

P

ostmodern Realism in Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*

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Abstract

One of the most significant qualities that differentiate realist novelists from modernist ones or postmodernist novels from those of modernist writers is their peculiar answers to the question of what literary works should represent. Many postmodernist novels do not inimically discard the idea of the novel as a genre of realistic representation despite the fact that what they depict in terms of period, order, scale, shape, or framework differs a lot from that of realist novelists because what they see as realism is composed of the “bricolage” of multiple perceptions, truths and beliefs that would alternate their forms with the introduction of every new vantage point. Winterson's novel *Sexing the Cherry* was a popular postmodernist novel that was studied extensively within feminist theories, and its metafictional qualities were underscored in many studies. However, one of the striking qualities of it is its overt use of realistic and factual elements and the grounding of the plot and characterization on these elements. Hence, the goal of this study is to analyse the abovementioned novel in detail in order to determine to what extent the realism suggested in the novel could be seen as an exciting end in itself, and to what extent it is constructed as

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a subversion of certain grand narratives and as a denotation of new forms of representation and unrealistic construction.

Keywords

Contemporary novel, realism, Jeanette Winterson, feminism, metafictional

In the preface of one of the earliest examples of the novel as a literary genre, the author of *Robinson Crusoe* presents himself as the “editor of this account” and claims that his narration is “a just history of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it” because the novel writers of the time basically claimed themselves to be the objective re-tellers of events that they are narrating with fidelity, and the novel to be a realistic reflection or imitation of life (Defoe 2007, *The Preface*). Traditional realistic fictions, as they are named today, “feature a set of aesthetic conventions for representation, such as complex and psychologically credible characters, a coherent and casually linked plot, and everyday settings” as well as an “assumption that there is a reality independent of observer which can be communicated via language” (Birke *et al.* 2013, 2). The basic premises of realistic fiction stated mainly attempt to create an illusion in which all happenings are possible variants of the phenomena in our life. In other words, the realistic fiction tries to create a self-enclosed world— which takes its reference from the real life itself. In order to achieve this, they try to detail their world as precisely as possible, populate it with such characters as credible as possible, endeavour to narrate the story as objectively as possible, and compose the plot as ‘well’ as possible.

At the turn of the 20th century, Henry James describes the realistic fiction of the passing age as “loose baggy monsters” as they are full of details of the physical world and characters, and later modernist novelists accuse them of lacking an essential quality: the depiction of the inner-reality of characters, which, for them, is the reality that

mattered. As a result, the novels of the period focus less on realistic depictions of the lives of several characters with a lot of actions extended over a considerable length of time, but more on the mental processes of a limited number of characters that provide the reader with an extensive study of the distorted psychology of the contemporary man due to great wars, loss of faith, lack of values, and the pain and questions in mind. As all surrounding events left a burden in the minds of contemporary men, the characterization and plot in the works of modernist writers are different from that of the preceding authors. Later on, it becomes more meaningful for modernists to depict mental processes of characters over an idiosyncratic perception of time through some peculiar techniques such as free indirect speech, stream-of-consciousness, interior monologues, fragmented narration, and metafiction.

At that point, certain formal realistic elements of fiction are replaced by the modernist ones; new techniques are introduced; new perceptions of time, character, and reality are depicted in novels; but still the novel remains as a consistent genre in terms of plot, form and characters with a beginning and ending, a narrator, though not necessarily an omniscient one, and a perception of time though it may be non-linear.

However, when we move on to the age of postmodernism around the 1960s, all stable concepts were superseded by problematic counterparts, and in Ihab Hassan's words, the "form" is replaced by an "antiform;" "purpose" with "play;" "hierarchy" with "anarchy;" "finished work" with "process;" "creation" with "decreation;" "selection" with "combination;" "signified" with "signifier;" "grande histoire" with "petite histoire;" "determinacy" with "indeterminacy" (quoted in Malpas 2005, 8) and in the words of Jacques Derrida, the postmodern literary texts become nothing more than a linguistic play in which no transcendental signified could be reached, and a signifier may only lead us to another in a linguistic structure (1989, 91). Such "writerly" texts, as Barthes suggests, are constructed to be like a play between the reader and the text thanks to some postmodernist techniques such as:

metafiction; the disruption of the linear flow of narratives and the relationship between cause and effect; challenging the authority of the author; the use of events and characters drawn from fantasy; self-reflexively drawing attention to the language that is being used to construct the fiction; the use of parody and pastiche, and more generally a scepticism towards fixed ideologies and philosophies. (Bentley 2008, 30)

