

JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *ORANGES ARE NOT THE ONLY FRUIT*: REWRITING OF MASTER NARRATIVE OF CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

The inculcation of norms and values of Christian religious discourse is an act of exercising repressive power over a particular society. In other words, the church controls and monitors the behaviour and private thoughts of each and every individual. In particular, it has played a dominant role in bringing about a drastic change in the Western notion of sex. This shift in the traditional notion of sex after the advent of Christianity has led to suppression of deviant identities like transgender, lesbian and gay. Usually, these deviant identities have been viewed as a sign of deeper, darker character deformities that should be treated by a psychiatrist. The Bible is the primary text that serves as the first and foremost metanarrative in order to substantiate and validate the heterosexist norms established by Christianity. As a result, sex has gained significance and meaning, and more importantly, sex has been moved from the periphery of minor transgression to the central issue of morality. In parallel with these narratives, the Western society has seen a number of counter narratives. The proposed paper will discuss Christianity as the dominant narrative of patriarchy that construct and shape the knowledge of sex in the West and take up Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* for analysis to show how using Bible as the framing device Winterson make Jeanette's non-conformity to Christian ideology, unwillingness to repent for same sex desire and declaration of her deviant sexuality turn into a kind of counter-discourse to her mother's, pastor's and church members' ideology, which is the product of master narrative of Christian religious discourse.

Key words: repressive power, Christianity, metanarrative, discourse, patriarchy, Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: Rewriting of Master Narrative of Christian Religious Discourse

INTRODUCTION

The heteronormative society suppresses the sexual deviants through the master narratives of religious and scientific discourses. The most relevant one to the present discussion is the master narrative of Christian Religious Discourse. In its attempt to bring about self-regulation and discipline in the mainstream society, Christianity, though the foundational stone of Western civilisation, has muted the voices of deviants through its meta-narratives. In fact, it has played a dominant role in bringing about a drastic change in the notion of sex in the West. This notion of sex enhanced the act of suppressing the voices of sexual minorities like transgender, lesbians, and gay.

Before analysing the role of Christianity in constructing the 'Other' on the basis of sexuality in detail, it is important to discuss how this discursive power works in the society. The effect of discursive power cannot easily be seen or felt, since it works underneath an institution. Unlike repressive power, which is solid, concrete and visible (as one can feel this by watching the police, the army or the courts), it exercises its power through production which is not apparent. In this connection, Riki Wilchins in his *Queer Theory, Gender Theory* says, "discursive power does not operate from "the top down" but from "the bottom up". It is not central, but diffuse and capillary. It is not held by authorities and

institutions; rather it is held by no one but exercised by practically everyone" (63). In spite of the dominance of master narrative of Christianity, the Western society has seen the emergence of number of counter-discourses. It is interesting for one to study this interplay of discourses in a particular society and its representation in art.

Primarily, the sexual knowledge was concerned with technique and pleasure. Moreover, it did not have any special meaning or secret. In other words, there was nothing to be learned from it except perhaps how to enjoy it more. This does not mean that there was no awareness of sex and transgression. Certainly, there was an awareness of public nudity, masturbation, lewdness, debauchery and congress with minors and in fact, all these were considered to be a disrupting factor to civil order and public morality. But following the Enlightenment, all this began to change. The Catholic Church, which was influenced by other monastic practices of monks and ascetics, for whom the self-denial of celibacy was the paramount expression of self-devotion moved sex from the periphery of minor transgression to a central issue of morality. Foucault is also of the same opinion when he says in his *History of Sexuality*, "Since Christianity, Western civilization has not stopped saying, 'to know who you are, know what your sexuality is about'" (43).

For a monk, almost any passing yearning might grow quickly into a serious threat to vows of celibacy, poverty and humility. Purity of thoughts was also treated as important as the purity of body and acts. In consequence, the church began to focus on the importance not only of sinful acts but sinful desires - things one only wanted or thought about. Impure thoughts were considered to be dangerous new sources of mortal sin, even when they never acted upon. The church urged people to confess everything about their sexuality in every exacting detail. This new concern for sexuality disconnected the knowledge of sexuality from pleasure and transformed it into something akin to truth.

