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## THE BREAKDOWN OF GENDER BINARIES THROUGH THE TRANSGENDERED SUBJECT IN ANGELA CARTER'S THE PASSION OF NEW EVE<sup>1</sup> AND JEANETTE WINTERSON'S WRITTEN ON THE BODY<sup>2</sup>

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### **Abstract**

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asked, “[i]s the breakdown of gender binaries... so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held to be definitionally impossible and heuristically precluded from any effort to think gender?” (Butler, 1990: viii) As a starting point this question is used to look at the way that gender is understood and unsettled in contemporary British fiction, specifically in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1994). In this respect, Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* demonstrates how the subjects are already transgendered and continuously reshaping the material world through the reconceptualization of the transgendered subjects. On the other hand, Winterson’s *Written on the Body* urges the reader to consider how possible to discuss sex and sexuality of the narrator when his/her gender is never exposed and how the reader constitutes an identity for the narrator and an entrance into the text in the absence of sex. Then, this study will show that how gender ambiguity created by the presence of a gender-undeclared, nameless narrator of *Written on the Body*, together with the trans narrator of *The Passion of New Eve*, enable the reader to interrogate gender dynamics and to reconsider the categories of sex and sexuality with alteration in mind.

**Keywords:** Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson, Transgenderism, Gender, Gender Ambiguity.

### **1. Introduction**

The broad concern of this study is the significance of gender ambiguity and fluid sexuality created by the presence of transgender narrators in the novels of two twentieth century women novelists. Hence, this study examines *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) by Angela Carter, and *Written on the Body* (1992) by Jeanette Winterson in order to examine and contextualize the role of transgender narrators and their critique of stable gender position articulated through body.

This study attempts to find out how the discourses of Carter and Winterson generate new conceptualizations of gender, sexuality, and body that transgress dualistic and essentialist

<sup>1</sup> Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Vintage, 1992). All the future references to this work will be to the abbreviated title *Passion* and the page number.

<sup>2</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (New York: Vintage, 1992). All the future references to this work will be to the abbreviated title *Written* and the page number.

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conceptualizations. Therefore, these women novelists offer new ways of thinking about gender and body through the exploration of transgender identities represented in these novels.

## **2. "There is a place where contrarities are equally true": The Re-vision of Gender Myths and Transgender Subject**

As Carter remarks in "Notes from the Front Line," she envisioned *The Passion of New Eve* as her "one anti-mythic novel" (Carter, 1997, 69). In the novel she focuses on deconstructing the myth of sexual difference, based upon the story of Eve's creation from Adam's rib, and achieves this by not only showing gender identities that are a mixture of male/female - Eve/lyn and Tristessa - but also by parodying myths of womanhood.

Carter critiques the idea of natural sexual difference through Mother, Leilah and Tristessa's excessive subscription to and exaggeration of supposedly "natural" configurations of female gender identity, specifically the myths of the Earth Mother goddess, the whore, and the femme fatale masquerading as virgin, respectively. These myths of sexual difference are shown to be fabrications of the male imagination. Accordingly, Carter depicts the destruction of all three characters/myths. Carter leaves Eve/lyn to form a subjectivity beyond myths of stable and certain gender.

Further, this re-vision of myths of Woman sets up Carter's most subversive critique and the novel's transgender figure: Eve/lyn and his/her simultaneous deconstruction of the hermaphrodite myth. In *Eve/lyn*, Carter re-creates a more postmodern configuration of gender uncertainty as a transgender cyborg by means of the concurrence of his/her transsexual body and transgender narrative voice. Eve/lyn represents re-constructive mutability and perpetual fluidity, allowing for the additional troubling of other binaries, in particular the division between self and other.

Evelyn a man from England, who has moved to New York City to assume a teaching position at a university, leaves the chaotic and deteriorating city and sets off on a journey to find himself. Reflecting upon his journey, Eve/lyn comes to understand gender as an inessential prescriptive identity category and as a complex combination of culture and nature.

Although Eve/lyn's body may be transsexual, his/her subjectivity is transgendered and characterized by the continual confusion and combination of conventional masculine and feminine traits. However, Evelyn is able to pass undetected as a member of the female sex. Despite having had his physical sex changed, Evelyn's maleness is not erased in *Eve/lyn*. At this point, it becomes clear that changing one's physical appearance does not alter one's identity or sense of self.

