

Review

The Representation of Evangelical Society in Winterson's *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*

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This paper drew the attention to the representation of the evangelical society in the novel which is full of values, mores and preconceptions associated with evangelicalism. It is intended to compare this representation with the existing norms of evangelicalism in real life. Furthermore, it tried to reveal the connection between the author's own life experiences with the fictional society she created in the novel. The contradictions between the beliefs of evangelical people and their behaviours criticized in the novel were underscored and questioned with regard to writer's objectivity in her fictional representation of a real community. The contrast between appearance and reality, the basis of the novel, was the starting point of the argument in this paper and it was aimed to reveal this contrast between the fictional world of the novel and the non-fictional world of members of a sect of Christianity.

Key words: Evangelicalism, region, hypocrisy, sexual preferences

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INTRODUCTION

Jeanette Winterson is a British postmodernist writer who, being a lesbian feminist, extensively engages in sexuality, gender roles, relationships, and marriage in her novels. She was born in Manchester in 1959 and was brought up by her adoptive parents who were strict evangelical Christians. Her first lesbian relationship takes place when she was sixteen. Upon the discovery of her homosexual tendencies, she was rejected by her parents and the church. She took on several part-time jobs in order to meet her own expenses and studied English at Oxford University. Her first novel *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* was published in 1985. Since then, she has written many controversial novels such as *The Passion* (1987), *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), *Written on the Body* (1992), *Art and Lies* (1994), and *Gut Symmetries* (1997). (Rennison, 2005, p. 151).

Oranges are not the Only Fruit is narrated in the first person by a girl named Jeanette. She is adopted by a couple who are dedicated evangelical Christians; she is a lesbian and is rejected by her adoptive parents and the church for this reason. The story mainly recounts Jeanette's evolution from an obedient religious follower to a critical defiant who tries to make sense of the world and people. As it is clear, the novel embodies many references to the author's real life story. Hence, the novel is in a way a semi-autobiographical work as it combines Winterson's real life story with some mythic stories. However, the novel shakes the perception of reality and history: "time is a great deadener; people forget, get bored, grow old, go away ... There is a certain seductiveness about dead things. You can ill treat, alter and recolor what's dead. It won't complain" (Winterson,

1985, p. 171). Here, it is implied that facts are easily reshaped throughout time and different histories and truths are reconstructed. Therefore, the autobiographical aspect of the novel is questionable.

The novel comprises eight parts which are named after the eight books of Old Testament and the developments that take place in Jeanette's life in a way corresponds to the events that are referred in those sections of the Old Testament. The first five books of the Old Testament, altogether called as the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy recount "the period from the creation to the occupation of the Promise Land by Israel. Its major theme is the selection of Israel from the nations and its consecration to the service of God according to His laws in a divinely appointed land" (Low, 2007, p. 20-21). In the same line with it, these sections in the novel narrate how Jeanette is brought up as a religious person who knows and comprehends the world only through the religious teachings. The final book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy, consists of Moses' farewell and "a new person (Joshua) took over the leadership. Moses was laid to rest" (Low, 2007, p. 53). Hence, in the sixth book a new leader appears and in the sixth section of the novel Jeanette comes to realize her homosexual desires towards her first love Melanie and discovers her hidden self which begins to see the world and people in a different way. Her biologic mother also appears in this section so her origins are revealed. The Book of Judges is about the repetitive circle of life. It maintains that people inevitably sin, they regret and repent, yet they sin again and again (Low, 2007, p. 63-64). Accordingly with it, in this section of the novel, Jeanette sins again by having a sexual relationship with another girl Kate. The Book of Joshua is described as 'Conquest of the Land', 'Victory', 'Obedience', 'Faithfulness', 'Reliance on God's Word' and contrasted to The Book of Judges which is featured as 'Confusion of the People', 'Defeat', 'Disobedience', 'Faithlessness', 'Rejection of God's Word' (Low, 2007, p. 64). These descriptions perfectly fit into Jeanette's actions and decisions in the sections which were named after these books. In the section, called Joshua, her love for Melanie is discovered by her family and the church; they separate the two lovers and Jeanette yields to their demands and holds on to the church. However, in the following section, Judges, she repeats her sin; questions the demands of the church; defies their power and leaves her home. Finally in the last chapter of the book, Ruth, named after the Book of Ruth which is about a woman who represents pure love and faithfulness, Jeanette returns her house and confesses her longing for God: "I miss God. I miss the company of someone utterly loyal. I still don't think of God as my betrayer. The servants of God, yes, but servants by their very nature betray. I miss God who was my friend" (Winterson, 1985, p. 170). Jeanette is not the same believer as she used to be in the past; she even