This new form of knowledge of sexuality enabled the church to exert enormous power, which is more subtle and dominant than repressive power, over people's lives and private thoughts. Moreover, it enabled the church to willingly manage and maintain their own behaviour, even when they were alone and far from the papal gaze. One becomes accustomed to thinking of sex as a central moral issue that it is hard to appreciate how far we have drifted from awareness of sex as just another pleasure. For instance, a man who puts on four-inch heels and mini skirt is

absolutely certain that his cross-dressing is not just an innocent pleasure but a sign of deeper, darker character deformities that should be treated by a psychiatrist.

The inculcation of the new form of knowledge of sexuality on people by the church seems to impose certain restrictions upon heterosexual couples and completely eliminate same sex desire from cultural scene. The church tries to suppress these sexual deviants and in most cases hide their presence in the society through its meta-narratives. Foucault tries to trace the history of notion of sex in the West. Before Christianity, Greco-Roman cultures treated sexual desires and practices as ethical or moral concerns, but not as the ultimate shameful or repressed truth of human experience. Crucially, ethics was seen as a relation between the individual and itself, and not as the basis for standards or norms of behaviour and discipline was seen as part of a practice aimed at attaining individual freedom or autonomy rather than subordinating others. While Greek and Roman societies differed from each other, the latter placing greater emphasis on heterosexuality and marriage, Christian culture effectively broke with the entire model of ethics of the classical world. Christianity, according to Foucault developed universal codes and interdictions increasingly centred on the truth of sex. While Romans might have seen desire as potentially harmful, Christians viewed it as intrinsically evil. Christianity has constructed a form of knowledge of sexuality and imposed upon the people. In turn, there are also emergences of many counter-discourses to the meta-narratives of Christianity. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette presents her counter-discourse within the frame of the master narrative of Christian religious discourse.

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit is an autobiographical novel but of different kind. This deviates from the conventional autobiographical novels for the narrator unfolds the story in non-linear fashion and infuses the fictional elements with the factual story. The story of this novel is simple: the effort of Jeanette's mother to make her daughter a missionary and the struggle of Jeanette, who is adopted into a Pentecostal family, to free herself from her mother's ideology and understand her lesbian desire. This novel is not to be read as a story about a morally and spiritually degenerated girl. Rather, it is a story of a girl who becomes the victim of the constructed knowledge of sexuality. Jeanette's non-conformity to Christian ideology, unwillingness to repent for same sex desire and declaration of her deviant sexuality turn

into a kind of counter-discourse to the master narrative of Christian religious discourse.

Jeanette Winterson takes up the Bible, which is the foundational stone of Western civilization, as the framing device for her novel. Using Bible as the framing device for her realistic narration of her story is a kind of postmodern parody. Unlike the traditional writers, Winterson revises and recontextualises Bible. She does not uphold the value of Bible. Rather she rewrites it in a different context. This is because she is aware of the fact that Bible is one of the strongest and influential narratives of patriarchy. She believes that in order to invent space for the deviant identities in general and female consciousness in particular, it is mandatory to disrupt all the existing grand narratives of patriarchal system. Paradoxically, Winterson, in fact, needs those narratives while she attempts to make her unnatural passion intelligible. What gains significance here is the analysis of how the dogmatic education, which is the product of patriarchy, helps Jeanette in shaping and understanding her lesbian desire and how she tries to free herself from the power of categorization.

In order to construct her parody, Winterson structures the novel according to the order of Biblical books. She has titled her eight chapters in the novel after the eight chapters of the Old Testament. The biblical book of Genesis describes the beginnings of the world, man, and the tribes of Israel. Likewise, Winterson's chapter also tells of Jeanette's beginnings, describing Jeanette, her placement in her family, and her unique family life. The biblical book of Exodus contains the story of the flight of the people of Israel from Egypt. Similarly, the Exodus chapter in *Oranges* deals with the themes of flight. Jeanette is able to free herself to some extent from the physical and ideological confines of her small home as she starts going to school. The biblical book of Leviticus contains rules and laws handed down from Moses to the Israelites. Likewise, this chapter outlines some of the laws Jeanette's mother has passed down to her. The Biblical book of Numbers gets its name from the "numbering" of the Hebrew that was undertaken when they escaped from Egypt, where they had been slaves. The essence of this book is that it brings about God's love for people and his demand, in return, for their faithfulness. This book also reveals that God will forgive wrongdoers but not those who breach his laws. Similarly, in the Numbers chapter in the novel, Jeanette feels her love for Melanie, who is of same sex. When everybody knows of Jeanette's same sex desire, which is

considered to be against the laws of God by the so-called followers of Christianity, Jeanette is taken to be a demon and it is believed that her soul can be saved only through repentance.