In addition, when Eve/lyn is dressed as the groom in his mock wedding ceremony to Tristessa, he understands that both his male costume and his female skin are masquerades, thus making his performance as Tristessa's groom a "double drag," which emphasizes gender's mutability. In this respect, the mirrors reflect Eve/lyn as male, revealing the mirror's inability to reflect accurately an individual's gender identity. Although Eve/lyn looks male, s/he characterizes this "look" as a disguise. At the same time, Eve/lyn admits that s/he is also "disguised as a girl" and asserts that this disguise, or mask, cannot now be removed, so this permanent female disguise is simultaneous with his/her continued identification as male. This layering of gendered masks onto a transsexual body indicates that Eve/lyn's identity is described as transgender.

Even after his/her physical transformation into the ideal blonde bombshell, Eve/lyn realizes that s/he has to act like a woman, not simply look like one, contradicting the essentialist portrait of womanhood celebrated by Mother. To illustrate, Eve/lyn's confused gender identity is further aggravated by his rape by Zero. S/he remarks at one point that her/his imprisonment and repeated rape by Zero made a "real" woman of him/her. In addition, when Eve/lyn decides to toss his/her male genitals, which are given back to him/her by Lilith, into the ocean, this action does not indicate his/her rejection of masculinity and unequivocal embrace of femininity and motherhood. Rather, disposing of his/her genitals symbolizes his/her rejection of the "fleshy manifestation" of gender identity (Passion, 1982, 101).

Eve/lyn's physical transition into "the technological Eve in person" (Passion, 1982, 146), in accordance with his/her exemplification of gender's changeability, renders him/her an example of Donna Haraway's cyborg, a figure that can be read as a postmodern incarnation of the hermaphrodite. In "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," Haraway defines the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction [. . .] who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted" (Haraway, 2004, 7-8). Accordingly, Eve/lyn's transsexual body apparently has profound potentialities for reconsidering the relationship between definitions of "natural" humanness and



bodily configurations that are the result of various kinds of mechanization, whether medical, technological or otherwise.

Existing beyond the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality and therefore beyond conventional frameworks of gender and sex, Eve/lyn appears as a transgender cyborg, a more postmodern version of gender mixture than that indicated by the figure of the hermaphrodite. That is to say, the contemporary transgender identification represents a subject-in-process wherein gender is constantly at play and conventional markers of male/female are free-floating. On the other hand, hermaphrodites are characterized by their dual-sexuality, reflecting conventional definitions of the androgyne. At the same time, Evelyn's relationship with the two gender categories can be described as "in-between," and it is this difference that illustrates Eve/lyn's departure from the traditional myth of the hermaphrodite and Carter's postmodern revision of it.

To further contextualize this identification of Eve/lyn as a cyborg, Eve/lyn's encounter with a wide variety of characters occurs in a post-apocalyptic United States. This act of inserting the transgendered figure within various post-apocalyptic settings demotrates Carter's critique of American culture, centering upon its capitalism that depends on the domination of subjugated groups and the ways in which the heterosexual structure supports the power structures performed by a market economy wherein sex is a major commodity. As an example, in the novel the figure of Leilah comments on the depiction of women and their role in pornography, exposing how sexuality and gender have become commodified in the capitalist society.

Apparently, Carter reconceptualizes the gender fusion in the figure of the transgender cyborg who comes to embrace a de-essentialized aspect of identity as impermanent and open to the play of difference. At the same time, rather than universalizing the transgender look, which Winterson succeeds in doing in *Written on the Body*, *The Passion of New Eve* makes a point of transgender identity by situating Eve/lyn's transgendered body in the novel's center and constantly reflecting on the paradox that his/her body and subjectivity represent. Yet, Carter's use of retrospective narration and the effect this has on the stability of the narrative voice in the first four chapters provide the framework for Winterson's transgender vision.

Accordingly, as Haraway points out, Evelyn as a transgender cyborg introduces a "cyborg politics [that] is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism" (Haraway, 2004, 34). In this respect, Carter uses Eve/lyn to present the fact that words and myths, as just two examples of pervasive and foundational symbols, are imprecise and that there is always a gap between any symbol's meaning and its representation, and it is within this gap that Carter's transgender cyborg exists, revealing and embracing gender's cultural and technological construction and disrupting the essentialist framework at the basis of most myths.

As a re-vision of the hermaphrodite myth, Eve/lyn's character in the sexual union of Eve/lyn and Tristessa, illustrates an alchemical transformation of the gender. At the same time, the act of fleshly touching reveals the fluidity of this artificial barrier separating the self from others as well as depicts the body as a continuous becoming. As a cyborg, Eve/lyn blends the tenets of nature/culture, flesh/performance, male/female, and heterosexual/homosexual, among others, in a cyborg fashion. Carter uses Eve/lyn to represent a serious consideration of the possibilities inherent in an embrace of transformative mixture.

