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**QUEERING THE TEXT: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF JEANETTE WINTERSON'S
*SEXING THE CHERRY***

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ABSTRACT

Sexing the cherry is a novel written by a British Novelist Jeanette Winterson. This paper critically analyses Jeanette Winterson's novel *Sexing the Cherry* as a queer text. It looks at the novel from a post modernist perspective and analyses how the author celebrates fluidity and plurality in both the form content. The paper argues how Winterson challenges and subverts Gender identities as social constructs and celebrates the possibility of a queer identity and desire which does not conform to the strict and rigid gender and sexual binaries of patriarchal heterosexist discourse.

Keywords: Queer, Post-modern, Patriarchy, Feminism, Rewriting, Gender, Heterosexuality, Desire, Homosexuality, Lesbian

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Sexing the Cherry, written in 1989, is a novel by Jeanette Winterson which traces the journey of a mother, the Dog Woman and her adopted son Jordan across time. As a post-modernist text, it experiments with the literary form, linear narrative structure, featuring the elements of Magic Realism to destabilize and subvert the conventional notions of gender, sexuality and providing us with the narrative of the 'other' by foregrounding and normalizing lesbian desire. As Jeanette Winterson states "the central relationship is between Jordan and the Dog Woman. It is a savage love, an unorthodox love... the boisterous surrealism of their bonds is in the writing itself. By writing the familiar into the strange, by wording the unlovely into words-as-jewels, what is outcast can be brought home...*Sexing the Cherry* is a

cross-time novel in the same way that the passion is cross-gender."

The narrative features the journey of dog Woman and Jordan in 17th century London which isn't linear and challenges the traditional historical accounts and patriarchal heterosexist discourse it can be read as a revisionary narrative, not just rewriting from a woman centric stance but a rewriting of 'Woman' as Susana Gonzalez points out. The figure of the Dog Woman, motif of grafting, story of the Dancing Princesses, all upset our ideas of how identities are constructed and constituted. It destabilizes the strict gender binarism and normativity of heterosexuality, by advocating and foregrounding multiplicity of identity and celebrating and naturalising homosexual desire. Winterson uses post-modern techniques on a formal level to

undercut the traditional notion of patrilineal history, linear time, sequence and the notion of a single 'Truth' and 'Reality'. Hence, the text can be read as queer in both its form and content.

Sexing the Cherry illustrates Linda Hutcheon's concept of Historiographic Metafiction. As Laura Doan contends that Winterson employs narrative tactics such as intertextuality, pastiche, parody, self reflexivity, multiplicity of narrative voices, fluidity of time and space to subvert patriarchal discourses and to engage in a radical oppositional critique. Hutcheon's concept of Historiographic Metafiction foregrounds a post-modern distrust of metanarratives. It sees official history and discourse as constructed and contingent, pointing out the possibilities of establishing counter historical framework. Hence it emphasizes on the plurality and fluidity of meaning, Truth. Winterson presents a melange of narratives not in a traditional realist narrative framework but employs elements of folklore, fantasy, hyperbole, surrealism. Through these multiple narratives she claims validity for the narratives of the 'other', the marginalized. She inverts the heterosexist discourse which posits heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as perverse and naturalizes lesbian desire. The novel shows gender identities as constructed and serving patriarchy. As Laura Doan argues that fiction becomes a site to interrogate and subvert gender identities and sexuality, thereby challenging the exclusive and totalising domain of patriarchal and heterosexist authority. she asserts that in naturalising lesbian desire Winterson "collapses binarism and creates a space not just for lesbians but for more productive, dynamic and fluid gender pluralities and sexual positioning." (p. 153)

The Dog Woman is a grotesque, hideous, giant like woman, whom Winterson herself describes as "The only woman in English fiction confident enough to use filth as a fashion accessory." Through the character of the dog Woman, Winterson questions and destabilizes the notions of femininity and also engages in a rewriting of the past historical accounts from her point of view. Winterson sees past as an "energetic space", not as a document but as a "lumber room, full of old trunks and mementos' and argues that in the writing of

past, there are "as many narratives as there are guesses."

The dog woman is the most unconventional female character, described in terms of her huge breasts, grotesque body and enormous strength. She is anatomically and biologically a female, a fact which is overemphasized in her sheer physicality. But she doesn't fit into the conventional idea of a female as she is not 'feminine' enough. To be adequately feminine is to be weak, fragile, submissive. Judith butler argues how gender identity is a matter of 'performativity' and we see how the novel destabilizes the notions of gender identity-femininity- by exposing how these are mere cultural constructs and not something which is natural and inherent. The Dog Woman is very much a woman and a mother but doesn't conform to behavioural norms, notions of motherhood, femininity as laid down by patriarchy. As Elizabeth Langland argues that though she is a woman, the Dog Woman performs her gender in a destabilizing way. She asserts that "women's bodies are at once a site for inscription of conventional meaning and also a locus for their disruption. The very materiality of body is vividly depicted in the huge bulk of Dog Woman ... her representation reinvents the female body as a site for cultural transformation." (p. 99)

The novel posits the metaphor of grafting to destabilize the stereotypical gender binaries and to foreground the possibility of hybrid, plural identities which do not fit into the hetero-homo binary. Jordan, who is an explorer and gets exotic fruits to England defines grafting as "the means whereby a plant, perhaps tender or uncertain, is fused into a hardier member of its strain, and so the two take advantage of each other and produce a third kind ..." (1992, 84) This third kind refers to a kind of hybridization which poses a challenge to the binaries on which patriarchal hegemony rests and opens up the possibilities of more fluid, hybrid, queer identities. Laura Doan sees this as a "wholly new genesis of gender", as imagining new possibilities of gender identity. Hence, the novel can be read as a critique of fixed, rigid and limiting gender and sexual identities which confine human self in patriarchal society. Taking this critique one

step ahead, *Sexing the Cherry* celebrates and foregrounds hybrid, queer identity and desire.

The story of the twelve Dancing Princesses in the novel serves to question patriarchy and the institution of marriage. It can be read as a feminist revisioning of fairy tale narrative. The twelve Dancing Princesses are kept in prison like structures, which have only ceilings but no floor. They are kept under constant surveillance and are not allowed to go out. They escape the patriarchal oppression by escaping from the prison as every night they go out and dance. One day a prince finds out and they are married off. None of these women have happy, fulfilling marital relations with their husband. This tale becomes a metaphor for the oppression of women in patriarchal society where women are stereotyped and imprisoned in well defined gender roles and norms, behavioural models and code of conduct. But the women in this tale are not proverbial victims. They are endowed with agency and they strive to change their material circumstances. They form a sisterhood, not just in their status as a victim but in their shared strength, to challenge patriarchy. In their marriage, they were either unfulfilled, or had unfaithful husbands who treated them as possessions. They defy the norms and either kill their husband or run away, finding fulfillment in lesbian love.

Fortunata, the most radical of these sisters, is the princess whom Jordan loves. She runs away from the church on the eve of her marriage. She teaches women to dance against the law of gravity. When they dance, they acquire wings and are able to flee the constraints of patriarchy. Dancing becomes a way of escaping the constraints imposed by body, materiality. Fortunata exists in the realm of fantasy and fantasy serves as a crucial tool in the hands of the writer to espouse a different reality for women. As Susana Gonzalez asserts "Winterson's fantasy opens up for consideration many aspects: women's strength, the real meaning of motherhood, lesbian relationships, sisterhood, and, above all, women's voice and its implied potential."(p.292)

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