

DISENTANGLING WINTERSON'S SEXING THE CHERRY

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Gerard Genette's idea of 'paratextuality'(1997) feeds well into the reader's interpretation and understanding of Winterson's text, while one is still outside it. The very title of the novel, *Sexing the Cherry*(1989), brings to mind the idea of grafting- artificial birthing- which sexualises and gives a particular identity to the (cherry) tree. But, the idea of grafting also makes apparent the fluidity of identity; two different, disparate identities coming together to create a third. It breeds in itself the idea of co-existence of different identities, realities and originalities. Just like the task of a modern artist is to rearrange existing art to create the semblance of a new work of art, similar is the outcome of grafting. The title of Winterson's novel thus makes apparent the co-existence of different originalities and narratives in the novel, which also problematizes the general idea of one- the one- truth or original story/ narrative. This idea of originality (and by extension, authorship), which is hinted at in the title, is further complicated as one engages with the body of the novel as the distinct narrative threads begin to disintegrate and make the reader question whose story is it after all. Primary to this understanding of a text, and the role of paratexts, is the fact of the reader- the reader and his perceptions are primary to any interpretation and understanding of a text, because a literary work's intertextual nature always leads readers to new textual relations and interpretations. The author is not alone responsible for the various meanings and interpretations that can be

attached to a text as, to paraphrase Mikhail Bakhtin, the world of language is only half one's own- half of it belongs to the readers/listeners.

The novel opens with two epigraphs by Jeanette Winterson-

"The Hopi, an Indian tribe, have a language as sophisticated as ours, but no tenses for past, present and future. The division does not exist. What does this say about time?"

"Matter, that thing the most solid and well-known, which you are holding in your hands and which makes up your body, is now known to be mostly empty space. Empty space and points of light. What does this say about the reality of the world?"

Both of these epigraphs try to dismantle our understanding of time and the reality of the world- the two parameters that help us locate ourselves in and relate to the Universe- and this is exactly what the major narrative of the novel also does by fusing the past of the seventeenth century Puritan England, the fantastical world of the Grimm Brother's fairy tale, 'The Dancing Shoes'(1972), and the present into one story. The two epigraphs, therefore, add to the reader's perspective of no one reality or originality existing individually within the fictional universe created by Winterson, as understood from the title itself. The introduction by Winterson herself to the novel reads as a shy attempt to tell the readers how to read her novel and what to expect from it in very simple terms. Winterson writes, "*Sexing the Cherry* is not really about the fruit. It is about bringing home something not seen before." It is

the process and not the result which adds to the narrative one is dealing with, and creates the semblance of a new piece of art or literature. These paratexts therefore lend an intuitive faculty to the readers by helping them pre-empt an understanding of the text; by allowing them to take a plunge into the text while still on its threshold.

History forms a major 'intertext' in the narrative of *Sexing the Cherry*(1989). The novel is partly located in the seventeenth century England, where the Dog Woman (from the present) is the executioner of the hypocritical puritans in Oliver Cromwell's London. And Jordan, who is the primary protagonist of the novel, in the seventeenth century, is an explorer who visits lands far away and brings exotic fruits and souvenirs to London. Even when history plays such a crucial role in the narrative, it is interestingly not invoked by Winterson for its own sake, or for its contemporary or political relevance- Winterson does not seem to really dwell upon the politics of Cromwell and the Puritans, but invokes it because she is interested in the employment of the 'body' in history, and in the past. In the introduction to the book Winterson writes, "I was using history as a way of talking about everything that was bothering me."(ix).For here, thus, a historical intertext in her writing does not function as the reproduction of an epoch or period in history, but as a reflection of her own concerns and botheration. The puritanical history and their detachment from the 'body' and its desires is presented in stark contrast to the Dog Woman who unabashedly accepts and belongs to her body. She uses her huge breasts as weapons and understands the desires of the body as necessities and not perversions. This stands contested to the superficial control of sex and desire practised by the Puritans,

who then go to brothels with full blown lust to have sex in bizarre and 'unnatural' ways; their forceful, puritanical control turns sex into a perversion.

