

Body and Essence: Gender as camouflage in Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Passion*

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*"Of all the objects in the world, the human body has a peculiar status:
it is not only possessed by the person who has it,
it also possesses and constitutes him. [...] The body is the medium of experience and the instrument of action.
Through its actions we shape and organize our experiences
and distinguish our perceptions of the outside world
from the sensations that arrive within the body itself."*

– Jonathan Miller, *The Body in Question*

Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* that "our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity and femininity" (166). Bodies are controlled, supervised, and continuously molded to fit within the constraints of heterosexuality. Gender is considered as the natural part of the body. A male body behaves differently from female body. The approved roles, behaviours, actions, and features that are considered right for male and female bodies are called gender roles: masculine for males and feminine for females. While the ideals of physical beauty and size keep on changing, the notions of masculinity and femininity are constant. Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; whereas women are cast as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive (Tyson 85). Body adhering to the prevalent social and cultural norms of masculine and feminine is regarded as an ideal body. Hence, an ideal female is feminine i.e. when outer appearance (slim and curvy body for females; strong and muscled for males) matches the inner nature (emotionality, submissiveness, and dependency as female features; rationality, authority, and boldness as male). Feminist critics have challenged this natural link between sex and gender. Delphy, a French materialist feminist, quotes Ann Oakley's following definition from *Sex, Gender and Society* published in 1972, to clear the differences:

'Sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function.
'Gender', however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and feminine.' (qtd. in Delphy 33).

Though bodies are categorized according to masculine and feminine roles but these gender roles are not natural essences of a body but are socially defined roles and cultural constructs only to regulate people's behavior. Jeanette Winterson aims at deconstructing the concept of gender in her novels. Her novels constantly question the conjunction of femininity, masculinity, and body. The present paper

aims at analyzing Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Passion*¹ (1987) with Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performativity. I posit that characters in the novel exhibit features outside the accepted notions of gender and hence gender is not a natural essence of body but a cultural construct.

Judith Butler developed her theories on feminism in 1990, 1993, and 2004. Collapsing the sex/gender distinction, Butler argues that there is no sex that is not always already gender. All bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no "natural body" that pre-exists its cultural inscription. This seems to point towards the conclusion that gender is not something one *is*, it is something one *does*, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a "doing" rather than a "being" (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25). Butler elaborates this idea in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." Butler like Foucault, views discourse as productive of the identities they appear to be describing. When a baby is born and the midwife announces "It's a girl" she is not reporting new matter but participates in a practice that constitutes that matter. The effect of repetition of acts of this kind is to make it appear that there are two distinct natures, male and female and two distinct genders, masculine and feminine. Gender and feminist critics have questioned the concept that sex is nature and gender is a direct copy of sex. Gender is a cultural construct and it "is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, x). Women are counted as inferior on the basis of biological differences between the sexes and this is considered a part of our unchanging essence as men and women. If one possesses a female body, one is expected to display feminine features and if one possesses a male body, one is expected to display masculine characteristics. Instead of being an authentic representation of sexed bodies, gender is "the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place" (Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 42). If a body does not exhibit the prescribed gendered behavior, it is excluded from the category of normal and is, thus, marginalized. Hence femininity is "not the product of choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, and punishment" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 232). Since the gender is fundamentally socially constructed, the gendered behavior is the performance rather than the true representation of one's natural essences. Gender norms are imposed on bodies to maintain the apparent coherence of gender dichotomy. Hence, 'femininity' and 'masculinity' become, broadly, bodily styles which our bodies incorporate to yield a gendered subjectivity.

Jeanette Winterson's fiction centering gender identity problematization, pursues an ontological examination of hegemonic belief systems with an explicit feminist awareness. She belongs to the third phase of feminist writers who "turn self-consciously and deliberately to the parodic and the fantastic, to masquerade and monstrosity" (Waugh 192). Her fiction deconstructs the hegemonic patriarchal discourse and subverts it by creating characters whose gender identity is vague, bisexuals/lesbians or grotesque; in one word, who are misfits. Further, she debunks and subverts the traditional masculine and feminine gender roles. Winterson's novels "install a particular lesbian narrative space at the centre" leading to the deconstruction of heterosexuality as norm (Moore 122).

