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Loathed Love: *Sexing the Cherry* and the Grotesque Body

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Abstract:

This research paper focuses on the subversion of gender and heteronormative desire in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*, with a cultural backdrop of seventeenth century London. The aim is to understand how Winterson uses the concept of the grotesque body as a site of dissent and nonconformity. This paper deals with one of the protagonists, Dog Woman and her journey to overturn the conservative, patriarchal order and also demystifies the fairy tale format with the twelve-dancing princess questioning the notion of myth and memory.

Keywords: Dog Woman, Grotesque, Post World War Literature, *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson.

The novel, *Sexing the Cherry*, 1989, is an attempt to recover the value of laughter. It is an endeavour to subvert the normative, linear and mono forms of hierarchy and power structures; with a fairy tale format to it. This essay would like to see the text itself as the 'grotesque body';

as everything that is denied, that is not linear, and exists to bring forth a catharsis for the alienated and a body for the non-conforming, repressed desires. The text then, while challenging historicism, asks a critical question; can women have desires that do not involve a man's narcissist gratification or does not involve the man inserting themselves, be inside the 'grotesque body' of the female or the text?

One of the two main protagonists of the text is Dog Woman. There is a general agreement in literary circles that she is the face of subversion of gender and femininity in the text. One could say Dog Woman exceeds and ironizes normative femininity. She and eventually her alter ego, become a threat to the masculine voice and physical body with their feminist history. More overtly, descriptions of Dog Woman's unusually large and 'monstrous' body throughout the text disengages with capitalistic, patriarchal desires and show her 'ugliness' as the economy on which psycho-social constructs of the body are deconstructed. Her body is the site of subversion. Her presence threatens all notions of beauty and femininity that have been deemed normative in sexual and moral

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politics of corporeal appetites. She is not the ‘angel of the house’ whose honour has to be protected to be a domestic goddess. She is, as Gilbert and Gubar would say, ‘the madwoman in the attic’ only because her monstrous representation doesn’t get subverted in the hegemonic, male narrative.

How hideous am I? My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy. I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas. (Sexing the Cherry 19)

This excessiveness is a feature of what Mikhail Bakhtin would call “grotesque”. In her hyperbolic gigantic description, we see the carnivalesque overturning the narrative order. It is primarily because of the satirical orientation towards the ‘inappropriate’ that makes Dog Woman an extreme, almost fantastic character. Her bodily excess, exaggeration of her size as someone monstrous, lends us imagery that is not just quantitatively large but also qualitatively wealthy; since Dog Woman’s sharp critique leaves the reader morally satisfied.

The exaggeration of the inappropriate to incredible and monstrous dimensions is, according to (Heinrich) Schneegans, the basic

nature of the grotesque. Therefore, the grotesque is always satire... Where there is no satirical orientation there is no grotesque. (Bakhtin 9)

Grotesque, thus, causes displeasure in its absurd imagery and creates a strong vexation. It indicates what might be socially unacceptable. Dog Woman and even the prostitutes of the brothels bring in the non-sterilized, scatological notions of being into mainstream, linear narratives. This bringing forth of normative notions of femininity through the fantastical allows Winterson to deconstruct them liberally; especially with the psychological features of the grotesque. For instance, she overweighs the elephant on a see-saw in the city fair.

Grotesque thus is insisting upon the subversion of several social phenomena. This is present in mocking of the phallogentric pleasures, where Dog Woman bites off the penis (emblematic of the overturning of the phallic order) in one of her sexual encounters. As Bakhtin notes, grotesque only begins when the exaggeration reaches fantastic dimensions. Thus, Dog Woman’s monstrous powers and her thirst to kill Puritan Preacher Scroggs and Neighbour Firebrace in the brothel transgresses not only the margins between masculine and feminine but also, as Smith notes in her essay, between the public

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abhorrence and repression of sexuality and their private, hidden sexual acts.