### **3. Postmodern Interpretations of New Figures of Subjectivity through the Revision of Love**

In *Written on the Body*, Winterson had created an unnamed first-person narrator who maintained his/her story of lost love without definitively revealing his/her gendered identity. However, considering *Written on the Body's* narrator as gendered either female or male, or in the opposite way, as fashioned toward a gender-free future disregards the complication of Winterson's novel and the possibility of the narrator occurring between these two dominant assumptions. With neither name nor gender, the ambiguously gendered narrator in the novel turns out to be a force of disruption that enables Winterson to dig up the tensions and dilemmas in the politics of desire and the multi-faceted identity constructions. Accordingly, Winterson tends to undermine gender and sexual norms not by erasing gender from the narrator, but by offering the endless possibilities for identity and desire that reveal the limits and artifices of such constructions.

Winterson undermines the gender binary through postmodern elements, making *Written on the Body's* presentation of gender, identity, and language more re-visionary than Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. Carter emphasizes critique over re-vision and present oppositional evaluations of gender categories while Winterson extends this critique and re-visions gender's relationship to subjectivity and language.



Therefore, *Written on the Body* expresses and universalizes more comprehensively a trans point of view and its ceaseless transitioning than *The Passion of New Eve*.

Apparently, the narrator not only performs the conventional definition of transgender, one whose sex and gender are not in full alignment, calling attention to the fluidity of gender, but s/he also fulfills more recent notions of transgender that intersect with postmodern concept of subjectivity. In examining the concept of transgender together with heteronormative categories of sex and gender, the question of what happens to individuals who are not appropriate to normative categories of sex and gender arises.

Calling to mind Prosser's definition of transgender, "It is this difference of ambivalence, a wavering around transition— or rather a transformation of transition into a new identity—that characterizes contemporary transgender," (Prosser, 1998, 169) Winterson's narrator lends him/herself to a transgendered reading. In this sense, his/her whole identity, not just gender, appears to be in a ceaseless state of transition and therefore embodies the idea of postmodernism's emphasis on subjectivity's inevitable de-centeredness and continual fluidity.

Louise, the narrator's lover, refers to the narrator's appearance a smattering of times— once to say "You were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen" and, just moments later, "You are a pool of clear water where the light plays" (Passion, 1982, 84-85). Both declarations characterize the narrator's physical existence as a provisional state. Most notably, the narrator refers to him/herself as "unreconstructed". The narrator's process of reconstruction is never complete or finished and Winterson's narrator therefore exhibits postmodern and posthuman trans subjectivity, in the sense of being transgender but also transitional, as s/he fluctuates within the borders of the gender binary in an effort to exist beyond them or, more precisely, in spite of them.

As Judith Halberstam states in *In Queer Time and Place*, interpreting the narrator as transgender forces readers to see that a representation of "gender ambiguity [in a text] is not a trap or a device but part of the production of new forms of heroism, vulnerability, visibility, and embodiment" (Halberstam, 2005, 96). Therefore, reading the narrator as postmodernly transgendered is perhaps the most productive approach to interpreting *Written on the Body*'s narrator not only because the narrator suits well within this boundless category but because reading his/her body as transgendered indicates how Winterson's novel deals with postmodern conceptions of subjectivity, time and space, placing gender as an integral component in a consideration of these categories.

Winterson contextualizes this disruption of gender and language within an extended meditation on the nature of love, presenting a portrait of love's complicated and conflicted relationship to the postmodern era. Winterson acknowledges love's classification as a metanarrative and critiques how it has been used to approve heterosexuality as "natural" as well as to order sexed identities in a rigid binary.

Significantly, *Written on the Body*'s narrator seems to reflect Barthes's assertion about the phrase "I love you": "Why is it that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear? 'I love you' is always a quotation" (Barthes, 1978, 9). Yet, Winterson refuses to abandon love altogether, rather presents her narrator's attempts to come to a more postmodern understanding of it.

Paradoxically placing love at the center of a fragmented postmodern world, Winterson highlights the transformative power she sees in love. Accordingly, in the novel she presents new figurations and manifestations of romantic love beyond those prescribed by heterosexual and androcentric parameters. Then, Winterson constructs narratives of love that account for de-centered subjects and the play of language in a postmodern context.

