



# ‘An Identity of One’s Own’

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A Discussion of Gender and Sexuality in Jeanette  
Winterson’s *Written on the Body*

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## Introduction

Throughout history, the suppression of certain nations, people and minds has been seen as a necessity by those in power in order to secure dominance. By asserting that one opinion is above others, humans have created subjugated groups and the feeling of 'otherness'. Therefore, in many binary relationships such as male/female, west/east, black/white, right-winged /left-winged etc., one group has been regarded as the dominant one. In literature, the patriarchal discourse has made it possible for the male writer to gain almost an entirely central position, leaving female authors on the periphery. The importance of gender was at one point so crucial that women published either anonymously or under a pseudonym, in the hope of getting a fair review. Anna Uddén states in *Veils of Irony*, addressing 18<sup>th</sup> century literature, that “no critic ever dealt with a literary work without first having made the decision whether the writer was a man or a woman. Only then could he address its literary merit . . . .” (52).

In Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body* (1992), the genderless narrator of the story has caused a similar reaction among critics. This time, the discussion regards not the gender of the author, but the gender of the narrator. In the New York Times, Jim Shepard remarks that the novel's weakness lays in “[Winterson's] refusal to identify the narrator's sex . . . .” (par 6). The primary discussion has revolved around how the love story in the novel should be interpreted based on whether the narrator is male or female, thus if the relationship depicted is a heterosexual or homosexual love affair. Ever since her debut with the 'coming-out' novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), a story that clearly depicts lesbian love, Winterson has been regarded as a 'lesbian writer'. However, the novels do differ in one substantial part. While the narrator in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is a girl discovering her love for women, the sex of the narrator in *Written on the Body* is never revealed. Therefore, it has been left to the readers and critics to determine the narrator's gender, which has led to several different interpretations of the novel, related to the fields of feminist, queer and lesbian theory.

Moreover, the main concern when approaching a novel from these theories is how to characterize what the definition of a 'lesbian novel, writer and subject' contains. Does the writer necessarily have to be lesbian for the text to be labelled a 'lesbian

novel'? And in that case, does the subject of the novel have to state a theme that is explicitly 'lesbian'? One critic that brings up the aspects of lesbian writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and explores the labels of 'lesbianism' is Marilyn R. Farwell. In *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*, she poses the question of “what if the writer is lesbian, has written a significant lesbian novel, and chooses to write a book with indirect rather than direct references to lesbian issues?” (6). This reflection clearly relates to Winterson's authorship. It can therefore be discussed if the interpretations of *Written on the Body* have been coloured by her earlier writings.

According to queer theory, society sees heterosexuality as the 'norm' and homosexuality as the opposite, the 'abnormal'. Queer theory can be closely linked to feminist criticism and gender studies, as well as postcolonial studies since they all put focus on an oppressed group. The prominent queer theorist Judith Butler claims that “sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions” (41). Just like feminist criticism questions the notion of feminine identity, queer theory strives to challenge the idea that there is supposedly a gay identity. From this perspective, can it thus be said that the use of an ungendered narrator aims to go beyond the distinctions that have for so long marked the stereotypical view of gender and sexuality?

This essay will discuss how the presence of an ungendered narrator makes it possible for the novel to question the heterosexual and patriarchal normativity in society. By looking at different depictions of gender and sexuality in *Written on the Body*, I will discuss whether the novel succeeds in escaping the traditional perceptions. The first section will deal with how Winterson plays with stereotypical male and female identifications, appearance and behaviour in order to deconstruct gender. The second section investigates in what ways the heterosexual discourse is questioned in the novel. The focus will foremost be on the deconstruction of marriage and the nuclear family. Finally, the last section analyses if the novel can be interpreted as a 'lesbian narrative' where the female body is reconstructed. The question is how the binary division of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual is challenged through the use of an ungendered narrator?

## Deconstructing Gender – Performing the Masculine and Feminine

“I thought you were the most beautiful creature *male or female*  
I had ever seen” (84, *my emphasis*).

