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Jeanette Winterson's Sexing the Cherry**

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*Dog Woman and the Complexities  
of the Maternal Instinct  
in Jeanette Winterson's Sexing the Cherry*

**Keywords:** maternal; body; instinct; mother; gender

**Abstract:** In *Sexing the Cherry*, Jeanette Winterson's *Dog Woman* is a gigantesque weapon yielding force to be reckoned with. As the title teases with the notion of gendering within language, both her physical appearance and actions beg for a reevaluation of what has been defined as both maternal and instinctual. She is at once a stable and loving, yet in order to protect her son from harm, she revolts against the powers that be and oscillates between time and place in both a self-made utopia as well as a force-fed dystopia. To her son, she is shelter, to her enemies, menacing and elusive. What, I am always curious when I teach the novel in class, is *Dog Woman* to the reader? Winterson's focus on the biology of this character is paramount. The rendering of *Dog Woman*'s 'self' in writing is a multi-faceted project for Winterson, and before terminology such as 'hybrid,' or 'border identity' emerge, *Dog Woman* embodies many selves in one, and defies almost all categorization. Pulling from modern literary and philosophical theory, my discussion does address the possibility of whether *Dog Woman* ever actually appropriates the maternal. My position remains, however, that Winterson may have succeeded in inscribing a new maternal mode onto the literary and cultural consciousness of our time.

*Sexing the Cherry* is Jeanette Winterson's fifth published work, and her fourth work of fiction. Like in many of her other works, the focus on the female and the female body is paramount, and to illustrate her profoundly original characters, she relies heavily on myth, fairytales, and history. Graphic language and vulgar insults fill several chapters of the book, and I imagine that the social climate of 17<sup>th</sup> century London, where the narrative is situated, would surely have stigmatized it as obscene. In *Sexing the Cherry*, *Dog Woman* is a Wintersonian Gargantua. Whereas a macrocosmic consideration of this novel may reveal the sublime beauty of a creation story which is narrated using scatological humor, crudity, and even violence, my focus here is isolated to the character of *Dog Woman* and what such a character brings to maternal discourse, with particular consideration of the notion of "instinct" and all that this problematic term signifies for *Dog Woman*.

I was fortunate to have discovered this book via an English professor who gifted it to me in my junior year of college as I was embarking on my first transatlantic journey. He labeled it "travel literature" because, as he suggested, it

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transports the reader elsewhere. Indeed, it did, and thanks to the other worldly creation of Dog Woman, I am here. Dog Woman, the weapon yielding maternal superpower, is more than just a force with which to be reckoned. As the title of the novel teases the reader with the notion of gendering within language, both Dog Woman's physical appearance and actions beg for a reevaluation of what has been defined as both maternal and instinctual. She is at once a stable and loving, yet in order to protect her son from harm, she acts rather impulsively and revolts against the powers that be, oscillating between time and place in both a self made utopia as well as a force-fed dystopia. To her son, she is shelter, to her enemies, menacing and elusive. What, I will be curious to find out when I teach the novel to college students, is Dog Woman to co-ed mainstream youth and the institution of motherhood? When Dog Woman first appears in the text in chapter 2 the reader instantly gets the sense that this character is neither explicitly male nor female. She is instead a figure, one which Jordan, the first character to speak in chapter 1 of *Sexing the Cherry*, will later simply call "mother":

My mother carved this on a medallion and hung it round my neck the day she found me in the slime by the river. I was wrapped up in a rotting sack such as kittens are drowned in, but my head was wedged uppermost against the bank. A face as round as the moon with hair falling on either side bobbed over me (Winterson 10).

