DESIRING THE MOTHER: A PSYCHOLOGICAL READING OF FEMALE IDENTITY AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN JEANETTE WINTERSON'S 'ORANGES ARE NOT THE ONLY FRUIT'

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ABSTRACT

This paper embarks on a comprehensive psychological exploration of desire, identity formation, and homosexuality within Jeannette Winterson's bildungsroman *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Drawing upon the foundational insights of Luce Irigaray's essay "Body against Body: In Relation to The Mother," this analysis offers a lens through which to scrutinize the intricate interplay of these themes. Beyond Irigaray, the essay incorporates the distinct theoretical contributions of some other feminist writers such as Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler.

Irigaray's thought-provoking insights into the primal connection to the mother via the umbilical cord, and the subsequent emergence of the father's influence upon its severance, provide a rich framework for understanding the novel's themes. The umbilical scar, an indelible wound, symbolizes an insatiable desire for the mother, one that is persistently moderated and controlled by societal structures, embodied by the Law of the Father. This control weaves a complex tapestry of anxiety and disgust into female sexuality as the longing for the mother is suppressed. These theoretical constructs are meticulously mapped onto the narrative canvas of the novel wherein the protagonist's yearning for her biological mother remains submerged in her unconsciousness. In stark contrast, her adopted mother dismisses the real mother as a mere "carrying case." As the essay unravels, it becomes evident that Jeanette's repressed desire for the mother eventually manifests as homosexual desire, a desire harshly censured by the representatives of the societal Father.

At the core of this analysis lies the central argument that Jeanette's journey towards homosexuality is catalyzed by her detachment from her real mother. Her adopted mother emerges as a symbol of homophobian religious society that together with the other church members, predominantly employs symbolic language (in contrast to semiotic, as distinguished by Kristeva). This culminates in Jeanette's alienation and marginalization within the confines of such a patriarchal society, solely due to her homosexuality. Employing various feminist psychoanalytical theories, the essay will offer profound insights into the intricacies of desire, identity, and societal oppression, particularly as they pertain to female homosexuality in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.*

Keywords: Jeanette Winterson, Homosexuality, Desire, sexual identity

1. Introduction

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit is a semi-autobiographical novel penned by British author Jeannette Winterson. First published in 1985, this literary work traverses the terrain of Jeanette's childhood and adolescence, narrating her upbringing in a strict Pentecostal religious household in a small English town. In this novel, readers are introduced to the female protagonist, also named Jeanette, who grapples with the fervent religiosity of her adoptive mother, the eccentricities of the church, and her own emerging realization of her lesbian identity. The narrative unfolds as a poignant exploration of the clash between personal authenticity and societal expectations, as well as the tension between religious doctrine and individual autonomy. The protagonist's relationship with her adoptive mother and they way it changes as she grows up and develops her genuine identity is at the center of the novel. Winterson's novel, stands as a literary testament to the complexities of identity, desire, and societal constraints. With its origins rooted in the author's own life, this bildungsroman provides a unique canvas upon which the interplay of these themes unfolds. In this paper, we embark on a multidimensional exploration of the novel, utilizing the perspectives of notable French psychological feminists, including Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler. Our aim is to scrutinize the intricate relationships between desiring mother, identity formation, and homosexuality within the narrative, ultimately shedding light on the profound implications of these themes.

Our aim is twofold: first, to illuminate the profound impact of familial and societal influences on the protagonist, Jeanette, and her journey towards embracing her homosexuality; and second, to shed light on the psychological dimensions of these themes within the context of gender identity and societal norms. Through this multidimensional analysis, we aspire to unravel the intricate tapestry of desire, identity, and societal oppression within *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.*

