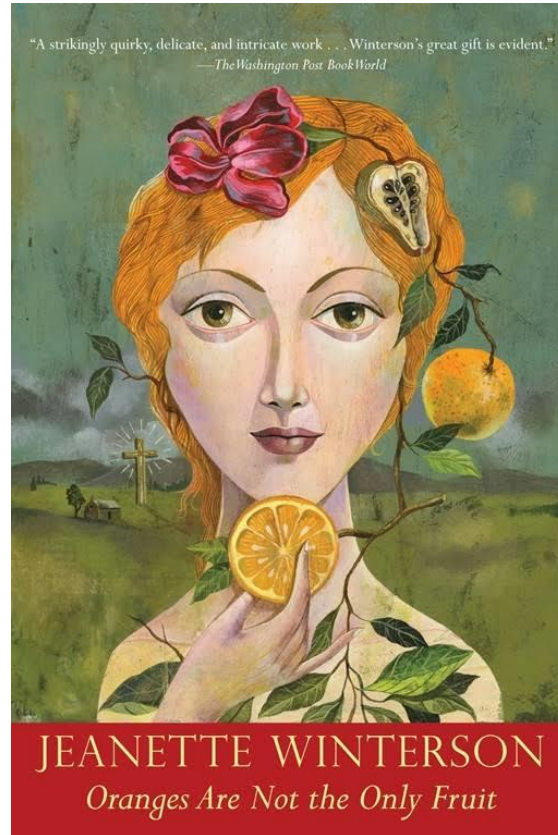


**Rebellious Homosexual Daughter vs. Religious Orthodox Mother –  
A Study of Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit***

**Vaishali Shivkumar Biradar, M.A., B.Ed., M.Phil.**

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**Abstract**

Jeanette Winterson is a novelist but her approach is more of a story-teller than a writer. She tells a story every time and tries to connect the two worlds of fact and fiction as well as the world of the believed-to-be-normal people with the world of believed-to-be-abnormal/not acceptable people – the Third Gender.

In addition, she rejects the label ‘political’ writer – as she rejects almost all kind of the labels such as feminist or lesbian writer but her work is absorbed with a sense of political injustice and protest. It is argumentative, aggressive, confrontational, and impassioned speaking up on behalf of history’s silent majorities and minorities – women, gay people and the working class, including subjects like patriarchy, war, racism and capitalism.

Her literary art opens a door to a new consciousness through which we can examine the vulnerable, self-doubting, intricacies of the self. She questions and gives a constant insurrection of the patriarchal binary regulation of sexuality that unveils and lays exposed the constructed, gendered conception of the self, and the restrictiveness of the concept of love within the compulsory heterosexual economics. Love becomes a major theme, whereas gender becomes a subsidiary element in Winterson. Moreover, her female characters are stronger in comparison with her male characters. It gives a feminist approach to her writing, also, but she prefers going beyond that and that is how her literature becomes the literature of the Third gender. But still with her style of writing, by rejecting both sentimentality and the teaching or moralizing of the readers she awards them the complete authority to choose the multiple ways to interpret and assess her texts. She advocates alternative traditions to understand the sexual, emotional, and intellectual self. Through the use of characters who endeavor to discover and explore their sexual identity (e.g. Jeanette’s character in the novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* – a young woman’s search for identity – rather a self not bound under the title ‘gender’; and the whole process to ascertain her lesbian identity), Winterson deconstructs standard narrative conventions and shows how storytelling need not be subordinated to the constraints of the patriarchal grand narratives. Through her narrative techniques, she demonstrates some of the innovative and challenging ways of writing, presenting a strong alternative to the patriarchal constructed binary oppositions between the masculine and feminine identities. In this paper we shall see how she advocates this alternate tradition.

**Keywords:** Jeanette Winterson, Lesbian identity, Third gender, Patriarchy, Genderless self

**Jeanette Winterson**

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**Janette Winterson**

Courtesy: <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/jeanette-winterson>

Jeanette Winterson's first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1987), is a semi-autobiographical novel in seven chapters named after the books of the Old Testament. The main character is Jeanette, a girl adopted by a working class couple active in a Pentecostal community. Jeanette is a naïve and yet very determined, self-assured girl. The mixture of early wisdom and childhood innocence is quite charming. In the course of the novel we see how Jeanette is trying to come to terms with what she herself experiences as good and that which her mother and Pastor Finch believe is virtuous. In that sense, it is a Bildungsroman. One of the themes in this book is the feeling of uncertainty Jeanette experiences, that she is trying to come to terms with: "I wasn't quite certain what was happening myself, it was the second time in my life I had experienced uncertainty". (Winterson, 1987, p.98) At the end of the novel, she opts for a life that embraces that feeling, leaving behind the certainties of the black-and-white world created by her mother.

