



Towards a Non-Gendered Identity: Performing Gender and Sexuality in *Written on the Body*

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Abstract— This paper discusses how the representation of a non-gendered narrator makes it possible for the literary work to question heterosexual and patriarchal normativity in society. The blurring of gender binaries and sexual conformity in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* will be used to explore how the text engages with the unconventional perceptions of gender to comment on the nature of the self. Within the framework of queer theory, Judith Butler's notions of performativity, drag performance and parody, will be a useful tool to investigate the reworking of identity, that results from this. This work will also take a look at how Winterson plays with stereotypical male and female identifications, appearance and behaviour in order to reconstruct gender, and also the ways in which heterosexual discourse is questioned in the novel.

Keywords— Queer theory, performativity, drag performance, gender, sexuality, Jeanette Winterson

I. INTRODUCTION

Early in Winterson's career, critics were drawn to her work not primarily for her unique style or complex structures, but because her debut aligned with the rise of lesbian criticism within feminist theory. Since Winterson was an openly lesbian author, her books were immediately categorized as "lesbian writing," making them a primary focus for this new academic field. However, this early wave of analysis often lacked depth, frequently applying theoretical frames to her work in a way that prioritised her sexual identity over a sophisticated reading of the texts themselves.

Queer theory seeks to dismantle the rigid boundaries of sexual identity, categories, and hierarchies rather than sexuality itself. It questions the possibility of a stable identity, exploring the link between power and the cultural construction of desire. Instead of relying on binary oppositions, this field celebrates fluidity and multiplicity, arguing that human beings cannot be defined by fixed sexual borders. Ultimately, because sexuality is a historical and discursive construct rather than an innate trait, one can

never truly stand entirely inside or outside of traditional categories like heterosexuality.

Jeanette Winterson's body of work has successfully moved beyond its initial "ghettoisation" as niche lesbian literature to receive broad critical acclaim. Scholars now seriously analyze her sophisticated narrative structures, precise vocabulary, and recurring motifs of transgression and 'crossing over.' By treating her core themes—such as love, loss, and the fluidity of identity—with the academic rigor they deserve, both her readership and the field of Winterson studies continue to expand rapidly.

This paper explores how the non-gendered narrator in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* is employed to call into question society's heterosexual and patriarchal norms. By examining various depictions of gender and sexuality through the framework of queer theory, specifically, Judith Butler's notions of performativity, drag performance and parody, I question whether the text successfully moves beyond traditional perceptions. Furthermore, this study analyzes how Winterson manipulates stereotypical behaviours and appearances to

reconstruct the concept of gender and challenge dominant heterosexual discourses.

II. METHODOLOGY

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault examines historical *épistemes* to outline how heteronormativity became a foundational structure in Western society. Building on this, William Benjamin Turner notes that

academic and social inquiry since 1800 has centred on "men" as the primary subject, specifically reflecting the biases of white, heterosexual males (p. 11) [1]. This focus established a rigid binary system that staged a discriminatory scenario where opposing pairs—such as male/female or heterosexuality/homosexuality—are not equal. Instead, these categorizations create a hierarchy that consistently values the first term over the second, reinforcing a social order based on perceived difference rather than neutrality.

Different from the ingrained imperatives and dictations of heteronormativity, same-sex desire in different cultures at different times evinces the fact that the conception and understanding of sexuality and gender is discursively, historically and culturally constructed. Moreover, the plenitude of sexuality suggests that it is not restricted to one distinct and unchangeable definition but is open to various attributions and configurations. The understanding of sexuality is ambiguous, fluid and unstable in itself outside the fixed strata of grounded and normative conventions. Freud's account of psychosexual development and his ideas on the nature of sexuality support the view that human sexuality is composed of not only biological but also social aspects. Freud, too, maintains the constructedness and later acquisition of sexuality, and proffers the idea that human beings are not innately confined merely to heteronormative patterns. Thus, "Freud goes beyond the binary trap of heterosexuality versus homosexuality, by displaying that all human beings are bisexual in nature but they are made to direct their sexual drive into solely one form of sexuality in the course of their infancy" (p. 106) [2].

In her informative book, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Nikki Sullivan traces the development of queer theory and the ongoing attempts to theorize same-sex tendency by various theorists. A German social commentator and activist, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs claims that homosexuality is innate, and it is "the result of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul" (p. 4) [3]. He says that some men are equipped with feminine drives and attributes, and some women carry masculine psyche within themselves. For Ulrichs, those men born with feminine motives tend to love men, and those women equipped with

masculine traits tend to love women. Ulrichs coined the terms "Urning" for males and "Dailing" for females, thus, generating a third sex category which is neither male nor female but a synthesis of both categories (p.5) [3].

