CHAPTER I

SITUATING JEANETTE WINTERSON WITHIN
THE REALMS OF QUEER THEORY
Jeanette Winterson is one of Britain’s renowned alternative literary figures and an inventive postmodern author. She was born on 27th August, 1959 in Manchester, England to unknown biological parents about whom she claims to feel no curiosity. Her fiction explores the nature and varieties of erotic love within the dynamics of queer theory. She is often described as one of the most controversial yet innovative fiction writers in contemporary English literature and although her fiction has entered the realms of the literary canon it still resists categorization. Winterson sees herself as a solitary literary prophet, much as the result of her own upbringing and her declared intentions are to create an ongoing body of work which challenges what she sees as the conventions within contemporary literature. This thesis attempts to examine aspects related to queer theory and its thematic centrality in Jeanette Winterson’s texts, with especial references to the manner in which queer theory initiates the construction of the self in five of her novels: *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), *The Passion* (1987), *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), *Written on the Body* (1992), and *Art and Lies* (1994). She blends many genres into her writings and these include fable, fairytale, fantasy, history, philosophy, lesbian writing, science fiction, magic realism and scientific studies.

Through a constantly evolving fictive structure and form which can be seen in her works, she willingly challenges literary convention on all fronts through her audacious and outspoken actions. She was adopted at the age of six weeks by Pentecostal parents who brought her up in the mill-town of Accrington. Her father John William Winterson was a passive and weak spirited person, while her mother Constance Winterson was a fervent evangelical Elim Pentecostal Christian. Hemmed in by her mother’s devoutly religious worldview, she learned to read from the book of Deuteronomy¹, and was taught
to read and channelize her energy into preaching. She was raised to believe that she
belonged to God and had been chosen by God, and because God was empowering her,
she could do anything. Her mother who was described as a resolute, domineering woman,
called herself “a missionary on the home front” while constantly grooming Winterson to
become a missionary. By the time she was eight she began writing and delivering
sermons, impressing parents and peers alike with her precocious mastery of language. A
zealous evangelist, her mother kept a tight reign upon her daughter’s education, while
restricting her experience of literature to the Bible.

Winterson had a difficult childhood, but that brought her to a legacy of self-
confidence. In her house there were only six books, including the Bible and Cruden’s
Complete Concordance to the Old and New Testaments. The fourth was The House at
Pooh Corner. The fifth, The Chatterbox Annual 1923. Strangely enough, the sixth was
Malory’s Morte d’Arthur and it was this that started her life quest of reading and writing.
She states, “I wake and sleep language. It has always been so. I had been brought up to
memorize very long Bible passages.” Whenever she read her books, she felt “relief and
exuberance, not hardship and exhaustion.” She would hide her books so that her mother
would not find them. One day her mother noticed her collection and burned “everything”.

Winterson writes:

Not everything. I had started to shift my hoard to a friend’s house and I
still have some of those early books, faithfully bound in plastic, none of
their spines broken.

Winterson claims to have grown up in a home where there were no books, no
paintings, and no records of classical music. Apart from learning at home, she also
attended Accrington Girls’ Grammar School. She went through a difficult process of growing up in an ecclesiastical environment, and it resulted in a rediscovery, in terms of an awareness of her own perceptions about her notions on sexuality. It also culminated in the rejection of all social and moral values, viewed as such by her family and the church. This phase also became a rejection of uninteresting and compulsory heterosexuality and the world of religious dogma. During her teenage years, she discovered the wider worlds of literature and history in the public library, and became a fervent and devoted reader and it was at this time that she also realized her sexual orientation towards women. When she came out as a lesbian, her relationship fell out spectacularly with both her mother and the church and subsequently she left home at the age of sixteen. Deprived of all forms of love and abandoned by her adopted mother, she initiated a furious escape from social mediocrity, religious fundamentalism and sexual false pretences. In 1981, Winterson graduated in English from St Catherine’s college under Oxford University. She supported herself through a string of unusual jobs that included working in a funeral home and serving as a domestic help in a mental hospital. Of her early experience with fundamental Christianity, she declares that although she no longer subscribes to any organized religion the spiritual influence in some way continues to inform her writing. She affirms however, that God was booted out and art burst in. She remains infused with the passion of the true believer, as one who believes in the redemptive power of stories and love.

She has gradually earned herself a reputation not only as a talented writer but also for her often hostile attitude towards critics regarding her lesbian love life. Her debut in 1985 thus aroused much enthusiasm. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, her first novel was published when she was twenty three by Pandora Press. It is a semi-autobiographical
novel that tells the story of an adopted orphan who struggles with her love for God and her love for women and it is a unique coming-of-age story. Her work was considered highly original. She became especially well known when the novel was made into a television drama series for her screenplay in 1990. This novel won the Whitbread Novel Award in 1985, and she also won the British Academy of Film and Television Arts award (BAFTA) for best drama in 1990 and Prix d’Argent award for best script at the Cannes Film Festival in 1991. She has been a full time writer since 1987. In 1985, following Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit; she published a comic novel entitled Boating for Beginners which received little attention. She received the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize for The Passion (1987), the E.M. Forster award from the Academy of Arts and Letters for Sexing the Cherry (1989) and in 2006, Winterson was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to literature. In 1999, she received the International Fiction Prize for Experimental Literature (Italy), and in 2005, the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region, Best Book). She was chosen as one of the 20 “Best of Young British Writers” published by Granta. All these novels as well as her later works, explore themes that are related to feminism, fantasy, sexuality, history, and myth with lyrical and imaginative prose. One of her later works, entitled The PowerBook (2000), also debates upon aspects that are related to cyberspace and virtual reality.

Predominantly due to her own life experience, themes related to religious, familial, and sexual betrayal find a salient place in her novels. Winterson herself states that she has often been involved with women who were married, because to her anything outside marriage seems like freedom and excitement and this has been reflected especially in her works such as Written on the Body and The Passion. Her writings have
become a coherent reflection of her ideology in terms of the narrator’s tone, the outcome of the book and metafictional passages. Her novels have progressively de-emphasized plot and character; they examine the nature of love, time, art, sexuality, self-discovery, and the evocative power of language and storytelling. Her texts denote varying emotions as well as insistent poetic passages that are interrupted by encyclopedic quotations, newly molded fairy tales and myths, time travel and meta-narrativity, parody as well as the grotesque. The purpose of her writing, as she herself declares, is mainly to make people see things imaginatively and transformatively.

Libby Brooks comments that Winterson:

divides like Moses and the Red Sea. Phoning round for context before I met her, I had never encountered such definitive: a sociopath, a seducer, fiercely loyal, impossibly demanding, a bitch, a blessing. For so many certainties, she must be a mystery. I was warned: she’ll flirt, she’ll charm, she’ll give you what you want. So who did I meet? A brilliant child, compelling and easily bored, who one is moved to protect. A woman for whom self is absolute, keen and knowingly dissembling, who has found her place of safety behind the words. No comfort, no coward. She must be a bugger to love.7

