

Satire on Religion in Oranges are not the only Fruit

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Abstract:

Winters on thus decries the patriarchy of the Bible, which would exalt men and place them in places of authority when they do little to earn respect for that authority and abuse that authority, as the men who try to hit on her sexually when they are married show. In Winterson's eyes women are not in any way inferior to men, she does not feel the need to defer to men when she is not intellectually inferior to them, it is only their superior standing inscribed by the bible that keeps her in her place and it is this that she escapes by running away from her Church and home. The alternative, to work in an asylum and funeral parlour, might seem lowly but it is to her a freedom from an oppressive patriarchal slavery which she will not accept. Indeed, with Winterson's talent, it is little wonder she does not feel the desire to defer to a man. Less talented and weak minded members of the female species might be content to be always subordinate, but for Winterson's case, it is clearly a case of one who does not see the need to defer to a male race which is not superior to her in any way.

Oranges are not the only Fruit provides a biting critique of Christianity from someone who feels estranged from its laws, customs and rituals—that is Jeanette, the protagonist, a lesbian who feels oppressed by the patriarchy of Christianity. Raised in a fervently religious household with an eye on turning her into a missionary, this extreme zeal for religion is indeed what proves to be Jeanette's downfall as women begin admiring her for her biblical fervour and start getting sexually

attracted to her, following which she has a string of affairs with the young women in church.

To phrase this downfall in Pastor Finch's terms, "The best has become the worst." (Winterson, 1985:16) Jeanette is deemed to have become filled with evil, a downfall from being extremely holy, because she has succumbed to her desire for women. Winterson is demonized from the moment she declares that she is lesbian. The cruel inhumanity with which she is eventually excommunicated from the church is what she takes issue with.

Indeed Jeanette feels extremely bitter about the process because she feels that her authentic self has been suppressed. Jeanette views marriage as an empty and meaningless institution. This feeling of marriage being a sham is derived largely from her observations of marriage in her own family. The passionless marriage of her adoptive parents seems a far cry from the unbridled passions she discovers in the arms of women from her church, who take to falling from her because of her extreme devoutness.

Religion is described on Winterson's terms as a highly oppressive institution. She describes her mother as being more Old Testament than New Testament, in other words, her mother delights in seeing to the destruction of sinners without demonstrating the grace, forgiveness and love for sinners that Jesus brings about in the New Testament. Arguably the lack of love in the Winterson household is what drives Winterson to seek love elsewhere, and it does not



help that Jeanette Winterson finds men repulsive as a species.

In her words, men are beasts, who are exalted above women simply by their superior authority delegated to them by the bible, but otherwise not appealing because they just seem to be vile drinkers and slobs who depend on women and cheat on them at the slightest chance. Winterson finds patriarchy unfair because she cannot bring herself to respect the male species who would become her master, who lust after women and make use of women and oppress women in their households without offering anything much in return.

Indeed Winterson finds men disgusting, describing one of the men a woman marries as a pig and subsequently a beast. Men are described as slothful creatures who lust after women and make use of them sexually and domestically, only to repay them by having affairs and drinking, demeaning the lives of the women who serve them. While this may be a skewed view of the male species in general, I think what Winterson objects to ultimately is the absolute power that men command over women when they do not seem to do anything to deserve that respect, instead exploiting women as slaves and sex objects in the household to be mistreated and abused.

What Winterson thus objects to in the Christian suppression of lesbian love is thus the arbitrariness with which same sex attraction is made a sin when the legitimate kind of love, heterosexual love, seems to put women at a losing end it is ultimately women who suffer whichever choice they make, only that homosexual love is viewed as a grave sin subject to being demonized and rejected by most of the Christian congregation, especially the church elders and the clergy, who view it as a visitation of demonic spirits and thereafter the need for exorcism or excommunication, when all Winterson can find is

a more authentic kind of love than the love held between a male and female.

Indeed all Winterson can think of Melanie's loveliness when they are separated, it seems unfair to be being viewed as demonic possessed when all she feels is love for Melanie, albeit for the wrong sex according to her religion's laws.

