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Jeanette Winterson's 1989 novel *Sexing the Cherry*, through postmodern elements of experimentation of literary forms and untraditional narrative structure as well as featuring elements of magic realism subverts the established notions regarding gender as well as sexuality. This subversion from the prevailing ideas of gender does not just happen in a role reversal manner, but also asserts to broaden the spectrum of gender itself, whilst drawing close attention to the formulation of the conventional gender identities (and gender binarism) and at the same time, demolishing them.

The long-established gender identities are perturbed through various characters and methods, such as through Dog-Woman, the motif of grafting and the provocation of a dilemma in Jordan of his gender. It is to be noted that Winterson reverses the gender specific expectation by shifting the focus on the "selves" of these characters rather than their roles, and thus normalizes the unconventional roles that they play. In the words of Gilbert and Gubar, "The woman who speaks out is branded as an active monster." Winterson adheres to this definition when she pens the character of the Dog-Woman, and in doing so, she challenges the repressive patriarchy, which deliberately denies women the execution of an aspect of the self, outside the predesigned gender role. Winterson uses and challenges this orthodoxy of definitions and their normalcy by normalizing the unconventional idea of freedom and agency in choosing one's own identity in the novel. This agency is not just bestowed to the Dog-Woman, but also the twelve dancing princess, Jordan and exhibited with the idea of grafting.

As depicted by Winterson, the Dog-Woman is an almost monstrous and hideous woman, who considers profanity decorative, one that even

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Winterson describes as “ The only woman in English fiction confident enough to use filth as a fashion accessory.” This description undermines the notion of femininity. Even Elizabeth Langland argues that “ women’s bodies are at once a site for inscription of conventional meaning and also a locus for their disruption. The very materiality of body is vividly depicted in the huge bulk of Dog Woman ...her representation reinvents the female body as a site for cultural transformation.”

The female narrator also takes over the agency of the novel, which conflicts with the idea of a Medieval Woman as she refuses to be the representation or mockery of men, but all the more upholding certain features as the talkative and sexually aggressive woman. She remains anatomically and biologically a female, and even goes to the length of acquiring some lady like manner whilst meeting Tradescant, but this doesn’t obliterate how she single handedly takes down a dozen of men who come to forfeit her house, or kill and gouge out eyes and teeth of the people who are against the king. This authenticates that she is ready to transgress from the definition of a woman in a patriarchal society, and become an agent of her own life, standing up for what she believes in, even if it means to go to the length of violence. What is to be kept in mind is the normalization of the gruesome language used by Dog-Woman and her violent ways. This alludes to the fact that Winterson writes familiar into the strange, as this normalization of violence has an uneasiness surrounding it, one which won’t entail had the same action been taken by a male protagonist and would be, perhaps dubbed heroic. This doubled edged design seems almost intentional to challenge the normativity of gender binarism. Her violence against Firebrace and Scroggs brings her

closer to a warrior than to a delicate woman and the imagery of dismemberment and necrophilia points to the type of woman that men fear. As Toril Moi puts it: “ The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell—in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her” (57). It is not due to happenstance, therefore, that the men who the Dog-Woman kills are Puritans, “ a community linked to repression, conventionalism, asceticism and the condemnation of the worldly, of the flesh.” Dog-Woman rebels against patriarchy first by using bodily force, by reversing the natural balance according to which man is more powerful than woman and secondly, by choosing not to censor or euphemize the horrid aspects of bodily functions that she witnesses. Dog-Woman is as “ masculine” as she is a “ female”. This idea of double identity encapsulates that of a grafted cherry. The gender doesn’t remain one but becomes a “ self” rather than a “ role”. Grafting hands over this agency (of choosing the gender) to the self. This is what Winterson supports. She is in favor of the agency of the self to espouse to one gender or the possibility of many of them, in accordance with the decision of the self. Winterson describes that hybridization doesn’t lead one to be sex less but encompasses all that one could be. This is exemplified skillfully in the character of Jordan.