In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Richard Von Krafft-Ebing argues that homosexuality is a congenital degeneration rooted in foetal development. He vilifies any non-procreative desire as a perversion, positioning reproduction as the sole legitimate purpose of sexual attraction. Along with sexologists advocating the innateness of sexuality from an essentialist standpoint, there have been scientists whose views on sexuality have not been as deterministic as those of Ulrich's and Krafft-Ebing's. One of those sexologists, Havelock Ellis, transcends essentialist views and suggests that any kind of sexuality including homosexuality is constituted by the joint working of nature and nurture. Ellis differs from Krafft-Ebing in that he does not see homosexuality as a disease but more like an anomaly or an abnormality. In this sense, inversion, Ellis claims "is analogous to colour-blindness or colour-hearing insofar as all three conditions are abnormal, but are not necessarily 'morbid' or 'harmful'" (p. 8) [3]. Dissociating homosexuality from its so-called derogation and morbidity, Ellis suggests that since homosexuality is congenital, there is no point in struggling to treat or punish it. Moreover, as he does not disregard sexuality's constructedness, historically and discursively, he believes in the possibility of eliminating homosexuality from very early on. Magnus Hirschfeld initially adopted the "third sex" model to categorize intermediate identities but later transitioned toward a concept of sexual pluralism that rejected rigid polarity (p. 12) [3]. By founding the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, he moved beyond binary constraints to champion sexual diversity and challenge the heteronormative social order. His work ultimately transitioned from biological determinism to a broader advocacy for equality and the dismantling of traditional sexual taxonomies.

Western recognition of homosexuality stems from 19th-century homophile groups and the later gay liberation movement, both of which sought social integration and legal reform. These organizations aimed to move from the margins to the center, utilizing education and political advocacy to secure equality and decriminalization. Stigmatized and marginalized by the dominant discourse, the gay liberation movement challenged the status quo by questioning the normalizing process and by challenging the traditional views on issues such as gender, legal terms, and marriage. Gay liberation was based on the notion of gay identity in which they took pride. Their motto "Out of the closets, into the streets" reflects the coming-out narrative, the public avowal of one's homosexuality, as

one comes to discover it. They believe that only by disclosing one's sexual identity can one realize one's self since homosexuality is not a personality trait to be shrouded in mystery and locked in a closet. On the contrary, it is a "transformative identity" that should be proclaimed publicly to constitute a site of existence in which one can live one's sexuality to the bitter end (p. 38) [4].

Judith Butler, an immensely significant figure in the field of queer theory, embraces the constructionist view and deconstructs the underlying parameters by evaluating those socially sanctioned gender/sexual terms and exposing them as constructed, not congenital. Butler traces the constitution of the subject and the configuration of sex and gender in her work *Gender Trouble*. She proffers her well-known and groundbreaking theories like performativity, drag performance and parody in the same book. She seeks answers for her questions about sex and gender. She asks:

What will and will not constitute an intelligible life and how do presumptions about normative gender and sexuality determine in advance what will qualify as the "human" and "liveable"? In other words, how do normative gender presumptions work to delimit the very field of descriptions that we have for human? (p. xxiii) [5].

Judith Butler argues that subjects do not pre-exist social reality but are instead "constituted" by the very language and gestures they perform. She challenges the idea of gender as a fixed, biological essence, describing it instead as a "changeable and revisable reality" that is continuously enacted (p. xxiv) [5]. Rejecting the notion of a "pre-cultural" sex, Butler posits that the body is a passive site where cultural values and inscriptions are externally imposed (p. 175) [5]. Ultimately, gender identity is an unstable effect of repeated stylised acts rather than an internal, immutable truth.

Butler adopts the Beauvoirian viewpoint that gender is not something one is born with; rather it is something one performs/does and eventually becomes. She interprets this catchphrase by stating that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity, instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 1) [5]. To this end, Butler proffers that gender is constructed by being repeatedly performed: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (p. 45) [5].

Butler contends that gender can be performed and reenacted in myriad ways, even in ways that are against the heterosexual framework of gender embodiment. If the ground on which gender identity is built is comprised of the stylized repetition of acts, but not of an immutable and prediscursive self/identity, then, Butler posits, "the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style (p. 1) [5]. Then, for Butler, gender is performative; it should be performed to come into being.