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Of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Winterson states, “It exposes the sanctity of family life as something of a sham; it illustrates by example that what the church calls love is actually a psychosis and it dares to suggest that what makes life difficult for homosexuals is not their perversity but other people’s”. (Winterson, 1987, p. xiii)

With this quote in mind, here, in this paper, I wish to focus on the family values – particularly on the mother-daughter relationship Jeanette and her mother are sharing.

### **Jeanette’s Father - a Minor Character**

In the novel, Jeanette’s father is almost a minor character in decision making in the household, and he is almost invisible in the course of the novel when he is really needed not just as a character but as the father-support to Jeanette. Actually, here, there are no strong male characters who can give a strong image which can be set by a patriarchal text. That is how, in this “female Genesis”, it is a woman, Jeanette’s mother, who does the act of “begetting” and is therefore responsible for the act of creation. Therefore, the mother’s claim of the lack of Wise Men not only fits with a feminist re-telling of an otherwise patriarchal text, but also accounts for the relatively minor role Jeanette’s father plays in the formative years of her life, as well as the reason why the mother’s evangelical community is largely dominated by women through much of the novel.

### **Mother’s Idea about “Begetting”**

When we consider her mother’s idea about “begetting” and the Real Mother (Virgin Mary), even about the absence of the Three Wise Men – these references are very strongly connected to the New Testament. As a result, Jeanette’s birth and initial upbringing are reflective of both the creation of the Earth - a reference from Old Testament, the “begetting”; as well as the embodiment of Christ – a reference from New Testament: “We stood on the hill and my mother said, ‘This world is full of sin.’ We stood on the hill and my mother said, ‘You can change the world.’” (Winterson, 1987, p.10)

This particular passage characterizes the young Jeanette as a Christ-like figure and is certainly appropriate given the strong role Christianity plays in the novel and, in turn, the fact that Christianity itself is a faith with foundations in both the Old and New Testaments. This detail notwithstanding, the chapters beyond “Genesis” are, to borrow a phrase from Jeanette about her mother, “Old Testament through and through” (Winterson, 1987, p. 4).

### **Influence of the Gospels**

It is needless to say that the Gospels influence peripheral aspects of the plot - they can be seen, felt and read easily during the course of the novel when community sings the hymns (Winterson, 1987, p. 53, 72), in the episode when the mother believes that her daughter’s ear infection is a sign of the rapture (Winterson, 1987, p. 22-23), and when Jeanette questions the patriarchal composition of the Trinity (Winterson, 1987, p. 87) – but also it confirms that the Old Testament is the preferred text that is used allegorically to describe the major events that occur between Jeanette and her mother and this, as an informed reader can understand, increases the emotional distance between them.

### **Mother’s Domination**

Jeanette’s mother is an almost powerful, forbidding figure who dominates strongly the young girl’s life, and although this is true throughout the course of this novel, it does not manifest itself in a negative form for Jeanette until her realization of the incompatibility of her sexual orientation with the Church’s teachings. At first, she is quite immature or perhaps hesitant of this fact and that is the reason she asks Melanie: “Do you think this is Unnatural Passion?”, before they spend the night together - a reference to the “sins” the mother first introduces to her daughter in “Genesis” when she speaks of the lesbian bookstore owners; at that time, Jeanette, of course, misinterprets the quote and associates “unnatural passions” to them putting “chemicals in their sweets.” (Winterson, 1987, p. 86, 7) Somehow, the reader constantly feels that the character – Jeanette is taken away from the ‘Unnatural Passion’ by her mother and in this process of taking her away from the effect of it, actually, her mother introduced that ‘Unnatural Passion’ to her and compelled her to be involved into it.

