

Deconstructing Gender Identity in *Written on the Body* by Jeannette Winterson

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Abstract--- *Various authors write for different reasons. This can be to convey a message, entertain, teach, challenge their readers, and the status quo in the society in which they live. This paper focuses on how Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* challenges the status quo on gender and identity. The article begins with an analysis of the ideas surrounding identity and gender in literature. After that, the paper looks at how the author dances around the gender of the narrator in the story to draw attention to it without confining them to a single gender or sexual identity. Finally, the paper makes the connection between Winterson's approach to the narrator and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and its contributions to feminist theory. Derrida's deconstruction and feminist theory are both evident in *Written on the Body* as the basis for the deliberate fluidity of the narrator. The paper conducts qualitative analysis method in approaching an in depth looking at the objective of the paper.*

Keywords--- *Gender, Identity, *Written on the Body*, Deconstruction Theory.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Identity is an essential aspect of humanity. Every individual has characteristics and traits with which they make their identities as separate and unique beings. People place a lot of emphasis on their identity because it represents the expression of self that influences their interactions with other people as well as the environment around them. Similarly, artists and writers put in sufficient effort to shape and define the identities of the characters that operate within the confines of their creations. In literature, authors rely on a variety of tools to shape the identity of their characters and influence the perceptions of these characters in the eyes of the reader. Gender is one of the tools often employed in this respect. Gendering characters in literature is convenient in identity formation because of the societal conventions that attach substantial meaning to one's maleness or femaleness. Readers subconsciously attach several assumptions about traits like personality, value systems, and individual preferences to a character by virtue of their gender.

In *Written on the Body*, Jeanette Winterson understands the central role of gender in the formation of a character's identity in the eyes of the reader. Winterson wished to avoid the inevitable assumptions about her main character, who is also the narrator based on their gender. Throughout the novel, Winterson intentionally neglects to mention the gender of the narrator; the author goes to extra lengths to confound the reader on this front by allowing the narrator to behave as both a man and a woman in separate instances. The narrator does not have any distinguishing characteristics that may enable the reader to assign them any particular gender without a high degree of uncertainty [3, 8]. In doing so, the author gives the narrator sufficient room to exist as just an ordinary person

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with human desires, needs and weakness without the weight of conforming to any social constructs of gender and the expectations that come with it.

A. *Deconstructing Gender Identity: An Analysis of *Written on the Body**

"Why is it that human beings are allowed to grow up without the necessary apparatus to make sound ethical decisions? [17] As far as identity goes for human beings in the real world and fictional characters in literature, gender is an integral building block. This is because gender is a social construct that governs the interactions and perceptions of people in everyday living. Gender determines the demarcations of society from birth to death [13]. Even communities unadulterated by civilization used gender as a deciding factor in all their activities. One of the most evident manifestations of the impact of gender on society is the division of roles in most communities. The norm is that males do the heavy lifting involved in physical provision and security, whereas female concern themselves with the care affairs of the family. The power imbalance also tilts in favor of the men as the naturally dominant species over the women by virtue of their maleness. This misguided belief is the core building block of patriarchy which spills over from the family unit and into social settings. The expectations of behavior also differ for men and women such that the former is free to be adventurous, bold and authoritative whereas the latter must humble themselves, practice subservience as well as follow the lead of the male figures in their lives.

Thus, when authors assign gender to their characters, they consciously or subconsciously project various assumptions along these gendered lines onto the characters. The author need not go out of their way to focus on the gender of their characters for the readers to ascertain their gender. If a protagonist in a story repeatedly demonstrates traits that the society associates with masculinity, the readers are within their rights to assume that the protagonist is male. Similarly, attributes associated with femininity will attract assumptions about the gender of the individual expressing these traits. Furthermore, the pronouns used when referring to people within the story also betray the gender, which also invites these assumptions based on social conventions of accepted and expected behavior from the individuals [1, 5]. In addition to the pronouns and expressed behaviors, authors also often betray the gender of the individuals in their stories through the names assigned. There are very few gender-neutral names. Thus, assigning a male or female name to a character automatically allows the reader to form assumptions about their gender and identity.