Apart from this, history also brings with itself the play of memory and forgetting which the past is always dependent on, as history is accessible to one only in memory which, in turn, is prone to forgetting. The Dog Woman says, "I had a name but I have forgotten it." (3). This points out to the ways in which memory works, only the bits that are repeated and re-repeated stay with us. History, therefore, is only the sediments that remain in the memory while the rest is forgotten. Only the name Dog Woman stayed with her through the years; her real name was lost. It is, however, interesting to notice how this bit of history that remains- the name, Dog Woman- plays upon identity of what it signifies. The Dog Woman, therefore, could be understood as a woman named Dog, in context of the kind of description that is drawn of her physicality which determine her nature and allow the puritanical logic to then understand her body and the passions of her body. Also, she could be called Dog Woman, literally, because she had thirty dogs which were family to her. History, for the text at hand, is therefore not a social or political inter text, but a personal inter text, making a case for a history- and not 'the history'- which is fluid, which can be filtered, manipulated and fictionalised through the play of memory.

Jeanette Winterson does not only set the novel simultaneously in the past(of the seventeenth century England) and the contemporary present, but also in the space and time of the fantasy; the fairy tale. The text draws upon Grimm Brother's fairy

tale, 'The Dancing Shoes'(1972), and subverts it, thereby making space to pull in a number of other references to function in the narrative. But the first and the foremost change made by Winterson is to situate her version of the fairy tale, which she titles 'The Story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses,' even before the Grimm Brother's conception and transcription of the (source) fairy tale itself, and goes on to dwell upon their life in old age. This dismantles, for the readers, the idea of originality and authorship for both the fairy tale and the novel. However, before Jordan meets the twelve dancing princesses, he is asked if he knew the story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses, to which he replied, 'I had heard it.' This question is not only a question posed at Jordan, but to the readers of *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), and the answer given by him is the expected answer. A writer's quest, according to Roland Barthes, is to imitate a gesture which is anterior; the power of the writer lies in the fact that he can meaningfully mix writings in new and creative ways. Thus, before dwelling on to Winterson's 'retelling' of the story of the twelve princesses, the text announces that there is pre-existing knowledge (or narrative) that the reader needs to be aware of to understand this 'new' text. Winterson, thus, lays the onus of discovering and disentangling the two versions of the fairy tale on the reader, as Barthes also argues- only the reader can discover multiple meanings within the text for himself, as reading is no more understood as a passive act, but the reader has to constantly participate with his prior knowledge and perceptions. What is also made evident is the fact that there is no master text; no one text, but texts constantly appropriate into one another to form a new original. The hierarchy between the copy and the original is broken down, as both the retellings are original in their own ways. Grimm

Brother's version follows from oral storytelling, whereas Winterson constantly deconstructs and departs from the narrative of 'The Dancing Shoes'(1972), implying that each retelling is an original, or that no text is merely an original or merely a retelling.

Fairy tales, most often, have a strong patriarchal setting and background, ending in marriages and the quintessential 'happily ever after.' Winterson takes a complete departure from the Grimm Brother's fairy tale, which was strongly set in the mould of a conventional fairy tale, and uses the space to give voice and agency to each princess who was shut out in the Grimm Brother's version. This conscious departure from the earlier version can be read as the execution of a *clinamen*, to borrow the term from Harold Bloom. Winterson's version of the narrative 'swerves away' from the Grimm's version to lend a feminist understanding to the tale otherwise controlled only by the male, phallogocentric voice of the narrator; nobody else had a voice in 'The Dancing Shoes'(1972), and the narrative ended with the restoration of the patriarchal values, which found its poetic justice in confining the princesses within the domestic space and in marriage- heterosexual marriage, which is the 'happily ever after.' Winterson starts the subversion backwards first, by first letting us know, through the eldest princess, that their 'happily ever after' did happen, but not with their husbands. The 'happily ever after' trope of conventional fairy tales is employed and in the same breath brutally undercut by removing the husbands from the picture and destabilising the patriarchal equilibrium. The very fact that Jeanette Winterson chooses to change the name of the fairy tale from 'The Dancing Shoes' to