2. The Complex Mother-Daughter Relationship

At the core of the novel, the unusual and often tumultous relationship betweem Jeanatte and her adoptive mother is clearly depicted; This is a relationship which is marked not by maternal warmth, but by religious dogma and rigidity. From the outset, it becomes evident that Jeanette's mother's motivations for motherhood stem from religious ideologies rather than affection. Her primary objective is to "dedicate her [Jeanette] to the Lord," (pp.6, 56, 66) and in this religious fervor, Jeanette's upbringing finds its foundation. Jeanette's mother's religiosity is all-encompassing, permeating every aspect of their lives. It results in a household where flexibility is nonexistent, and every decision, every moment is guided by the tenets of faith. In this rigid environment, Jeanette is nurtured, or perhaps, molded, not with the tenderness of maternal love, but under the unyielding rule of religious doctrine. One of the most striking aspects of their relationship is the palpable absence of physical affection. Jeanette makes it clear that her mother's touch is seldom gentle, and they "never usually touched except in anger" (p.76). The

mother is so preocupied with religion that when the chid cried for a week, she just prayed and "stabbed the demons", not even "a jolt beneath the hip bone" (p.6). This absence of motherly affection is a stark contrast to the nurturing, maternal love that one might expect in a mother-daughter relationship. Jeanette's mother's preoccupation with her missionary work further exacerbates the neglect Jeanette experiences. When faced with health challenges, it is Elsie, not her mother, who stands by her side in the hospital (p.18-21). Even upon her release, Jeanette's mother's religious commitments take precedence over her daughter's well-being. This physical and emotional neglect is a recurring theme in their relationship. Jeanette feels the lack of mothely affection, and the moment she realizes that the mother is not her real mother and she has in fact been adopted inaugurates the protagonist's unconscious yearning for her biological mother.

3. **Irigaray's Framework: Primal Connection to the Mother**

As we delve into the depths of this narrative, Luce Irigaray's profound insights on women and madness in her essay "Body against Body: In relation to the Mother" become invaluable tools for comprehending Jeanette's journey. Irigaray's assertion that the prohibition of mother desire is perpetuated by the Law of the Father, deeply intertwined with religious dimensions, finds poignant echoes in the novel's portrayal of the adoptive mother's actions. As Irigaray argues, "the relation to the mother is a mad desire, because it is the 'dark continent'" (p.10), a realm veiled in enigmatic obscurity, evoking images of night and hell. This portrayal underscores the intensity and complexity of the desire that Jeanette grapples with, and its unsettling, transformative power. To navigate the intricacies of desire within the novel and its prohibition, we turn to Lacan's three orders of the human psyche: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. (Habib p.589). It is within the realm of the Symbolic, governed by language and societal norms, that Irigaray's arguments come into sharp focus. Here, she posits that mother desire is systematically suppressed and censored by the Law of the Father. Mirroring Irigaray's conceptualization within the novel, we see all fathers, whether biological or figurative, assert their authority to censure and repress the mother's desire. This suppression is not merely an imposition of control; it is bound up with notions of goodness, virtue, and holiness, all of which become entangled in the web of religious zealotry. One poignant instance in the novel is when Jeanette's biological mother appears at their doorstep. In this moment, the adoptive mother, more a Father disguised in the mother's role, adamantly rejects the biological mother's presence. She reduces the biological mother to the dismissive label of "a carrying case" (p.75), denying Jeanette the opportunity to see her. This moment encapsulates the essence of the prohibition of maternal desire- an imposition of control that reverberates with the echoes of Lacanian symbolic law and religious righteousness. It is within this poignant momery of the "awful occation" (p.74), and the prohibition of any "corps-a-corps" with the mother (Irigaray p.13) that we witness the imposition of patriarchal power, the repression of maternal desire, and the consequent effects on Jeanette's burgeoning identity.

