

Reading Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* as a Postmodernist Text

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Abstract: Jeanette Winterson's novels can always be studied from a postmodern perspective. Postmodernism, though a loosely-defined term, makes reference to a cultural, intellectual, or artistic condition which does not have a direct predominant hierarchy, and epitomizes extreme entanglement, discrepancy, uncertainty, diversity, and heterogeneity. In this sense, *The Passion* (1987) is written to deconstruct the various domineering cultural, social and moral conventions or constructed realities and norms of Western civilisation. Techniques of postmodernism – temporal and spatial distortions, gender roles, parody, pastiche, historiographic metafiction, irony – are often used by postmodernist writers in their works. This article aims to pinpoint that Winterson is resisting dominant ideologies and discourses in *The Passion*, and trying to reconstruct a free and alternative discourse in the same society through postmodernist techniques in the narrative of the novel.

Keywords: Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*, postmodern novel, historiographic metafiction, gender roles

INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism is generally defined as a response to, denial, and distribution of the elements of the modernist tendency which seem totalizing and delimiting to the postmodernist thinkers. In other words, to the postmodernist thinkers, the tendency of modernist thought implies a grand narrative or master code. The current understanding of postmodernism has begun with Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* (1984) in which he challenges the grand-narratives. In history at full length, metanarratives or master/grand narratives have been very influential tools in terms of forming an idea that claims that there is a bondage between society and science. These

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metanarratives, such as Marxism, liberal democracy, Christianity, Islamic fundamentalism, The Progress of Humans, or anthropocentrism are the very principles that have enabled the existence of a society and supported society's actions and perceptions of the future. They are the long-standing means by which human beings order their world. To Lyotard, the postmodern can be understood in terms of "incredulity towards metanarratives" (1984, xxiv).

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (Lyotard 1984, xxv)

Therefore, the postmodernist condition, as Lyotard defines it, is of disillusionment with such metanarratives because none of the systems can be all-inclusive; any attempt at enforcing universality will be violent and repressive, and will silence those who must, of necessity, be excluded from its vision. Lyotard claims that from its renunciation of the homogenizing and the totalitarian impulses of the Enlightenment's grand narratives, to its embracement of heterogeneity and local narratives, his version of postmodernism is always oppositional: "it is a fluid series of paralogical or contradictory strategies that resist classification, seeking to adopt a spectral form of discontent that counters and haunts all totalising projects without creating a new orthodoxy or organised party line" (qtd. in Snipp-Walmsley 1996, 412).

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces, are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. ... The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. (Lyotard 1984, xxv)

As highlighted above, the postmodern, according to Lyotard, seeks to "impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable," and the postmodern writer "invent[s] allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented." Accordingly, Chris Snipp-Walmsley underlines that "postmodernism is a site of conflict, negotiation, and debate [and] has

evolved into a wholesale relativism that has infringed upon all areas of knowledge and interest, leading to a wholesale scepticism about truth, ethics, value, and responsibility" (1996, 405). In this sense, one can argue that the term postmodern literature emerged as a reaction to both Enlightenment project and modernist literature.

THE PASSION AS A POSTMODERNIST TEXT

To begin with, Jeanette Winterson, in *The Passion* (1987), refuses the conventional ways of narration. As Helena Grice and Tim Woods comment, "Winterson's work may also be located within a tradition of British women writers who employ fantasy and the fabulous in their fictions, which also coincides with so many postmodernist stylistic interests" (1996, 6). Winterson questions the validity of conventional codes of narrative techniques and styles by bringing together magical realism, fantasy, history, and mythology in *The Passion*. In this matter, Judith Seaboyer's claims as follows:

The Passion gathers a heterogeneous mixture of stories within two intertwined narratives, and this together with an expressed bias literary sleight of hand results in a narrative ground that from the reader's perspective is unstable. Henri's journal of the Napoleonic Wars obsessively reworked, rewritten, and reread over a period of twenty years, is at once a bildungsroman and an elegy of exile. Villanelle is an oral account, perhaps as retold/reimagined by Henri. From story to story, history is juxtaposed with tales of goblins and of humans who have animal-like or superhuman attributes, gothic horror is interlaced with musings on love and war, and the whole narrative is repetitively illustrated with metaphorical reference from biblical and classical mythology. (1997, 495)