'The Story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses' says something about the kind of change and modification one can expect in her version; the fact that agency is given to the princesses is highlighted in her choice of the title for the tale itself. This also takes one back to the title of the novel, *Sexing the Cherry*, and the idea of grafting, as previously discussed. The fact that here, these two versions of the fairy tale come together to create a completely new reality and narrative is apparent. Further, giving voice to each princess and the narration of their story to Jordan makes space for (what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) calls) 'polyphony' and 'dialogism' to exist in a tale which was in the earlier version monologic. Winterson liberates her characters, including the princesses, to speak in 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices,' as is typical of novels. Moreover, the choice of each princess to narrate her own story allows Winterson to employ other intertextual references, within the larger framework of 'The Story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses,' of which an informed reader can make utmost sense by feeling through connections in the web of textual relations that is created. The second princess begins her tale by saying, "That's my last husband painted on the wall, looking as though he were alive." This invokes the first two lines of Robert Browning's poem, 'My Last Duchess'(1842)-

'That's my Last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as though she were alive.'

Overturning of the gender roles by Winterson is evident, with respect to Browning's poem. The intertextual references, therefore, tend to feed in to the purpose of the larger reference of the Grimm Brother's fairy tale, which is to invert patriarchal the logic of the fairy tale itself, and instead employ it for the cause of women; to

empower them through a subversion of established conventions, socially and literally.

The role of the body and all that it entails is a bit difficult to tap in the face of Puritanical England of the seventeenth century, as already discussed. However, with this contestation in the background, Winterson's use of dance in the novel is interesting, as it can be deployed as a means of addressing not only feminist but also intertextuality. The convention of dance entails a history and becomes an intertext in itself, whose various narratives need to be disentangled. While the patriarchal fairy tale tradition prohibits women dancing, who are then punished by being confined to the space of the household (or domesticity) either by the father, or the husband, as in the Grimm Brothers' 'The Dancing Shoes' (1972), the ability to dance is seen as a prerequisite in the marriageable Victorian woman. Eighteenth Century novels, such as *Pride and Prejudice* outline in detail the primacy of dancing at the balls in order to win a husband. Jane Austen's women character's chances of getting married were always in direct proportion to the number of times she was asked for a dance at the ballroom parties. Here, thus, dance was the gateway to men's hearts; the only way to please men and win husbands in a society where marriage was the only way, especially for middle class women, to climb up on the social and economic ladder of the society. In face of the male gaze which constantly needs to be pleased, the idea of dancing, here, reflects a state of inferiority, a state of powerlessness for the woman. Jeanette Winterson, however, overthrows both these conventions and uses dance only to celebrate the feminine body and allow the woman complete control of her body. Dance not only celebrates the body but also marks one's sexuality. Winterson

seems to embracing those markers of gender and sexuality, which through cultural and social baggage have always weighed heavily upon women, through dance, by allowing these princesses (and dancing women) from the Grimm Brother's fairy tale to break away from the norm and take agency of their bodies and their lives- Winterson's dancing women have an after story which is empowering and about their 'happily ever after' lives, without the husbands. The convention of dancing itself throws up a number of intertextual relationships at the readers, which makes one wonder the role dancing has played throughout various traditions, and literary conventions, and the role it plays in the text at hand. A.K. Ramanujan in his essay, 'Three Hundred Ramayanas'(2004), much like Roland Barthes, places the responsibility of meaning making, especially of the 'retellings', with the readers (or listeners). It is thus the responsibility of the reader, also, to find motifs and tropes that run through convention and look at the trajectory of their understanding, meaning and reception through time. This is how the motif of dancing also needs to be looked at and understood with respect to Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* and its inter-relations with the fairy tale tradition and Victorian ballroom dances- two literary traditions where dancing was of primary importance, for however different reasons.

Jeanette Winterson's novel, *Sexing the Cherry*, sits comfortably as the perfect example of an 'intertext' made up of a 'mosaic of references', as Julia Kristeva (1966) would argue, where the reader is constantly caught up in a web of references between texts. It is not the individual text, but the 'intertext' born out of a network of textual

relations that the readers are faced with, and in the readers' movement out of the 'text' and into the 'intertext' that meanings and interpretations are born. It is in this kind of horizontal reading, as proposed by Roland Barthes, that meaning is constantly attached (and detached) from a text which is always in flux; always in a state of becoming, as new intertextual relations keep getting formed by every new reader of the text.

References:

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