Luce Irigaray's discourse on the genital drive and the primal link to the mother offers a unique perspective on the intricate interplay of desire, identity, and societal norms within the narrative of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Irigaray's assertion that without paternal intervention, there exists a perilous risk of fusion, even death, stemming from the uncomfortably close link to the original maternal matrix (p.14) sets the stage for our analysis. Irigaray's exploration of the "primal link between the child and the mother" via the umbilical cord unveils a potential danger lurking within the depths of this connection (p.14). The risk of fusion, so intimately tied to the maternal womb, raises the specter of an identity subsumed by the maternal presence. It is in this precarious moment that Irigaray introduces the concept of paternal intervention as a necessary and deliberate act to sever this bond. The man father, according to Irigaray, plays a pivotal role in this narrative. His intervention becomes the means to replace the womb with the matrix of language. It is through this symbolic act that the child transitions from the maternal realm to the domain of language, culture, and societal norms. In doing so, the man-father serves as the gatekeeper of language, privilege, and identity. Irigaray's assertion that the empire of language privileges the male sex to the point of confusing it with the entirety of the human race (p.14) mirrors the narrative in the novel. Within the novel, the patriarchal religious society, embodied by Jeanette's adoptive mother, wields language as a tool of control. It is a language that perpetuates male dominance and suppresses alternative narratives, particularly those stemming from maternal desire.

4. **Restricting Symbolic language Versus Subverive Semiotic**

As it was already mentioned, Jeanette's adoptive mother raises Jeanette withing the realm of Laguage or Lacan's symbolic order (Habib p.589). Within the World of language, "the world of predefined social roles and gender differences" (p.589) Jeanette is exposed mostly to biblical language and learning. Education, a cornerstone of personal growth and identity formation, becomes a tool wielded by Jeanette's mother to perpetuate her religious worldview. She is resolute in her determination to limit Jeanette's education solely to religious teachings, seeking to maintain complete control over her intellectual development. This restrictive approach reflects not only a rigid adherence to religious principles but also a desire to mold Jeanette in her own image. When she receieves a letter stating that she has to send Jeanette to school, which she calls "the Breading Ground", Jeanette gets excited and sees this as an oppotunity to free herself from the suffocating limitations. (p.13) The suffering Jeanette endures at school because of her preoccupation with religion (p.30) which marginalizes her among her classmates, and her mother's indifference to her feelings germinates the seed of hatred towards her adoptive mother within Jeanette. This feeling intensifies later when her mother buys her a giant pink mac. This oversized and garish mac, chosen by her mother, becomes a physical representation of the constraints placed upon Jeanette. "I was feeling trapped" (p.58) is what Jeanette says after wearing it, which parallels Judith Butler's description of forcing one "into the straitjacket of the prevailing" social norms (Leitch p.2373), limiting one's ability to construct their own

identity freely. “I hated her” (p.58) is the next thing Jeanette says, and it is in this moment of sartorial imposition that Jeanette begins to harbor resentment towards her mother.

Although Jeanette's mother forces her into the symbolic language of the Law of the Father and teaches and warns her about "unnatural passions" of homosexuality (pp.4,67,70), Jeanette finds solace in the sanctuary of literary language. In these moments, her imagination takes flight, birthing stories that are interspersed into the main plot of her own narrative. These stories are imbued with the essence of folklore and myth, at times even embracing the lyricism of poetry:

“Katy sat in a deckchair and Katy looked at the sun

Katy ate an ice-cream and Katy looked like fun.” (p.90)

Julia Kristeva's notion of irrational system of semiotic language, maternally connected (semiotic-chora) and subversive to the Law of the Father, finds a resonance here (Selen pp.132-134). By subverting the law of the father, Jeanetter can become Winnet (pp.105-120), and her mother who teaches missionary can be replaced by a father who teaches the rules of magic. This subversion is mirrored in Jeanette's rebellion within the church, where she boldly stands up for her sexual rights and desires, confronting figures like Pastor Finch and her adoptive mother:

> He turned to me.
>
> `I love her.'
>
> `Then you do not love the Lord.'
>
> `Yes, I love both of them.'
>
> `You cannot.'
>
> `I do, I do, let me go.' (p.79)

While this act of defiance inevitably leads to alienation within her society, Jeanette's unwavering determination to challenge societal norms and fight for her rights shines as a testament to her resilience and unwavering spirit.

