

Article

Deconstructing Dogma: Faith, Queer Identity, and Narrative Fluidity in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

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Abstract: Intervention of faith, queer identity, and the fluidity of storytelling challenging the conventional norms is examined in this paper in the context of Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Through the lens of postmodernism and Queer theory, Winterson criticizes institutionalized religion and its suppression of non-normative identities by dissecting the protagonist's apostolic upbringing and also by examining the conflict between religious dogma and Queer self-realization. The protagonist's coming-of-age journey also reflects the fluidity of queer identity. The paper argues that the novel's fragmented and polyphonic narrative structure mirrors the fluidity and Jeanette's own self-discovery, allowing for a narrative space where identity is not fixed but is constantly evolving. This study contends that the author's portrayal of narrative fluidity provides an illuminating perspective on the prospect of self-reinvention, suggesting that different themes of identity, faith, and personal history are continuously reshaped through storytelling.

Keywords: queer; faith; fragmented narrative; self-reinvention; polyphony

Introduction

The complex intersection of religion, sexuality, and identity in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, written in the year 1985, is a semi-autobiographical novel that follows Jeanette, a young girl raised in a strict Apostolic community, who navigates her burgeoning queer identity in an environment that condemns both her sexuality and her individuality. Through Jeanette's coming-of-age journey, Winterson delves into themes of religious dogma, societal expectation, and the personal quest for self-understanding. The significant importance is laid in both queer

theory and feminist contexts. In the queer theory perspective in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, a profound exploration of the tension between the protagonist's queerness and her oppressive religious upbringing is offered, illustrating the transformative power of self-acceptance and the rejection of binary gender structures. Winterson challenges the idea of fixed identity through the presentation of queerness as fluid and evolving, aligning with the central tenets of queer theory that resist essentialist or binary categories of sexuality and gender. From a feminist perspective, the novel challenges the restrictions placed on women by both religious and patriarchal systems. Jeanette's rejection of conventional roles—whether as an obedient daughter or a woman expected to conform to heterosexual norms—highlights Winterson's critique of these structures. By engaging with both feminist and queer perspectives, the novel becomes a significant work in discussions of gender, sexuality, and power dynamics in contemporary literature. The author uses the narrative as a vehicle for challenging traditional storytelling methods, employing a fragmented, polyphonic narrative style mirroring the complexity of the author's journey. The reflection of fluidity of identity and the multiplicity of experiences is found in the shift between past and present and between the autobiographical and fictional elements. The novel is also a radical reimagining of coming-of-age narratives.

The primary themes of this paper- Faith, Queer identity, and Narrative fluidity—are interwoven in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. *The exploration of these themes is essential for understanding the complex layers of identity and resistance that have been addressed in the work.* These themes not only define Jeanette's journey but also act as key perspectives through which the novel critiques societal norms, religious doctrine, and the formation of identity.

1. **Faith:** The theme of faith is central to this work as the Protagonist is raised in a strict apostolic Christian environment, which shapes her perception of the world, her identity, and her morality. The dogmatic and repressive aspects of Jeanette's relationship with faith play a pivotal role in her coming-of-age story. Her queerness is condemned in the novel as she navigates her growing awareness of her sexuality, facing the harsh judgment of her religious community. The examination of faith, therefore, enables a critique of institutionalized religion and its influence in reinforcing gendered and binary gender structures and expectations.
2. **Queer Identity:** The second central theme, Queer Identity, provides a profound examination of how lesbian identity in particular is suppressed within the confines of a religious society. Sensitive and radical subversion is also explored thematically. From her initial denial to her eventual acceptance of her queerness, Jeanette's journey of self-discovery addresses the conflict between societal expectations and individual identity. Looking through the lens of Queer theory, the portrayal of the journey of self-disclosure challenges rigid binary distinctions of gender and sexuality. This theme stands as the most crucial theme of the play as it interrogates the reductive representations of sexuality that pervade religious and social discourses, proposing instead a complex, multifaceted understanding of queerness as an intersection of personal and collective identities.

3. **Narrative Fluidity:** The key structural and thematic element of the novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is the Narrative fluidity, which is evident in the mirroring of the fluidity of Jeanette's identity and spiritual journey through the novel's fragmented, non-linear structure, which shifts between different voices, memories, and time periods. Winterson's rejection of a traditional, linear narrative emphasizes the idea that identity, particularly in relation to faith and sexuality, is not a static or fixed construct. Instead, it is shaped and reshaped over time, much like the narrative itself. The narrative's fluidity mirrors the fluidity of queer identity, enabling the novel to subvert essentialized categories and present a more complex, multifaceted representation of selfhood. The novel's central argument: Identity is something that must be experienced and created, not something prescribed or predefined, is thematically reinforced in this novel.