Winterson is also the author of the experimental novels Written on the Body (1992), Art and Lies (1994), Gut Symmetries (1997), The Powerbook (2000), Lighthousekeeping (2005), as well as a collection of essays, entitled Art Objects (1995). Her works have been translated into more than sixteen languages and she has been published in twenty eight countries. She lives both in London and Cotswold.
Much of her writing deals with the themes and problematic of history, arts, body, sexual identity, and how bodies and identities are connected to queer, and how monstrosity is also connected to it. A major concern on her texts focuses upon how the self is represented in contemporary writing at both a national and an individual level. This aspect thereby is engaged with different social and cultural contexts that shape the subject in various texts and it investigates the complex dynamic that informs the process of either creating or writing aspects related to the self. She was embraced by queer theorists and feminist scholars in terms of her postmodern interpretations of contemporary life. For her, modernism is a revolution of the word. To a large extent, Art Objects (1995) is Winterson’s attempt to situate herself in relation to the tradition of modernism. She herself points out her partiality for the modernists, and a great deal of her allusions is to the heroes of modernism. She often invokes Virginia Woolf, and at the same time, she also incorporates T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein in her works. Her works both intertextually and stylistically are associated with James Joyce in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1985); with T.S. Eliot in Sexing the Cherry (1989) (with its clearest intertextual references to Eliot’s Four Quartets); with Virginia Woolf in Written on the Body (1992) and The Passion (1987); and with the poet, Hilda Doolittle in Art and Lies (1994). She wrote in Art Objects (1995) “I was in a bookshop recently and a young man came up to me and said ‘Is Sexing the Cherry a reading of Four Quartets?’ ‘Yes,’ I said, and he kissed me”. She not only denotes references to these writers in her works, but consciously undertakes to work collaboratively with them while creating her own body of work.
Winterson mentions the names of various poets and writers in her works. There is mention of William Blake, Swinburne, W.B Yeats and Christina Rossetti as literary figures. Others are only alluded to, through popular phrases from the given author. For instance, she revels in having a “room of my own”, an obvious reference to Virginia Woolf, and she spontaneously utters “The importance of being earnest” while alluding to Oscar Wilde.

She insists upon the discreteness and integrity of the artistic realm of the modernists while she associates postmodernism with the mass media, towards which she is ambivalent. “You are a slave to advertising, to fashion, to habit and to the media”, she charges the reader in Art and Lies. The way out of such slavery, for Winterson, is to return to real ideas which are to be found in books. Her writing in her own essay, “A Work of My Own”, echoes not only Virginia Woolf’s essay title, “A Room of One’s Own”, but also T.S.Eliot’s concept of the artist as inheritor of an artistic tradition by working within a contemporary present. She states:

I have to respect my ancestors and not try to part company before we know each other well. A writer uninterested in her lineage is a writer who has no lineage. The slow gestations and transformations of language are my proper study and there can be no limit on that study. I cannot do work without known work. Major writers and minor writers alike are vital. The only criterion is that they be true; that they had something a little different to say and a way of saying it that was entirely their own. To live along such writers is to live within a complete literary tradition.

Lyn Pykett has called Winterson’s work “post-modernist”, she says:
Winterson’s postmodernism is post-modernist not in the sense of constituting a break with modernism or superseding it, but rather as a collaborative dialogue with modernism which continues what Winterson sees as a postmodernist project.  

Postmodernist techniques, modernist tradition, meta-fiction, and magical realism are, however, mere instruments that she deftly combines with a strong political commitment aimed at subverting socio-cultural power structures and, ultimately, at appropriating traditionally male-defined concepts for her lesbian politics.

Linda Hutcheon describes the postmodern self which Winterson also adhered to in her writing as:

something in process, never as fixed and never as autonomous, outside history. It is always a gendered subjectivity, rooted also in class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. And it is usually textual self-reflexivity that paradoxically calls these worldly particularities to our attention by foregrounding the doxa, the unacknowledged politics, behind the dominant representations of the self and the other - in visual images or in narratives.

Consequently, twentieth-century women and queer writers have sought for new systems of (re)presentation of female, gay, and lesbian identities, which rest not so much on the notion of subjectivity but rather on positional and performance. Winterson presents herself as an open text not only in her writings of fiction but also in her public performances. On the one hand, Winterson insists upon the fact that none of her novels are autobiographical and on the other hand, she also maintains in several interviews that
there is as much of her and her life in every one of her books as there would be in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. She explains that she was reinventing herself and remaking herself which was to her a conscious act and a creative act. Through aspects of autobiography, Winterson guides the readers through the facets of her life and in the process is also engaged in a search for the origins of the self, tracking the subject through the process of writing itself, by intermixing fact with fiction. She also chooses to render her life story in a narrative mode which straddles the generic divide between fiction and autobiography, in the production of a semi-autobiographical fiction, with an accompanying alter ego, “Jeanette” in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. The novel has been widely understood as semi-autobiographical as it narrates the story of an adopted girl, significantly called Jeanette, who grows up a lesbian inside a strict religious community. The novel is both the most obvious example of her realist impulse and her first conscious attempt at deconstructing reality. Jeanette (Winterson’s alter ego) talks about her adoption and the path chosen for her, the plan that was laid out to her by her adopted mother in this manner:

My mother [...] would get a child, train it, build it, dedicate it to the Lord:

a missionary child,

a servant of God,

a blessing.

And so it was on a particular day, some time later, he followed a star until it came to settle above an orphanage, and in that place was a crib, and in
that crib, a child. [...] She said, ‘This child is mine from the Lord.’ [...] Her flesh now, sprung from her head. 16

A lot of pressure was put upon Jeanette by her mother, in order that the latter’s dreams be fulfilled:

We stood on the hill and my mother said, ‘This world is full of

We stood on the hill and my mother said, ‘You can change the

world.’ 17

Jeanette discovered that everything in the natural world was a symbol of the Great Struggle between good and evil. 18 The novel chronicles the struggles of a young girl against a domineering mother and the strictures of religion. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit elucidates upon the story of Jeanette’s quest for subjectivity and (homo)sexuality but rejects the traditional appropriation of the aspect of the self by the masculine. It emphasizes instead upon the mother-daughter bonding as a counter-narrative of conventional masculine bondage that highlights female specificity and gender difference. Similarly in all her writing her characters have the desire to go beyond what is already known along with the passion to go beyond what is common. In that way, they embrace uncertainty and the beauty they hope to find and achieve there demands a letting go, an escape from old values and traditions, and an openness, that is coupled with an alternative thinking and a passionate determination.

Winterson’s works reveal that the category “woman” has been dissolved into a splintered mass of possibilities. Her writings continue to follow aspects that are related to the movement known as “lesbian-feminism” which emerged in the 1970s. This
movement was much more than just a group of lesbians who also happened to be feminists. As such lesbian writing has significantly aroused an unprecedented degree of interest. The most basic tenet of the lesbian-feminist movement was that lesbianism was “a choice women make in response to society,” as Rose Weitz put it in her article from the 1984 lesbian-feminist anthology “Women-Identified Women”. In the article she advocates within the framework of this movement that lesbians have not always identified themselves with women, nor have they seen themselves as dissidents. Lesbians have, for centuries, existed peacefully within romantic friendships, bisexual arrangements, or closet marriages and sometimes even take risks in terms of cross-dressing and living as men. The revolutionary moment of feminism asserted that women did not have to cross-dress, be an invert, be different, or be born dyke. A lesbian was they felt, the rage of all women condensed, to the point of explosion. Such women were explosively angry at the way they were treated and they demanded freedom to create their own selves. As such the term woman is no longer a fixed point of closure, but rather, a dynamic process. The “new world” created by the Lesbian Feminist Movement was to bring about major changes in attitude towards lesbianism and the expectations of women in terms of what lesbian identification implies. Lesbian-feminists promoted lesbianism as a choice that all women can and should make in order to resist patriarchy and prevent in as much as is possible their private love lives from being directly controlled by patriarchal power. The relationship between feminist and gender criticism is, in fact, complex; the two approaches are certainly not polar opposites but, rather, they exist along a continuum of attitudes toward sex, sexuality, gender, and language. As such, Simone De Beauvoir had even suggested in The Second Sex (1973) that “one is not born a
woman, but, rather, becomes one.”

For Beauvoir, gender is “constructed,” but implied in her formulation is an agent, a cogito, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could, in principal, take on some other gender. Lesbian texts tend to be valued by mainstream critics not for their lesbian content but for “universal” features such as an understanding of human experience and portrayal of character.