The Passion, as underlined in the lengthy quotation above, has two narrators; Villanelle and Henri. Winterson employs the double narrative technique in order to mingle two narratives in a natural way. Susana Onega notes that "In *The Passion* she [Winterson] has two, instead of one, internal narrators/characters who focus on the historical events from their own marginal perspectives" (1996, 300). Henri's narration is further problematized as he often claims that "I made up stories about mine. They were whatever I wanted them to be depending on my mood" (Winterson 1987, 11). Moreover, he contemplates on the idea of keeping a diary to grasp the "reality" in the present time and the emotions felt at the moment of his writing.

I started [keeping a diary] so that I wouldn't forget. So that in later life when I was prone to sit by the fire and look back, I'd have something clear and sure to set against my memory tricks. I told Domino [the midget of Bonaparte]; he said, 'The way you see it now is no more real than the way you will see it then.' I couldn't agree with him. (Winterson 1987, 28)

Domino claims that narrating the present is as difficult as narrating the past. In other words, perceiving the truth or the validity of "the present truth" is problematized by the dialogue between these two characters. For Domino, Henri's attempt to organise the incidents is bound to failure because his quest for grasping the meaning or freezing the present is merely impossible in a chaotic world where everything is in flux. As Domino highlights in the novel, "There is only now" (Winterson 1987, 29).

Echoing the ideas of poststructuralist theorists, Paul Sheehan attracts the attention to the power of language in creating a hyper-reality: "Because language is riven with figuration – a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms, it cannot represent the world with any degree of accuracy, let alone in the immediate, undistorted way that some theories of mind have claimed" (2004, 23). Sheehan asserts that language constructs human reality; that is, everything in the world, both spatial and temporal, as we understand them is linguistically structured. The world is a construction based on language. Although Henri tries to command the events around him through language by writing entries in his diary, he fails in his attempt, and at the end of the novel, Henri-the-narrator admits that he cannot control the events around him and the chaotic and monolithic nature of time, consisting of the past and the present as well as the future:

This year is gone I told myself. This year is slipping away and it will never turn. Domino's right, there is only now. Forget it. Forget it. You can't bring it back. You can't bring them back. [...] We cannot keep in mind too many things. There is only the present and nothing to remember (Winterson 1987, 42-3).

Henri's thoughts about temporality reveals that the conventional ways of communication such as written and oral modes of language do not enable him to configure and express the reality he is sensing. Thus, he understands the structured-ness of the world brought about by language. He admits that his attempts merely put forward the unrepresentable in presentation.

As a postmodern novel *The Passion*, furthermore, clearly displays fantastic images. Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, in his *The Fantastic* (1973), defines the fantastic as in the following quotation:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know...there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. [...] The laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. (Todorov 1973, 25)

Todorov associates the fantastic with the hesitation, or by laws unknown to us, and maintains that fantastic lasts as long as hesitation lasts. The feeling of hesitation is aroused in reader through fantastic images in *The Passion*. Every character in the novel has a fantastic feature that makes the reader hesitate to rely on them or not. For instance, Henri's friend Patrick has a telescopic eye. It is depicted in the novel that Patrick was a priest in Ireland before joining the French Army. But ironically, he uses his gift of seeing to satisfy his sexual desires. So the reader is left with the decision of whether or not believing the fantastic element in the story.

Villanelle's webbed feet can be considered as another use of fantastic element in the novel. By portraying a fantastic female character that is partly a human and partly an animal, Winterson further deconstructs the binaries and hierarchies about the gender and body issues in the dominant patriarchal discourse. Villanelle as a woman who has "male-body traits" and wears "male-clothes" is depicted as a direct threat to the culturally-created binaries, such as male-female, dominant-obedient, the central-the marginal, in the society. Her webbed feet, as reflected to the reader in the novel, help and enable Villanelle to disrupt and problematize the limitations of stable gender roles.

