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Gender Polarisation in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: Understanding Homosexuality and the Destructive Result of Gender Polarisation in a Religious Context

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Abstract

Gender polarisation refers to the pervasive and insidious process of creating and reinforcing a binary distinction between two gender identities, typically masculine and feminine. This dichotomisation simplifies the complexities of human experience, reducing the vast array of gender identities, expressions, and experiences to two mutually exclusive categories. Consequently, individuals who do not conform to these narrow definitions, such as non-binary, genderqueer, or gender-fluid individuals, are marginalised, excluded, and often forced to navigate a society that refuses to acknowledge their existence. Furthermore, gender polarisation perpetuates traditional gender roles and expectations, limiting individuals' potential and expression and reinforcing harmful stereotypes and biases. By recognising and challenging gender polarisation, we can work towards promoting gender inclusivity, equality, and a more nuanced insight of the complicated nature of human identity. Thus, the concept of gender polarisation enforces a socially constructed system of oppressiveness in society by making binaries between two gender identities. The power structure prevailing in society is there to beef up the idea of polarisation by empowering men and by subjugating women and, metaphorically, vice versa. The

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concept of polarisation dismantles the idea of individualism and personal freedom of choosing tasks and behavioural traits irrespective of gender. This paper is going to explore the theme of gender polarisation through a detailed analysis and interpretation of the novel “Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit” by Jeanette Winterson with reference to various scholarly articles and social theories that capture the factors of gender binaries, gender roles, feminine psyche, non-binary sexual identities, and sexual aggressiveness.

Keywords: Gender Polarisation, Gender Binary, Homosexuality, Sexual Identity, Lesbian, Patriarchy, Christianity.

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Introduction

The concept of gender polarisation shows a particular gender rigid and different from the other in respect of behaviour, social expectations, and roles. It creates a wide binary between men and women and their social roles. Women, being human beings, have the same demands, rights, and requirements as men in a society. Gender polarisation promotes a sense of stereotyping by associating specific characteristics with a particular gender identity. For that reason, society assigns bravery to men and emotionalism to women. To some extent, we are habituated to categorise women as sensitive and emotional and men as aggressive and emotionless. Hence, the concept of gender polarisation makes distinctions among men and women based on their perceived gender identity. It also hinders and excludes people having non-binary identities. Gender polarisation excludes queer people and LGBTQ people from gaining their rights by limiting society within male and female identity. So, by positioning men and women opposite to each other, the idea tends to establish a power structure, which results in social and gender inequality. The relationship between men and women is interpreted as a power relation rather than a romantic or conjugal relation. It leads to the creation of a power hierarchy on the basis of gender relations. The marital relationship between a man and a woman is all about authorisation and dominance of the powerful over the powerless rather than romantic and emotionally sensitive. Thus, the concept of gender polarisation enforces a socially constructed system of oppressiveness in society by making binaries between two gender identities. The power structure prevailing in society is there to beef up the idea of polarisation by empowering men and by subjugating women and metaphorically, vice versa. The concept

of polarisation dismantles the idea of individualism and personal freedom of choosing tasks and behavioural traits irrespective of gender. This paper will analyse homosexuality and rigidity of gender polarisation through Winterson's masterpiece novel.

Discussion

To evaluate and explain the existence of gender polarisation, there are some major perspectives that help to build up vivid ideas about the subject. Queer theory is a critical framework that advocates for the recognition and celebration of unique gender expressions and identities of individuals, challenging conventional notions of gender and sexuality that have been profoundly ingrained in societal norms. By subverting the binary gender system, which reinforces the idea that there are only two genders, male and female, queer theory promotes a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender, perceiving that individuals may identify with multiple gender identities, or none at all. This perspective celebrates the diversity of human experience, acknowledging that individuals have unique gender expressions and identities that may not conform to societal norms, and challenges the notion that gender is assigned or unavoidable, instead arguing that it is a social construct that can be shaped and reshaped by individuals and society. So, like any shape of othering, polarisation does not simply tell the difference between two groups but rather it states how the difference is illustrated and acted upon (de Silva, 2024, p. 2).