Butler argues that gender is not an inherent trait but a product of regulatory practices and language within the "Symbolic" realm. This system utilizes "performative speech acts"—including taboos and prohibitions—to materialize culturally "viable" sexual subjects (p. 106) [5]. Upon entering language, individuals are pressured to adopt and maintain specific stylized actions that align with dominant social norms. These hegemonic discourses effectively "freeze" the fluid nature of identity by categorizing it into restrictive, binary labels. Consequently, discursive performativity creates the very gendered reality it claims to merely describe, forcing subjects to perpetually enact its requirements (p. 107) [5]. In the light of Butler's arguments on gender as performance, specifically, the notion of discursive performativity, it is worthwhile to examine the subversion of gender norms and gender transformation in Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body*.

III. DISCUSSION

Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body* draws a realistic picture of twentieth century England, but in contrast to the majority of postmodern works that display chaos and displacement often accompanied by apocalyptic future visions, *Written on the Body* sets love and trust against individualism and control. Winterson, by undertaking an experiment through a narrator whose sex and gender remain nameless, problematizes the construction of gender.

In *Written on the Body*, the (non-gendered) narrator ruminates over the meaning of love, and reminisces about time spent with Louise, a now-lost lover. These reminiscences and musings are interspersed with tales of other past lovers and remembered incidents with them. The narrator abandons a relationship with Jacqueline for the married Louise, only for her husband, Elgin, to blackmail them into a separation by leveraging Louise's cancer diagnosis against her medical care. Fleeing to Yorkshire, the narrator descends into a state of anatomical obsession and grief, eventually attempting a failed

connection with their bar manager, Gail. Gail ultimately condemns the narrator's departure as an act of cowardice, prompting a desperate and violent return to London to find Louise. After a fruitless search and a physical confrontation with Elgin, the narrator returns to their country home to find Gail has made herself at home. The story reaches its emotional peak when the narrator's mourning is interrupted by Louise's sudden, frail appearance in the kitchen

"I thought you were the most beautiful creature *male* or *female* I had ever seen" (p. 84) [6]. In *Written on the Body*, it seems essential not to reveal the gender of the narrator, which is evident in the above quote. When Louise addresses her lover, she does not specify whether the person she is in love with is male or female. Instead, by referring to the beloved as a creature, the narrator's gender stays undeclared. Since the story is narrated from a first-person perspective, the reader only gets the narrator's point of view. It is therefore possible to keep the narrator's gender disguised because the narrator never provides any information on the topic. Employing the use of a genderless narrator thus seems to be a deliberate strategy.

In order to discuss the complex problems that arises due to the non-gendered narrator in

Written on the Body, it is essential to consider how society and critics have regarded the terms of gender. Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" is an essential frame of the modern view on gender (p. 224) [7]. Beauvoir distinguishes biological sex from socially constructed gender, and implicitly raises the question of how gender should be interpreted. A critic who later builds on the assumption that gender is a construction shaped by social and cultural conventions is Judith Butler. Butler takes the discussion even further, arguing that different gender roles are performed, thereby indicating that they are in fact just roles which are acted out (p. 184) [5]. This argument suggests that there is no direct connection between the female sex and feminine behaviour, or the male sex and masculine behaviour. Instead, the notion of male and female becomes a floating distinction that changes depending on the performer.

A conspicuous feature of *Written on the Body* is that although the narrator does not reveal any gender references about herself/himself, s/he mentions her/his sexual relations with other women and men. As suggested by Lisa Moore, "the narrator's undeclared gender makes the space of narration a 'virtual space,'" and further, in this virtual space, the anxiety caused by not arriving at any information about the narrator in terms of her/his name, age, occupation and background upsets the readers and frustrates their expectations (108) [8]. Winterson, by

disrupting the traditional narrative line and incorporating the gender ambiguity of her narrator; through the shift of her narrative, the integration of different points of view, the dissection of bodily integrity and flashbacks into her narrative, invites the readers to a fictional game. She seems to test whether the readers can endure when the story falls apart and ties together again.

In her challenge to the traditional understanding of sexual identities, Winterson aggravates most of the readers as she does not follow the determinate heteronormative sexual paradigm which prescribes human beings with biological male sex to understand themselves as men, follow the bodily and aesthetically approved appearance outlined for men and direct desire at women. Correspondingly, human beings with biological female sex should understand themselves as social women, follow the bodily and aesthetically approved appearance outlined for women and direct their desire at men. The readers are confused regarding the gender of the narrator, as on one page they witness her/his affair with a woman and on another page with a man. Winterson seems to problematize the gender/sexual boundaries by assigning different gender/sexual roles to her narrator. "Eventually, it becomes clear that s/he is not a seamless character but constructed by the stories s/he tells, with different identities evoked by various memory flashbacks typically beginning with 'I had a girlfriend once' or 'I had a boyfriend once'" (p. 50) [9].