The adoptive mother's subjugation to the pastors is undeniable; in their eyes, whatever they decree is regarded as irrefutable truth. So when Pastor Finch issues a distressing command: “don't let her out of this room, and don't feed her” for a harrowing three days (p.81), the adoptive mother complies without hesitation, reflecting her unwavering obedience to the pastors' dictates. Amidst this religious fervor, Jeanette's longing for her real mother, for a motherly embrace and affection, intensifies exponentially. The absence of such maternal warmth leaves a void within her that, as Luce Irigaray suggests, inexorably leads towards a form of madness. This psychological turmoil is poignantly manifested in Jeanette's hallucination of the “orange demon” (p. 87). In those moments, she candidly articulates her descent into illness, affirming

the deep psychological suffering she endures: “I’m going to die” (p.88) This hallucinatory episode stands as a haunting testament to the profound psychological toll exacted upon her by the intersection of maternal absence, religious zealotry, and societal repression.

5. **Infantile Sexuality and Jeanette's Coping Mechanism**

While struggling to recover from temporary madness and establish her sexual identity, Jeanette states: "I started to feel ill again, so I took off my socks and pushed my toes into my mouth for comfort," (p. 83). Relateing this to Freud's theories of infantile sexuality, we can argue that this behavior exhibits parallels to the oral phase of psychosexual development, where individuals seek satisfaction and comfort through oral activities. Jeanette's act can be viewed as a form of self-soothing, reminiscent of infantile behaviors associated with the mouth. It also reflects a regressive tendency, suggesting that in moments of psychological distress, she may unconsciously revert to earlier developmental stages as a means of coping. This connection between Jeanette's psychological challenges and Freud's theories offers insight into her complex inner world and how she navigates the tumultuous experiences of her upbringing.

Finally Jeanette is able to overcome this anxiety and phychological distress by finding solace in the tender bosom of a female, to sooth the pain made by her detachment from her real mother. Although she faces alienation and marginalization due to her homosexuality within the patriarchal society, and in spite of the restrictions of her adoptive mother who symbolizes a homophobian religious society, she succeeds in recovering from identity crisis by avoiding what Judith Butler calls “exclusionary gender norms” and fixed identities (Leitch 2372). By discovering her real self and personal identity, she defies socially produced gender identity by resorting to Butler’s challenging “resignification” (Leitch 2373). Finally, Butler insists that “nothing is natural, including sexual identity and sexual desire”. Jeanette succeeds in subverting her adoptive mother’s binary opposition of natural/ unnatural passions. In the end of her essay, Irigaray says: “since the first body we as women had to relate to was a woman’s body and our first love is the love of the mother, women always have an ancient and primary relationship to what is called homosexuality” (p.20). This is exactly what happens to the protagonist of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.*

6. **Conclusion**

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit by Jeannette Winterson provides a profound exploration of desire, identity, and homosexuality. The complex mother-daughter relationship between Jeanette and her adoptive mother forms the heart of the narrative, portraying the stifling influence of religion and the absence of maternal affection. Despite societal constraints, Jeanette embarks on a journey of self-discovery and rebellion, defying exclusionary gender norms and embracing her true self. In this paper, we tried to show how Jeanette’s narrative echoes Irigaray's assertion of women's ancient and primary relationship with homosexuality. Irigaray's framework highlights the societal control over female desire and identity through the Law of

the Father, resulting in anxiety and disgust in female sexuality. Within the story, Jeanette navigates between symbolic and semiotic languages, as distingushed by Kristeva, seeking autonomy and identity through imaginative storytelling. Using the insights of feminist theorists like Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler, we had a closer look at how Jeanette transcends societal constraints and embraces her true self. Ultimately, "Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit" celebrates the resilience of the human spirit in the face of societal oppression, affirming the fluidity and complexity of sexual and gender identities.

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