Queer theory explains the work of scholars such as Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Gayle Rubin, who have helped shape the field of queer theory, which continues to evolve and expand our understanding of gender, sexuality, and identity. The hierarchical gender binaries are imposed to fulfil the patriarchal dream of gender and sexual order (Butler, 2024, p. 27). By exploring key concepts such as performativity, intersectionality, and queer temporality, queer theory offers a powerful framework for understanding and celebrating the diversity of human experience and for challenging the dominant ideologies that have historically marginalised and excluded queer individuals and communities. Gender-diverse queer people are marginalised and stigmatised by this contemporary perception of the gender binary, which sets limits to choosing and internalising individual identity and preferences.

Homosexuality in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit by the renowned British author Jeanette Winterson is an amazing novel dealing with gender identity and gender roles in a religious and patriarchal society. The protagonist of the novel, Jeanette, was an adopted girl whose adoptive parents visited the Pentecostal church and were highly religious. They led their life according to the Bible. Automatically, Jeanette, at a very early age, became extremely religious and believed in God. She thought of herself as a lucky girl having a divine experience. As the novel develops, Jeanette comes close to her friend Melanie and understands her sexual identity while developing a romantic feeling towards Melanie. She revealed her homosexuality to her mother, and her mother warned her again and again. This shows the contemporary gender norms of a religious community. She was expelled from her church due to her homosexuality.

Finally she found her own identity after getting excommunicated from the church. The novel follows the bildungsroman technique and reveals Jeanette's sexual identity through a series of events. The queer theory can evaluate the aspects of Jeanette's non-binary identity. The queer theory advocates for unique gender expressions and identities among individuals. Thus, this theory opposes the concept of polarisation, which penalises people like Jeanette for having a queer identity. Her sudden realisation about her sexuality gives the novel another dimension, showcasing the religious-patriarchal polarised societal notions in the 60s' England. The author depicts gender polarisation by revealing the protagonist woman's sexual identity in a religiously bound community and the role of the church in fostering patriarchy. The church, being the main vehicle to promote gender binaries and gender roles, controls individuals, especially women, by limiting their sexual exploration to find out their identity. Jeanette's view from the novel exposes the polarised societal expectations. She realised that she had ideas about sexual politics, and there are shades of meaning, but a man is always equipped with social privileges (Winterson, 1985, p. 117).

Gender Polarisation in a Religious Context: The Power of the Church in Shaping Gender Roles

The novel offers a critical, polarised version of gender roles and identities believed by a woman. Meanwhile, the concept of gender polarisation does not allow the church, the supreme authority in a religious community, to question the contemporary gender roles and the notion of the gender binary. Polarisation ensures that there are two gender identities—male and female. Based on this binary perspective, all the societal norms and gender roles are

constructed. So, Jeanette's identity, which adhered to homosexuality, is problematic for the religious-patriarchal community because it deviates from the binary notion of gender identity. Gender polarisation marginalises the people having homosexual or queer identities, and that is why the authority of the church, as the bearer of patriarchy, did not allow Jeanette to live in the community after her homosexuality had been unlocked. She questions the traditional perspective of marriage as a lesbian and poses a threat in this regard to the patriarchy with her gender identity from the perspective of the leading power (Atasoy, 2021, p. 6).

The church, strictly bound by the concept of gender polarisation, did not accept the homosexual relationship of Jeanette and Melanie so that their polarised views towards gender could be kept intact. This control of the church hinders people from pursuing individual dreams and following individualism. The irony lies in the fact that the church expels Jeanette due to her sexual identity, whereas she sticks to her religious belief and her faith in God. Her belief in Christianity and God was not shattered by the act of the church, as she does not think that one has to hide his/her sexual identity to worship God and to visit the church. Factors such as race, gender, and class all play a role in marginalisation" (Adhikari et al., 2024, p. 2). Winterson, here, portrays the character of Jeanette in a unique manner to unleash the double-standard nature of the church, which is seen as the supreme messenger of God.