In *Written on the body*, it seems to be essential not to reveal the gender of the narrator, which is evident in the passage above. 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 of problems of the ungendered 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 “[o]ne is not born a woman, one becomes one” is essential for the modern view on gender (qtd. in Lynn 224). Beauvoir distinguishes the biological sex from the socially constructed gender, and implicitly raises the question of how gender should be interpreted. A critic that 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 the different gender roles are performed and indicating that they are in fact just roles acted out (184). 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.

In literature, the focus on female writers and writings has been of great importance to feminist criticism in order to oppose the patriarchal normative. Feminist critic Elaine Showalter points to three different phases in the history of female writing. The first one, ‘the feminine phase’, took place from 1840 to 1880, and involved women adapting a male voice in order to find a place within the patriarchal hierarchy. The second phase, ‘the feminist’, stretched from 1880 to 1920 and dismissed the perception

of the female position as subjugated to male dominance. The theme of the suppressed woman was common and many female writers depicted the vision of a more equal society. Finally, the 'female phase' is the third in order. It is the stage that Showalter considers to still be in progress, which focuses on dismissing any male-oriented influence and striving to find a female identity (13).

Winterson's use of a genderless narrator can be used to discuss the third phase of feminist writing. The absence of a gender specified narrator denies the existence of identity being tied to the female or male attributes. *Written on the Body* therefore does not become a work about the search for female identity, but rather as Ute Kauer puts it, "This is no longer self-discovery, but rather self-construction" (41). Instead of aiming to discover a female identity the narrator constructs an identity beyond the notion of gender. It then seems that the novel has gone beyond the feminist phase and proceeded to post-feminism. If early feminists sought to identify, recover and appreciate female writers and their writings, post-feminism attempts to destabilize the binary relationship of male and female. The main aim of post feminism is to destabilize familiar patterns of thinking and reconsider the idea of a female identity (Lynn, 222).

The first gender specific identification in *Written on the Body* occurs when the narrator compares him/herself with Alice in Wonderland (10). As Kauer suggests, "identifications of the self are usually inseparable from one's own gender". 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 also foremost known for his seduction of women (20). By this identification the narrator adopts the voice of one of the most stereotypical male characters – a Don Juan.

It is mainly the narrator's role as the typical male lover that is depicted in the novel. For instance when talking about the phrase 'I love you', the narrator treats the subject with carelessness: "I had said them many times before, dropping them like coins into a wishing well . . . I had given them as forget-me-nots to girls who should have known better" (11). Comparing the words 'I love you' to the trite gesture of giving away flowers leaves a nonchalant impression. Obviously the narrator has treated the subjects of his/her love with little concern for their feelings. The depiction of the narrator thus creates an image of the confirmed bachelor who goes from lover to lover.

When reflecting over the many love affairs, the narrator addresses the unrealistic side of this casual lifestyle: "I've always had a sports car, but you can't rev your way out of real life. That home girl gonna get you in the end" (21). This vision actually comes true when the narrator meets Jacqueline who is the definition of the conventional housewife.

In the 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" (25). The description of Jacqueline matches the image of the 'home girl' that 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 in a fast sports car. When the narrator, after falling for Louise, ends the love affair with Jacqueline, it shows that no such fairy tale exists in real life.

However, the image of the traditional male subject is contrasted when the narrator positions him/herself as the opposite 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" (17). Here the narrator turns the image around, now identifying with a heart-broken mistress in contrast to being 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. For instance it is illustrated in Lord Byron's poem "Don Juan": "Man's love is of man's life a thing apart, / 'Tis woman's whole existence . . ." (lines 1545-46). This image has been central in literature and poetry, consistently used when depicting the difference between male and female love.

In *Written on the Body* the narrator is then at one point seen as the male lover, keeping love at a distance, but later, as the female lover embracing it to the full extent. The oscillation between these identifications creates an uncertainty in the reader of how to interpret the role of the narrator. One way to regard the use of these stereotypical gender identifications is to view them as tools for breaking familiar patterns of thinking. In accordance with post feminism, one has to break down the binary relationship

between male and female stereotypes (Lynn, 222). By contrasting the image of a traditional Don Juan with the depiction of an emotional mistress, Winterson shows that these images are not in opposition to each other, but that both are a legacy of traditional gender conceptions.