Winterson’s corpus also reveals in very seminal ways that feminist and queer movements are inherently different from one another. A brief overview upon lesbian and queer identities has been denoted within this chapter. The development of lesbian theory has revolved on the whole around two contemporary poles namely: woman identification and lesbian libertarianism, giving rise to definitions of the lesbian signs and assumptions about the lesbian way of life which, according to Paulina Palmer, are radically different. Women influenced by these poles question the concept of a unitary lesbian identity and a homogeneous lesbian community and culture. With the gradual separation of lesbianism from women and inevitably, lesbian from woman, lesbian has become a part of a single corporate entity: giving a new firm LESBIAN ‘n’ GAY, or subsumed into the new product, QUEER. They are a predominantly post-feminist generation who used to regard feminism as their mother politics but that politics is gradually, more like a redundant patriarchy. Cherry Smyth observes:

The attraction of queer for some lesbians is flavored by a rebellion against a perspective feminism that had led them to feel disenfranchised by the lesbian feminist movement ... the importance of identifying politically as a lesbian had obscured lesbianism as a sexual identity.
There has gradually been a break with feminism. Queer theory ultimately displaces patriarchal gender hierarchy in favor of heterosexuality as the primary regulatory system. It is vitally important for feminism to see heterosexuality as a gendered hierarchy and not just as a normative construction of cross-sex desire. By participating in queer politics and forging alliances with gay men, lesbians also challenge the concept of “separatism” and “women’s space”, and these are integral to lesbian feminist thought. Hence, some women who identify as lesbian have joined “Queer Nation”, a New York direct-action group that was formed in the late 1980s with the aim of responding to the AIDS crisis and stemming the tide of violence against lesbians and gays. The recuperation of the term queer is originally a term of abuse which is aimed at homosexuals, but it has been reclaimed to them to announce their pride in their identity as gays and lesbians. It also allows for a focus on different sexual identifications such as bisexual, transsexual and heterosexual. The term queer has marked a shift in the study of sexuality from a focus on supposedly essential categories as gay and lesbian to more fluid or queer notions of sexual identity. Yet queer is a category still in the process of formation. The word “queer” represents:

among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a monitorizing logic of toleration or simple political interest representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal. ... For both academics and activists, “queer” gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual, and normal includes normal business in the academy.
Queer theory is different from feminism and racial and ethnic studies in having been from the beginning, less invested in identity categories as the standpoint from which one might perform scholarly or political work. Although many people believe that queer theory is only about homosexual representations in literature, it is also significant to note that it also explores the categories of gender, as well as sexuality, that is, the contestations of the categorization of gender and sexuality. Theorists claim that identities are not fixed, they cannot be categorized and labeled because identities consist of many varied components and that to categorize by one characteristic is wrong. Queer is an attitude, a look, a style and also calls attention to itself because it is cheeky, provocative and subversive. Queer demonstrations include kiss-ins, leaflet and manifesto distributions, and other “in your face” displays of same-sex affection in public to make their well-known overall point slogan: “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!” Winterson was already part of a new generation of queer writers. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is not so much a coming-out novel as a portrait of the artist as a young lesbian. This was a significant political shift as Ducker writes:

I want to reflect on Winterson’s writing within the wider perspective of the feminist and lesbian writing, both theoretical and imaginative, which precedes her work. The early feminism of the late 1960s and 1970s, created both the context and the audience for her work. Winterson transforms, extends and subverts many themes that were common to the writing which wasn’t shy of labels, or of slogan, the writing which proclaimed itself radical, feminist, lesbian.
Her lesbian politics coincide with but are not subsumed by the feminist, philosophical or historical interests in her work. Tracing back its history, in the 1970s, a feminist cultural anthropologist, Gayle Rubin, first introduced this concept of sex/gender system. It was system which problematized the naturalized relationship between the two concepts. By analyzing the anthropological theories of Claude Levi-Strauss and psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud, Rubin in her essay entitled “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy of Sex’” (1975) argues that sex/gender system is:

the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied. 28

Queer theory in itself is a pairing of words coined by Teresa de Lauretis during a working conference on theorizing lesbian and gay sexualities that was held at the University of California, Santa Cruz in February 1990. In the feminist journal Differences 3.2 (1991), a collection of essays drawn from this academic conference, she writes, “[T]he term ‘queer,’ juxtaposed to the ‘lesbian and gay’ of the subtitle, is intended to mark a certain critical distance from the latter, by now established and often convenient formula.” 29 By tracing some of the different usage of terms such as “homosexual,” “gay,” and “lesbian,” de Lauretis returns briefly to the utility of the catch-all phrase, “queer theory”.

According to Teresa de Lauretis, “[T]he term ‘Queer Theory’ was arrived at in the effort to avoid all these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any
of these terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead both to transgress and to transcend them or at the very least problematize them.”

In the first essay of the journal, a more sustained case for the term “queer theory” was made by performance theorist Sue-Ellen Case. She argued:

Queer theory, unlike lesbian theory or gay male theory, is not gender specific. In fact, like the term ‘homosexual,’ queer foreground same sex desire without designating which sex is desiring.

Case also argues that queer theory works “not at the site of gender, but at the site of ontology, to shift the ground of being itself.” She further suggested that “queer revels constitute a kind of activism that attacks the dominant notion of the natural. The queer is the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny.”

Queer theory, therefore, is both an academic and political tool which aimed at deconstructing a heterosexual society’s view of “the natural” and remains an inherently new branch of study or theoretical speculation. It has been named as an area only since about 1991. According to queer theorists, the double assumptions of queer are that sexuality is at work in all human endeavors, and that the sexual practices are neither static nor easily mapped in a moralistic world view. “Queer” has been often used as slang for homosexual or as an offensive homophobic abuse. Queer theory emerges from theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, David Halperin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. As Sedgwick eloquently connotes, “Queer is a continuing movement, motive - recurrent, eddying, troublant. ... Keenly, it is relational, and strange.” Queer is often seen by many critics as something connected with the categories of “lesbian” and “gay” in order to variant sexualities and genders. Many believe that the framework of gay and lesbian
studies comprise such topics as hermaphrodites, transgender, cross-dressing and even
gender ambiguity and gender corrective surgery. In general, “queer” is a term used to
describe identities and practices that can highlight the instability in the supposedly stable
and casual relationship between anatomical sex, gender, and sexuality. The identities and
practices have the potential of unveiling this relationship as an ideological fiction of
normalized heterosexuality. 34

Immensely influenced by the works of Michel Foucault, namely History of
Sexuality: Volume 1 (1990) and Power/Knowledge (1980), queer theory builds both upon
feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self. It also encapsulates
arenas which include gay/lesbian studies, and a close examination of the socially
constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. Whereas gay/lesbian studies focus its
inquiries into “natural” and “unnatural” behavior with respect to homosexual behavior,
queer theory expands its focus to encompass any kind of sexual activity or identity that
falls into normative and deviant categories. Foucault argues that the assumptions about
sexual orientation; sexual interests and sexual classification of an individual should not
be merely based on social constraints. In his work Foucault and Queer Theory (1999), he
defines queer theory as the theory of sex and gender within the larger field of queer
studies. This shift in influence can also be seen in feminism and postcolonial theory.
Based upon Foucault's theory on the formation of identity, queer theory is a post-modern
line of thought that counters the normative discourse of identity. Rejecting defined
categories of male/female, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, queer theory
deconstructs the hegemonic heteronormative discourse which dictates the intelligible
sexes and permitted identities 35 and states that “queer politics attempts to translate the
deconstruction of heteronormative categories into pragmatic steps to change the general social conceptions and performances of sex, gender, sexuality and sociality.” 36 As Foucault suggests, queer theory is a unique attempt to deconstruct not just these hegemonic social discourses but also the very categories which are responsible for the creation of identification with these structures and ideologies. The categories of sex, gender and sexuality are proven to be socially and historically constructed, devised through the power of discourse, historical social relations, and repetitive acts of performativity. Queer theory and its agenda denaturalize and deconstruct the understandings of these categories. From Foucault onward, scholars of sexuality have had to contend with the fact that homosexuality and heterosexuality entered history and discourse together, and in that moment near the end of the nineteenth century “queer” acquired a sexual valence which it had lacked in nearly four hundred years of usage. It is noteworthy to mention that queer theory is a field of study which does not assume itself as a better version of gay and lesbian, or a conspiracy against the accomplishments they have influenced. Queer theory follows feminist theory and gay/lesbian studies in rejecting the idea that sexuality is essential. Sexuality can be understood as a complex array of social codes and forces, forms of individual activity and institutional power, which interact, to shape the ideas of what is normative and what is deviant at any particular moment. In Jagose’s view, queer’s main achievement is to pay attention to the assumptions and naturalizations inherent in any identity category, and also in queer. 37