Winterson's concern in her postmodern novel is of the formulation of history and the individual/subject. She presupposes that both institutional history and the human being as a subject have largely been fabulised and constructed by the male-privileged, patriarchy-centred, or phallogentric narratives. History is what we make of the past in the present, or it is how we understand the past within a present perspective. Her novel, *The Passion*, clearly seeks to challenge the longstanding patriarchal and heterosexist/discriminatory discursive and philosophical practices by paving the path for a potentially rich and fruitful and inclusive attitude and approach.

Winterson continuously observes and cherishes the idea of displacement of the fixed subject from their central position in her fiction, which thus largely makes her processes of story a deeply political act. Her strategy of writing is to reformulate such narratives in order to open up and fabricate more inclusive cultural spaces, and in these spaces, it becomes possible to validate and reflect alternative performances. Moreover, frequently, though not always, she attends particularly to the process of creating new spaces that have the ability to communicate and celebrate homosexual identities and queer desires. That is why, according to Winterson, the term gender should be redefined in order to criticize and deconstruct gender roles in *The Passion*.

In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1997, 281) maintains that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. [...] It is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine”. This statement of Beauvoir is supported by Judith Butler who relies on and constructs her theory of gender upon such modern theorists’ ideas as Beauvoir, Foucault, Lacan, and Kristeva. According to Butler, subject is not easily granted but it is “a subject-in-process” that is built in the cultural matrix by the actions it carries out, therefore, she states that gender is “performative and, by definition, unnatural” (Butler 1994, 35). Therefore, Butler implies that because there is not necessarily a relationship between one’s gender and one’s sex, one can appear as a female in terms of body but lack characteristics conventionally regarded as the feminine. Thus, these terms – masculine and feminine – can be used interchangeably to describe a male or a female.

As Butler’s implications clearly point out the constructedness of gender, Winterson similarly takes gender as something which can be altered or de-constructed in her works. If these are culturally constructed views in essence, that is, if these male/female characterizations, expectations, and roles are formulated in terms of femininity/masculinity, then these terms can be easily subject to criticism, problematization and reconstruction. Winterson, accordingly, prefers to criticize the man-privileged systems and underlines how gender roles can be reconstructed in her novel.

In *The Passion*, as mentioned before, there are two narrators: Henri and Villanelle. Using one female and one male narrator facilitates and delivers the criticism of gender roles. In addition to this, both Villanelle and Henri readily transgress and blur the lines concerning

the boundaries of conventional gender roles by performing both of the roles. Kübra Baysal (2019, 181) states that “through gendered politics, patriarchal rules pervade in all fields of life and push women into periphery and passivity”. Winterson clearly criticizes the separation of gendered identities by depicting such characters as Henri and Villanelle. She subtly parodies the traditional gender roles. Winterson is quite aware of the gender roles that are ascribed to members of the society and she wants to revert this idea. Her characters are just the deconstructed versions of the women/men in real life. In patriarchal societies, the categorisation is simple: there are tough soldiers/men who are brave, heroic, muscular and absolutely heterosexual and on the other hand, there are beautiful, blonde women who are passive, submissive and chaste and definitely heterosexual. In such societies, these are the idealised gender role types for men and women which are emphasised by movies, fairy tales and even by governments.

Gender roles, according to Winterson, are also socially and culturally created standards. Firstly, these standards are deconstructed by the characterisation of Villanelle who explicitly does not reflect the stock representations of the idealised female characters. She is bisexual and web-footed which is one of the characteristics of the Venetian boatmen in the novel. She has a homosexual love affair with the queen of spades. Her queer traits and appearances free her from the limitations of longstanding gender roles, and by this means, she becomes a bold and assertive representative of Winterson's ideas. Villanelle is a strong mouthpiece of her writer concerning her ideas particularly on sexual politics. Moreover, Seaboyer underlines the importance of Villanelle as in the following: “The fluidity of Villanelle's gendered identity, as well as her body's freakish mixture of human and animal, makes it as difficult to define her” (Seaboyer 1997, 506). Unlike other women living in Venice, it is only Villanelle who can travel freely there in her boat, thanks to her masculine features, that is, her webbed feet in the context of the novel. As mentioned previously, having webbed feet is a masculine feature in Venice and due to their webbed feet, Venetian men can walk on the water while fishing. Villanelle in this sense challenges the traditional female stereotype formulated in the stories of “hetero-patriarchal” (Palmer 1996, 104) societies. Villanelle is mostly described as a woman of adventures who kills time outside at night. She is “a masculine female” as Butler (1999, 43) puts it. Villanelle, like

Euripides' Medea, uses the benefits of crossdressing and leads her extraordinary life working at a Casino in disguise of a woman at night.