The fifth chapter Deuteronomy is similar to the biblical one in essence but varies in content. The biblical chapter is concerned with the teachings of Moses. Moses directly speaks to the people how to deal with everything from how to raise one's sheep, sacrifice a lamb and marry. The book of Deuteronomy forms the basis for the biblical law. While the rules of Deuteronomy governed Jews and Christians for generations, Winterson questions whether blind adherence to the rules in the Bible is appropriate since all stories are made up and furthermore, it is often manipulated by the few for political or material gain. The Biblical Book of Joshua starts at a new historical beginning as the Hebrews are no longer enslaved and have returned to Israel to claim their promised land. In the Joshua chapter, Jeanette, though she is faithful to God, has been kept out of the church for her deviant sexuality by the heteronormative society. But she does not give up her search for the Promised Land which is not homophobic. The Biblical book of Judges is concerned with the judges set up by God who were to direct and judge the affairs and people of Israel. In the novel, there are judges to assess the conduct of Jeanette. The judges are the congregation, pastor and Jeanette's mother. They blindly condemn Jeanette for her sexual inclination towards a girl of same sex without taking into account her true love for God. The Biblical Book of Ruth deals with the issue of exile and also deals with attachment between a daughter and surrogate mother. The chapter Ruth in the novel deals with the exile of Jeanette and the reconciliation to some extent between Jeanette and her mother. The reason for the deliberate attempt of Winterson to bring the correlation between her own real life story and the Bible is to subvert the established notion of Bible as an unquestionable absolute religious truth. In other words, the correlation suggests the fact that Bible is no longer considered to be words of God. Rather, it is read as a mere subjective and fictional story. Moreover, Winterson highlights how Bible has often been manipulated for political and material gains.

The parallel between the real life story of Jeanette and Bible so far discussed shows that a single text can be manipulated in order to control and regulate the life of people. On the other hand, the analysis of the two major characters – Jeanette and her mother – makes it evident that an

institution, especially church exercises its power over the life of people in a particular society at different levels. Of the two characters, Jeanette's mother represents the repressive power, whereas Jeanette, though church tried to victimize her, represents the liberating force that makes her free from the confines of the heteronormative society. The exercise of power by Jeanette's mother on her daughter and Jeanette's counteraction form the essence of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*.

Jeanette's mother is a fundamentalist Christian woman. She often engages herself with praying, singing hymns, listening to World Service and other church activities. She is of the opinion that world is full of sin and the wrath of God is inevitable. She always prays exactly the same way, "First of all she thanked God that she has lived to see another day . . . for sparing the world another day" (4). She has got interested in missionary work after going to Pastor Spratt's Glory Crusade. The pastor himself spent most of his time out in the jungle and other hot places converting the Heathen. Jeanette's mother believes that the sinful world can be changed by a Christ like person. She dreams that she would get a child, train it, build it, and dedicate it to the Lord, "a missionary child, a servant of God and a blessing" (14). As she wants a Christ like figure, she does not want to beget a child. Rather, she wants to acquire a child without having sex. Finally, she adopts a child from an orphanage and calls it Lord's child, "This child is mine from the Lord" (14). She equates herself and Jeanette to Virgin Mary and Christ respectively. The involvement of Jeanette's mother in church activities shows herself an ardent follower of God's laws. But the close reading of the novel makes it clear that she does not even have compassion which is the characteristic of true servant of God. In other words, in the course of the novel hypocrisy of Jeanette's mother does get revealed.