## **Unforgiving of Jeanette's "Deviance"**

As the plot-line develops, the mother becomes increasingly unforgiving of Jeanette's "deviance" and, by the latter portion of "Joshua", considerable attention is given to the "orange demon" that is said to possess her. She first encounters this "demon" in a hallucination when her faith community confronts her about her lesbianism: "Leaning on the coffee table was the orange demon. 'I've gone mad,' I thought." (Winterson, 1987, p. 106) Carter argues that the orange demon is "linked to Jeanette's distinctive creativity, her humor, her lesbianism, to all those qualities that the people around her would have her hold in check." (Carter, 1998, p. 16). In fact, demonic imagery plays a significant role in this novel, as it is a means of legitimizing the growing separation between mother and daughter. Ultimately, Jeanette is forced to leave home, and when the circumstances of Elsie's death bring her and her mother together again, there exists an attitudinal swing from Jeanette being portrayed as a demon to all-out disownment: "'Oh she's a demon your daughter,' wailed Mrs. White... 'She's no daughter of mine,' snapped back my mother, head high, leading the way out." (Winterson, 1987, p. 153) At this point, it becomes clear that although Jeanette never truly abandons her religion, her religion abandons her because of clear disagreements over her sexual identity.

## **Concepts of Loyalty and Maturation**

In contrast to this sense of abandonment and distance, the final chapter, "Ruth", also speaks much of the concept of loyalty. One example is the mother's continued service to a Church that has both been exposed as corrupt (Winterson, 1987, p. 159) as well as insistent of the "limitations of [the female] sex" (Winterson, 1987, p. 132), but an even more poignant illustration arises from this very fact, that Jeanette returns home to find little has changed. As with all bildungsromans, this portion of the text highlights maturation, but there is a key difference in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: Laurel Bollinger asserts that "conventional stories of female maturation require that the daughter leave the mother in order to experience adulthood... [but], Winterson suggests that maturation consists in the return to, not the flight from, familial or maternal ties." (Bollinger, 1994, p. 374) Despite the mother's loyalty in remaining the "Kindly Light" who oppresses her daughter by not accepting her sexual orientation, Jeanette remains in solidarity with the woman who raised her: "Families, real ones,

are chairs and tables and the right number of cups, but I had no means of joining one, and no means of dismissing my own.” (Winterson, 1987, p. 171)

### **Meaning of Orange**

According to Jeanette’s mother the orange indicates the only possible, correct and appropriate holy world. Her mother teaches her that the other kinds of fruit are not sacred. She compares the other fruits to unnatural passion that she finds filthy. It is obvious that these kinds of fruits refer to the Biblical apple – the forbidden fruit. This consideration of fruit is shown in the example below when Jeanette falls in love with Melanie – a girl – who represents the forbidden fruit as melon does not represent the fruit Orange. Oranges appear many times in the story. When Jeanette feels uncertain about something her mother always gives her oranges. In this way, oranges become a symbol of heterosexuality and the only possible way to live life according to her mother. There are other possible ways but they are not available to her mother as she is not ready for the mixed feelings. There are friends and there are enemies and enemies are: The Devil, Next Door neighbors, Sex (in its many forms), Slugs and friends are: God, Our dog, Auntie Madge, The Novel of Charlotte Bronte, Slug pellets. (Winterson, 1987, p.3) She either loves or she hates and both the circumstances do not communicate with Christian values. Jeanette’s mother and the church find people who have sex dealing in unnatural passion and anyhow, they feel that there are fixed roles for both the genders and heterosexuality has to be the set norm for the society. They believe that the right to preach, to lead, to make rulings and other expressions of power are solely masculine privileges. It keeps the masculine hegemony intact. Jeanette assumes to behave like a man not just socially but also sexually, according to them.

### **Female Values**

Females have to carry forward some particular values according to Jeanette’s mother and that is the reason why she and the church forces Jeanette to repent to preserve the heterosexual social structure that is advocated by the church and by Christianity in general. Somehow, from the very beginning, Jeanette’s mother tries to warn her to beware of men and sex – the unnatural passion, but this is the reason why Jeanette takes an opposite route in her life. Just like a man, a woman’s sexual initiation begins in earliest childhood. In this atmosphere, Jeanette finds her

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feelings for the same sex normal as her young life is surrounded by women from the church most of who live without men and do not have any respect for the 'Other' gender, also. Jeanette's mother is the dominant character in her household. Even she complains that majority of men she met were of no use and at the end, she found one man who was just a gambler. After marriage, she reformed him into religion and he did not dare to answer anything back (Winterson, 1987, p. 35). Her father's low position, also, gives her a low concept of men. She, in her young age, continuously hears that there are no wise men in the world.