This satire on monastic depravity, as Bakhtin calls it, is a superstructural restriction on a body that is bound to transgress itself to the other bodies. Since the grotesque not only displays the outward but also inward features of the body, the beheading of both the Puritans, that too in a brothel, becomes the threat to masculine spaces; by a woman who is at the margins of culturally constructed notions of femininity. The novel, then, also challenges the conventional sexist depictions of the historical materialist, by depicting the potent female figure of Dog-Woman as the history-teller “man enough to blast open the continuum of history”. (Smith 32)

This divide between the public and private can also be explored through Julia Kristeva’s formulation of the “Abject”. It is the repulsion and horror elucidated in the subject in the presence of situations that threaten to break down traditional meaning patterns. Since it creates a discrepancy between the subject and object, the intensity of rejection exceeds the rational understating of human mortality. Dog Woman in her overwhelming presence replete with body odour and fluids shatters the divide between the abject and the accepted. She is extremely candid with her body and there are several references to this in the text. She doesn’t hesitate to push

Johnson in her dress, she changes her clothes only once in five years, she strips in front of the carnival crowd to be weighed against the elephant.

For her, the body is universal. And in that universality, it embodies all that is exiled to the margins of propriety and acceptability to create an inexhaustible vessel of conception. This is in congruence with the grotesque body as Bakhtin believed it could swallow the world and the world could swallow the body. It adds and expands to itself bodies that transgress and desires that get marked as contemptible ceasing to become a transfixed entity. Becoming a mutable entity enables Dog Woman and her alter ego to overturn the abstract thought of material history as a faraway concept from the constructive, corporeal system of representations. Thus, in her personal narrative of nurturing Jordan and ruthless violence towards the Puritans, Dog Woman sits in between binaries and uses these differences as her power to experience her history.

The parodying of precursor texts is aptly found in the twelve dancing princesses’ stories. They are not only challenging the notion of a patriarchal ‘happily ever after’ but also deconstructing notions of myth and storytelling. They are instead, producing a counter-memory (taking off on the Foucauldian concept of writing against memorialization) that

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doesn't engage in any form of heteronormative desires and where overturning the discourse of 'regimes of truth' is the primary aim. Diverse memories cannot be easily integrated into the hegemonic narrative of the 'happily ever after.' For Foucault and Winterson, counter-memory and mainstream are not mutually exclusive, but rather a dichotomy. This discursive plurality is explored through feminine cultures to reinvent definitions of normativity.

These tales' strategies of reversal and humour reconfigure power structures: the women violently reclaim their right to freedom and to self-narrative, and their narrative questions mythical norms. (Smith 28)

What is also interesting to note is that Winterson is not only subverting the fairy tale format in terms of the princess' running away from their husbands or their father's cell tower. But also, in terms of, them building a life for themselves without the patriarchal rigid norms. They have autonomy over their bodies and physical spaces and are free to be whoever they wish to become. They are their own masters of corporeal desire and physical independence.

In *Sexing the Cherry*, self and other, masculine and feminine, past and

present, nature and culture are envisioned not as alternatives but as simultaneous and coexisting. (Langdon 94)

This becomes essential to understand since they are not escaping the linear flow of space and time. They are in fact, choosing a constant state of fluidity, hybridity and plurality to become whatever radical alternatives they chose to be. Their body is a site of a generation of identities that are not sexual yet yield radical socio-political power. This is true for *Fortunata* and even later *Dog Woman's* alter ego who is an ecofeminist and takes the shape of a giant, monstrous woman who captures men corrupting positions of international power. Thinking like this makes it pretty clear that Winterson wants the reader to understand that gender is performative. That notions of femininity and masculinity are not biologically based but culturally constructed and therefore a gendered self, like the grotesque, never stops changing or growing.

The self is not contained in any moment or any place, but it is only in the intersection of moment and place that the self might, for a moment, be seen vanishing through a door, which disappears at once. (*Sexing the Cherry* 87)

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The twelve dancing princesses, Dog Woman and Jordan are highlighting the purpose of the novel. That there are multiple truths and multiple histories. One cannot distinguish between historical fact and fiction, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, or claim that only history has a truth to claim. *Sexing the Cherry*, then, not only becomes the very site of dissent, non-conformity, grotesque and the carnivalesque, it also becomes the space of becoming and exploring the possibilities of life without the hegemonic repression and living life with alternative realities. Becoming all that one desires, without the intrusion of the dominant, hegemonic, patriarchal, linear authority.

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