questions the existence of God, yet she still believes in pure love which in a way restores her belief in something beyond ordinary people or in the existence of something holy.

The novel presents a microcosm of evangelical society through Jeanette's mother and some of her friends. It reflects their way of thinking, their daily lives, their taste in music, their literary preferences, and the way how their religion shapes their life styles and their relationships with other people. To start with, their perception of the world is formed through binary oppositions: "She [Jeanette's mother] had never heard of mixed feelings. There were friends and there were enemies" (Winterson, 1985, p. 3). Hence, she thinks that the world is made up of black and white; there are no other shades. In the novel, this is illustrated through Jeanette's mother but it is strongly implied that the whole evangelical society holds the same view in their perceptions of the external world. This generalization can be justified by their antagonistic attitudes towards people who behave or think differently from them. In their daily lives, rather than television programmes, radio programmes are popular such as the Light Programme and the World Service. It is made clear that Sunday is the most important day for them; it is referred as the 'Lord's day' (Winterson, 1985, p. 3). It is occasionally implied that they are intolerant towards alcohol and that they can only tolerate heterosexual sex which take place after marriage. Desire and passion are regarded to be sins by Jeanette's mother and her friends. Education is initially received at a very early age at home through religious doctrines: "It was in this way that I began my education: she taught me to read from the Book of Deuteronomy, and she told me all about the lives of the saints, how they were really wicked, and given to nameless desires. Not fit for worship; this was yet another heresy of the Catholic Church and I was not to be misled by the smooth tongues of priests" (Winterson, 1985, p. 15). Moreover, the quality of schools is questioned and undermined: Jeanette's mother calls them as 'Breeding Ground' and says her "They'll lead you ashtray" (Winterson, 1985, p. 16). There are a few references to literary figures and works in the novel other than the religious works like William Blake, Keats, Little Red Riding Hood, 'Beauty and the Beast' and Jane Eyre which also carries the traces of evangelicalism (Stockton, 1994, p. 116).

In evangelical society, women have an important and influential place. They are regarded as domestic leaders although neglected and underrated outside this sphere. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, women in this society took a feminist standpoint by claiming themselves a place in religious activities outside the house and created some religious organisations run by women. Thanks to their struggle for including themselves in such social activities, women are regarded as 'reformers' and their changing role in their society is expressed as

follows:

[W]omen's moral and spiritual superiority fostered the gradual expansion of their public roles as well. Women constituted more than half of church members and the churches were one of the first public forum in which they were permitted to organize. During this era, the vast majority of women's organizations were church societies. In these women sought to extend their roles as promoters of religion and virtue. During this time when missionary movement reached its peak, women were the mainstays of local support. (Marsden, 1991, p. 26)

As the quotation above reveals, they have gradually achieved a more active role outside of their domestic lives and gain power. Their influence has been to such an extent that they have even managed to shape evangelical churches (Cochran, 2005, p. 9). Their influential power in evangelical society is reflected in the novel, as well: "The women in our church were strong and organised. If you want to talk in terms of power I had enough to keep Mussolini happy" (Winterson, 1985, p. 124). Hence, they are even contrasted to the Italian dictator Mussolini in terms of their authority and power within their circles.