### **Does Not Feel Male Superiority**

Thanks to her mother's dominant role at home, she did not have the feeling that under a man's caresses she will find the same security as in her mother's arms. She does not feel male superiority at home. Thus, Jeanette's father is almost an absent character in her development years and so her incomplete family, also, plays a major role into her choice of the same sex love affair. Melanie has no father. And Jeanette does not have any active father in her life and household. Both of them come from incomplete families. Jeanette's mother and the attitude of her female friends towards men lead Jeanette to see men differently. As women around her call men pigs, she begins to worry if there are any men who are not pigs 'out there'. She is investigating the quality of men in the world and assuming whether there will be any benefit in a heterosexual relationship. When Jeanette asked her Aunt why men were animals, her Uncle Bill came to her and said, "You wouldn't love us any other way" and he rubbed his spiky chin against her face. She hated it and him. (Winterson, 1987, p. 71) This expression shows her hatred for the male and how uncomfortable she feels when a man touches her. After these kinds of feelings she admits she does not want to have a boyfriend, not even once. All these kinds of influences, positive or negative, give a strong power to Jeanette's decision that she cannot make a heterosexual relationship or she cannot marry, even.

### **Foreshadowing Elements**

There are plenty of foreshadowing elements in the novel showing the readers that the protagonist girl is going to have a lesbian relationship in her future. Some of the examples of it

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are the Gypsy's prediction, as also, when two women from the paper shop are talked about (who are lesbians according to Jeanette's mother), the full suppression Jeanette feels under her mother's rule and religion's harsh dualistic approach towards the society and faith. A reference to Jeanette's future homosexuality is also available in her mother's past relation with a female whose photo is excluded by her mother after Jeanette asked her about the female friend, Mrs. Jewsbury, Jeanette herself, Melanie, Katy and also two young girls in the city who are suspected of having this kind of feelings as well.

Jeanette's mother is a hypocrite. She appears busy in church duties when her daughter is sick and needs her. She fights with the neighbors over their fornication that she disdains, which also shows the readers that she likes to fight for her own thoughts and beliefs. Other people's choices do not appeal to her. These kinds of contradictions are available in her character although she believes that she is a true and faithful Christian. Though Christianity puts forward the emotions of love, care and forgiveness Jeanette's mother, and her friends are devoid of these qualities.

### **Elsie, Only Friend**

In this horrid atmosphere, Elsie is the only friend available to Jeanette who teaches her new things in life, and becomes a motherly figure in her life. She guides her about her imagination and relationships. She teaches her the depth of love and also, she introduces the world of literature to her. She explains to her that one thing can be seen with multiple perspectives. Not a single thing has to be given a single meaning or solitary point of view. Elsie introduces a new Jeanette to Jeanette. In simple words, she introduces the inside world of Jeanette to her. She makes Jeanette understand her inside and outside world and the upheavals she is going through.

### **Not Accepted Because She Is a Homosexual**

Not being accepted by her mother, minister and the church, since she is a homosexual – a lesbian, Jeanette has to give up her teaching and preaching and she decides to leave the house as

her mother tells her to go away. Her mother feels that the house gets polluted because of her presence in the house and the same happens if she comes to the church; her religion abandons her and she moves out of the house and the church. She starts to work independently. This determined isolation of Jeanette gives a new identity to her existence – free from the bondages of her mother, the church – hypocrite and false religion, and the false societal norms. At the end of the story, she retells the story as a myth.

### **She Yearns to Liberate Herself**

Most of Jeanette’s feelings are repressed by the church and her mother whether it is related to clothes, choices, meals, or relationships. She, although, tries her level best to discover her emotional developments and the depth of relationships, both the church as well as her mother cannot stop her being herself; they cannot stop her understanding what she is and what she wants from life. And therefore, she confronts the entire society in refusing to repent, stay and conform. This is the beginning of her successful conquest over her internal territory. What comes first – rigid and conservative, hypocritical religion or pure desires? She yearns to liberate herself. She stands in a serious dilemma whether to free herself from the church and stay alone, or to deny her feelings and identity and follow the church restrictions. Finally she decides to be true to her desires. This is the key motif that Winterson deals with in this novel: whether to stay in this ready-made world to be safe or just throwing away all the barriers of the rigidity and follow the paths of desires only.

### **To Conclude**

To conclude, I find *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit* such a text which opens up possibilities of change regarding our limited and self-limiting categories of gender identity. Jeanette’s personal journey is marked by her struggle for self-knowledge and freedom and her refusal to be a victim of oppression in the name of the religion and a hypocritical standard of behaviour. It symbolizes the ways in which we as individuals can achieve an awareness of our inner selves that will help us along the road to emotion and thinking differently about ourselves, according to the author, Jeanette Winterson.

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