It is in this second chapter that Dog Woman invokes herself as mother, and for the first time we begin to see the terms of 'maternity' begin to take shape in the text. Yet without a womb, any articulated feminine attributes, human form, or even a real name, how, then, can such a subject be legitimized? Within whose discourse, if any, does she exist? She, who adamantly rejects the phallus, strangely enough, feels uneasy towards a banana. Upon its discovery, she says, "it's either painted or infected, for there is none such a colour that I know . . . There was no good woman could put that to her mouth" (Winterson 12-13). By locating herself within the temporal framework of the other subject (Jordan) in the text, Dog Woman, however liberating her wild voyages seem to be, proves to be a rather fixed subject whose existence can primarily be characterized as relative [to Jordan's]. In other words, by positioning herself in relation to Jordan, and his insatiable exploratory appetite, Dog Woman functions as a kind of linguistic, maternal stabilizer, attempting to hold him close while fastening the text to the page.

The problem is that Dog Woman herself is responsible for Jordan's exploratory nature, due, in part, to the name that she has chosen for him. At first she defends her choice of names, "but I wanted to give him a river name, a name not bound to anything, just like the waters aren't bound to anything," and then regretfully admits her mistake, "I should have named him after a stagnant pond and then I could have kept him, but I named him after a river and in the flood tide he slipped away" (Winterson 11). This is a crucial moment in the text, for it is precisely here that most of the "gender trouble" can be found rearing its shapeless head. And once it is established that Dog Woman did not biologically give birth to Jordan, the critical complexities of Winterson's text become more and more

evident. What does it mean that she did not partake in the physical aspects of child bearing? What might be Winterson's larger assignment in carefully crafting Dog Woman so that she bears no resemblance to most maternal figures known as such in literature? Finally, what message is being conveyed by the lack of any male contributor?

On biology and men, Dog Woman asserts, "I would have liked to pour out a child from my body but you have to have a man for that and there's no man who's a match for me" (Winterson 11). What is granted here is Butler's "non-signifying inscriptional space" that is gender (Winterson 52). This space becomes a map of sorts on which one could trace the unmarked paths of form and femininity, two roads that clearly do not intersect in Dog Woman's district.

Above all else, Jeanette Winterson's Dog Woman uses the maternal as a navigating force to guide her on her respective journeys. She is a figure of creative audacity that seems to revel in an instinctive power that is often the single strongest force propelling her forward. The maternal becomes the point of origin from which all is articulated. It acts as a force through which the love that Dog Woman emotes is channeled. This is why I am choosing to frame my discussion with the work of Luisa Muraro, a leading figure in Italian feminism.

In *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, Muraro extricates the figure of the mother from the well of writing surrounding the 'woman.' The mother, for Muraro, is not a 'kind of woman, or a by-product of the woman's function, but instead she is an ontological process unto herself. Likewise, Dog Woman and is not an imagined creature- fantastic,<sup>3</sup> perhaps, but not imagined. Luisa Muraro's philosophical findings are helpful in understanding how the 'mother as trope' works in this narrative, in particular, how this understanding moves toward a necessary re-thinking of gender and identity.

Muraro departs from theorizing about the mother in terms of unrealistic and often fantastical notions of childbirth and childrearing, and instead, affirms:

I do not speak of the mother metaphorically. I speak of her realistically, and in order to be clear, I will renounce the beautiful and rich language that develops from the metaphor of the mother and the symbolism of birth (48).

The text, apart from the notion of space as well as place in locating the maternal, also juxtaposes public versus private place/space: a city street, the open sea, flea markets, the bank of a river, a public square. In other words, Dog Woman occupies spaces that have culturally and historically excluded women. In the prologue to *Gender Space Architecture*, Leslie Kanes Weisman discusses the idea of space as power. She claims that "the appropriation and use of space are political acts" (5). In this respect, Winterson works to restructure the rigid notions of gendered space for their characters' sake. What makes her project even more

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<sup>3</sup> Mine Özyurt Kılıç, a professor at the Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey, wrote her PhD thesis on Winterson, claiming that, "in the hands of writers with feminist intents, the fantastic becomes a perfect tool for deconstructing old-established gender roles." Mine Özyurt Kılıç. *The Function Of The Fantastic In The Works of Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson.* Diss. Middle East Technical University, 2005, iv.

unique is the fact that she attempts to do so using the single authority of the 'maternal'.