More than the analysis of the hypocritical nature of Jeanette's mother, it is important to discuss her constant attempt to shape the life of Jeanette according to her ideology and her effort to eliminate Jeanette from the society when she does not conform to the ideology. First, Jeanette is chosen for a missionary life which is pre-conceived by her mother. Jeanette has been asked to go to church, sing hymns and study Bible regularly. In order to make people believe that Jeanette is a Christ like figure, her mother would say that she followed a star until it settled on an orphanage where she found Jeanette. From her childhood, Jeanette has also been made to believe that she

is born to change the world like how Christ did. In the course of the novel, all the efforts of Jeanette's mother to make her daughter a missionary turn out to be futile. Whenever Jeanette seems to deviate from her mother's ideology in the beginning, she has been confined to the walls of her home. But towards the end of the novel, her mother goes to the extent of banishing her from the society.

Jeanette's mother is the first person to declare that her daughter is in a state of rapture when she has stopped answering anyone without knowing the fact that she has gone deaf, "It's the Lord . . . working in mysterious ways" (31). In the church, pastor gives a speech about Jeanette for twenty minutes. Jeanette alone knows that she is quite because she couldn't hear anything. She tries to draw her mother's attention to this fact, but Jeanette's mother is busy with reading the book called *Other Continents Know Him Too* which has the description of missionary life. At last, Jeanette finds Miss Jewsbury who is ready to listen to her. Jeanette takes up a pen and writes at the back of a form that "Dear Miss Jewsbury, I can't hear a thing" (36). Miss Jewsbury takes Jeanette to her mother and informs that "this child's not full of spirit . . . she's deaf" (37). Though Jeanette is admitted for operation in the hospital, she is left alone by her mother. Her mother gives Bible, a Scripture Colouring book and a wedge of plasticine. Jeanette's stay in the hospital has not affected her mother's work in the church. This is the first instance where the hope of Jeanette's mother to make her daughter a missionary seems to dwindle. The discard of Jeanette in the hospital and the act of giving Bible to her by her mother shows that Jeanette's mother does not love her daughter but using as a mere tool to validate her own narrative of ideology. In other words, Jeanette's mother does not want her daughter to be an ordinary girl but a Christ like figure. Moreover, only at this juncture Jeanette comes to know of the false notions of church. This realisation leads her to a sense of self-contradiction, "Since I was born I had assumed that the world ran on very simple lines, like a larger version of our church. Now I was finding that even the church was sometimes confused. This was a problem" (38).

Jeanette meets a girl named Melanie in a fish stall and falls in love. She does not find anything wrong in loving both God and Melanie as she says to Melanie that "I love you almost as much as I love the Lord" (156). She starts meeting Melanie often in her home. When Jeanette takes Melanie to her church for the first time, they meet Pastor Finch who is

visiting the church on his regional tour. He has come in a Bedford van on which it is inscribed that "HEAVEN OR HELL? IT'S YOUR CHOICE" (129). He gives a long speech on the epidemic of demons. After his long sermon, he asks the sinners to raise their hand. Melanie without understanding anything raises the hand because she needs Jesus. She also asks Jeanette to be her counselor. Jeanette goes to Melanie's home for reading bible to her. Along with Bible reading Jeanette's love for Melanie also does develop. This becomes clear when Jeanette says "We read the Bible as usual, and then told each other how glad we were that the Lord had brought us together. She stroked my head for a long time and then we hugged and it felt like drowning" (138). Jeanette is not aware of the fact that her love for Melanie, according to heteronormative society, is an unnatural passion. Moreover, she will be considered to be an evil spirit and will not be allowed to enter the church. Without knowing these consequences, Jeanette discloses her love for Melanie to her mother.

Jeanette and Melanie are accused of same sex desire by the pastor in their church. The pastor says that "these children of God have fallen under Satan's spell . . . are full of demons . . . how are the best become the worst" (157). When pastor accuses these girls, Jeanette alone seems to be resisting it, "I'm not and neither is she" (157). Jeanette agrees to pastor's accusation but she is not willing to repent. According to Jeanette, in spite of being sexually deviant, she can still love God. On the other hand, Melanie promises to give up the sin and beg the Lord for forgiveness. This shows the feeling of grief and loss of sexual deviants brought out by religious organizations. Many religious organizations maintain that homosexuality is morally wrong and majority of religious organizations regard homosexuality as a sin. In fact, the individual, who identifies himself as sexually deviant, has left with two options: first, hiding the deviant identity to gain the acceptance of the church; second, accepting both God and deviant sexual orientation. Jeanette comes under the second category. In order to cope with her deviant sexuality, Jeanette does not attempt to modify her belief about God. In this connection, the article of Jennifer E. Hansen and Serena M. Lambert titled "Grief and Loss of Religion: The Experience of Four Rural Lesbians", which explores the interplay among rural lesbians, the role of religion and loss, acquires significance. Of the four lesbians studied in this article, three have modified their beliefs about God before accepting their deviant identity and the

remaining one has not modified her belief, but goes in search of church which accepts homosexuality. Jeanette's resistance to change her belief and repentance is similar to one of the lesbians participated in the study named Kris who "has no change in her religious beliefs after identifying as a lesbian because she never thought of God as someone who was going to judge her" (192).