Jeanette questioned the rigidity of gender roles established in her community and believed that one can elicit his/her identity and can worship God. To be a devotee, an individual does not need to hide her sexual identity. One can be a disciple of God and a homosexual as well. Jeanette's view reveals a clear idea, questioning the relation between sexual identity and religious belief. Religion has no gender, and if it is for everyone, then what does the church do with someone's sexual identity? This question hits Jeanette, and that is why her belief in God was not shattered. In a true sense, the patriarchal church tried to impose socially constructed roles of gender on Jeanette by restricting her self-expression. Gender discrimination is nothing but like a baby's wish (Eftekhairul & Bhattacharya, 2024, p. 1). Even in the church, leadership and other so-called male features were maintained by men, whereas women were less powerful and passive observers.

The traditional fundamentalism of Christianity is caught up throughout the novel to uncover the gender polarisation and how it is implemented by the church. On the other hand, Jeanette's mother also had a conservative perspective towards gender norms and identities. She

was equipped with the fundamental religious belief of “purity” and thought of homosexuality as a religious “sin”. A line from the text eliminates this idea of purity in a religious context—“To the pure all things are pure” (Winterson, 1985, p. 98). The line suggests that criticising women’s choices and non-binary sexual relationships is not pure at all. Purity lies in the heart, and it is not used to tag a woman who deviates from the constructed gender roles. Gender polarisation and rigidity of expected gender roles are mirrored here through her mother’s binary gender perspectives. Women are so deeply brainwashed by the social and religious institutions like the church that they are unable to understand the patriarchal tricks to entrap their choices and sexual expression. Therefore, being a woman who was subjugated in the church, Jeanette’s mother enforced the fundamental view about sexuality and did not want to let her daughter choose her own sexual identity. Her mother’s viewpoint proves her moralistic and religious-bound views of sexual identity, especially towards a woman. According to her, romantic relationship between two women is a sin (Winterson, 1985, p. 116). It shows the contemporary religious-based perspective of sexuality, seeing homosexuality as an “improper” act. The rigidity of gender polarisation is shown here by defining homosexual relationships as sinful or improper for a woman. Jeanette’s mother, Louise, lacked agency, and that is why she reinforced her fundamental perspective of gender identity on her rebellious daughter.

Destructive Outcome of Gender Polarisation: Unleashing Lesbianism in the Novel

The author challenges the contemporary religious-patriarchal society and the established gender roles by portraying Jeanette’s lesbian identity. Winterson questioned the femininity and identity of the protagonist (Soumia, 2022, p. 9). Jeanette deviated from the binary views of gender roles and rejected traditional femininity by announcing a rebellion against the church and her religious community. Her adoption of freedom to express her sexuality was a revolutionary step, standing at that time in her community. This groundbreaking step explores how the polarised view can be thrashed by rejecting male authority and female conservativeness in a patriarchal and religious setting. Here, religion played a crucial role in Jeanette’s life to foster and perpetuate the notion of gender polarisation and gender binaries. Jeanette also had to pay the penalty of nonconformity as the community made her isolated. This is the utmost consequence of an individual rejecting the prevailing gender norms, which makes him/her isolated and alienated. The rigidity of gender roles and heterosexuality makes homosexual and queer identity unacknowledged and disregarded. The

queer theory can be applied here to explore Jeanette's different type of sexual expression, which breaks the predominance of heterosexuality. The queer theory challenges the binary views of gender and opposes gender polarisation as a medium of promoting heterosexuality. Polarisation is evident in the fact that her community, guided by the church, ostracised Jeanette for her homosexual identity. Her sexual relationship with Melanie and later with Katy conflicts with the heterosexual perspective of sex, which sets limitations assigned to individuals by gender polarisation.