The Relevance of Inquiry:

Through the exploration of these themes in the context of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, a framework for understanding how Winterson challenges dominant cultural, religious, and gender norms is evident. Also, the novel offers a critique of rigid, binary thinking, whether it is in terms of faith, sexuality, or narrative structure. With the examination of the themes of Faith, Queer Identity, and Narrative Fluidity all together, the novel depicts the individual identity as a factor determined by the societal roles, presenting the novel as multi-layered and as a subversive response to the traditional coming-of-age genre.

The thematic exploration of the theme Faith enables the readers to examine how religious institutions shape critically and sometimes restrict personal identity, especially for women and queer individuals. An avenue for understanding how societal pressures can conflict with personal desires and self-expression, highlighting the resilience and resistance of marginalized identities, is provided with the analysis of the theme Queer Identity. Finally, the theme of narrative fluidity prompts a critical re-evaluation of conventional storytelling paradigms, revealing identity as a non-linear, iterative process of negotiation and redefinition. In unison, all the themes offer a radical, transformative lens through which Winterson's work can be understood as a powerful critique of oppressive structures and a celebration of the possibilities of personal and narrative freedom.

Hypothesis:

The interplay of faith, queer identity, and narrative fluidity to critique societal norms, religious dogma, and the rigid construction of identity is used by Jeanette Winterson in her novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. The protagonist's journey of self-discovery exposes the oppressive nature of institutionalized religion, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality, while also subverting traditional narrative structures to highlight the fluid, evolving nature of identity. Winterson suggests that identity is not something predetermined or fixed, but a process that can be actively reshaped through personal experience, resistance, and self-narration, by challenging the binary and essentialist thinking imposed by both religious and social systems. Through the

intersection of themes, Winterson mounts a critical challenge to the restrictive forces of societal norms, concurrently advocating for the emancipatory potential of personal autonomy, self-expression, and narrative agency. This positions *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* as a seminal, radical exploration of queer identity and a refusal to accept apostolic ideologies.

Faith and Religious Dogma

Drawing on queer theory and poststructuralist thought, this analysis of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* argues that faith is a complex, multifaceted construct that is deeply intertwined with power, identity, and morality. The novel is seen as a site of resistance to dominant discourses of faith and identity, offering a nuanced exploration of the tensions between loyalty, identity, and desire.

- 1. Faith as Authority and Control:** In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette Winterson portrays the Apostolic faith as an authoritarian force controlling every aspect of Jeanette's life. Her mother enforces conformity, tying faith to repression, particularly for women and queer individuals. This rigid system damages Jeanette's identity and self-perception. It stifles her creativity and autonomy, forcing her to conform. The church's expectations are suffocating, leaving Jeanette feeling trapped and confused. Her journey is one of self-discovery and resistance against the oppressive forces that seek to define her.
- 2. Rejection of Dogma and Personal Spirituality:** Jeanette's relationship with faith evolves throughout the novel, despite the oppressive nature of her upbringing. She was initially forced to accept the rigid tenets of the church by her mother, but she gradually started rebelling against the oppressive interpretation of spirituality imposed upon her. Representation of Jeanette's quest for self-empowerment and liberation is evident with the protagonist's search for a more personal, flexible understanding of spirituality, finding that the language of faith no longer fits her experience.
- 3. Faith and Transformation:** The depiction of faith in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* functions as a metaphorical framework for Jeanette's iterative process of self-discovery and transformation, underscoring the complex interplay between spirituality, identity, and personal growth. Jeanette begins to form a new sense of self that integrates her queer identity and personal beliefs as she moves away from the rigid constraints of her religious upbringing. The novel suggests that true faith—one that is rooted in love, acceptance, and personal experience—cannot be imposed from the outside, but must be cultivated from within. Jeanette's journey is one of transformation, where she learns to define her own spiritual path, free from the oppressive constraints of her mother's faith.

Queer Identity:

In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette Winterson powerfully explores the theme of queer identity and the subversion of normative structures. The novel chronicles Jeanette as a queer person following her journey of self-discovery growing

up in a rigid, apostolic Christian community. A critique of binary gender societal and religious structures, illustrating how queer identity can be a personal liberation, a form of resistance, and a subversion of oppressive norms, is presented through the protagonist's experiences.