There are important implications to dangerous nature of the politics of Evangelical Church: "It is not possible to change anything until you understand the substance you wish to change ... and to change something you do not understand is the true nature of evil" (Winterson, 1985, p. 141). Jeanette makes many references to the strict and intolerant attitudes of the church towards the people that are outside its norms and its endeavour to either exclude or convert the so called anomalous people. This is implied both through the real events that take place in her life and through the myths she makes up, even the most recurrent figure, oranges, is used as a means to convey this monopolizing and standardizing attitudes of the church. The absolute power of the church derives from its success in naming things. In the novel, Jeanette expresses this clearly in one of the mythic stories about wizards with a reference to Bible: "Naming meant power. Adam has named the animals and the animals came at his call" (Winterson, 1985, p. 142). In the same way with Adam, the church names people; establishes stereotypes of them in order to exercise authority over them. In this way, it determines the boundaries of everything: people's behaviours, preferences, public or private relationships. It imposes a world of binary oppositions onto people and achieves this to a great extent. For example, it achieves to regulate human relations in the society by marking some people as respectable and faithful like Jeanette's mother and Mrs. White and condemning others as heretic and dishonourable like Ida and later on Jeanette.

However, the church cannot become totally successful. Its potential failure is foreshadowed in the end by Jeanette's mother's accepting her without further questioning about her sexual preferences and her recognition of pineapple as a fruit in addition to oranges: "'After all', said my mother philosophically, oranges are not the only fruit'" (Winterson, 1985, p. 172).

In the novel, Winterson, through the protagonist Jeanette, apparently takes a critical approach to evangelical society and often makes references to its hypocritical aspects. It is not evangelicalism that she blames but the way people understand and practice it in the society. For example, Jeanette, a very devoted believer at first, starts to question the understanding of perfection in their community during a sermon because the man describes perfection as 'flawlessness'. He says "[p]erfection, the man said, was a thing to aspire to. It was the condition of the Godhead, it was the condition of the man before the Fall" (Winterson, 1985, p. 64). This is Jeanette's, in her own words: 'the first theological disagreement'. Just as she is listening to his speech, she switches her memory of the sermon with a mythic story about a prince who is searching for a perfect woman to his bride. The prince thinks that he has found the perfect woman but she teaches him that perfectness is actually not flawlessness: "the search for perfection, she told him, was in fact the search for balance, for harmony. And she showed him Libra, the scales, and Pisces, the fish, and last of all put out her two hands. 'Here is the clue,' she said. 'Here in this first and perfect balance'" (Winterson, 1985, p. 64). The honesty and sincerity of the evangelical society are also questioned again through the mother. For example, although her mother is seemed to be a devoted member of the church, she is not honest and sincere most of the time: she disregards Jeanette's desire to meet her biologic mother; she and one of her religious friends Mrs. White eavesdrop on their neighbours; she keeps a wine glass in the house despite her strong dislike of alcohol; she ignores Jeanette to such an extent that she even cannot realize her temporary deafness because she is very busy with some religious activities and organizations; finally there are corruptions and adultery within the community. Jeanette's mother's most obvious and disappointing lie for Jeanette is her changing the ending of Jane Eyre. There are also some facts her mother hides from her like the woman whose photograph disappeared in their album which is called 'Old Flames'. This event implies that in the past her mother also had lesbian inclinations or even relationships. Hence, she is hypocrisy is not only about her actions but also about her feelings. She denies and represses her feelings. This denial and hypocrisy is more apparent in Miss Jewsbury as she has a sexual relationship with Jeanette but still she hides her preferences from other people and pretends to have heterosexual desires.

In the novel, Winterson utilizes myths or mythic stories, in addition to Jeanette's daily life stories, in order to explain the importance and true nature of some abstract things such as faith, love, loyalty, and honesty. Evangelical society has an antagonistic attitude towards myths. They do not favour imagination much. Therefore, they have a traditional prejudice against myths. In evangelical belief system "[m]yth was a scare word, a term of denigration, or accusation" (Dorrien, 1998, p. 128). When Winterson's critical approach towards the practices of evangelical society taken into consideration, it can be assumed that her preference for mythic stories is a reaction to their avoidance of mythic stories and their censorship on imagination.