The pastor asks Jeanette's mother to confine her daughter into the room until she repents. For two days Jeanette has been locked up in the room without food. The elders pray over her and urge her to repent her sins before the Lord. Interestingly, Jeanette, though the pastor and elders exorcise her, is still reminded of Melanie. Jeanette herself says that she "could only see Melanie's face and Melanie's body, and every so often the outline of Miss Jewsbury bending over me" (162). After two days of confinement, Jeanette agrees to repent her sin. This is not because of her complete rejection of her sexual identity, but because of physical torture inflicted upon her. The church takes enormous effort to make the people believe that Jeanette's deviant sexuality is because of possession of demon and that she needs to be exorcised and forced to repent before the Lord. This is how a dominant institution, especially church has been constructing the knowledge of sex. The church makes the people look at this new form of knowledge as not a mere fabrication but an absolute fact. In the course of time, people get accustomed to this constructed knowledge. As Riki Wilchins rightly points out, "we are accustomed to thinking of sex as a central moral issue that it's hard to appreciate just how far we've drifted from awareness of sex as just another pleasure" (50).

Jeanette, though succumbs to the pressure of pastor and the elders, is desperate to meet Melanie before she leaves the place. Miss Jewsbury arranges for a secret meeting between Jeanette and Melanie. Jeanette is eager to know what the pastor and elders have done to Melanie. Melanie says to her that she has repented her sin and they have asked her to leave the place. Jeanette stays in Melanie's home the whole night: "I think we cried each other to sleep, but somewhere in the night I stretched out to her and kissed her until we were both sweating and crying with mixed up bodies and swollen faces" (69-70). Though Jeanette stays within a religious organization and does not want to reject its ideologies, she does not attempt to prevent herself from coming out of the closet.

After her repentance, Jeanette involves herself with church activities. She starts conducting Bible study classes and preaching. The church believes that Jeanette doesn't lose her gift. Jeanette's mother boasts herself that she has saved the soul of her daughter at the right time. The church is contended that it has suppressed the voice of Jeanette and denied the presence of homosexuality. On the other hand, Jeanette again falls in love with a girl named Katy, a new convert from Blackpool. Jeanette does not find it incongruous to love Katy and continue in the church. Jeanette and Katy love each other as much as they love God. The love of Jeanette for Katy has been blooming without intervention of the church. The attempt of Jeanette to hide her love affair from church fails as she is caught in Morecambe guest house with Katy. Unlike the first instance when Jeanette has repented for her love affair with Melanie, this time when Jeanette is summoned again, she strongly disagrees to repent and goes to the extent of leaving the church. Since Jeanette is accused of same sex desire for the second time, the pastor says that "the demon had returned sevenfold" (201) and Jeanette has to avoid all her contacts with the church and more importantly, a more powerful exorcism has to be arranged for her. Instead of enduring confinement and negligence, she opts to leave her home and the church. Jeanette's mother, who believed that her daughter will turn out to be a Christ like figure, couldn't tolerate the presence of a lesbian in her home. At last, she is

convinced of Jeanette's decision to leave the place: "I'm not having demons here" (209). Unlike Melanie and Katy, Jeanette resists the repressive power and comes out of the closet. Though the pastor, elders and Jeanette's mother construct a new knowledge of sex-homosexuality of Jeanette is corresponded to possession of demons in order to mute the voices of sexually deviants, Jeanette struggles hard to realize and assert her deviant sexuality. This struggle of Jeanette to come out of the constructed knowledge of sex and to realize her real sexual orientation in the novel, in turn, reinforces the fact that *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is not just an autobiographical novel but a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of Christian religious discourse.

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