*Written on the Body* is Winterson's most extended and concentrated critique of the language regarding romantic love. Just as *Written on the Body*'s narrator's gender and body is more subversive when understood as transient and fluid, language serves as the same. Accordingly, Winterson's narrator uses language's instability to undermine narratives that define romantic desire as heterosexual and gender as binary.

Specifically, in the novel the narrator attacks the greatest romantic cliché of all: the phrase "I love you." In fact, the narrator struggles how to express their feelings in light of the clichéd expression "I love you" because it is charged as the ultimate expression of love when in fact it is simply a quotation uttered by others and not unique to their respective relationship. Accordingly, Winterson uses the inherent play of language to restore language rather than disrupting dominant discourses that prescribe desire and identity.

Likewise, the simultaneous subversion and revision of conventional marriage vows is just one attempt by the narrator to open up language to its inherent ambiguity and to characterize his/her relationship with Louise beyond marriage. After the previous criticism of the institutionalized love in the



form of marriage, the narrator contemplates an alternate wedding with Louise. Again, this is the narrator's struggle to free love of the narratives that surround it and to create an account that is unique to his/her experience with Louise. Apparently, romance and marriage are all shown to be creations of culture and society intended to arrange people into heterosexual relationships.

Later, the narrator applies the language of science to love in order to find a better, or more precise, way to describe what s/he has experienced with Louise. However, the narrator finds that this language is too prescriptive and artificially fixed. Within the novel's postmodern world of fragmentation and uncertainty, the narrator finds that the fixed language of science, which is directly implicated in the creation and prescription of binary gender, ends up being just as vague as the over-determined language of love, marriage, and romance.

By undermining the discourses of love, marriage, romance, and even science through an emphasis on language's ambiguity, the narrator questions how the body has been previously articulated and conceptualized, revealing the heteronormative values underlying these discourses. The body as complete, discrete, and contained crumbles as an inevitable result of its revelation as a cultural and scientific construction, just as the idea of only two genders similarly crumbles. Thus, the novel's narrator re-vision stories of the body, reviving the body from passivity and reclaiming some agency for it, particularly for its role in realizing love.

As such, Winterson's reclamation of the body speaks to Halberstam and Livingston's conception of the "posthuman" body: "Posthuman bodies are not slaves to master discourses but emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context" (Halberstam and Livingston, 1995, 2). Accordingly, Winterson's novels, not just *Written on the Body*, become counter-narratives of love that characterize the transgender body materializing through the fractures of these master discourses and revealing the unavoidable variability beyond the binary divisions that they enact.

To re-vision the language of love, Winterson combines it with the body, and the narrator of *Written on the Body* constantly refers to his/her body as well as Louise's as different kinds of texts, examining how one can know the body as various texts rather than through various texts. During the affair, Louise's body is a map, a scroll and a book. In turn, the narrator's body is also conceived of textually, as s/he and Louise interact with one another.

It is significant to note that the narrator's transgender body, like any text, is presented as in the process of becoming, as an unfinished text that is still being written, improving the narrator's transitional nature and the process of his/her self-construction in *Written on the Body*. This process of becoming illustrated by the narrator's transgender body is integral to the transformative narrative that Winterson presents. The body is never certain or reliable, not a discrete container, and Winterson's idea of the body as text highlights not only its incompleteness but also its constant vacillation between artificially imposed binaries and categories. Skin is fluid and not a container of stable subjectivity, just as genitals do not secure a stable gender.

Winterson portrays the body as a text of sensation rather than a text of language. The body comes to be a locus of love's expression for the narrator but the body is only realized when engaged in a lover's touch. In the novel, the mentioning of the raised letters of Braille text is significant because Braille is not only a language that needs touching in order to impart meaning but also it does not contain linguistic gender markers. Through the touching shared by Louise and the narrator, the narrator's unknown gender becomes unremarkable since they share a language in which gender does not exist.

Further, through the sensation of touch, the division between subject and object can be dissolved, unlike the other senses, thus undermining another key binary in the conventional construction of identity. Additionally, this bodily language of love embodies the permeability of the boundaries between two lovers through a kind of textual touching. The metaphor of textual touching epitomizes Winterson's re-vision of language in light of its connection to the constantly transitioning transgender body. At the same time, it also eradicates boundaries erected between self and other and male and female by pointing out their construction.