There are some references which associate some economical issues to the evangelical society. For example, there are implications of capitalism which is brought to mind through two stores in the novel: Maxi Ball's and Marks and Spencers. Although the former is a cheaper place, Jeanette's mother does not shop from there for the fear that she might be seen there: "The Maxi Ball owned a warehouse, his clothes were cheap, but they didn't last, and they smelt of industrial glue. The desperate, the careless, the poorest, vied with one another on a Saturday morning to pick up what they could, and haggle over the price. My mother would rather not eat than be seen at Maxi Ball's" (Winterson, 1985, p. 5). Her mother's attitude is an explicit example of capitalist understanding. The latter store stands for capitalism and relatively well off people, such as Mrs. Clifton, do their shopping from there (Winterson, 1985, p. 81). In addition to capitalism, Winterson also makes a reference to imperialism and its economic gains: "Knowing what to believe had its advantages. It built an empire and kept people where they belonged, in the bright realm of the wallet" (Winterson, 1985, p. 93). Here, it is implied that people take a pragmatist approach even in what they believe; that is they may pretend to believe in things that they normally do not for the sake of some gains, and eventually they may make profit out of it. It may be considered as a reference to the British Empire and its means in the way of success.

Politics in the lives of evangelical society is another important matter referred to in the novel. For example, Doreen, a regular visitor of the church, is also introduced as a member of the Labour party and it is emphasized that she supports equality (Winterson, 1985, p. 75). The references to labour party and capitalism connote socialism inevitably. When it is considered that both socialism and evangelicalism have come into existence as a reaction to the existing set of systems and beliefs, it is not surprising for Winterson to bring them together while questioning the way these ideologies ended up in practice. In this respect, the novel deals with the idea of utopia as it criticizes the existing situation in the society. It offers a utopian city through one of the mythic stories:

The villagers were simple and kind, not questioning the world. They didn't expect Winnet to talk very much. Winnet wanted to talk ... she wanted to talk about the nature of the world, why it was there at all, and what they were all doing on it. Yet at the same time she knew her old world had much in it that was wrong. If she talked about it, good and bad, they would think her mad, and then she would have no one. She had to pretend she was just like them ... Winnet had heard that there was a beautiful city, a long way off, with buildings that ran up to sky. It was an ancient city guarded by tigers. No one in her village had been there, but all of them knew about it, and most held it in awe. The city dwellers didn't sow or toil, they thought about the world. (Winterson, 1985, p. 153)

The above quotation clearly exhibits Jeanette's own situation in her society. As a lesbian, she feels different and does not fit into her society. They regard and treat her as if she were a creature or the embodiment of demon on earth. She has revolutionary and idealistic views like the freedom of speech, emotions, and thoughts and rebels against her society leaving them behind. However, in the end she returns to her mother and the society which condemns her: she does not express her ideals out loud to her mother; her mother does not question and try to 'convert' her any longer. Therefore, the ideal situation: their being able to discuss everything together is still far away, yet there are improvements. The developments do not take place only in spiritual level; it is also displayed that there are amazing technological advances which pave up the way for globalization: "now she regularly spoke to Christians all over the England, as well as listening to the radio. Already, there were plans of a meeting, and a newsletter for electronic believers" (Winterson, 1985, p. 173).

To sum up, the novel portrays the hypocritical aspects of evangelical society but through them makes many references to significant worldwide issues and ideologies such as feminism, socialism, capitalism and globalism. Hence, it is not a mere reflection of that society; it is actually a strong criticism of the wrong practices, prejudices, and stereotypes of it. Moreover, it is a successful illustration of how ideologies shape people's mind and how this influence is experienced in daily lives.

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