Furthermore, the narrator shows the importance of appearance and dress codes in the reader's perception of gender identity. A modern person might be reluctant to consider the idea that clothing would still be a gender signifier. Society has come a long way since the time when men were the only ones wearing pants, but there are still certain dress-codes that are associated with either a male or female persona. For instance the narrator, on several occasions, wears "a pair of shorts with RECYCLE tattooed across one leg" (12), and in another passage just about to get undressed by a lover the narrator says, "Off with the business suit" (72). Shorts and suits are garments that might conform to the reader's notion of male attire and make the reader assume that the narrator is a man. However, except for a few indefinable descriptions of the narrator's appearance, these descriptions are as vague as the gender identifications. Searching for clues to the narrator's gender by looking for depictions of clothes and appearance therefore gets the reader nowhere, but rather reinforces Winterson's aim to expose the fixed gender assumptions in society.

Interestingly, Winterson contrasts the narrator's diffuse gender identity with Louise's femininity. While the narrator often wears the RECYCLE shorts, Louise is depicted as a very feminine and elegant woman: "She wore a simple dress of moss green silk, a pair of jade earrings . . ." (32) and, "There was Louise in an ivory silk flapper dress with a silver headband" (34). In both these descriptions Louise wears silk dresses and exclusive jewellery, clothing that is highly associated with femininity. As Patricia Duncker remarks, "Louise with her fabulous body, sexy petticoats, décolleté dresses . . . is all woman" (84). However, instead of seeing the narrator as manly and Louise as feminine the contrast between the two lovers can be traced to how the notion of a butch-femme couple is perceived. In *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*, the butch-femme relation is described as a constellation which denies male and female gender categorization for instance by disrupting the boundaries of traditional clothing (Farwell, 12). The contrast of the narrator's and Louise's appearance alludes to these boundaries, making the reader question whether the narrator's gender identity is simply



male or if it can be seen as 'butch'. The fact that the appearance on the 'outside' is masculine does not have to exclude the possibility that the essence of someone's personality is feminine.

The narrator further turns around the notions of male and female actions. In certain scenes the narrator acts in accordance to society's norms of masculine behaviour. For instance when confronting Louise's husband Elgin the narrator uses violence: "I saw Elgin's look of complete astonishment as my fists, locked together in an unholy prayer, came up in a line of offering under his jaw" (172). If the narrator is interpreted as male, this passage would reinforce the notion of men as strong and violent. However, if the narrator is perceived as female, the passage would break the convention of women as the weaker sex. Kauer notes that in *Written on the Body* "[s]tereotypes about masculinity are mocked and employed as a means to undermine traditional concepts of female behaviour" (46). In the passage above, the interpretation of the narrator as female then destabilizes male and female behaviour.

Obviously, *Written on the Body* invites different interpretations depending on whether the narrator is understood as a man or a woman. Since there are no direct qualities or situations that verify the narrator's gender, critics have interpreted the question differently. The narrator is mainly identified as a female, but there have also been critics who identify the narrator with a male. Walter Kendrick, discussing the narrator from the male perspective states, "[The narrator] broadcasts his current affairs without hesitation, even to near-strangers; it's difficult to imagine that such love is not heterosexual" (132). Viewing the romantic relationship between the narrator and Louise as heterosexual, Kendrick thus assumes that the narrator is male. To analyse the narrator as male because s/he displays the relationships in public, seems to conform to the stereotypical gender biases that *Written on the Body* tries to escape from.

More interestingly, when regarding the narrator as female, Kauer brings forth the importance of irony and parody as means of deconstructing the traditional feminine role (46). As argued before, there are certain passages where the narrator conforms to a cliché-ridden male behaviour. There is nothing ironical about a male acting as a Casanova since male promiscuity has been the norm, and therefore the paradox of acting like a typical male lover only emerges with a female narrator. Furthermore, Kauer remarks that with a female narrator the stereotypically masculine actions would

then be a mask of male behaviour worn in order to be able to deconstruct gender binaries (47).