According to William B. Turner, “the investigation of foundational, apparently unquestionable, concepts is central to queer theory.” 38 It is the trend of queer theorists to deconstruct binaries, such as, mind/body, man/woman, and heterosexual/homosexual, in
order to destabilize them, and make them seem queer. As Sullivan suggests, instead of reversing, undermining or destroying the relationship of these binary categories altogether, queer deconstruction could, however, “highlight the inherent instability of the terms, as well as enabling an analysis of the culturally and historically specific ways in which the terms and the relation between them have developed, and the effects they have produced”. Queer theory is thus a very specific subset of gay and lesbian studies which are based upon the idea that identities are not fixed and do not determine who we are.

Winterson, too, follows this concept which states that a person’s identity is not fixed but is in transition. She embraces “queer theory” and was in turn embraced by queer theorists and feminist scholars who praised her postmodern interpretations on contemporary life. For Simone de Beauvoir and Monique Wittig, the identification of women with “sex,” is a conflation of the category of women with the ostensibly sexualized features of their bodies and, hence, a refusal to grant freedom and autonomy to women as it is purportedly enjoyed by men. This statement is clearly reflected in the novels of Winterson with characters such as Jeanette in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, Villanelle in Art and Lies and Dog Woman in Sexing the Cherry. The aftermath, that is, the destruction of the category of sex would be the destruction of an attribute, sex that has, through a misogynist gesture of synecdoche, come to take the place of the person, the self-determining cogito. In other words, only men are “persons,” and there is no gender but the feminine. Wittig observes:

Gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in the singular because indeed there are not two
genders. There is only one: the feminine, the “masculine” not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine, but the general. 40

In this way, Wittig calls for the destruction of “sex” so that women can assume the status of a universal subject. And in this way toward that destruction, “women must assume both a particular and a universal point of view”. 41 In addition to gestures and acts, as well as speech, clothing, virtually all gendered behaviour and expressions can be considered performative. Esther Newton writes about drag:

At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, “appearance is an illusion.” Drag says [Newton’s curious personification] “my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.” At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; my appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ [myself] is feminine. 42

Winterson shares Newton’s argument, if we take, for instance, in The Passion with Villanelle’s character and physical appearance. Villanelle is a bisexual woman who cross-dresses as a man for money and for fun and who, in the story, shares with Venetian boatmen one of their exclusive male features, their webbed feet. In her, the binary opposition between man and woman is dissolved. Patricia Duncker labels Winterson’s writing as “queer” which by her definition “calls attention to itself.” 43

Nikki Sullivan summarizes that queer theory is often constructed “as a sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political) positions that has the potential to challenge normative knowledge and identities.” 44 Besides questioning the nature, performance, the stability as well as gender identities as earlier indicated, queer theorists
consider the intersections of sexuality and gender in relation to other constructed identity categories such as race and class. Queer theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick mark that queer reaches out to dimensions that cannot be incorporated under gender and sexuality and she opines that such identity categories like “race”, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality, gender, sexuality, and other identity-constituting and identity-fracturing discourses are crisscrossing with each other. She states that many:

... are using the leverage of ‘queer’ to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state. 45

According to Teresa de Lauretis, queer is “another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual.” 46 Many feminists in the 1980s had assumed that lesbianism met feminism in lesbian-feminism. Winterson does not consecrate femininity or signal a gynocentric world alone just because she herself is a lesbian. Queer theory uses the marginal – what has been regarded as perverse, “the other” to analyse the cultural construction of the centre: heterosexual normality. Widely regarded as Britain’s most talented and provocative contemporary writer Winterson’s novels are often humorous, but have serious reconsiderations of gender and sexual identity – particularly what it means to be a lesbian, as well as to the relativity of existence, desire and time. To Winterson, lesbianism is not mainly the erotic consummation of a set of political beliefs. In an interview in 1992, Winterson had made it clear that while she herself was a lesbian feminist, her work should not be seen under that definition. 47 Like many writers before her and the present, she is aware of the conflation of the book and the writer, of sexuality and textuality. In a rather scathing anecdote in an essay entitled “The Semiotics of Sex”, Winterson tells of a young female student who approached her in a bookshop, informing
her that she was writing a comparative essay on her work and that of Radclyffe Hall, and asking Winterson if she could help. Her rather cutting reply, “Yes. Our work has nothing in common”, provoked puzzlement in the student who responded with “[but] I thought you were a lesbian.” 48 She later commented thus on the encounter:

I have become aware that the chosen sexual[ity] . . . of one writer is, in itself, thought sufficient to bind her in semiotic sisterhood with any other writer, also lesbian, dead or alive. I am, after all, a pervert, so I will not mind sharing a bed with a dead body. This bed in the shape of a book, this book in the shape of a bed, must accommodate us every one, because, whatever our style, philosophy, class, age, preoccupations and talent, we are lesbians and isn’t that the golden key to the single door of our work? 49

What Winterson so vehemently objects to here, are the delimiting (binding) effects of the production of meaning and identity as singular; the fact that “women”, “women writers”, and the “sexual” are all deemed to be determinable concepts, and that all “women writers” who have “sexual relations” with other “women” are condemned to inhabit the malignant domain of the same, of homogeneity. In ‘I’m Telling You Stories’: Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading (1998), Lynne Pearce comments that Winterson has often expressed an animosity towards being labeled, that is, being labeled as a lesbian author. She is “a writer who happens to love women” and “not a lesbian who happens to write.” 50 As a writer who happens to be a lesbian, she has commented that the straight world is wilful in its pursuit of queers and to her it seems that to continually ask someone about their homosexuality is harassment by the back door. This is highlighted by Sappho 51 in Art and Lies (1994): “After loss of identity, the most potent modern terror,
is loss of sexuality, or, as Descartes didn’t say, ‘I fuck therefore I am.’ Why do you ask me about my lovers, one, two, twenty?” She has even attacked the “negative” use of the word lesbian in newspapers. She complained that tabloids have tended to emphasize the sexual orientation of gay or lesbian criminals. She has also emphasized that she would feel better if the tabloids weren’t so anti-gay in their general outlook and especially if they would stop using “lesbian” as a negative adjective. She also denotes that she was considering upon getting the press council onto this because she had been collecting headlines from the tabloids and overwhelmingly, “lesbian” or “gay” were used negatively, as though once the sexuality is identified, the rest of the horror story including benefit fraud, underage sex, battering would naturally follows. She has also stated that even as there are some rotten no-good lesbians and some rotten no-good gay men, there exist rotten no-good heterosexuals too. She declared that sexuality need not be used a potential yardstick to justify one’s actions. As a lesbian author, she wants to live in a world where the gender of one’s lover is the least interesting thing about them. She further argues that one must not “judge the work by the writer”; rather, one must “judge the writer by the work”. Winterson states that she does not want to read only books by women or only books by queers, rather she would read books so long as they are genuine because she finds that choosing reading matter according to the sex and/or sexuality of the writer is a dismal way to read. She comments thus:

For lesbians and gay men it has been vital to create our own counter-culture but that does not mean that there is nothing in straight culture that we can use. We are more sophisticated than that and it is worth remembering that the conventional mind is its own prison. ... Literature,
whether made by heterosexuals or homosexuals, whether to do with lives gay or straight, packs its supplies of energy and emotion that all of us need. 55

Winterson goes on to state that:

It is true that a number of gay and lesbian writers have attracted an audience simply because they are queer. Lesbians and gays do need their own culture, as any subgroup does, including the sub-group of heterosexuality, but the problem starts when we assume that the fact of our queerness bestows on us special powers. It might make for certain advantages (it is helpful for a woman artist not to have a husband) but it cannot, of itself, guarantee art. Lesbians and gay men, who have to examine so much of what the straight world takes for granted, must keep on examining their own standards in all things, and especially the standards we set for our own work. 56

These elements have been predominant markers, which are central to the primary texts by Winterson. She remarks that the man who won’t read Virginia Woolf, as well as the lesbian who won’t touch T. S. Eliot, “are both putting subjective concerns in between themselves and the work”. 57 It must also be realized that heterosexuality is the political system within which we are all born, and within which we all live—whether we call ourselves women, wives, mothers, feminists, straights, queers or dykes. Adrienne Rich states that heterosexuality is a political system, a compulsory political institution which affects us all differently. 58 She continues to denote that some of us are privileged within it, financially protected by the hetero-patriarchal state; but some of us are caged,
controlled, destroyed; and some of us are marginal to the structures of the institution. Predominantly, there is a difference between heterosexuality as an institution and as lived experience and she has denoted her own concept on that matter in terms of her narratives.

Queer theoreticians have worked only to make sense of an early deeply enriched set of questionings and abrasions of normality. For Annamarie Jagose, queer theory has been criticized for encouraging apolitical quietism when deconstructing identity categories and that to some critics might seem that queer might devalue analyses elaborated by lesbian and gay critics on homophobia and heterocentricism. ⁵⁹ Jagose believes that lesbian and gay investing in authenticity and political efficacy of identity categories and the queer’s tendency to problematize those very categories enthuse each other and open up “the ambivalent reassurance of an unimaginable future.” ⁶⁰ According to Rosellen Brown, Winterson’s own attempt to insert lesbian desire and thereby profoundly upset and unsettle heterosexual hegemony is political. She laments that Winterson’s stories feel like pretexts, for her vengeful hostility to men and marriage, her fascination with androgyny, and her compensatory vision of women as the stronger, more sane, and even physically dominating sex. ⁶¹ However, Brown’s reading may be less than acute in drawing out the subtleties of Winterson’s complex handling of issues relating to sexual politics and gender construction, but she nevertheless discerns that Winterson pursues her own peculiar vision of a lesbian feminist political agenda. The main focus of the reception of Winterson’s novels has been two fold, these are related to the discussion in relation to her as a lesbian writer and in relation to her as a postmodern writer. Winterson’s portrayals remain, nevertheless, intrinsically philosophical and generally in
keeping with the wider cultural concerns of the literary postmodern. She pursues her political agenda through a postmodern writing practice.  

Surveying Winterson’s first three novels namely *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, *The Passion*, and *Sexing the Cherry*, Lynne Pearce explains that the popularity of Winterson’s novels is linked to how the novels could be read as universalizing lesbian love and states that:

This is an ambivalence that centers on the tension between the perception of romantic love as a non-gendered, a-historic, ‘cultural universal’, and as an ‘ideology’ which the specificities of gender and sexual orientation constantly challenge and undermine. By attending to the ‘universalizing’ discourses in Winterson’s work the (heterosexual) ‘general reader’ can see the texts as transcending the particulars of sexual orientation; regard the fact that s/he is reading about lovers of the same sex as incidental and, consequently, a-political. Indeed, the fact that in her later fiction Winterson has shown many different combinations of love-relationship (homosexual and heterosexual) has, perhaps, contributed to the reader’s impression of (great) ‘Love’ as being transcendent of history, culture, and gender.  

Michele Roberts viewed that though readers perceive Winterson as a lone genius, she is an unashamed intellectual, who has been nourished by queer theory, which declared that even gender was a costume. She herself has declared that for a while she had relationships with men as well as women. She has also viewed that heterosexuality and homosexuality are a kind of psychosis, and that the truth is somewhere in the middle.
To her, the homosexual is not an imitation of a heterosexual; the lesbian is not an inferior version of a man. As mentioned earlier, Winterson says that it is helpful for a woman artist not to have a husband and that she herself never wanted children, because having children would place work as secondary. She declared that she never wanted to be a part-time writer because work had to come first, which is selfish and self-directed. She affirms that she is glad to be part of changing attitudes, and with gay pride, the community needed people who were known and would stand up. She declares that she dislikes the word lesbian because it tells us nothing as its only purpose is to inflame. She writes mainly to bring about a change in consciousness and her fictions provides a valuable insight into what the postmodernists writers value; the creation of the “alienation generation” who are disillusioned with their own perception of the world with the subject (which suggests the human subject) and our concept of what it means to be called, or to name oneself, “a woman” or “a man”. Linked with this is the notion of a collective subject, which is, “women” and this becomes intrinsic to the parameters that Winterson has set for herself within the framework of her texts. Her fiction often concerns the vicissitudes of romantic love in her novels and the readers often liken their relationship with her novels to a love affair. Winterson argues that:

If queer culture is now working against assumptions of identity as sexuality, art gets there first, by implicitly or explicitly creating emotion around the forbidden. Some of the early feminist arguments surrounding the wrongfulness of men painting provocative female nudes seem to me to have overlooked the possibility or the fact of another female as the viewer.
Why should she identify with the nude? What deep taboos make her unable to desire the nude? 66

Winterson’s concerns in her first novel Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit echo those of early feminism, in terms of the relationship between mother and daughter. The mother/daughter dyad was a key subject for theory and fiction. 67 Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit is both the most obvious example of her realist impulse and her first conscious attempt at deconstructing the opposition reality/fiction. In this semi-autobiographical novel, the protagonist Jeanette who was adopted as a child is left hopelessly sitting in the wake of her mother’s electronic evangelism at the end of the novel:

I stared into the fire, waiting for her to come home. Families, real ones, are chairs and tables and the right number of cups, but I had no means of dismissing my own; she had tied a thread around my button, to tug when she pleased. 68

Winterson’s concern with the mother/daughter bond and its indissoluble passionate oppressiveness addresses an issue that is central to feminism as well as to queer. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit is thus a significant example of lesbian fiction. It consists of the two genres that writers focusing on lesbian feminist themes in the 1970s most frequently employed the Bildungsromane and the Coming Out novel. She conveys a description of the naive but intelligent protagonist, Jeanette, who feels crampled by the narrow confines of her provincial surroundings, and her discovery of her lesbian orientation through a first love affair. It also denotes her subsequent betrayal of her lover who reverts to heterosexuality, and the punitive treatment meted out to her by her family and the community. It rejects a unitary model of subjectivity in favour of a delineation of
fantasy identities and multiple selves, also, in true postmodernist spirit. It 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 the acts
of storytelling and fabulation in which she engages. The focus which the novel places on
woman-identified involvements reflects lesbian feminist attitudes, but its emphasis on the
sexual aspect of lesbianism has more in common with the perspectives of the lesbian
sexual radicals. While the network of female relationships which comprises Jeanette’s
life recalls Rich’s theory of lesbian continuum, these relationships are not idealized or
described uncritically. Her representation of passionate love, sexual, homosexual and
otherwise are also drawn along the same lines and are reflected in *Oranges Are Not the
Only Fruit* where the concept of love has been defined by Winterson through Jeanette:

> I want someone who is fierce and will love me until death and know that
> love is as strong as death, and be on my side for ever and ever. I want
> someone who will destroy and be destroyed by me. There are many forms
> of love and affection, some people can spend their whole lives together
> without knowing each other’s names ... Romantic love has been diluted
> into paperback form and has sold thousands and millions of copies.
> Somewhere it is still in the original, written on tablets of stone. 69

In the presence of love, hearth and quest become one. Winterson also defines love
through the unnamed ungendered narrator in *Written on the Body*: “No-one can legislate
love; it cannot be given orders or cajoled into service. Love belongs to itself, deaf to
pleading and unmoved by violence. Love is not something you can negotiate. Love is the
only one thing stronger than desire and the only proper reason to resist temptation.” 70
Like art, love is liberating and it is also a form of self-transcendence. Winterson’s commitment to an exploration of love in terms of agapeic tradition, with its sacrificial shedding of the erotic body, have made it more difficult than before for critics to sustain the idea of a lesbian feminist. In The Passion where Villanelle’s heart is being imprisoned by the Queen of Spades as well as the Sappho sections of Art and Lies, she exposes the damage done to another group of abjected persons - women who love women - and the silencing of this damaged self. The wrong involved becomes the damaging and erasure of gendering, or the soft-voiced violence of sex. Winterson’s narratives of romantic love and sexual passion seek in a different form, the experience of perfect union with another as demonstrated in the ecstatic practices of charismatic Christianity. She has consistently drawn on Biblical language and religious experience to produce her own exalted discourse of passion. She denotes that she grew up not knowing that language was for everyday purposes. She grew up with the Word and the Word was God. She had felt that language was something holy.  

The Dog Woman in Sexing the Cherry also talks about love in the most frustrating manner. She comments, “I am too huge for love. No one, male or female, has ever dared to approach me. They are afraid to scale mountains. I wonder about love because the parson says that only God can truly love us and the rest is lust and selfishness.” The Dog Woman fell in love once, and it made her ponder “…if love could be that cruelty which takes us straight to the gates of paradise, if only to remind us they are closed forever.”

The Passion is a fiction of stories which recounts a sequence of events set in the past, but it does so with an eye on their relevance to the present. In The Passion, too,
Winterson destabilizes gender. Maria del Mar Asensio points out the gender ambiguities of both the narrators: “Henri’s androgynous features are as obvious as he displays traits which are conventionally regarded as ‘feminine.’” This includes sensitivity and distaste for killing, and he is ridiculed by his fellow soldiers for being unmanly. When Henri envisions his married life with Villanelle, he sees himself as “impersonating the traditionally passive, resigned, impotent fate of wives rather than the authoritarian destiny of husbands.” 74

In Winterson’s opinion, the binary opposition between man and woman; heterosexual and homosexual; and mind/body are dissolved. These binary challenging bodies are, moreover connected with the construction of identities. On this aspect, Patricia Duncker, too, labels Winterson’s writing as “queer” which by her definition:

...calls attention to the instability of gender. Queer undermines fixed, settled, heterosexual discourses. The binary opposition between masculinity and femininity is fluid and unstable. [...] Gender is performance. The body becomes ambiguous. Therefore, power and knowledge cannot be so easily allocated to the masculine in queer discourses. Queer is a gender game. Direct action rather than lobbying is characteristic of queer politics, just as within the revolutionary moment of feminism. Queer is an attitude, a look, a style. Queer calls attention to itself. Queer is cheeky, provocative, subversive. So far, so good. 75

The best of queer emotion is pure, undiluted rage. Winterson’s fifth novel Art and Lies is a polemic book. It is an angry book which is not delicate, playful or self-indulgently vain. The definition of queer seems to go well with her general attitude and
her oeuvre. As such, in her texts, characters change gender “...either actually (Marlene in *Boating for Beginners*), or temporarily (Villanelle in *The Passion*), or their gender remains ambiguous (Lothario in *Written on the Body*).” 76 Another feature in Winterson’s texts that destabilizes gender is her monstrous women. Villanelle is one of them with her webbed feet, but this is not the most monstrous of women in her oeuvre: The Dog Woman in *Sexing the Cherry* seems to supersede in her monstrosity. Here the uncanny appears to take precedence over the realistic, which also could be said for Villanelle, but in Villanelle’s case there is at least a partial explanation to her monstrosity, which was that, her mother had made a mistake in a traditional ritual performed during her pregnancy. But Dog Woman is not explainable. Jana L. French states that “Dog Woman [...] defies sex and gender stereotyping not only because of her size and physical appearance, but also because of her independence from men.” 77

Another more language-concerned aspect is pointed out by Ute Kauer, which is that when gender becomes ambivalent and uncertain, trust in the narration is deconstructed. 78 The Dog Woman of the seventeenth century figure and her twentieth century double or counterparts are ridiculed by the general public as “monster”. The Dog Woman was ridiculed on account of her appearance, exceptional size and strength, which are regarded as unfeminine. She was also ridiculed on account of her radical views and commitment to a politics of direct action. Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible. 79 In this case, gender is created by “action,” and by the condition one enacts, one becomes a man or a woman by repeated acts which depend on social conventions, habitual ways of doing
something in a culture. Hence, Dog Woman operates as the shifter in an in-between zone, between the binary of femininity and masculinity, showing that “[S]exuality and desire, then, are not fantasies, wishes, hopes, aspirations (although no doubt these are some of their components), but there are energies, excitation, impulses, actions, movements, practices, moments, pulses of feeling.” Laura Doan finds that Sexing the Cherry is Winterson’s most successful example of lesbian postmodernism. She refers to its use of the strategies of both technique and ideology to illustrate its postmodernism. Doan reads the grafting of the cherry, with the outcome always being female, as a clear lesbian symbol. While Lisa Moore considers the protagonist of Written on the Body as the best example of a “virtual lesbian.”

The relevance of Sexing the Cherry to the topic of lesbianism is more indirect as compared to her other writings. Lesbianism does not enjoy a privileged status but is represented, in a manner resembling the approach adopted by the lesbian sexual radicals and the supporters of Queer Politics, as one of a variety of sexual identifications and positions which include homosexuality, bisexuality, heterosexuality, sadomasochism and celibacy. As Palmer puts it, “some episodes either refer to it directly or treat themes and motifs which play a central part in the lesbian cultural tradition”. For instance, in Winterson’s innovative version of the story of the Twelve Dancing Princess lesbian and woman-identified relationships take on political significance, denoting female courage, perseverance and resistance to patriarchal power. In Sexing the Cherry, Dog-Woman’s huge stature and Jordan’s ability to travel through time and space let her question gender and sexual identity, along with the limits and subjectivity of history, and the artificiality of narrative. As Winterson rewrites the fairy tale, she portrays the princesses as liberating
themselves, in some cases by violent means, from their husbands’ dominance and control. Instead of the conventional having happy endings in marital bliss, as indicated by social conventions, they set up home together in a female community. She highlights the female characters through the various narratives assigned to them, which reveal the social and economic power which men wield, and also the brutal punishments which they inflict on women if they dare to defy or transgress the conventional role of object of exchange by forming sexual relationships with one another. With her open avowal of lesbianism and indifference to the literary establishment and stunning inventiveness, she captivates her own generation. She argues that in any discussion of art and the artist, heterosexuality is backgrounded while homosexuality is foregrounded. She writes:

I am not suggesting that a lesbian who recognizes desire for a man sleep with him. We need not be so crude. What we do need is to accept in ourselves, with pleasure, the subtle and various emotions that are the infinity of a human being. More, not less, is the capacity of the heart. More not less is the capacity of art. 86

This element is significantly located in Winterson’s writing. Like other postmodern feminists such as Julia Kristeva and Monique Wittig, she proposes that the concept of gender is socially constructed and is not biologically inherent. Overall, the construction of the world in binary systems limits and excludes those people and stories that fall outside of the definitions. By not seeing the world as a strict duality, a greater multiplicity of people can be seen as creating its essence. People are not simply black and white, but they also line the many shades of gray in between. In “Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Postmodern”, Laura Doan comments on Jeanette’s (the narrator in Oranges
Are Not the Only Fruit) resistance towards the heterosexual hegemony in terms of her naturalizing the binary of good and evil to fit her lesbian view of life. Lesbianism, which is natural, is considered good and therefore heterosexuality is unnatural, it must be evil. Throughout her literary works, Winterson describes sexual passion in the language and with the understanding of a parallel and informing spiritual faith and compassion.