What makes Winterson 'political,' to use Weisman's term, is that she wholly dominates male dominant, non-domestic space such as a 17<sup>th</sup> century public square in London. She is an anti-super heroine of sorts, unapologetic and fierce, unmercifully punishing the thugs around her, shoving the faces of corrupt Kings into her soiled undergarments. Yet none of her actions are gratuitous. The text clearly illustrates that the reason she acts as such is explained away by her fierce maternal instinct: all that she does is in order to protect her son. The point I am making here is that Dog Woman's actions do not support a potential criticism that she may simply be appropriating masculinity by behaving as she does. Instead, under the auspice of maternal love, Dog Woman succeeds, I am claiming, with Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in pocket, in performing subversive body acts which work to reveal the artificiality of gender based behavior and representations. Winterson examines the maternal as 'site' in *Sexing the Cherry* by acknowledging the power of the return to the mother at the onset. But what do such efforts to locate the maternal and centralize a narrative around it signify? Unlike the ability to identify and locate, the particular origins of a genre or of a trend in critical theory on a literary map of sorts, the task of trying to examine the trajectory of the 'maternal,' is quite problematic, especially when the mother figure is herself on a journey of epic proportion.

Dog Woman asserts, "does it matter if the place cannot be mapped as long as I can still describe it" (15)? As I will show, for Winterson, the answer is clearly no. In *Sexing the Cherry*, Dog Woman yearns to be the maternal homeland from where her son Jordan will depart. She is his origin. He does leave her for adventurous pursuits only to sail around the world and return. He asserts: "The shining water and the size of the world. I have seen both again and again since I left my mother on the banks of the black Thames, but in my mind it is always the same place I return to"(17).

Jeanette Winterson illustrates the idea that from the time that a mother has a child (notwithstanding biology), there is a constant tension of ebbing and flowing. With the imagery of water intertwined with the background of discovery and the journey, Winterson creates a narrative that ensconces the maternal body (Dog Woman) as fixed and the kin (Jordan) as stray. Dog Woman plays the part of a warrior, fierce and confrontational, as well as genuinely protective of the boy Jordan she takes on as her own. When Dog Woman takes Jordan to see the wonder of a banana for the first time, and encounters adversity, she does not hesitate to assert her strength and threaten the adversary.

I took Jordan on a hound-lead and pushed my way through the gapers and sinners until we got to the front and there was Johnson himself trying to charge money for a glimpse of the thing...I lifted Jordan up and told Johnson that if he didn't throw back his cloth and let us see this wonder I'd cram his face so hard into my breasts that he'd wish he'd never been suckled by a woman, so truly I would smother him (12).

And what's more, she actually uses the female properties of her body as a defense. She does not, as Irigaray has suggested, need to "suppress and subordinate" these properties (186). Her actions echo the sentiments of Carolyn Heilbrun in *Reinventing Womanhood* that "women must abandon the fantasy of womanhood, that fantasy provided by fairy tales and romances, and perceive themselves as the active principle" (167). In any event, despite Dog Woman's ferocious façade, the reader easily believes that she may fall apart if harm were to ever come to her son. Her agenda is selfless in that respect. She is no *Mother Courage*.<sup>4</sup> Her intentions are pure and simple. While it's true that she does not hesitate to take revenge, verbal and physical when necessary, what never falters is her role as Jordan's mother. This role contains no preconceived notions about what that term has ever signified, only steadfast certainty about the imagined process of giving birth: Of that, she says, Dog Woman iterates, and in part, celebrates, the non-biological terms of her motherhood: "he came from the water". She at once acknowledges and laments this fact as well as Jordan's decision to sail the world, "... I knew the water would claim him again" (83). At heart, Dog Woman is a protector. She is also vehement defender of what she deems as unjust. Cunning about that which she allows to envelop her heart, Dog Woman is an opportunist. Ironically, her son is the only one who can pierce through her heart and expose her weaknesses. For example, Winterson allows Dog Woman to go into detail describing herself as a young girl at a time when she seems to be aware of her own coming into being and self development. She also, for the first time, mentions her parents' relationship. She goes on to detail how, unapologetically, she comes to commit her first murder: that of her father.