Winterson's "text", *Sexing the Cherry*, involves all of the above mentioned techniques and qualities in order to subvert truthfulness, artistic integrity, universality, unity, linearity of time, the perception of space, the boundary between low and high art, the well-made plot and an ending, established meaning and characters. Oddly enough, the text embraces certain qualities as well adhered to by realistic fiction, but the way in which the author makes use of them leaves much to discuss.

To begin with, as is the case with many postmodern texts, *Sexing the Cherry* is based on certain historical facts and characters. In addition, myths and fairy tales are attached to the text, and all are commingled on the basis of parody, and several new fantastic stories are weaved into it by Winterson; thus, it is aimed to set, an "incredulity" towards reality and realistic narrations as grand narratives in the words of Lyotard. The text sheds light from a different angle on some historical events such as the dethronement of Charles I, the period of Cromwell and the strict practices of the Puritans, the Great Fire of London, the Great Plague and the restoration of the monarchy by Charles II; hence, it is referential to documented history and our world in this sense. Nonetheless, as we keep reading, it quickly becomes clear that this postmodern text does what previous historiographies have done, but at an extreme level that is achieved by irony and parody (Nicol 2009, 32). Such an attitude in the text is described as historiographic metafiction by Linda

Hutcheon, and she claims this new way of history writing to be “intensively self-reflexive and parodic, yet it also attempts to root itself in that which both reflexivity and parody appear to short circuit: the historical world” (1988, *Preface*). Certain historical events mentioned above are presented with the gaze of a marginal, grotesque character, “Dog-Woman”, whose identity is problematized as she is not given an individual name, so how she depicts those historically true events from a subjective, ironic viewpoint becomes important within a postmodern scale. To illustrate, Dog-Woman’s opinion on the conflict between the parliament and the king is one of these moments. She says,

As far as I know it, and I have only a little learning, the King had been forced to call a Parliament to grant him money for his war against the kilted beasts and their savage ways. Savage to the core, and the poor King only to make them use a proper prayer book. They wouldn’t have his prayer book and in a most unchristian manner threatened his throne. The King, turning to his own people, found himself with a Parliament full of puritans who wouldn’t grant him money until he granted them reform. Not content with the Church of England that good King Henry had bequeathed to us all, they wanted what they called ‘A Church of God.’ (Winterson 1989, 20)

Many of her opinions on the historical events and facts are nothing but unorthodox and subjective perceptions that aim to raise questions in the reader’s mind about certain realities. These utterances in the text reveal the deconstructive inclination of the text as it renders certain truths and assumptions with a new point of view; thus, from a Derridean point of view, it aims to “reveal and subvert the tacit metaphysical presuppositions of Western thought” (Abrams 1999, 59). It is also clear in the text that Winterson does not make any effort to denote alternative

truths to the old ones, but she tries to cast doubts on them so as to let the reader question. The linguistic structure of the text does not have any claim to form a new presupposition as it forms a subjective, humorous “parole” which is much more different than the one that would be seen in a history book or in a traditional historiography. Moreover, the basic characters and narrators of the text as well, Dog-Woman, Jordan, Nicholas Jordan, and the environmentalist woman are marginal characters, in Hutcheon’s words, they are “anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history” (1988, 114). Jordan expresses such a quality of his own at the beginning of the text where he describes himself with such words:

For the Greeks, the hidden life demanded invisible ink. They wrote an ordinary letter in between the lines set out another letter, written in milk. The document looked innocent enough until one who knew better sprinkled coal-dust over it. What the letter had been no longer mattered; what mattered was the life flaring up undetected till now. I discovered that my own life was written invisibly, was squashed between facts. (Winterson 1989, 3)

What is significant in this quotation is that it puts emphasis on two things. The first one, as mentioned above, is that it draws our attention to the marginality of the character and the fact that these marginal characters were invisible among facts; in other words, they had neither been cared enough to be written about, nor had they been the focal point of any historiography or fiction before. The second point that Winterson draws our attention to with this excerpt is about the transforming of the invisible into the visible or dragging of it into a visible realm. This is done smoothly by adopting a specific type of writing--fantasy--because this sub-genre, according to Jackson, “traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (1981, 4). Hence,

it may be concluded that adopting such a sub-genre plays a complementary role on the content of the text so as to reveal one thing: the reality that society or history claims should be put into question, as it is a metanarrative constructed by the dominants of a culture and prone to ignore others.