Helena Grice and Tim Woods write:

Despite the many differences between Winterson’s texts, they return repeatedly to certain issues: love and desire; identity and subjectivity; artifice and aesthetic self-reflexivity; lesbian and gendered perspectives; the difficulty of forging a language suitable for the discussion of non-heterosexual love; and the relationships between narrative and reference...

Winterson’s fiction appears to resist simple categorization such as realist, postmodern, or fantasy, and the multiplicity of approaches to her fiction within the essays included within this volume attest to this resistance.

The tendency to “return repeatedly to certain issues” is apparent in her texts where repetition continues to run even to the point of monotony. This repetition is made to produce a desired effect upon the readers. The “theme” that is repeatedly identified in such works as central to Winterson’s writing(s) is lesbianism. Lisa Moore describes Winterson’s oeuvre as a particularly powerful attempt to imagine a lesbian body without a liberatory political agenda. Both Cath Stowers and Paulina Palmer are of the same opinion, who in their readings of Written on the Body and The Passion, argue respectively that “the trajectory of [Winterson’s] work exceeds a gendered logic towards a specifically lesbian reconceptualization of female desire”, And that Winterson’s
creation of a lesbian subject position or lesbian narrative space disrupts conventional heterosexual narrative structures and scripts, resulting in a re-figuration of female desire. Whilst these readings portray Winterson’s writing(s) as transgressing boundaries, for example, the boundaries of gendered logic and/or conventional heterosexual narrative structures, they simultaneously re-inscribe the texts in accordance with the logic of regionality by representing them as refiguring female desire and naming this reconfiguration lesbian.

In Sexing the Cherry as the narrative progresses, Jordan’s desire to be more like Tradescant present him enmeshed in gender expectations which define appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour. Throughout the novel he expresses anxiety at his inability to fulfill or reach that masculine teleological model of travel represented by Tradescant, whereby “voyages can be completed. They occupy time comfortably. With some leeway, they are predictable”. Like Henry, Jordan is surely more reminiscent of women travelers and his travels are infinite and labyrinth. In the text, Jordan’s journeying is initiated by the very sight of the phallic signifier, namely the banana and his travels are an attempt to return to that sight of memory, and “to release whatever it had begun in me”. However, throughout the text, that phallic banana represents and becomes a symbol which is associated with Dog Woman while Jordan is represented by the more female fruit, namely the pineapple. This reflects her unsettled signifiers of gendered identity. In The Passion, Henri negates paradigms of heterosexual desire and the male model of control of the Other. Similarly in Sexing the Cherry, Jordan’s explorations are more concerned with discovering a reciprocal love and desire to be wanted by both Fortunata and Dog Woman. Jordan justifies himself by saying that he is not like
Tradescant, because for Tradescant “being a hero comes naturally”. Rather than being a hero, Jordan would simply want his mother “to ask him to stay, just as now I want Fortunata to ask me to stay. Why do they not?” Luce Irigaray has mentioned that identity is a male concept which is used to make sense of men’s necessary separation from their mothers. She claims that women have a closer relation to their mothers rather than men, Irigaray argues for the possibility of a female identity that is “unrecognized, unknown, unthought-of, as are reciprocity, fluidity, exchange” and all these are clearly reflected in all of Winterson’s fictions.

_Art and Lies_ is a meta-fictional work involving three characters namely Handel, Picasso, and Sappho, as they travel by high-speed rail to London. Each character presents a dramatic monologue that is interspersed with authorial comments that addresses sexuality, music, philosophy and art. This work emphasizes the ability and responsibility of art to move beyond the circumscribed and the known in order to open up more inclusive and far-reaching human possibilities. While Handel flees a hypocritical world, Picasso has to cope with having been continually raped by her brother and ignored by the rest of the family. Sappho is a reincarnating lesbian (or hermaphrodite) calling herself “a Sexualist” whose poetic work is burned by Savonarola in the fifteenth century, and later maladjusted and re-interpreted again and again. All three suffer from patriarchal indoctrination and society as a whole. Winterson writes in _Art Objects_ (1994) that “the question of ‘How shall I live?’ had to be addressed.” In _Art and Lies_, She put the text into her life mainly because she believes that the true artist is somewhat connected with his/her writing. Through _Art and Lies_, she reveals both the beauty and the horror with which humans are confronted with on a daily basis. As the title suggests, _Art and Lies_ is
more of a philosophical digression about art as artifice and invention than a story in the traditional sense of the term. It criticizes the Platonic notion of art as mimesis and reverences the power of the word. These three characters separately flee a London of the near future. They find themselves on the same train, drawn to one another through the curious agency of a book and stories within stories take the reader through the love affairs of an eighteenth century bawd and into a world of painful beauty. The text can be seen as an extended rift on art, sex, religion, social repression, the dangers of patriarchy, and everything that is wrong with the society. Each character is fleeing past traumas and present injustices. Alternating between these three narrators the text denotes a description of their unusual lives.

Love is discussed as a parallel to language and cultural forms of relating. James Wood, however, interprets this accretive process as a dulling return to sameness, finding only “identical mounds” of meaning while complaining that her language “appears to want to please itself—‘not words for things, but words that are living things.’” Winterson’s sensate and erotic words in Art and Lies are both pleasurably self-directed when read. For instance, for Sappho, speaking another’s words is sex, and the pleasure is always wrought in and through the exchange. It is through an emphasis on pleasure that she revitalizes postmodern language, so that words become living things.

Art and Lies also contains pieces about art and modernism as well as a defense of all her novels that are related to the technique of writing uncompromisingly intense poetic prose. Winterson, through double entendre, allusion, metaphor, and genre-blurring, reinvents literature as a form of play that creates a new space for the truth(s) of lesbian lives, love, and sex, a free(ing) space in which “lesbian” can exist liberated from the
over-determination of a homophobic and misogynist culture. As Laura Doan has argued, Winterson’s work is imbued with many of the conventions associated with postmodern historiographic meta-fiction in order to challenge and subvert patriarchal and heterosexist discourses and, ultimately, to facilitate a forceful and positive radical oppositional critique. Broadly speaking, Winterson’s concerns in her fiction, and the categories she interrogates, may be said to be history and the subject. She assumes that both of these have largely been regarded to have been inscribed in the past by male-centered, male-privileged narratives. She attempts to create and reconfigure such narratives so as to construct other cultural spaces within which it may be possible to enact alternative performances.