As an opposition to Villanelle, furthermore, there is Henri who, as Paulina Palmer points out, proves to show the characteristics traditionally regarded as "feminine" (Palmer 1996, 105), such as sensitivity and a disliking for killing, and Henri is teased by his fellow soldiers for being unmanly. When he first joins Napoleon's army, he wants to be a drummer but ends up being a cook in the battle camp. Although the story is set in the Napoleonic Wars time-periods, paradoxically the male character is not a brave soldier. In the kitchen, "like a woman," he remains a passive observer. He is scared in the battlefield although he never literally fights in the battlefield because he is always in a kitchen tent. Winterson states that every role other than soldier and women are temporary ones but by employing a man like Henri, who can be considered to be "a feminine male," the author simply challenges or subverts the conventional gender roles.

Henri's mother is also another figure of subversion because of her brave and rebellious behaviour. Henri includes her mother's unusual experiences into his narration, and this displays another example of overturn of the conventional beliefs and codes. He talks about his mother's disobedience to her father and her reluctant marriage with Claude, Henri's father. Along with her disobedient behaviour and courage to leave home, Henri's mother is not as sensitive or hysterical as women who are expected to be so in patriarchal societies. Through such characters, Winterson manages to pinpoint the subversion of categorised gender roles.

Another manifestation of gender difference in the novel is related with the issue of space, which is also constructed to indicate the nature of gender in a society. Nilay Erdem Ayyıldız (2019, 57) asserts that "Patriarchal Victorianism constricted women and men to clear-cut separate spheres; women to the domestic sphere and men to the public one". Traditionally, kitchens are engaged by women to do some routine cooking and cleaning works. On the contrary, casinos are regarded as masculine places mostly occupied by men to entertain themselves by playing chance games. In *The Passion*, these two places are used to signify the opposite perspective to subvert the traditionally separated territories of the male and female. In other words, the reader sees a male in the kitchen and a female character in a casino, which can be called cross-placing the characters as well. Through this,

Winterson neutralizes the gender roles assigned to people by the patriarchally-driven systems.

It can be suggested that spatial re-organisations in the novel help Winterson explore, reflect and negate the man-centred mentality of the compartmentalized life for different sexes. Hence, in order to reverse gender roles, Henri and Villanelle's representations prove to be significant, through which what is implied is that the gender roles are decided and given by hetero-patriarchal systems and these gender-related appointments can be transgressed and altered.

Winterson's use of the fantastic is not only an intentional act to subvert binaries but she also aims at transcending "reality". On this issue, Derrida (1982, 37) puts forward that realities cannot define themselves as "centre" without reference to the "margin". Accordingly, Winterson denies such fixity and restraint to create a space for different lives. As a reaction to domineering "norms" of Western society, Winterson wants to depict the constructed nature of these laws, and she tries to create a space for alternative realities that problematize and negate the long-standing rules of the hetero-patriarchal societies. She simply deconstructs the term 'origin' and the 'margin' by subverting and even confusing their definitions. At the end of *The Passion*, "the marginalised/Villanelle" has metamorphosed to become the "origin/centre", and she eventually has her own free space in the community.

In addition to these, parody is employed in the novel as Winterson blurs the border between low and high culture. Although a priest is supposed to be quite a respectable man neither Patrick nor Henri's supervisor is a decent man who deserves to be designated as cultivated person. It seems that parody in Winterson's approach to the men of religion in *The Passion* is a method of critiquing the religion's male-privileged view point.