One scene where the narrator can be said to be wearing the mask of male identity is when s/he describes an ex-girlfriend's invention of a papier-mâché snake. Even though it is obviously made out of paper and is harmless, it still makes the narrator uncomfortable when placed at crotch level: "I hesitated to ring the bell. Hesitated because to reach the bell meant pushing my private parts right into the head of the snake" (41). This event shows a fear of castration, a fear which logically would only apply to men: why would a woman feel threatened over losing her non-existing penis? However, if the narrator is a female acting in the role of a male, the fear of castration would be ironic, showing that men are so afraid of losing their penis that they dread a paper snake. Antje Lindenmeyer observes that "Winterson never affirms the importance of the penis/phallus as marker of sexual difference, but plays around it, offering only shifting positions of phallic woman/castrated woman/man ridden with castration anxiety that can never be immovably allocated" (51). The mask of a male persona thus allows a female narrator to enter the sphere of the patriarchal discourse and as Judith Roof proposes it is "possible to perform a masculine persona without necessarily accepting it" (qtd. in Stowers 92). Just because the narrator acts within the frame of male behaviour does not mean that s/he agrees with it, but rather uses it as a tool to deconstruct social conventions.

As noted above, 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. The queer and feminist critic Judith Butler states that "[g]ender is not being, it is doing" (34). The narrator's alteration between male/female identifications, behaviour and actions is a role play, just like the role played by an actor entering 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" (187). 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” (12). 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 “[b]y 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” (47). When the genderless narrator identifies him/herself 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 become certain of the narrator’s gender, but instead perceives gender as a continuum, never fixed to an implicitly sex. The performance of different gender roles is constantly broken up and aims to show that identity is not connected to gender.

## **Deconstructing Sexuality – A Questioning of the Heterosexual Discourse**

Just like how the patriarchal perspective in society has been dominant, thereby marginalizing women, the heterosexual discourse has pressed homosexuality into the margins. This oppression has led to homosexuals being almost invisible in mainstream culture and politics. Within the field of literature one can argue that a patriarchal heterosexism has dominated the canon. In the article “The Homophobic Imagination”, Rictor Norton observes that “[h]omosexual literature is written, read, criticized, and taught within a generally hostile environment” (272). Therefore, even though homosexuals, explicitly or imexplicitly, have written about the subject of same-sex love, it has been disregarded by a homophobic society.

It is not until recently that the suppressed voices of gay culture and community have been able to come forth. One thing that has contributed to this break-through is queer theory. The emergence of queer theory has become a necessary part of “scrutinizing and celebrating sexual desires and erotic practises that question and reach beyond the bounds of normative heterosexuality” (Cooper 17). Hence, queer theory is a way to establish an identifiable homosexual discourse aside from the heterosexual hegemony present in society. If feminist criticism aims to highlight the effect of a patriarchal discourse, queer theory is a complement to this. In Gregory W. Bredbeck’s

words, “Feminism, one might say, has launched a first-strike frontal assault on the privileging of the phallus. Homosexual semiotic theory can bolster the battle through a subsequent attack from the rear” (qtd. in Farwell 5). Thus homosexual semiotic theory (queer theory) attacks the categorization of sexual identity, defined by the binary relationship of hetero and homosexuality.

*Written on the Body* employs not only gender ambiguities, but also diverse images of sexuality to confuse the reader. For instance the narrator addresses the importance of finding “Mr Right”, but later on adds to the sentence “Miss Right” (10). The question of whether the narrator is male or female thus becomes a question of whether the narrator is hetero - or homosexual. In the beginning of the novel the narrator only refers to past girlfriends, making it natural to assume that the narrator is a heterosexual male. However, this is later on contradicted when the narrator suddenly retells memories of former boyfriends: “I had a boyfriend once called Crazy Frank” (92). With the references to both girlfriends and boyfriends it is unavoidable not to regard the narrator as bisexual.

The narrator’s position as bisexual allows a questioning of heterosexuality, and especially the heterosexual marriage. In the beginning of the novel the narrator addresses the tradition of marriage: “How happy we will be. How happy everyone will be. And they all lived happily after” (10). In this passage the narrator ridicules the conventional view of marriage leading to happiness by using a fairy tale cliché. This cliché implies that one can only reach happiness through marriage. In the anthology *I’m Telling You Stories*, Duncker notes that “[h]eterosexuality – with all its manifold ramifications of marriage, motherhood, the family . . . – was the political regime within which women were kept down” (79). The heterosexual and patriarchal discourse has thus been able to suppress women within these institutions. By questioning heterosexual marriage as the perfect constellation, Winterson opposes this suppression.