What Muraro does in theory, Winterson puts into practice. Dog Woman can be said to be enacting exactly what Muraro calls for: "a shift from the power of the father and from its interface on our action" (16). She says:

When I was a girl I heard my mother and father copulating. I heard my father's steady grunts and my mother's silence. Later my mother told me that men take pleasure and women give it. She told me in a matter-of-fact way, in the same tone of voice she used to tell me how to feed the dogs or make bread. When I was born I was tiny enough to sleep in my father's shoe; it was only later that I began to grow, and to grow to such proportions that my father had the idea of exhibiting me. My mother refused him, saying no member of her family should be the subject of an exhibition, no matter how poor we became. One night my father tried to steal me and sell me to a man with one leg. They had a barrel ready to put me in, but no sooner did I burst the bonds of the barrel and came flying out at my father's throat. That was my first murder (107).

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<sup>4</sup> The *Mother Courage* reference speaks to the infamous mother figure in Bertold Brecht's 20<sup>th</sup> century play where a poor, widowed merchant loses two of her three children in war time but almost immediately continues on with the business of buying and selling, an operation afforded to her solely because of the war.

And we then recall that Dog Woman is now a mother, with her own maternal obligations and worries. It becomes crystal clear that Winterson writes female development and femininity as contradictory and problematic. Through the figure of Dog Woman, she interrogates and alters certain traditional notions the reader may have of the maternal. In doing so, the maternal is set outside of the cadre of the feminine, so that the texts challenge the notion of the maternal as an “unstable category” that plagues scholars and writers alike.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, however, in privileging the maternal over the feminine, Winterson carves a deeper route for mapping the matrix, revealing a trajectory much more probable than problematic.

Physically steering his mother around the globe in pursuit of adventure, Jordan, navigator, continuously eludes his mother, navigatee, causing both of them to move further away from any solid land of origin. On the other hand Dog Woman, in *Sexing the Cherry*, is a self made mother, rewriting all that the term may mean. Finding a baby on the bank of a river, she boldly claims for herself the right to mother it. A lovingly grotesque disfigured giant of a thing, she adores her son and holds motherhood as the central responsibility of her life, yet she never insists that the mother is ever a sacred vessel or a passive agent. Instead, she fixes her attention onto the nature of the mother/ kin paradigm. Her son becomes a sailor, a fitting metaphor for their familial arrangement. He leaves home, travels the world and she either stays or goes along with him, in awe.

At the close of the novel, Dog woman celebrates the many chapters of her life, that of a mother, a dog breeder, and a fighter. As she is readying for Jordan’s long awaited homecoming, she adds another interesting behavior to her repertoire – nesting. Filled with anticipation and joy, she begins cleaning the hut, brushing down the dogs, and draping on her pearls. She mentions that she is excited that Jordan will see how she has “risen in the world these last years,” hinting at how she had finally found the time to undertake her own enterprise, selling pure bred hounds to the nobility (135). Proudly, she remarks: “I see I have a flair for enterprise. It was ever with me, but smothered, I think, by my maternalness and the pressing need to do away with scoundrels” (135). Is this a 17<sup>th</sup> century version of a work-life balance? Perhaps so.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Dog Woman acts upon various types of instincts, and at the conclusion of the novel, we come to find that there is not one dominant instinct that she acts on more so than the other. By mentioning her “maternalness” along with this “pressing need to do away with scoundrels” in tandem, it becomes clear that to be “maternal” for Dog Woman is to embody many traits and exhibit multiple behaviors, with one only momentarily able to eclipse the other. It is to be protector, vigilante, nurturer, and more. No two maternal instincts are alike, and Winterson’s 17<sup>th</sup> century creation of Dog Woman

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<sup>5</sup> Unlike Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, in which she radically ponders how the female imaginary would even be represented if it were to actually “deploy itself”, theorists Julia Kristeva, Drucilla Cornell, and Denise Riley hold that ‘woman’ is an altogether unstable category that cannot viably be set apart, even in the imaginary, from the narratives and images that contain her.



might just be one of the closest things to a real mother that this century has ever seen.

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