Furthermore, *Sexing the Cherry* is a compilation of certain intertexts and a rewriting of them – and here text should be understood as any cultural structure or expression based on Derrida’s suggestion that “[t]here is nothing out of the text” – with the aim of parodying patriarchal and logocentric presuppositions or, in other words, metanarratives in Western literature, philosophy, and history through undermining them with the help of a style that could be considered as “revisionist myth-making.” At this point, when we consider the differentiation between pastiche and parody that Hutcheon made, denoting parody as something more political and subversive “for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (1988, 11), *Sexing the Cherry* involves both realistic elements that are true to history, and deconstructs them by way of parody; thus it becomes politically charged because it exposes the constructed nature of all texts with this metafictional quality; though, this is not the only proof for its being so. The narrative of the text also becomes important when we consider the text as a combination of the qualities of realistic fiction writing and postmodern parody. Intrusions of the author to the text, multiple narrators, the realistic story of Dog-Woman that includes details about the life of a poor grotesque seventeenth century female, certain factual data of the period concerning England’s history, in addition to the realistic narration of Jordan’s imaginary journeys are certain metafictional qualities that make *Sexing the Cherry* both postmodern and realistic at the same time. However, the realism mentioned here could not be understood in the conventional sense. Gasiorek claims realistic fiction to be something changing constantly in time, and for him, it is “flexible, wide-ranging, unstable, historically

variable, and radically open-ended” (1995, 14). Also, he argues that “realism changes in different periods and that it cannot be reduced to a set of formal features” (1995, 179). With his remarks in mind, it could be claimed that realism in fiction is essentially a time-bound concept, and what we can call realistic fiction currently may both resemble and differ from the notion of realistic representations in the nineteenth century; though, not necessarily just in terms of formal features. Hence, the story of Dog-Woman has realistic qualities as the world she narrates is referential to our world, and it consists of the daily life of a poor woman at the time. However, this realistic setting and characterisation is also challenged by the addition of this unusual, grotesque woman figure into the centre of the story as the focaliser. Additionally, the journeys of Jordan are imaginary, but are narrated with “an empirical approach” that brings them closer to realism because “[l]ike any seventeenth-century explorer he keeps a detailed record of both the voyages he takes with Tradescant and his fantastic journeys” (Aldea 2010, 95). Thus, these journeys are both a form of travel writing populated with imaginary and fantastic elements and, at the same time, a parody of this tradition. Jordan casts doubts on his journeys by saying “These are journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time” (Winterson 1989, 2). These stories disrupt the realistic narrative as we can see a mixture of realism with the fantastic, the magical and the imaginary, and as a result of this blending, *Sexing the Cherry* offers a form of “magic realism” as the text relies upon a “realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings” (Bowers 2004, 3). Such an eclecticism in a text and transgressions of boundaries are seen as qualities of “overt narcissistic texts” in Hutcheon’s word because they “overtly ask” the reader “to create a fictive imaginative world separate from the empirical one in which he lives” (1980, 32). For instance, in one of the places Jordan visits, the words of the people in town rises up and “form a thick cloud

over the city, which every so often must be thoroughly cleansed of too much language”, and then to clean this mess of words “[m]en and women in balloons fly up from the main square and, armed with mops and scrubbing brushes, do battle with the canopy of words trapped under the sun” (Winterson 1989, 11). Later, he meets a family with “a strange custom” in which “[n]ot one of them would allow their feet to touch the floor,” and their house of has “bottomless pits” and “furniture ... suspended on racks from the ceiling; the dining table supported by great chains, each link six inches thick” (Winterson 1989, 13). All of Jordan’s travels have such imaginary and fantastic qualities, and it is impossible to talk about empiricism in these descriptions, or to be sure whether these journeys take place in his mind or not; but it is possible to talk about a transgression of the boundary between fact and the imaginary, and about a disruptive attitude towards our reality or about an imaginary alternative to our world.