Moreover, Winterson creates an alternative to the conventional image of heterosexual marriage. Since society has excluded homosexuals from the institution of marriage, *Written on the Body* produces a counter-part to this tradition. When the narrator imagines a wedding ceremony it is portrayed very differently:

We must have walked wrapped around each other to a café that was a church and eaten

Greek salad that tasted like a wedding feast. We met a cat who agreed to be best man and our bouquets were Ragged Robin from the side of the canal. We had about two thousand guests, mostly midges and we felt that we were old enough to give ourselves away. (19)

Winterson uses irony to challenge the traditional wedding. By refusing trite traditions such as the father giving his daughter away, the novel suggests that such traditions are partly a legacy from a patriarchal hegemony. Since marriage is a tradition that has restrained homosexuals and women, the narrator reverses the fundamentals of marriage to create new ways of thinking.

The heterosexual marriage is questioned further in the depiction of Louise and Elgin's marriage. The fact that Louise engages in an affair with the narrator suggests that she is not content with her husband. In one passage the narrator asks, "You despise him, don't you?" and Louise answers, "No, I don't despise him. I'm disappointed in him" (63). This heterosexual marriage cannot give Louise what she desires and she therefore rejects the monogamy that it stands for. While Louise seeks comfort in the narrator's arms, Elgin goes to prostitutes and Louise tells the narrator that "[h]is present hobby [is] to fly up to Scotland and be sunk in a bath of porridge while a couple of Celtic geishas [rubber-glove] his prick" (68). The adultery that both parties commit crushes the illusion of the holy marriage. On the topic of heterosexual versus homosexual love, Norton discusses the common opinion of the heterosexual relationship as 'closed' and monogamist whereas homosexuality is 'open' and promiscuous (273). By instead depicting a heterosexual marriage as 'open' Winterson contradicts this opinion.

The traditional image of the nuclear family is also deconstructed. The family structure of father, mother and child has long been seen as the foundation of heterosexuality, excluding homosexuals since they cannot reproduce in a natural way. When the narrator describes a family having a picnic by the riverside, Winterson uses the means of an ironical description to shatter the hegemony: "They were grouped the way families like to group; dad with the paper propped on his overhang, mum sagging over the thermos. Kids thin as seaside rock sticks . . . ." (11). The words "overhung" and "sagging" create a negative image of this unit, questioning its perfection. The perfection of the nuclear family is further challenged when the narrator questions the common

perception of reproduction as a necessity in a relationship: “Is that what I want? The model family, two plus two in an easy home assembly kit. I don’t want a model, I want the full scale original. I don’t want to reproduce, I want to make something entirely new” (108). Here, the image of the heterosexual family, which in society is seen as the norm, is rejected.

Furthermore, *Written on the Body* presents an alternative to the heterosexual family structure. Instead of the image of a nuclear family, the novel compares the narrator and Louise’s relationship to the comfort that a family gives: “This place will warm me, feed me and care for me” (51). The narrator experiences all qualities connected to a home in the company of Louise, and together they create their own notion of a family. At one point when lying next to Louise in the bed the narrator also states, “I put my arms around her, not sure whether I was lover or child” (80). By dismissing the traditional family construction, Winterson shows that there are other possible structures. Norton remarks that homosexual love has been regarded as ‘incomplete’ and ‘sterile’ because of the impossibility to reproduce (273). Nevertheless, *Written on the Body* shows that reproduction is not essential in creating your own family.