In *Written on the Body*, Jeanette Winterson finds a way around all these traps that would otherwise reveal the gender of the narrator and automatically box them into a limited corner of identity, and takes apart the whole idea about it that already exists in the recipients mind. In the Novel, Winterson repeatedly sidesteps any gender assumption on the part of the reader by allowing the narrator's behavior to identify as both male and female on different occasions. The narrator in the early pages of the novel tells that "Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there." (WOTB, p. 89) Winterson's narrator displays an ambiguous variety of stereotypes that would help identify them as either male or female. For instance, strength, power, and dominance are socially constructed to infer masculinity, and in some cases, the narrator demonstrates these stereotypically male traits [4]. However, within the same book, the narrator is also unsure, weak, and chasing the sentiment of romantic love. These are feminine traits that most works of literature assign to their heroines. The unstable nature of the narrator's temperament makes it difficult to assign a specific gender without reasonable doubt.

In so doing, Jeanette allows the narrator to exist as a human being without the encumbrance of gender stereotypes that automatically limit the spectrum of emotions and actions expected of literary figures.

On top of the behavioral ambiguity of the narrator, the author also refrains from providing a name for the book's protagonist. Gender is such an integral aspect of identity in society such that even the naming system is binary. If Winterson named the narrator Mary, no amount of behavioral ambiguity would suffice to convince the readers that the narrator was not a woman, albeit a confused one. On the contrary, if the narrator was Tom, masculinity would be their default gender regardless of whether they acted with the same amount of ambiguity or not. Moreover, Winterson avoids using gendered language in the self-description of the narrator, which would give away their gender [9]. For instance, words like beautiful, blouse, and she automatically denote femininity whereas handsome, shirt, and he imply masculinity on the part of the individual they describe. Winterson dances around these descriptions that would pin down the narrator to a single gender.

The use of gender as an identifying marker in literature also hinges on the sexual habits of the characters. It is essential to differentiate between gender and the sex of figures in works of art because they are two different aspects [7]. Many people often conflate gender with sex in discussions about the two and the role they play in influencing human interactions in society. As mentioned above, gender is a social construct, while sex refers to the biological differences that draw the line between men and women, including but not limited to, genitals and the different roles in the reproductive process [16]. Human sexuality is one of the primary warfronts in the debates about gender and it is evident that Winterson is acutely aware of this fact. Due to the necessity of sexual relations for procreation and the continuity of the human race, heterosexuality was the only accepted orientation for many societies. Thus, the fluid nature of the narrator's sexual pursuits also provides another frontier through which Winterson not only infuses doubt about the gender of the narrator but also critiques the default of heterosexuality.

The narrator in *Written on the Body*, constantly switches between relationships with men and women. The narration repeatedly refers to girlfriends and boyfriends in the past, which show that there is no specific sexual orientation that can help the reader to assign a gender. In a heterosexual world, men have relations exclusively with women, whereas women have relations with men. However, if someone does not stick with either gender, they cannot be limited to either definition. The author inflicts frustration upon the readers who have to rethink their rigid notions of love, gender, and sexuality as they witness the narrator's affairs with married women in one page followed by relations with men in the next [18]. As a result, the readers must face their implicit biases about sexual relations among human beings and examine why the obscured gender of the narrator bothers them.

The concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality, among other sexual orientations, stand firmly on the idea of gender differences. That is, if people of the same gender desire each other sexually, they are homosexuals. The default here is that people should desire individuals of the opposite sex. However, Winterson puts this notion on the spotlight by having the narrator steps away from either of the labels in this binary system as a sexually fluid individual with sexual and romantic interests in both women and men [14]. Through this, Winterson deregulates identity and all its related concepts such as gender, sex, and sexuality [10]. The only way for the reader to relate and fully consume *Written on the Body* is to accept this deregulation of the protagonist's identity, which disempowers the gender binaries that are the norm in conventional societies. Winterson requires that the readers step out of their

comfort zones as pertains to gender and identity. Failure to do this will lead to an incomplete experience of this literary masterpiece.

Winterson's approach to identity and gender in *Written on the Body* is also a homage to the theory of deconstructionism by Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction is a theoretical approach aimed at explaining the relationship between words, their usage, and the meanings attached to them [2]. Deconstruction is applied to literature to show that texts often carry contradictory meanings rather than existing as logical wholes with unified interpretation. According to Derrida, deconstruction does not seek to break down a text, rather, it is evidence that every text exists in a dismantled form with multiple meanings [6]. Derrida's theory rose out of a critique of Western culture whereby people express their thoughts and observe the world around them in binary terms. Thus, it is an attempt to dismantle the logic of everything exist in opposing forms. For instance, if someone is not straight, then they are automatically gay. Similarly, something can only be present or absent, superior or inferior, negative or positive, masculine or feminine, black or white so on and so forth.