1. **Queer Identity as Resistance to Normative Expectations:** Jeanette's queerness is considered a form of resistance to the rigid gender roles and sexual norms laid down by both her mother and the church. Being raised in an apostolic environment, Jeanette was told that anything outside of heterosexuality is considered sinful and her life should be framed by religious moral codes only. The church views queerness as a sin that has to be eradicated. When she started developing feelings for women, it was seen as a threat to the purity and salvation of her soul. Here, Jeanette attempted to correct her through spiritual intervention. Queer identity becomes an act of resistance, directly subverting the expectations placed on her by the community that challenges the very foundation of the family's religious and moral order.
2. **Subversion of Heteronormative Structures:** Jeanette's queerness subverts the heteronormative norms pervasive in her Pentecostal community and society at large. Jeanette's same-sex attraction disrupts the faith's rigid gender binary and traditional roles for women. Winterson's narrative emphasizes the importance of individual authenticity, as Jeanette finds solace in her relationships with women and rejects the notion that her love is illegitimate. Ultimately, Jeanette's queerness becomes a bold assertion of self-expression and defiance against societal expectations.
3. **The Process of Self-Discovery and the Deconstruction of Norms:** Learning to accept and embrace queer identity in the face of rejection, shame, and isolation reflects Jeanette's journey as one of self-discovery. Jeanette's realization of her attraction towards another woman is considered an act of deconstructing the binary gender structure, values, and religious teachings. Growing with the thoughts of queerness as sinful, Jeanette started challenging the idea that queerness is inherently wrong or sinful as life moves forward. Jeanette's relationships with women, especially Melanie, are important because they help her discover who she is beyond the limitations set by her community. These relationships are a way for Jeanette to experience love and desire without fear of judgment or rejection.

Narrative Fluidity:

A postmodern narrative structure that subverts traditional storytelling techniques and embraces a fluidity of time, memory, and perspective is employed in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. The author offers a more fragmented narrative, challenging the reader's expectations of linear storytelling through the use of multiple voices, metafiction, and the play of truth. This narrative fluidity serves as a means of exploring personal identity, particularly in relation to queerness and religious upbringing, while also reflecting on the nature of storytelling itself.

1. **Postmodern Narrative Structure:** Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* can be understood as a postmodern novel due to its fragmented, non-linear narrative structure. The story does not follow a traditional chronological order, and the flow of events often jumps back and forth in time. This fragmented approach mirrors the disjointedness of Jeanette's own life experiences, particularly in relation to her queerness and her struggle to reconcile her sexuality with the rigid religious beliefs imposed upon her. The narrative is broken into episodic moments, each reflecting different stages of Jeanette's development and her relationship with the world around her. Winterson uses this postmodern technique to highlight the complexities and contradictions of personal identity.
2. **Multiple Voices and Perspectives:** Multiple voices, often shifting between first-person narrative and third-person narrative, are employed in this novel. This shifting enables the exploration of multiple layers of meaning and also gives voices to various individuals who shape Jeanette's identity. The novel uses multiple voices to show the contrast between Jeanette's own feelings about her queerness and the strict, often hurtful views of those around her. The novel's use of multiple perspectives encourages readers to think critically and interpret the story in their own way, rather than accepting a single version of events. This approach reflects postmodern ideas that truth is personal and different viewpoints shape reality.
3. **Metafiction and the Play of Truth:** The use of meta-fiction is one of the striking aspects of Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, in which Jeanette reflects on the act of storytelling, commenting on how stories are shaped and told, and how meaning is created. For example, Winterson often draws attention to the process of writing, especially through Jeanette's reflections on her own story. Winterson's novel plays with the idea of truth, challenging traditional notions of identity and history. The story suggests that our sense of self is constructed from memories and interpretations, and that truth is flexible and open to reinterpretation. This approach questions the idea of a single, objective truth, especially in relation to Jeanette's queerness.
4. **Narrative as a Means of Reconciliation:** The usage of narrative in Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is a means for reconciliation of her identity between the religious self and the Queer self. The fragmented structure of the novel mirrors Jeanette's own fractured journey toward self-understanding. Through storytelling, Jeanette finds a way to reconcile the conflict between her religious past and her queer identity, working through the tension and finding a sense of resolution.

Conclusion:

In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette Winterson explores the complex intersections of faith, queer identity, and narrative fluidity. Winterson critiques the oppressive forces of religious dogma, especially in its attempts to control and define sexual and personal identity through the story of Jeanette, a young woman raised in a strict apostolic faith community. The novel shows the conflict between Jeanette's growing awareness of her queer identity and the strict moral rules of her mother and

the church. It highlights how faith can both influence and limit a person's understanding of themselves. Winterson's unconventional storytelling style helps explore themes of identity, queerness, and spirituality. The fragmented narrative reflects Jeanette's fluid identity as she navigates her complexities. By using multiple voices and perspectives, Winterson challenges traditional storytelling, showing identity as a subjective, evolving construction. The fluid narrative mirrors Jeanette's self-discovery journey, where she reclaims her identity and reconciles faith and queerness. Through storytelling, Jeanette resists imposed narratives, creating her own faith and selfhood.

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