Apart from deconstructing the heterosexual marriage and family the novel confronts the question of sexual desire. The language of desire in *Written on the Body* has been claimed to conform to heterosexual conventions and as Valerie Miner points out, “the romance is disappointingly conventional” (21). For instance, the narrator uses a heterosexual phallic language when addressing sexuality: “I have a head for heights it’s true, but no stomach for the depths. Strange then to have plumbed so many” (17). The image of the active man penetrating the passive depth of a female is strongly connected to the power of the phallus. Not only does *Written on the Body* depict the sexual act in accordance to heterosexual discourse, but also presents an image of women as an excursion: “How could I cover this land? Did Columbus feel like this on sighting the Americas?” (52). The female body represented as a land to conquer and possess is often connected to the traditional heterosexual male describing his desire. The following lines in John Donne’s poem “To His Mistress Going to Bed” reflect the use of a colonial language, comparing the feeling that arises when discovering new land to the feeling of discovering a lover’s body for the first time: “O, my America! my new-

found-land,/My kingdom, safest when with one man manned, /My mine of precious stones, my empery, /How blest am I in this discovering thee!” (27-30). Winterson seems to allude to Donne’s lines depicting male desire. As Duncker argues, “The languages and discourses we have inherited not only distort, mask and conceal the meanings attempted . . . but actually reinscribe the structures of power . . .” (82). So why does Winterson choose to write in a phallic language, if the novel intends to reverse the heterosexual discourse?

Just like the binary gender divisions that are present in the novel only to be challenged in a later stage, the references to the female body as penetrative and coverable are later negated. Therefore, when the narrator retells the love story of Louise s/he rewrites the language of desire: “I had no dreams to possess you but I wanted you to possess me” (52). The narrator wants Louise to be the pursuer and not the pursued, thus reversing the traditional model of desire. By crossing the boundaries of heterosexual markers, Winterson creates the space for another love than the heterosexual to take place.

### **Reconstruction – ‘The Lesbian Narrative Space’**

As mentioned in the introduction, critics have analysed *Written on the Body* as a lesbian narrative. So what does a lesbian interpretation of the narrator and Louise’s relationship contribute when it comes to breaking familiar patterns of thinking? While Kauer claims that the narrator is female because of the narrator’s adoption of male behaviour that functions as an ironical device in the attack against the patriarch, Marilyn Farwell sees a female narrator in order to interpret the novel as a lesbian narrative. It is also within this interpretation that lesbian criticism comes into the picture.

Similar to queer theory, lesbian criticism focuses on homosexual culture, but aims to bring forth the lesbian woman in society. Just like queer theorists point out that all sexualities apart from heterosexuality have been almost invisible in the literary space, lesbian critic Gabriele Griffin remarks that “[l]esbian writing was – and to some degree still is – silenced because of its association with sexuality, a sexuality which is resistant to the normative forces of a heterosexist society” (2). Consequently, the silencing has led to the difficulty of tracing lesbian writings and themes in the history of literature. In an attempt to restore the lesbian heritage, early lesbian critics, like the early

feminists, have analysed how lesbians have been depicted in literature as well as lesbians as writers. As Jane Rule puts it, these studies were an effort “to discover what images of lesbians women writers have projected”, and in what way these female writers have been affected, “by their own personal experience” (qtd. in Farwell 11). This way of approaching lesbian narratives has been possible in works like Radclyffe Hall’s *A Well of Loneliness*, where an explicit lesbian character figures in the novel. The question is how is a lesbian interpretation possible in a work like *Written on the Body*, where the word lesbian is never mentioned?

Critics argue that it is possible to observe a lesbian theme in a work without the existence of lesbian characters by regarding the codes authors use to write about sensitive subjects. Just like there is no explicit evidence of the narrator’s gender in *Written on the Body*, there are no clues to the relationship between the narrator and Louise being a lesbian one, since the narrator in fact seems to be bisexual. However, by noting the suppression of lesbian authors and themes, it is possible to argue that in order to be able to write about same-sex love, writers have to escape the traditional narrative system. From this standpoint Farwell remarks that “[e]mploying codes enables critics to discount the need for either a lesbian writer or a literal lesbian character in determining whether a text is lesbian or not” (7). These codes can be seen as a criticism against a heterosexual patriarchal discourse or the disruption of gender dichotomies. Thus, when *Written on the Body* with its genderless narrator transcends familiar gender constructions, it could then be interpreted as a lesbian narrative.