Moreover, Mikhail Bakhtin's term carnivalesque literature seems to have an impact on Winterson's novel. Bakhtin (1984, 219) claims that "carnivalesque literature paves the path for the imagination and thus enables freedom". Victoria Bilge Yılmaz (2019, 219) similarly argues that "Bakhtin's concept of carnival grew out of the medieval cultural carnival, which attempted to promote the ideals of freedom, pleasure, body, fertility, nature and which subjected human beings to the governance of absolute unity and harmony". In this fashion, the reader of *The Passion* is introduced with all kinds of representatives of a heterogeneous community such as an emperor, a soldier, a cook, a

prostitute, a lawyer, a farmer, etc. Therefore, the carnivalesque not only clears the path for the imagination but it also eliminates the borders between high and low cultures in the same community.

The Passion can also be regarded as a historiographic metafiction which denotes works of fiction that render and transform the actual events or figures from history into fiction. The focus in historiographic metafiction is on the possibility or impossibility of “representing” any historical event, factual or fictive. History is generally defined as the study or the branch of knowledge dealing with the chronologically arranged and ordered facts concerning political, social and economic events in the past of nations. However, as Linda Hutcheon argues, the factuality of historical knowledge is denied by the postmodern argument that “both history and fiction are discourses and both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past...” (Hutcheon 1988, 89). As a strand of the postmodern novel, historiographic metafiction, which blurs the line between history and fiction, challenges the classical definition of history. Furthermore, Hutcheon points out: “Postmodern novels raise a number of specific issues regarding the interaction of historiography and fiction; [...] the question of reference and representation; the intertextual nature of past; and the ideological implications of writing about history” (Ibid, 117). That is why, historical figures are brought into action in fictional settings or historical events are narrated through the perspectives of fictional characters or fictional characters participate in historical incidents and so on.

In *The Passion*, Jeanette Winterson rewrites history by presenting a picture of the Napoleonic era. A historical character, Napoleon Bonaparte, inhabits the same setting with other fictional characters such as Henri, Villanelle, Patrick, Domino, etc. Winterson’s novel problematizes the validity of any historical account by questioning the separation between the historical and fictional. Also in the interview with J. Noakes and M. Reynolds (2003, 22), Winterson underlines her outlook of the past and claims that the past should be a temporal platform to re-invent to re-discover: “because the past is not a place that we know. We weren’t there. [...] We are continually understanding our past in a different way because we are continually re-interpreting it and fiction does that very well”. It is obvious that Winterson takes historiographic metafiction as a way of freeing the text from its own time or she creates a text unstuck in time. In other words, some incidents which are stuck in history books as military

histories are released and fictionalized/reformulated in the diary pages of Henri as his own stories. In Henri's diary, Napoleon is depicted as "a self-centred and ambitious emperor" (Winterson 1987, 38) who wants to conquer the whole world by any means. He does not care about his soldiers at all. Moreover, he is a person with a lot of vanities and flaws. For instance, he does not like tall people as they remind him of his lack of length, and his passion for eating chickens can be regarded as an obsession. When Henri becomes his cook, he depicts Bonaparte's passion for chickens. This is the parody of a great leader in the history of world. Furthermore, unlike soldiers in history books, Napoleon's soldiers are not depicted as brave men who are ready to sacrifice themselves for the welfare of their empire and emperor. Thus, Palmer also states as follows:

The master narratives treating masculinist concerns such as military conquest and empire building which we inherit from earlier periods are interrogated, and emphasis is placed on narratives produced by marginalised sections of the community, such as women and homosexuals. In addition, the division which, since the nineteenth-century, has been assumed to exist between history and literature, is questioned. (Palmer 1996, 108)

In Henri's narration, it is obvious that Winterson denounces the idealised representations of Napoleon Bonaparte and his soldiers written in historical texts. As mentioned before, Domino's sense of past reflects the constructedness of history as well. What is more, Henri does not include the tragic death-stories of soldiers in the battlefield, which implies that there is not one truth about history, but it may depend on how we fabricate it in the present.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Jeanette Winterson's third novel *The Passion* can be regarded as a postmodern novel with its various features and techniques. These techniques of postmodernism such as temporal distortion, parody, pastiche, historiographic metafiction, and irony are often used by postmodern writers in their works.

Winterson, in *The Passion*, deals with some socially imposed norms and "myths" of Western civilisation in a postmodern fashion. In other words, she resists the dominant ideologies and discourses, and she attempts to re-construct a free and alternative discourse within the same society through techniques of postmodernism in her narrative.

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