The alternative language of love featured in Winterson's novels compliments the postmodern manifestations of time and place reflecting how the presence of the transgender body has an effect on these times and places. Such an intersection of queer time, place and the transgender body creates distinctively queer moments that illustrate a perpetual present, the most striking occurrence at the conclusion of *Written on the Body*. The narrator's contact with Louise in *Written on the Body* asserts the permeability of the flesh



and his/her transgender body illustrates the permeability of gender categories. Just as the body comes to be subversive when it is realized as fluid and unstable, Winterson's emphasis on the power of the present breaks with heteronormative conceptions of time that privilege the maintenance of the nuclear family and a queer version of time. The present is always an absence, it cannot be measured and thus perpetually represents the possibilities of transience and contingency.

Written on the Body's concluding scene, the fusion of the narrator's transgender body with Louise's naked female body is the purest conception of the possibilities latent in queer time and space, as it challenges the logic of reality and combines the local and global space. This is where the postmodern love story begins and this novel's concluding scene is not an ending at all – happy or not. Time, space, identity, and reality are each presented as limitless and boundless, as permeating each other's boundaries in a ceaseless transitioning. The narrator finds the global within the local, finds the universe in his/her shabby room, and the present is shown to be just as formless as the space in which s/he finds him/herself. As the narrator makes physical contact with Louise, s/he realizes a place and time outside of boundaries. Again, the novel points out the uncertainty of flesh, but this uncertainty provides the narrator with hope and the possibility of a happy ending. As in Written on the Body's conclusion, the presence of the moment is emphasized and valued as it contains the past and future, rather than being separated from them, just as the transgender body contains male/female and his/her fusion with Louise eludes the hetero/homosexual binary.

#### 4. Conclusion

The reader not only serves as a witness to the ambiguously gendered body and to sexualities that occur beyond the binary categories of hetero/homosexuality, but s/he is also placed to look with these alternative perspectives through the novels' simultaneous subversion of gender identities, language, bodily discourses and conventional conceptions of reality, time and space. While The Passion of New Eve invokes the reader to read Eve/lyn's body and story as posttranssexual manifestos, situating the reader in an unconventional reading identity, Written on the Body calls on the reader to disrupt his/her reading identity to adopt the multiplicity of the transgender look. By inserting the reader in a queer world and breaking down the distinction between reader and narrator, Written on the Body universalizes the transgender point of view, which enables the reader to attain a queer perspective. More significantly, the narrator's ambiguous gender identity, in accordance with language's constant slippery and ambiguous nature, paves the way for the reader's identification with him/her, and thereby universalizes the transgender point of view. Additionally, several individuals with non-normative sexualities and gender identities populate the novel, including Elgin and his masochistic inclinations, and therefore enhances Winterson's presentation of a queer world in Written on the Body.

Through settling her novels with ambiguously gendered characters who perform queer sexualities, Winterson inserts the reader in this non-normative world by promoting these characters and their behaviors rather than positioning them in the minority position from which they would exercise little power to transform the reader's way of interpreting. However, since they are placed as the majority, the fluidity of gender and sexualities is presented as a given, which urges the reader to look with these characters rather than look at them.

Together with embedding the transgender point of view by transmitting the narrative through a trans perspective and by occupying the narrative world with numerous queer subjectivities, Winterson also universalizes it by dismantling the relationship between the narrator and the reader. The reader is immediately forced into the text by the narrator's ambiguously gendered identification. An additional method of achieving this fusion between the reader and narrator is through the narrator's self-declared unreliability. Related to the narrator's unreliability is his/her realization of memory's faulty nature. Winterson depicts memory as just as faulty and in some ways unknowable as the notions of "truth" and "reality." Further, the changing signification of "you" affects the readers' relationship to the narrator and their involvement in the story s/he is telling.

Through the narrator's critique of gendered stereotypes, cliches of romantic love, and prescriptive discourses of the body, Written on the Body reveals the heterosexist values latent in the maintenance of the gender binary. In fact, ceaseless transitioning between divisions of male and female and self and other characterizes individual identity and frees language of its supposed stability. For Winterson, love has served as the context for this disruption and re-vision of gender and language since love comes to be the ephemeral but powerful aspect of humanity. Like reading, Love in the novel turns out to be a transformative experience to transcend boundaries of gender as well as of time and place.



After all, it is important to note that these women writers introduce “transgenderism” into their narratives to undermine gender binaries as well as the social, cultural norms of femininity and masculinity. Indeed, the conceptualization of the term transgender points out a gender identity that is always and ceaselessly in the process of transformation. The novels to be examined highlight that transgender identity embodies the inclusiveness, mutability and transition between the gender binaries.

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