The Passion is an overtly metafictional novel that rewrites the story of rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte from the point of view of two traditionally marginalized and silenced individuals, a French soldier-cook and a bisexual woman. Characters, in this novel, very well demonstrate what Frye called, the pervasiveness of the "Parasitism of the male on the female" (409):

When our feminist acts or practices have an aspect of separation, we see assuming

power by controlling access and simultaneously by under taking definition ... and definition is another face of power ... the powerful normally determine what is said and sayable. (412)

Reversing pivotal characters' expected gender roles and identities, the novel deconstructs the binary² opposition between masculine and feminine. As Butler notes, "the body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm and expose realities to which we thought we are confined as open to transformation" (*Undoing Gender*, 215). Body, as the site of exploitation, is the place in which the subversion lies as well. Winterson subverts the traditional gender roles – Henri, male character, exhibits feminine traits while Villanelle, female character, is attributed masculine qualities.

Subversion of binary oppositions

Gender theory explores "the pitfalls of gender assignment. Whether that assignment is essential, constructed or performance" (Garber 239). Winterson clearly subverts the traditional notion, men for the field, women for the hearth, and shows that gender roles are only performances. Henri, a male, is a cook hence he belongs to the domestic/private sphere whereas Villanelle, a female, works in a casino, public sphere. Henri lacks physical strength. He dreamt of being a drummer in the army but he is enrolled as a cook. He relates: "The recruiting officer gave me a walnut and asked if I could crack it between finger and thumb. I could not and he laughed and said a drummer must have strong hands" (Winterson 5). Instead, he has been recruited as a neck-wringer but only of chickens. Then he becomes Napoleon's cook, which shows Henri in the domestic sphere. Villanelle, in contrast, is shown in the public sphere as a woman who works in casinos and likes roaming about on the streets, or rather the canals, of Venice, and like Henri, she challenges the accepted gender constructions. She is a "masculine woman": "I walked the streets, rowed circles around Venice, woke up in the middle of the night with my covers in impossible knots and my muscles rigid [...] I ate when food was put in front of me and slept when my body was throbbing with exhaustion" (102). Villanelle's mother too performs masculine duties. She "cleaned the boat and sold fish and brought up ... children" (50). She is the breadwinner of family, a role typically associated with man, proving the binary oppositions as mere traditions and not rationally defined phenomenon. Inventor's wife provides for her husband who remains busy in inventing and reinventing to make people happy. Gender is not an essence of body but Genders ... are only produced as the true effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136). Clothing is a popular marker of gender. However, Villanelle's cross-dressing deconstructs gender boundaries. Cross-dressing leaves her gender in ambiguity. Villanelle wears male clothes while working in casinos as a part of her job but she continues dressing as a man in her private life as well, sometimes, however, "[she] took to working double shifts at the Casino, dressing as a woman in the afternoon and a young man in the evenings" (Winterson 102). Therefore, cross-dressing – which she deliberately pursues to confuse her gender – questions the whole fixity of the binary between male and female.

Subversion of rational/emotional binary

"The inner truth of gender is a fabrication" which is "instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies" (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136), men and women may not necessarily exhibit prescribed gender roles. Gender roles attach rationality and practicality to males while women are viewed as emotional, incapable of reason. Henri displays a sensitive nature. He also proves to be different from the rest of the army people when he is especially sensitive to the soldiers' maltreatment of women. In the brothel scene, when the soldiers dehumanize the women, it is Henri who feels the outrage. Henri depicts the

miserable condition of army prostitutes as these are “runaways, strays, younger daughters of too-large families, servant girls who... were expected to service as many men as asked them day or night. One woman I met crawling home after an officer’s party said she’d lost count at thirty nine” (Winterson 38). Henri’s fondness for his mother is palpable from the very beginning and it can be seen as a reason for his feminized character. When he left his home, Claude, his father, wept but his mother stayed strong. His echoing cry, “I was homesick from the start. I missed my mother” (6), again points to the feminized aspect of Henri. Hence, Henri’s nature is in total contrast to masculine rationality.