In contrast to the conventional understanding which advocates increasing the reliability of the narrator so that the reader can be convinced and drawn into the narration more easily, Winterson consciously dictates to her narrator the idea that s/he is not reliable. The narrator questions her/his credibility: "I can tell by now that you are wondering whether I can be trusted as a narrator" (p. 24) [6], or tries to remember what s/he has said earlier, "Did I say this has happened to me again and again?" (p. 17) [6]. The narrator struggles to transfer her/his past into the present. By stating something indecisively and then restating it, the narrator consolidates the distrust felt by the restless readers. While recalling the scene in which s/he and Louise lay on their bed, the narrator cannot indicate the time precisely. S/he points out:

That year the branches were torn beneath the weight, this year they sing in the wind. There are no ripe plums in August. Have I got it wrong, this hesitant chronology? Perhaps I should call it Emma Bovary's eyes or Jane Eyre's dress. I don't know... Nevertheless, I will push on. There were plums and I broke them over you. (pp. 17-8) [6]

Through these indeterminate statements, Ute Kauer asserts that "the reader is made to see that what he or she will get

is fiction, not facts or rather uncertainties instead of straightforward categories” (p. 44) [10]. By repudiating the categories such as name and gender that engender an abiding self, the narrator wants the readers to become aware of the restrictions around them and to cherish multiplicity rather than sticking to singularity.

The first gender specific identification in *Written on the Body* occurs when the narrator compares him/herself with Alice in Wonderland. As Kauer suggests, “identifications of the self are usually inseparable from one's own gender” (p. 37) [10]. In relation to this statement, the reader is inclined to assume that the narrator is female. However, this notion is soon contradicted when the narrator identifies with the character of Lothario, who is not only a male, but is also foremost known for his seduction of women. By this identification the narrator adopts the voice of one of the most stereotypical male characters – a Don Juan.

Winterson initially frames the narrator through the archetype of the “confirmed bachelor,” characterized by a nonchalant and superficial approach to romance (p. 11) [6]. By treating “I love you” as a trite, disposable gesture, the narrator performs a masculine cliché of emotional distance and serial affairs. This persona is further reinforced by the mention of a “sports car” and the cynical belief that a “home girl” will eventually catch up to this casual lifestyle (p. 21) [6]. However, the narrator’s relationship with Jacqueline demonstrates the restrictive nature of these ‘real life’ domestic fantasies. Ultimately, these descriptions serve to highlight how individuals often perform gendered scripts that fail to capture the complexity of actual human connection.

In his/her relationship with Jacqueline, the narrator tries to conform to the picture of the faithful lover. Introducing her to the reader, the narrator says, “It was Jacqueline's job to make everything bright and shiny again. She was good with parents, good with children, good with animals . . . She was good with me” (p. 25[6]). The description of Jacqueline adheres to the image of the “home girl” who could change the characteristic Casanova with her caring and motherly instincts for both children and pets. Nevertheless, this image is just as cliché-ridden as the notion of the restless bachelor with a sports car. When the narrator, after falling for Louise, ends the love affair with Jacqueline, the stress is on the fact that no such fairy tale exists in real life.

However, the image of the traditional male subject is contested when the narrator positions him/herself as a contrast to the image of a heartless lover. On one occasion s/he burns the love letters written to a former girlfriend after finding out that the woman in question is going back to her husband: “I took them into the garden and burned

them one by one and I thought how easy it is to destroy the past and how difficult it is to forget it” (p. 17) [6]. Here the narrator turns the image on its head, now identifying with a heart-broken mistress in contrast to the Casanova who causes the heart-ache. While the image of the inattentive lover is often associated with male behaviour, the despairing and lovesick mistress is usually associated with female behaviour.

By oscillating between the roles of the distant “male” lover and the emotionally immersed “female” mistress, Winterson forces the reader to confront and question binary stereotypes. This constant shift in identification acts as a tool to break traditional patterns of thinking, showing that these supposedly opposite archetypes are both products of the same gendered legacy. Ultimately, the narrator’s fluidity undermines the rigid separation of masculine and feminine behaviours. Winterson highlights how dress codes, such as the narrator’s “business suit” or recycled shorts, trigger ingrained gender assumptions in the reader (pp. 12, 72) [6]. While these clothing often carry masculine connotations, the narrator’s physical descriptions remain intentionally vague to frustrate any definitive categorization. By presenting these sartorial clues as inconclusive, Winterson exposes the social tendency to link clothing to a fixed biological sex. Ultimately, this ambiguity serves to undermine the fixed gender assumptions prevalent in modern society.