The entire novel captures what can be the baleful consequence of gender polarisation in a religious society. This novel presents a poignant exploration of the damaging effects of gender polarisation in a religious society, capturing the baleful consequences of rigid gender roles and expectations imposed by the Pentecostal community in which the protagonist, Jeanette, grows up. Through Jeanette's journey, the novel highlights the restrictive roles assigned to women, who are expected to conform to traditional norms of domesticity and submission, limiting their opportunities for personal growth and development, while also suppressing female desire and sexuality, particularly for women who do not conform to heteronormative expectations. The novel further exposes the punishment and exclusion faced by those who do not conform to the community's expectations, including Jeanette, who is forced to navigate the complexities of her own identity and desire in a society that seeks to suppress and deny them. Ultimately, the novel presents a powerful critique of the damaging effects of gender polarisation in a religious society, highlighting the need for greater inclusivity, acceptance, and understanding, and offering a will to the power of human soul to resist, survive, and thrive in the face of gender oppression and multiple intersecting dimensions of oppression (Ashton & McKenna, 2020, p. 6).

The deadly categorisation of sexuality and gender identity into masculine and feminine traits intensifies gender polarisation and the established gender roles. Jeanette's religious upbringing and her rebellious nature against the church community revealed her innate indomitable spirit of fighting against the patriarchal rules. She accepted the non-binary identity bravely to keep her sexual resilience intact. Understanding Jeanette's determination, her mother, Louise, condemns her and tries to block her daughter's imagination. This kind of role of the mother as reversed challenges the masculinist frame of the classical Bildungsroman, serving the author's goal of the subversion of the patriarchal myths of literature (Yagci, 2022, p. 5).

Winterson portrays a strong sense of gender polarisation to show Jeanette's fluid identity and the destructive result of rejecting gender norms. A nuanced evaluation of sexual expression, gender roles, and social expectations is highlighted throughout the novel, giving rise to gender awareness. Louise's attempt to control her daughter's body, making it "pure", explains how the patriarchy always tries to monitor women's sexual desires by making them sexually passive in order to keep male sexual dominance intact. Jeanette's nonconformity to the church's values and patriarchal rules is mirrored through her indomitable spirit while she was not given food for 36 hours as a punishment for embracing her homosexual identity. Though her relationship with Melanie did not find a destination due to the existence of gendered power structures, she did not repent and fought against the repressive rules of patriarchy. Gender polarisation is foreshadowed by Louise's adoption of Jeanette to make her a servant of God. This shows how a woman with conservative religious views tends to bring up her daughter as per her wish, rejecting the child's individual preferences, wishes, and desires. A very rigid sense of polarisation is mirrored through Louise's point of view on Jeanette. She did not prioritise Jeanette's individual wishes, sexual desire, and gender identity. On the other hand, Jeanette's dissension towards heterosexual marriage became a threat to the patriarchal church, which used the institution of marriage as the medium of sustaining the power hierarchy and gender binaries. She was reluctant to marry men from the time of her adolescence and hated heterosexual marriage. She believed that some women have to marry beasts because they are not allowed to marry each other. She also challenges the patriarchal notion that imposes the burden of having babies on every human being (Winterson, 1985, p. 73).

This perspective of Jeanette was perilous for the patriarchy, and that is why she was punished as she trespassed the gender norms. The destructive outcome of gender polarisation was witnessed by Jeanette due to her lesbianism, and that is why she decided to exercise her homosexual identity so confidently, giving rise to the nonconformity to rigid patriarchal values.

Conclusion

Gender polarisation is a concept that can be unlocked within this fabric of patriarchal society to evaluate various issues related to gender, sexuality, and personal and social

relationships. This notion of gender polarisation sets binaries between humans in the aim of continuing the gendered power structure in society. Men and women who encroach on this established gender boundary through their social and sexual roles must face destructive consequences. It promotes heterosexuality and binary views of gender, dividing gender into male and female identities. On the other hand, this concept of gender polarisation perpetuates the invalidation of individual identities of human beings. It also hinders and excludes people having non-binary identities. The strict categorisation of gender identity creates obstacles towards a fluid understanding of sex and gender. The construction and deconstruction of gender polarisation are portrayed in the novel. The author's occidental modern perspectives are caught in her novel. She has shown the courage to build up the themes of homosexuality and lesbian sex in an extremely religious setting controlled by the church. She explores gender polarisation and its destructive consequences through Jeanette's ostracism from her religious community. To sum up, it can be said that the theme of gender polarisation has been analysed in the paper properly through this novel so that we can debunk the invisible veil of polarisation.

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