Derrida's constructionism can be found in some of the fundamentals of feminist theory. Where there is the notion of the superiority of the masculine form over the feminine form, feminist theory and activism seek to overthrow this belief and insist on equality of the sexes. Modern feminist theory also acknowledges that people do not exist as either male or female [15]. There are various sexual identities and orientations that may not necessarily fit into the binary model of looking at identity. With regard to critical difference, Johnson notes that "if anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself [12]." Thus, the goal of deconstruction of destroying the claim of domination of one form over the other in all instances aligns with feminism's quest to dismantle patriarchy.

Therefore, Winterson's deliberate decision to avoid assigning a gender to the narrator goes against the grain in literature whereby most authors allow the gender of their characters to influence all aspects of their identities. In *Written on the Body*, the author allows the narrator to exist outside of this binary demarcation. The narrator oscillates from a masculine version of themselves whereby they are a Lothario to being the princess in Alice in Wonderland. The narrator says, "one does after years of playing the lothario and seeing nothing but an empty bank account and a pile of yellowing love notes like IOUs [17]." The label of a Lothario is an allusion to the male fictional character in a seventeenth-century play and was known for his lecherous ways. Unsurprisingly, Lothario had the notoriety of seducing unfaithful married women, a trait replicated by the narrator in Winterson's novel. On one hand, the narrator also says that "I will call myself Alice and play croquet with flamingoes [17]. On the other hand, princesses have the reputations of not only deep-seated femininity but also hopeless romantics in search of love from princes who are their knights in shining armor. The princess, in this case, was a convent virgin.

Winterson attempts to deconstruct the reader's normative idea of gender in a binary state by allowing the narrator to exist in multiple forms across the spectrum of societal expectations. The society places the expectation of purity on women while allowing men to be their lecherous selves with little condemnation. Virginity in women receives praise as a mark of purity with no similar expectations placed on men who exercise this freedom through affairs with multiple women married or otherwise. The idea of virginity as constructed by society limits women's freedom of

sexual expression while giving free rein to men in the same breath [10]. It is a patriarchal notion in that it expects women to keep themselves pure for men in their future without the same requirements for the men. However, the narrator demonstrates that it is possible for a human being to be both of these things rather than limiting them to the binary of either woman or man. The narrator is a Lothario in pursuit of romantic love. These two propositions are in direct opposition that cannot exist within the confines of societal expectations. However, the deconstruction of gender by Winterson allows the narrator to be more than just one thing.

However, it is debatable whether Winterson's deliberate omission of the gender of the narrator achieved its full purpose [11]. Proponents, such as Rubinson, of her decision argue that it highlighted the issue with a binary approach to gender discussions. By her own admission, the author always sets out to make the readers think, and this book achieves that effect. The readers have to reflect on their own biases and question the source of their desire to assign the binary genders to the narrator. It is also an excellent critique of the markers that individuals rely on when determining the gender of an individual or character. Unfortunately, the reader's interpretation and understanding of *Written on the Body* may also depend on their familiarity with the author and her prior publications. Arman notes that 'A reader unfamiliar with Winterson or her previous work would probably assume that *Written on the Body* is a text about a male heterosexual individual since it features a non-gendered narrator who falls in love with a married woman [1]." Arman goes ahead to note that a reader who is, "Aware of Winterson's sexuality, and having read *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* as an autobiographical text of a young lesbian woman, this reader will not take heterosexuality for granted. Instead, he or she will be tempted to presume that since the author is female and lesbian then the narrator must be female and lesbian [1]." Therefore, *Written on the Body* only falls short in its reliance on the audience's prior knowledge of the author and her ideological leanings.

II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that *Written on the Body* is an excellent example of deconstructionism in literature. Jeanette Winterson's decision to deliberately obscure gender and sexuality of her narrator forces the reader to go beyond the surface of analysis in addressing gender and sexual constructs as put forth by society. By blurring the gender of the narrator, Winterson draws even more attention to the binary construction of the same. In their efforts to figure out the gender of the narrator through the confusing behavioral and language clues, the readers confront their inherent misconceptions about issues to do with gender, sex, and sexuality.

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