Indeed Jeannette is alienated many times over by her mother, whose religious superstitions seem to her extreme and fanatical as well as ridiculous. Jeanette despises the way in which her mother views the people around her as heathen, the stories on television as demonic, simply because they fall short of the biblical standards her mother holds. The ultimate hypocrisy she views of her mother is her denial of her opportunity to reunite with her birth mother while all the time suffocating Jeannette with her ambitions to turn her into a missionary.

Her mother then fails to genuinely care for Jeannette, only viewing her as a tool to further her religious ambitions and status in the church, while denying her the right to love in whatever form it comes for Jeanette, this authentic love for Jeannette Winterson being lesbian love or the genuine love her mother has for her, which her adoptive mother ruthlessly thwarts at every turn. Indeed, Mrs Winterson is described in terms that make her seem to be a religious monster and hypocrite by Jeannette Winterson.

Religion is thus seen to be so suffocating for Jeannette Winterson that she would rather choose the demonic than to be esteemed highly by her church by going on to be a missionary. Indeed, the alternatives that Jeanette Winterson chooses, getting excommunicated from her church, working for funeral parlours and asylums, hardly seems a respectable route to take, but it is the price that Jeanette Winterson is willing to pay for authenticity and being true to herself.



Jeanette Winterson simply refuses to be slave to a man and call him lord and master when she cannot bring himself to view a man as one who is deserving of that kind of authority and respect. Indeed, being intelligent and highly devout as she is initially, she cannot see why she has to defer to a man simply by virtue of his sex. Winterson finds Pastor Finch hypocritical and as oppressive as her mother because of his highly condemning nature.

Jeanette's sin ultimately is to be different from what most women are because they choose to be oppressed and to be enslaved to men. While Jeanette chooses to reject servility to the male race, there is a high price she must pay for it. She gets rejected by her church and her family, and is forced to fend for herself outside home. Her crime in her own eyes is being true to herself and loving members of the same sex with a passion she cannot feel for members of the opposite sex. Indeed the cruelty with which she is told by Pastor Finch that Elsie does not love her before she dies seals the hypocrisy of the church for her because love that is illegitimate cannot be viewed as authentic love just because it is not legitimate, when illicit love is indeed authentic love for her and she finds it suffocating to conform to religious laws and customs just for their orthodoxy.

At the same time in celebrating lesbianism Winterson does not seem to be mindful of the consequences this choice has for women. Indeed to Winterson it is the authentic choice. But to become a lesbian is to be alienated many times over, from the church, from society, from one's family, there is a high price to pay for non-conformity, and it seems that Winterson romanticized the liberating thrill of escaping societal norms without considering the high price to be paid for living outside those societal norms. Indeed in her introduction to the book Jeanette

Winterson describes herself as living in poverty and extreme decrepitude.

She manages to escape this poverty by writing a bestseller that is semi-autobiographical, but how many lesbians can make the same claim to fame and success? The ugly truth is that for most lesbians, they live in shame and secrecy at the fringes of society without the glamour and fame Jeanette Winterson enjoys. Hence while Jeanette Winterson may have successfully escaped a life of slavery to a man, she has chosen a path that is dangerous and unfulfilling for most others who choose it because of the high amount of rejection one faces from society as a consequence of that choice.

Indeed, Winterson writes that oranges are not the only fruit, meaning that men are not the only choice, but to me it seems that she has exchanged one form of servility for another. Servility to a man might be demeaning, but servility to a woman risks the loss of one's reputation and respectability as well as rejection by the whole church and all of society. Indeed Winterson does not seem to realize she has just chosen a different master. Her new master is woman rather than man.

Escaping servility to a man does not necessarily mean escaping servility when one becomes involved with a woman. Indeed, the fear, loathing and rejection with which most of her female lovers treat her with after being confronted by the church shows that she has chosen servility to females at the price of her name and mental health, which is why she is reduced to working in an asylum. So indeed, Jeanette Winterson's novel does come across as highly political and polemical, but it is also blind to the fact that the alternative she chooses might not be as glamorous as it seems.