Another significant point in *Sexing the Cherry* regarding the problematic relationship that it has with the notion of realism is the perception of time. If we consider realism as a mode of writing that refers to any kind of text that captures reality, it could be asserted that novel writing has always been within this mode of writing or in relation with it since it first appeared. However, as Gasiorek claimed, the kind of reality it captures has changed over time: the focus during the nineteenth century was undeniably on physical reality, in the modernist phase it turned to inner reality, that is the psychology of the characters; and in the postmodernist mode of writing on the non-existence of reality itself. Nevertheless, when we read a nineteenth century or a modernist text, we have a clear idea of time, be it linear or cyclical, and of a time span as long or short, chronological or anachronic. A postmodern text like *Sexing the Cherry* offers us little or no perception of time, but an ambiguous, problematic idea of it, and we feel as if we are in a myth or a fairy tale in which we have no idea of when it begins or ends, but just moves on

constantly. In *Sexing the Cherry*, Dog-Woman's story is set in seventeenth century London, and this briefly gives the reader an understanding of time and space that would exist in a realistic fiction. However, with the involvement of Jordan's fantastic journeys and fragments of several more timelines and stories, as well as jumps in time between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, the order of the plot and the flow of chronical time are disrupted. As a result, the reader is left with ontological questions relating the existence of a reality offered in this problematic perception of time. Such a postmodernist text, in Brian McHale's words,

foreground[s] questions like ...: 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? ... What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured?' (2004, 10)

Subverting the sense of time perfectly serves an aim that is related to the destruction of the reality presented in the text because with the loss of the time concept, the reader cannot initiate a referential interaction between the world outside and the world of the text. As a result, the reality constructed in the text loses its illusionary quality, and the realistic side of fiction is undermined whereas the fictionality of it is underlined extensively.

The final significant point in *Sexing the Cherry* draws attention in relation to the notion of realism that the text offers, is about the structure and narratology of the text. As mentioned before, structuring the text upon various historical events and characters as well as fictional ones, fairy tales, and a realistic story of two more figures in present time—Nicholas Jordan and the environmentalist woman—the text offers a mise-en-abyme in which the basic narration of Jordan and Dog-

Woman leads to the other storylines and narrations. The text unfolds with two narrators and their stories appear realistic at first because the life of a poor woman and her son is portrayed with certain details about their life, such as the poverty they live in, the surprise they express when they see a tropical fruit, a banana, for the first time, their strict puritan neighbours, the intrusion of Tradescant into Jordan's life, and letting the young explorer set out on various journeys, etc. We see the text forming a frame of a realistic story up to that point. However, there are also certain qualities that lead the readers to become detached from this reality - for which we can consider Dog-Woman's claim of fishing Jordan out of the stinking Thames, Jordan's imaginary journeys, and the stories of the characters in these journeys such as the tales of the twelve dancing princesses, Fortunata, Rapunzel, the myths of Artemis and Oreon, and Orpheus. At this point, the text could be claimed to have formed a frame earlier just as to break it later. Patricia Waugh describes metafictional postmodern texts in her article "Are Novelists Liars?" as such: "Frames are set up only to be continually broken. Contexts are ostentatiously constructed, only to be subsequently deconstructed" (1984, 101). By the same token, with the chapter named "1990" in the text, we jump in time and hear the story of two characters who are suggested to be the same characters as the earlier major ones, or perhaps duplications of Jordan and Dog-Woman. Therefore, the earlier frame is broken once again and linear movement of time is distorted because of such spatiotemporal impossibilities. In addition, this new frame, constructed in "1990" is also broken by the involvement of a character from the past, possibly Tradescant, as the events of the present and past suggestively resemble each other. A few pages later, the chapter ends when Nicholas Jordan is at sea, leaning on the railing of the ship. The transgression of the border between past and present becomes clear with these sentences of Nicholas Jordan:

I rested my arms on the railing and my head on my arms. I felt I was

falling into a black hole with no stars and no life and no helmet. I heard a foot scrape on the deck beside me. Then a man's voice said, 'They are burying the King at Windsor today.' I snapped upright and looked full in the face of the man, who was staring out over the water. I knew him but from where? And his clothes nobody wears any clothes like that anymore. I looked beyond him, upwards. The sails creaked in the breeze, the main spar was heavy with rope. Further beyond I saw the Plough and Orion and the bright sickle of the moon. I heard a bird cry, sharp and fierce. Tradescant sighed. My name is Jordan. (Winterson 1989, 112-113)

Commingling the mythical with the historical, the fantasy and the grotesque with the real, the past with the present, and the fictional with the factual, Winterson presents us a unique text that grafts these all to each other; and considering Nicol's description of such texts as having "adherence to the logic of 'both ... and...,' rather than 'either...or...'" (2009, 31), *Sexing the Cherry* offers us a distinct postmodernism and a distinct realism because it grounds its politicized, postmodern arguments on realism. Yet, its overt postmodernist techniques outweigh its realistic qualities, which has been done on purpose because no postmodernist author would be interested in retelling a commonly known story, myth, or event without an aim of looking back to these from a new and different point of view. In fact, such a text undoubtedly, neither desires to present the past and the reality as it is, nor does it even offer something similar to it with a single worldview, solution, vision, or ending. Additionally, although the world created by the novel is seen as having "direct links to the world of empirical reality, it is not itself that reality," and it challenges "both any naïve realist concept of representation and also any equally naïve textualist or formalist assertion of the total separation of art from the world" (Hutcheon 1988, 125). Earlier I mentioned Jordan's claim that his story was written between the lines with invisible letters, and now I will suggest that

Winterson has a similar attitude as she lays realism between postmodernist lines. Furthermore, this sort of realism in *Sexing the Cherry* is not utilized as an exciting end itself, but as a technique within the novel; not as a vision of life, but as a way of projecting a subjective vision, so as to make the entire text politically charged. It reaches the peak when Winterson intrudes and counts a list of lies:

LIES 1: There is only the present and nothing to remember.

LIES 2: Time is a straight line.

LIES 3: The difference between the past and the future is that one has happened while the other has not.

LIES 4: We can only be in one place at a time.

LIES 5: Any proposition that contains the word 'finite' (the world, the universe, experience, ourselves...)

LIES 6: Reality as something which can be agreed upon.

LIES 7: Reality as truth. (Winterson 1989, 74)

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Öz

Jeanette Winterson'ın *Vişnenin Cinsiyeti* romanında Postmodern Gerçekçilik

19. yy gerçekçi yaklaşıma sahip roman yazarlarını 20. yy modern dönem yazarlarından veya ikisini postmodern dönem yazarlardan ayıran en önemli özelliklerden bir tanesi bu yazarların eserlerinde bir edebi eserin neyi aktarması ve yansıtması sorusuna verdikleri farklı cevaplarıdır. Birçok postmodern roman romanda gerçekçilik yaklaşımını, modern dönem eserlerinde olduğu gibi düşmanca bir biçimde göz ardı etmez ama yine de bu postmodern eserlerde ele alınan öğeler zaman, ölçü, biçim veya çerçeve olarak 19. yy gerçekçiliği anlayışından çok farklı boyutlarda aktarılır çünkü bu yazarların gerçekçilik terimiyle kastettikleri kim tarafından ve hangi açılardan ele alındıklarında değişen çoklu

gerçeklikleri, algılamaları ve inançları içeren bir tür toplama, “bricolage” ‘dır. İngiliz yazar Winterson’ın popüler postmodernist romanlarından *Vişnenin Cinsiyeti* feminist teoriler bağlamında birçok defa ele alınmış ve metinde uygulanan üstkurmaca yöntemlerine pek çok defa atıfta bulunulmuştur. Ancak, bu eserin en önemli özelliklerinden biri de gerçekçilik yaklaşımından ve yöntemlerinden ciddi boyutlarda faydalanması ve anlatım öğeleri arasında dönemsel, tarihsel öğeleri çok sık kullanmasıdır. Buna bağlı olarak, bu çalışma Winterson’ın gerçekçilik yaklaşımı dâhilindeki yöntemleri ve öğeleri ne ciddiyette, ne açılardan ve hangi amaçla ele aldığını detaylı bir biçimde incelemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Postmodern dönem romanı, gerçekçilik, feminizm, üstkurmaca