Subversion of Feminine Beauty Ideals

Villanelle’s body undermines the patriarchal definitions of female body. She is born with webbed feet. In Venice, boatmen are born with webbed feet which, as rumoured, enable them to walk on water. Villanelle, as a girl, is born with these masculine webbed feet, “My feet were webbed. There never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen” (51). When she is born, they immediately want to “cut off the offending parts straight away” (52), but they are well able to stand firm against the knife; and as a result, Villanelle’s queer body remains hidden in her boots and becomes a means of blurring gender identity in the novel which patriarchy defines in terms of body. In this respect, her masculine body works like her cross-dressing: Villanelle enters the male domain because of a genetic inheritance. The oddity of webbed feet can remain hidden for years beneath boots, but there is no mistaking the implications: the search for clear-cut distinctions where gender is concerned is futile (Doan 148). Webbed feet make Villanelle distinct from other women by showing her as different from the conventional notions of femininity. Standing for masculine quality, her webbed feet are “the symbol of the phallus. In spite of her being a woman, Villanelle is also in possession of a distinctively masculine trait in the novel” (Asensio Arostegui 13).

Resistance to Marriage

‘Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to a woman’ is a well known statement and an accepted truth. It is accepted as a fulfilling relationship. However, female characters in the novel loathe being married. For them marriage is no heaven. It actually “requires that the heroine’s transference of dependency (from father to lover) be not only sexual but also material. Beneath romantic justifications of ‘love’ lurk actual historical practices which “reduce women to marketable commodities” (Rowe 245). Women characters set an example by transgressing the traditionally-set boundaries. Both Henri’s mother and Villanelle deconstruct patriarchy’s marriage myths. They turn mother/wife, father/husband categories upside down. Opposite to expected passive nature, both these women are assertive in nature. Henri’s mother wanted to be a nun but she was forcibly married off by her father. Being a strong woman, and “believe(ing) in the power of the Virgin,” she leaves home in order to resist this oppression (Winterson 10). She feels that it’s better to burn than to marry. Eventually, she does marry Claude but only out of social necessity. Although Villanelle gets pregnant, she refuses the basic structure of patriarchal society, ‘a happy family,’ by remaining a single mother. “She does not reject sexual pleasure nor does she renounce the experience of motherhood” as she prefers mother-daughter bond over marriage, she “manages to maintain her independence” (Asensio Arostegui 16).

Subversion of Heterosexuality as a Norm

Heterosexuality is regarded as the normative discourse. However, as Butler suggests gender is a matter of bodily style and performance and there is no natural link between gender and bodily shape, then the alignment between anatomical shape and gendered performance is open to destabilization and change. For Butler homosexual practices are one way of destabilizing the normative links of gender

and heterosexuality. Villanelle has passionate lesbian relationship with “Queen of Spades.” Nevertheless she takes “pleasure with both men and women” (Winterson 59-60). Hence she deconstructs the heterosexual desire as normal nature of body. “The female stands ... as a positive, assertive and powerful entity” ready to transgress the boundaries to find happiness and fulfillment (Gonzales 285).

Jeanette Winterson perceives body as a space to explore one’s unique individual identity, to experience pleasure, and to establish bonds with others. She lays bare the notion of femininity, and she is able to show that gender norms as masculine and feminine are only discursive practices and are not natural part of a male and female body. While male and female is the sex of a body, masculine and feminine are the characteristics that a body is expected to display. When a body fails to comply with these social and cultural constructs, it is labeled as unacceptable. A male or female body has no inscribed roles. It is as a part of society that we learn to act and behave in a particular fashion, but body is not an object of social control. Hence masculine or feminine norms are only performative parts of a body and Henri, Villanelle, their mothers exemplify that gender is only a fabrication, an inscribed role, a performed part of body. A female may not always belong to the domestic sphere and a female can be strong and rational. On the other hand, a male can also work in domestic sphere and his body may not always be muscular, and a male can be emotional or weak. Similarly, heterosexuality is not always normal whereas homosexuality may open door to a loving and equal relationship between bodies.

END NOTES

¹References in the article are from 2001 print edition

²Helen Cixous explored the binary oppositions that exist between the terms male/female, self/other, and subject/object. Helen Cixous notes that women are always placed on the right side of binary opposition and is treated as an inferior, weak, emotional and pathetic dependent being. It treats man as centre and rational being. Hence these binary oppositions symbolize patriarchy’s control of women.

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