Winterson’s novels are peopled and narrated by storytellers whose stories have their origins in lack and desire. Her heroes are sensitive people, who are often travellers and searchers, who are exploring their own selves. They are on a quest for the self and will cross boundaries in order to find it. They are, in that sense, revolutionary because they have the desire to go beyond what is already known, and the passion to go beyond what is common. With that, they embrace uncertainty. The beauty they hope to find there demands a letting go from old values, as well as openness and a passionate determination. The antagonists in Winterson’s works display the exact opposite characteristics. They do not seek anything except stability, order, and law-like certainty and in some cases they are mainly interested in power or money. Her preference for the first set of characters and characteristics are evident from the passionately poetic language and visionary images with which she describes them in her fiction. They are also confirmed in her non-fiction,
essays and journalism. She makes constant references to the Bible, and to Greek mythology, while reinventing and reinterpreting them in order to reveal new perspectives.

In 2003 interview she declares:

I’ve said that the seven books make a cycle or a series, and I believe that they do from Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit to The Powerbook. And they interact and themes do occur and return, disappear, come back amplified or modified, changed in some way, because it’s been my journey, it’s the journey of my imagination; it’s the journey of my soul in those books. So continually they must address one another. And you don’t know that at the time. You only know that when you’ve done enough of them. But that’s why I say it is a series, and that’s also why I say it’s finished now with The PowerBook and there has to be new beginning. Whether or not I’ll go on quoting myself in this new beginning, I don’t know.102

Winterson is not restricted to what she has experienced or what she knows; she lets herself loose outside of her own dimension which makes possible “a total escape from Self”.103 Her novels reveal a preference for stories and romance over history. In her fictions, stories are less a way of trying to explain or understand the universe than of experiencing it, or alternatively, of sharing oneself against its confusions and complexities; less a way of understanding material history or “the historical process” than of transcending it or escaping from its confines. She denotes:

What I do use are stories within stories within stories within stories. I am not particularly interested in folk tales or fairy tales, but I do have them about my person ... As a peddler, I know how to get a crowd round when I
unpack my bag, and if one person buys the Dog Woman, and another, a pair of webbed feet, and another, a talking orange called Jeanette, and you, a forest of red roses on a salt-rock, then I’m glad of my wares, or should I call them my bewares? ¹⁰⁴

She also asserts that by telling stories and making them what we will, which is what inevitably happens (and that includes history too), “we have a way of keeping it all alive, not boxing it into time”. ¹⁰⁵ In the chapter “Deuteronomy”, in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, she also outlines her preference for keeping history in untidy knots interwoven with stories, because clearly stated facts are easily discarded when they become uncomfortable. And besides, says Winterson in tune with Gertrude Stein, “how dreary it is when a fact is a fact is a fact.” ¹⁰⁶ Winterson’s fiction forces the reader to work at reading, to reconsider the relationship of things and people in the world, and to recognize the multiplicities in things rather than their singularities. ¹⁰⁷

Throughout her literary career, Winterson has been guided by a strong belief in principles such as the freedom of speech, the value of art, or the anti-linearity and multi-dimensionality of reality, and she uses these principles as the wire-frame around which she models her characters. In her world, female values are predominant and the advocates of her ideas are females rather than men. Although there are some masculine heroes, Winterson’s unfavourable idea of men in general is unmistakable in her fictions. As Gary Krist signals:

With a few exceptions, the males in the book (like Sexing the Cherry) are depicted as cruel, hypocritical and/or insensitive, as little more than obstacles in the way of the self-realization of women. On analyzing the
text, one finds that she needs her characters to be unhappy, oppressed, isolated or obsessed now and then, in order to make their solutions special and more often we might get the impression that she is calculatingly and deliberately place men in the position of the evil-doers, for instance the characters like Napoleon, the mischievous cook, God and many priests, Picasso’s brother and father, Elgin, Handel’s colleagues, some of the husbands of the twelve princesses and many others. Critics note that the male characters also appear either weak, like Jeanette’s father in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, who might as well not be in the story at all, since he is usually kept out of the way, either at work or watching sports on television, as Jeanette says, was ‘never quite good enough.’

Jeanette’s father is a mere shadow, and as such, gives an implicit message that men are not important in Jeanette’s life, and sometimes they are made to seem ridiculous, like Pastor Spratt. In addition to that, most of the dominating characters in her fiction are female: Jeanette and her mother, Villanelle, Sappho, Dog-Woman, Fortunata and Louise. Two integral aspects remain noteworthy in her works. These are, that many children are adopted or are foundlings and many women are at least bisexual, gender-benders or true lesbians. Winterson achieves an accurate, non-male dominated, emotionality that releases genuine realities upon the reader. Only very few men are presented as sensitive and vulnerable. As a writer, she is significantly concerned with returning the lost meaning into the self. Her ever-present yet disappearing characters could be regarded as personifications, or concrete realizations of this lost meaning. With this in mind, thematic material that at first seems self concerned and petty takes on a
world of implication, which is why Winterson’s lost lovers, are ever-present even though they seem to be gone. The beauty inherent in everyday life is there, wherever and whenever it seems to have been lost.

Winterson rejects being labeled as a “political” writer just as she rejects labels of all kinds. In spite of this, her work is suffused with a sense of political injustice and protest. It is combative and impassioned, and it is a text which is speaking up on behalf of history’s silent majorities and minorities. Her use of language however remains poetic and original, and her advocacy of women’s sexuality is a rejection of patriarchal assumptions, and a stand for women’s sexual rights. Winterson hopes to offer, throughout her œuvre, a writing that is original and influential especially in terms of freedom from the confines of literary orthodoxy and literary patriarchy.
NOTES

1 As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 15

2 Ibid. 55


4 Ibid. 157

5 Ibid. 154

6 As elucidated by Granta and the Book Marketing Council, 2 Oct 2009 <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth100>


8 Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects, (New York: Vintage, 1995) 118

9 As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 30

10 Ibid. 158

11 Ibid. 62

12 Jeanette Winterson, Art and Lies, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994) 186


16 Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, (London: Pandora, 1985) 10

17 Ibid. 10

18 As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, (London: Pandora, 1985) 16


21 As elucidated by Paulina Palmer, Introduction, *Contemporary Lesbian Writing* by Paulina Palmer, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993) 1


30 Ibid. v


32 Ibid. 3


36 Ibid. 81


42 Esther Newton, “‘Role Models’” *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1972) 103


49 Ibid. 103

50 Ibid. 104
Sappho was an Ancient Greek poet, born on the island of Lesbos. She was included in the list of nine lyric poets. Her birth was sometime between 630 and 612 BC, and it is said that she died around 570 BC. The bulk of her poetry, which was well-known and greatly admired throughout antiquity, has been lost, but her immense reputation has endured through surviving fragments. Sappho’s poetry centers on passion and love for various personages and both genders. The word lesbian is derived from the name of the island of her birth, Lesbos, while her name is also the origin of the word sapphic; both words were only applied to female homosexuality, beginning in the nineteenth century.


Ibid. 110

Ibid. 104-5

Ibid. 110


Ibid. 131


As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects, (New York: Vintage, 1995) 105

Ibid. 107


Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 176

Ibid. 170

Jeanette Winterson, Written on the Body, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) 77

As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects, (New York: Vintage, 1995) 156

Jeanette Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989) 32

Ibid. 33

Maria del Mar Asensio, “Subversion of Sexual Identity in Jeanette Winterson’s


80 Ibid. 191


As elucidated by Paulina Palmer, Contemporary Lesbian Writing, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993) 104

As elucidated by Jeanette Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989) 47-61


93Ibid. 113

94Ibid. 114

95Christine Holmund, ‘The Lesbian, the Mother, the Heterosexual Lover: Irigaray’s Recoding of Difference’, Feminist Studies 17. 2 Summer (1991): 56

96Jeanette Winterson, Art and Lies. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994) 58

97Ibid. 58


103Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects. (New York: Vintage, 1995) 188

104Ibid. 189

105Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit. (London: Pandora, 1985) 91


Jeanette Winterson in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, (London: Pandora, 1985) 11