The narrator challenges binary gender roles by performing actions that oscillate between traditional masculinity and femininity. For instance, the narrator’s violent confrontation with Elgin (p. 172) [6] serves to either reinforce male aggression or subvert the trope of female weakness depending on the reader's perception. Kauer argues that these masculine stereotypes are intentionally “mocked” to undermine conventional expectations of how women behave (p. 46) [10]. Ultimately, this ambiguity destabilizes the link between specific actions and a fixed biological sex.

While Kendrick identifies the narrator as male because of their public, “heterosexual” openness regarding affairs (p. 132) [11], this perspective arguably relies on the very gender biases Winterson seeks to subvert. Conversely, Kauer suggests that identifying the narrator as female allows for a subversive use of irony and parody to deconstruct traditional roles (p. 46) [10]. From this viewpoint, a female narrator performing ‘Casanova’ clichés exposes the absurdity of male promiscuity as a social norm. This performance acts as a masculine mask designed to deliberately disrupt and reconstruct rigid gender binaries (p. 47) [10].

Instead of perceiving gender as either male or female, it is possible to perceive gender as a performance. From this

angle, the genderless narrator neither conforms only to male nor only to female behaviour, but plays the different gender roles depicted in the text. Judith Butler states that “gender is not being, it is doing” (p. 34) [5]. The narrator’s alteration between male/female identifications, behaviour and actions is a role play, just like the role played by an actor on a stage. In fact, Butler uses the example of drag artists to support her statement: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (p. 187) [5]. The different male and female attributes traced in *Written on the Body*, according to the theory of gender as performative, do not verify the narrator’s sex. Butler indicates that “man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (p. 12) [5]. In line with this argument, the description of a typical male quality in *Written on the Body* could equally define a female doer or the other way around.

With this notion it becomes less significant to determine whether the narrator is a man

or a woman. Kauer argues that “by joking with these roles and the stereotypes attached to them, the narrator constantly plays with the categories determining our view of the world and of the text” (p. 47) [10]. When the genderless narrator identifies her/himself with Alice in Wonderland or Lothario it is a performance that is anchored in culturally constructed gender premises. *Written on the Body* never lets the reader take the narrator’s gender for granted or to become certain of it. The work instead perceives gender as a continuum, never fixed implicitly to a sex. The performance of different gender roles is constantly broken up and aims to show that identity is not connected to gender.

In order to make the readers realize the inconsistency and versatility of sexuality, the narrator deliberately dwells on false assumptions and hints regarding her/his gender and sex. Sometimes s/he becomes Alice in Wonderland, stating that “I shall call myself Alice and play croquet with the flamingoes” (p. 10) [6], and sometimes after recalling memories with one of her/his earlier boyfriends, s/he announces, “I still blush” and asks herself/himself “Why do I feel like a convent virgin?” (p. 94) [6]. Winterson’s narrative renders gender clues obsolete, forcing readers to see sexuality as a true diversity of bodies and desires rather than a binary of male or female. By decoupling attraction from specific gender categories, the text seeks to emancipate desire from restrictive social frameworks that limit human experience. This strategic ambiguity deconstructs traditional labels, ultimately challenging the idea that gender or sexuality should serve as the primary basis for human identity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Winterson’s story makes gender markers irrelevant, pushing readers to view sexuality as a broad spectrum of desire rather than a strict male-female binary. By separating attraction from traditional categories, the narrative frees human experience from the restrictive social boxes that typically define us. This intentional vagueness breaks down labels, ultimately questioning whether gender or sexuality should be the core of one’s identity at all.

Written on the Body is a romance story whose main protagonist and narrator is non-gendered. This reading suggests that the author uses the unspecified gender of the narrator as a stratagem to problematize the very notions of gender and sexuality as the keystones of identity. The non-gendered identity of the narrator is, thus, utilized in the novel as a step forward in blurring gender and sexual boundaries, and in facilitating the development of an identity freed from rigid restrictions. Hence, the narrator is able to pursue a self that is not perceived as being caged within clear and defined gender boundaries, but as being diverse, multiple and not easy to determine.

Written on the Body is an extraordinary piece of work both from a narratological and a textual point of view. Its subversive status transgresses and expands the boundaries of gender and sexuality by challenging and emasculating the preconceptions of its audience, inducing them to envision a whole new universe of possibilities. Winterson’s writing also dissolves the binary opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and defies the stability of the self.

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