Hence Winterson's novel may be viewed as a diatribe against the hypocrisy of the Christian faith which endorses heterosexual love while



profaning homosexual love when heterosexual marriage in Jeannette Winterson's novel is depicted as something of a sham. Her adoptive parents barely love each other, and the women in the novel are all complaining of the trap that marriage has lulled them into, leading them to marry drunkards and gamblers. At the same time one wonders if Jeannette Winterson, being led by her lesbian politics, has depicted heterosexual marriages fairly. To be sure, not all heterosexual marriages are as dysfunctional as the ones she describes. There are genuinely loving heterosexual families, and men who do not seem to be merely beasts or simply desire sex objects and slaves in their households, yet all this seems glossed over by Winterson in her desire to glorify the lesbian choice.

Jeanette Winterson thus seems to be writing with the political purpose of creating a lesbian utopia, a utopia in which all the men as beasts are expelled from the paradise of women living together with authentic passions. But indeed again, one would highly question if only lesbian passion is authentic passion. To be sure, the high amount of rejection each clandestine lesbian relation ends with ends up with a highly dystopian form of love instead. Winterson's utopia of lesbian love might be ideal in her eyes, but cannot come into fruition as long as most of society is heterosexual and heteronormative.

Indeed, Winterson has accurately observed that it is religions like Christianity which uphold the heterosexual norm and oppress the lesbian alternative. But Winterson does not seem to dwell on the consequences for choosing the lesbian alternative, shame, secrecy, rejection, God's wrath, madness and so on. Living on the fringes of society might be extremely romantic to Winterson, but not all women are willing to pay that price.

Having said that, Winterson has indeed written a compelling critique of the heterosexual

norm in societies and the religious orthodoxy that reinforces it. The hollowness of orthodox marriages in the novel in contrast to the fiery passions she finds in the arms of women seems to reinforce the idea that homosexual love is more authentic than heterosexual love. It is also true that because of Biblical scripture, women in heterosexual marriages experience a high degree of subordination to men.

Women are commanded to bear children and be domestic keepers while men can have all the alcohol and affairs they want while seeming to get away with it, and thus it would not be surprising that Winterson finds women receiving the losing end of the bargain when it comes to marriage. Indeed the very institution of marriage is something of a joke in the Winterson household.

Mrs Winterson, Jeannette's mother, marries a man whom she barely loves just for the sake of being married, and does not want children because to her sexual passion is fornication and sin, and hence they adopt Jeanette whom they abuse or neglect throughout the novel. If Jeanette Winterson has a skewed view of marriage, it is because the family she was raised in was highly dysfunctional to begin with, with her adoptive mother Mrs Winterson being something of a religious monster and hypocrite, leading Jeanette to hate Christianity altogether as a result.

The main reason Jeannette Winterson hates Christianity is because her mother has misrepresented it on several accounts. Firstly as was earlier observed her mother is more Old Testament than New Testament. Thus her mother is highly condemning and judgemental without showing the grace, love, and mercy that Christ brought about in the New Testament towards sinners. The same is to be said of Pastor Finch, who instead of finding some way to show some grace and mercy to Jeannette as a sinner when it is exposed that she is a lesbian and find some way of

loving her back into the Christian family, condemns it wrathfully instead with the result of Jeanette being very bitter about being excommunicated by the Church. Indeed the Pentecostal Church Jeanette attends shows all the symptoms of the Old Testament God without the New Testament God tampered with mercy and grace with the coming of Christ. Hence it is little wonder, being treated like foul heathen and a wretched sinner at all turns, Jeanette decides to leave the Church instead.

Winterson has thus written a compelling critique of the way in which Christianity treats homosexuality. Indeed, it is an abomination in God's eyes according to Christianity, but this abomination seems entirely arbitrarily determined when heterosexual marriages seem something of a sham and hollow and meaningless according to Winterson's depiction. What is at issue is the double standards there is for men over women.

Men can drink and have affairs at the expense of their wives, who put up with their excesses to preserve the sanctity of marriage, which seems to subjugate women and render women highly subordinate on all counts. Women are child bearing slaves and domestic helpers in marriages, while men have a license to exploit women sexually as well as treat them as domestic slaves, so it is really little wonder marriage is an institution Jeanette Winterson does not believe in.