Jordan breaks down all sorts of barriers, between the sexes, between the ages, and between reality and lie. When explaining grafting Jordan says, that it is “ the means whereby a plant, perhaps tender or uncertain, is fused into a hardier member of its strain, and so the two take advantage of each other and produce a third kind” This grafting carries a metaphorical significance

for Jordan as he later on says, “ What I would like is to have some of Tradescant grafter on to me so that I could be a hero like him. He will flourish in any climate, pack his ships with precious things and be welcomed with the full honours when the King is restored.” Jordan’s writing is charged with a dilemma and pervaded with a poetical virtuosity that is often equated with the spoken language of womankind. Even though there is the evidence of his discourses being marked by the qualities of femininity, this instance demonstrates Jordan’s performance of male values. Here he is in pursuit of, “ the colonial male dream of conquering other spaces and he incorporates the stereotypes of travelling, fighting, searching for love in the model of the male hero”.

Here, ironically, the Dog-Woman reflects the ideology of a patriarchy which doesn’t accept this new gendered species, and says that “ such things had no gender and were a confusion to themselves.” This connotes the reaction that is witnessed against bisexuality and even gender fluidity. The transgression of gender stereotypes and the open embrace of bisexuality is only ascribed to Jordan; Dog-Woman remains a conservative being who sticks to clear-cut distinctions and the cast-iron certainties of matter. From this we infer that Sexing the Cherry reverts the traditional assumptions of women’s language as sentimental and men’s language as clear, scientific, pragmatic. Dog-Woman’s discourse becomes highly-unfeminine in its emphasis on grotesque details of the body; its monstrosity resides in its capacity to speak out, to refuse the passivity that society assigns to women.

Winterson, while showcasing the need for grafting emphasizes on the possibility of more than two genders and it is Jordan, who through his <https://assignbuster.com/the-broadened-notion-of-gender-and-the-possibilities-it-implies-in-wintersons-sexing-the-cherry/>

preoccupation with grafting and crossdressing, rejects and blurs the clear distinctions between the sexes. His search is not so much for the missing dancer, Fortunata, but for the fantasy of androgyny, symbolized by the very metaphor of grafting in the title. This fantasy of androgyny is brought about Jordan in many instances, such as “ The inward life tells us we are multiple, not single”. Winterson also suggests experimentation with different gender identities in the case of Jordan. He doesn’t want to be confined to just one thing, for example he questions the notion of identity when asking “ I’ve heard people say we are shaped by our childhood. But which one?” or when he desperately tries to fit into his biologically given role, “ I want to be like other men”. It is to be kept in mind that Jordan wants to pursue a “ self” or a “ role” unknown (or unnatural) to him, whilst not losing who he is; he doesn’t want to not delve into the questions and philosophy that he does, he doesn’t want to not go on adventures of fantasy and meet people who don’t exist, he just wants to explore the opposite of this role as well. He is also very aware of how he isn’t like other men (or how Dog-Woman doesn’t adhere to the conventional role of a woman). An interesting example of this is showcased when Jordan seems to be aware that the Dog-Woman is the one between them who takes on the role of a protector when it is supposed to be him. This acceptance doesn’t bring about resentment in him; instead he embraces all that he is. What he wants is to transgress the boundaries set for him. He wants to be all that he is and more.

Judith Butler asserts that “ gender identity is a matter of ‘ performativity’ and we see how the novel destabilizes the notions of gender identity by exposing how these are mere cultural constructs and not something which is natural

and inherent. The Dog Woman is very much a woman and a mother but doesn't conform to behavioral norms, notions of motherhood, femininity as laid down by patriarchy whilst Jordan's discourse, is permeated by multiplicity regarding reality, sexuality, history, and challenges phallogocentric unity. In the feminization of Jordan and the empowerment of Dog-Woman, Winterson explores the notions of gender identities and its various possibilities, by rewriting and reassigning gender roles and shifting the focus on the "self", more than on the "role".

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