept who she truly is, she must embark on a physical and spiritual adventure. She will must challenge the assumption of this patriarchal world. From her birth, she was conditioned for a mission and by the end of the novel it becomes clear that even though she has become a lesbian, her quest still continues. She is sure that even as a writer and as a lesbian she can still help to fight against the evil in the world.

The novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* focuses most of its attention on the tension and friction that spark when Jeanette's sexual life clashes with her religious life, and on the drastic measure that her church takes to drive the "demon" and "unnatural passions" away from her. Although Jeanette's development and moral growth is most certainly the focus of this novel, a lot of content is focused on her strange relationship with her mother and on the mother's blind and ritualistic devotion to her church.

The incident, when goes deaf for three months and her mother instead of taking her to the hospital, starts Jeanette informing everyone that Jeanette is "in a state of rapture" (Winterson 23) begins the process of Jeanette's moral growth and self-realization. When Jeanette realizes that her conditions is due to biological processes rather than spiritual rapture. It is in this moment when she realizes that her mother does not have all the right answer and neither does the Church. As she says :

Since I was born I had assumed that the world ran on very simple lines, like a larger vision of our church. Now I was finding that even the Church was sometimes confused. (Winterson 27)

In an Easter Egg painting competition she realizes that even though his master piece was definitely the best project submitted to the competition , she loses simply because she steers away from convention rather than creating a habitual Easter theme project for the competition, she strives to be different and creative, which essentially makes Jeanette a queer character in many other aspects besides her sexuality. Jeanette is such a companionate and thoughtful character that it is easy for her to take side and believes that her lesbianism is not wrong. On the whole, Jeanette stands as a symbol of spirit and life. By the end of the novel, she still feels closely aligned with God but realizes that most of the Church teachings are false. She often

observes that the Church members broadly preach guidelines but don't follow them sincerely in their heart.

Winterson uses of various images and symbols correspond with the life of Jeanette. Oranges symbolizes the dominant ideology that pervades the world in which Jeanette lives. In some cases these oranges appear to strictly represent heterosexuality. But generally they represent more than just the dominance of heterosexuality; they represent the entire repressive system that Jeanette's mother supports. By questioning why she cannot have other fruit, Jeanette put into question the limitations that are imposed on her choices and preferences contrary to the beliefs of her congregation. Jeanette strongly believes that her spiritual and sexual life is able to coexist. The desire to steer away from convention and to find her true self i.e. lesbian is the main concern of this novel.

The image of the stone wall resembles Jeanette's delirious dream that she is surrounded by these stone walls. These walls symbolizes the social forces that distort her self. Jeanette observes that while these walls i.e. the structure of her society protected her, they also confine her. She longs to liberate herself but doubt her ability to wander safely in the world. She had at last found her promised land by being true to her desires. She realizes that she still loves God and her church but will no longer become a missionary. Although she remains in the church she allows her lesbian desire to blossom in her affair with Katy. She still does not see any sort of contradiction in her loving both the Church and Katy. Jeanette must become aware that "she is different, that while for everyone else "Oranges are the only fruit", for her "they are not." (Preda 227-228)

The martyrdom and eventual success of these mythological characters like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego mirror the life of Jeanette. Like them Jeanette refuses to pay homage to an idol or actually an ideal that of her homosexuality. For her disobediences, her church members punish her in various ways. It is her faith in her own interpretation of god that will save her. The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego correspond with the life of Jeanette that faithful is protected from persecution. Jeanette possess all the qualities of empowered woman. She has strong sense of her self. She wants to be true to her desires and needs. She does not feel any hesitation to claim that she is a lesbian. She challenges the idea that women are biologically inferior, and that men and women have set biological roles. For Jeanette, however, a woman is a woman and a man is a man. She strongly believes that the idea of gender is socially constructed, not biologically. She feels that there is not a clear biological role for men and women. Gradually she begins to understand that through the act of writing and telling her own story, she is able to liberate herself.



Winnet Stonejar, the alter-ego of Jeanette represents Jeanette in a magical world. The events in Winnet's tale mirror those in Jeanette; she is adopted, cast out, wander and finally becomes a city dweller. For Winterson, the self is always in a process of being created and reinvented. Jeanette has been able to change as she has grown. Eventually, Jeanette develops a profound understanding of her self where she can see who she was before and what she is now. Jeanette has come to terms with her lesbianism in her relationship with Katy. She has accepted it as part of her identity. Jeanette's recognition and acceptance of herself is the part of her quest towards self realization. At the beginning, she completely follows her mother's interpretation of the world but as she grows, she begins to understand the world herself, and she forms her own opinions. Gradually, she learns to differentiate between her own sincere beliefs and the misguided beliefs of others in the Church. She feels the need to remain true to herself and in this she manages to follow her ideal of God. Jeanette also changes as she grows much more imaginative. By the end of novel, she is on her way to become a writer and constantly summarizes the events in her life by speaking about them through the guise of made-up characters. Her ability to free her imagination relates to her increased sense of self. Jeanette's willingness to interpret the world differs greatly from when she was a child and accepted the rhetoric of the church and her mother blindly. As a child she was destined to become a missionary, who is someone that repeats stories that have been told to her.

She feels that she is a prophet who still is continuing the mythic quest that she starts as a child. Unlike a missionary, however, she will not simply repeat the law as it is written, she will rewrite it herself. To wind up the discussion it can be said that the novel ends on a optimistic note and finally Jeanette is able to find her true self and identity.

### **Works Cited and Referred**

Winterson, Jeanette. *Orange Are Not the Only Fruit*. London: Pandora Paper back edition, 1989. Print.

Preda, Alina. *Jeanette Winterson and the Metamorphoses of Literary Writing*. Clujnapoca : Argonaut. 2010. Print.

Childs, Peter. *Contemporary Novelist : British Fiction Since 1970*, New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.

<<https://angelmatos.net/2014/01/12/oranges-are-not-the-only-fruit/>>

<[http://www.academia.edu/4874423 oranges-are-not-the-only- fruit](http://www.academia.edu/4874423/oranges-are-not-the-only-fruit) Jeanette Winterson.