The strategy with which Winterson uses to promote her lesbian utopia is to make homosexual relationships seem more authentic and fulfilling than heterosexual relationships. Indeed one would say that each of the passions that Jeanette Winterson describes in her books seem more exalted than heterosexual relations. To put it Winterson's terms "To the pure be pure."

These relationships are viewed as unnatural and unholy in the Church's sight, but to her the experience of lesbian passion is never anything less than a very pure kind of love rather

than the unnatural lust her Church describes it as. There is thus a fracture between what her church views as unclean and damning and what she finds an intensely spiritual experience, which is what she believes each one of her relationships to be.

Indeed what the Church view as sin and profanity Jeanette Winterson takes to be an intensely spiritual pure and fulfilling experience. In most of her affairs Winterson is taken to be a kind of spiritual teacher because of her religious zeal. Most of the women she gets involved in also view their passions with Jeanette not as lust but an intensely spiritual experience, but because of its Biblical unsanctity, it gets dismissed wrathfully as fornication and illicit just because of its homosexual nature.

Jeanette Winterson thus is rebelling against the religious authority that homosexual relations are illicit on her account that this arbitrary and unfair. For Winterson, it is the authenticity of the love and passion in question that matters, not the sex of whom she is having an affair with, and for Winterson this happens unfortunately to be women, which the bible clearly damns.

Winterson is thus writing against religious hypocrisy and authority in the Christian church. She questions why the institution of heterosexual marriage should be viewed as sacred when it is clearly so full of flaws. Indeed, with the loveless marriage of her adoptive parents and the high level of dysfunction she witnesses in a lot of heterosexual marriages around her, it is little wonder Jeanette Winterson does not come to respect heterosexual marriage as a sacred institution.

Jeanette Winterson is thus writing against the patriarchy of the Bible and religious authority which deems men as an authority over women and women as subordinate to men without having much rights for themselves, in Jeanette's case it is



a matter of the right to love women in place of men.

Winterson resents having to defer to men when men do little to entitle to earn that kind of respect, with a lot of them being in her terms, beasts and slob who exploit women while they lead hedonistic lives drinking and having affairs, all the time exploiting women for sex. Winterson thus clearly resents being the subordinate sex in patriarchy, indeed her rebellion is against a male authority which she does not view as legitimate.

It is not merely that Winterson hates men as becomes apparent from all the above, it is also the case that she is highly indifferent to men. In one scene Winterson describes a prince looking for the perfect woman whom he finds in Winterson, whom Winterson rejects, because she views men as having nothing to offer her other than a life of slavery and subordination.

Hence to Winterson, Oranges are not the only fruit, and men are not the only choice, because in Winterson's eyes men are a rotten choice. To be married is to be enslaved, to be a child bearer, to be household keeper, when this is not even an authentic choice or love to begin with because Winterson genuinely prefers the company and passion of women. That this is forbidden by the Bible is her tragedy, and it is the reason she has so much against Orthodox Christianity, because it forbids what she truly desires.

What Winterson has issue with is thus patriarchal authority, a place she would usurp by becoming the surrogate male lover for many of

the women she has affairs with. She simply refuses to defer to male authority because she does not view it as legitimate or rightful authority. With the many men around her turning out to be slob, beasts and pigs, it is little wonder why this is the case for her,

Winterson thus decries the patriarchy of the Bible, which would exalt men and place them in places of authority when they do little to earn respect for that authority and abuse that authority, as the men who try to hit on her sexually when they are married show. In Winterson's eyes women are not in any way inferior to men, she does not feel the need to defer to men when she is not intellectually inferior to them, it is only their superior standing inscribed by the bible that keeps her in her place and it is this that she escapes by running away from her Church and home.

The alternative, to work in an asylum and funeral parlour, might seem lowly but it is to her a freedom from an oppressive patriarchal slavery which she will not accept. Indeed, with Winterson's talent, it is little wonder she does not feel the desire to defer to a man. Less talented and weak minded members of the female species might be content to be always subordinate, but for Winterson's case, it is clearly a case of one who does not see the need to defer to a male race which is not superior to her in any way.

Works cited:

- [1] Winterson, Jeanette. *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*. Vintage, London. 2001.