Society and literature have been characterized by heterosexual male voices, where female and lesbian writers have had to use phallic language in order to be able to write within the patriarchal narrative system. Therefore, it is essential to create a new literary space. Farwell calls this divergence from Western canonical writing: ‘The lesbian narrative space’. Moreover, she argues that this narrative space would allow a lesbian subject to be “perceived as an ambiguously gendered figure”, who “refuses to align itself with the gendered mechanics and instead challenges those mechanics for its own narrative space, a ‘lesbian narrative space’ ” (61). Applying this approach to the narrative strategy in *Written on the Body*, would then explain Winterson’s use of an ungendered narrator. So how does *Written on the Body* create a ‘lesbian narrative space’?



In order to escape the patriarchal and heterosexual plot system, the narrator needs to renew the relationship with Louise, making their love unconventional. This renewal takes place within the rewriting of Louise's body. Throughout the novel the narrator uses a phallic language to describe the lover's body, but this language changes when Louise is diagnosed with cancer. Instead of focusing on Louise's beautiful appearance, the narrator goes beyond the outer body to explore the inside. In one passage, before making love to Louise the narrator says, "I wanted her bones, her blood, her tissues, the sinews that bound her together" (51). Here Louise's body is described in a scientific way which shifts how the female body is usually described. In line with this argument, Farwell notes that reconstructing desire "must start with the reconfigured female body of Louise, for it is the female body which has been the basis for the clichéd Western romantic story against which the narrator struggles" (189). The female body that is associated with femininity and desired by men is reconstructed and becomes unknown. The narrator even says to Louise "[y]ou're the foreign body now" (116). Louise is renewed as the lesbian body, foreign to the patriarchal and heterosexual discourse.

The remapping of Louise's body continues when the narrator goes through her body parts one by one. Louise's diseased body is divided into four different sections: "The cells, tissues, systems and cavities of the body which includes the skin, the skeleton and the special senses". In each section, the narrator rewrites the anatomical expressions of these body parts, creating a tribute to the lesbian body: "Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of sucking, sweating, greedy, defecting self, I found a love-poem to Louise" (111). The narrator does not romanticize the image of Louise's diseased body, but embraces the full extent of it. Farwell notes that the lesbian body has been depicted as grotesque and monstrous, alienated from the female body. However, Winterson reverses this image by allowing Louise's sickly body to become a reflection of poetic imagery: "The skin loosens, yellows like limestone, like limestone worn by time, shows up the marbling of veins" (132). Just like the narrator plays with gender assumptions, s/he juxtaposes the female body both as grotesque and poetically beautiful. Even though the narrator speaks of how Louise's skin becomes miscoloured and falls off there is nothing repulsive about the transformation of the lover's features.

To be able to reconstruct lesbian desire, the narrator erases the old and familiar patterns of loving. In one passage Louise states, “I want you to come to me without a past. Those lines you’ve learned, forget them. Forget that you’ve been here before in other bedrooms in other places. Come to me new.” (54). Therefore, the narrator repositions as the lesbian lover and leaves the heterosexual male paradigms behind. For instance, the narrator abandons the expressions of possessing the female body as a land and presents a new definition: “We shall cross one another’s boundaries and make ourselves one nation. Scoop me in your hands for I am good soil.” (20). The narrator introduces the idea of the lovers as one nation, exploring each other in contrast to the male lover exploring the female body. This image reinforces the notion of the lovers being joined together instead of being two separate individuals.

As a lesbian couple, the narrator and Louise become one and the same. The homosexual sameness in contrast to the heterosexual differences is often emphasized. As Cath Stowers observes, in *Written on the Body* “suggested gender differences become undercut by lesbian metaphors of sameness” (93). At one occasion the narrator perceives herself and Louise as one body, duplicated: “You are my blood. When I look in the mirror it’s not my own face I see. Your body is twice. Once you once me” (99). In this passage, the lovers are inseparable, described as one individual. Furthermore, the narrator breaks the traditional notion of desire when implying that heterosexual attraction is inferior to same-sex love: “I thought difference was rated to be the largest part of sexual attraction but there are so many things about us that are the same”. Here the narrator denies the fact that the desire between man and woman would be the ultimate match just because of their different anatomies. Instead the narrator continues, “Bone of my bone. Flesh of my flesh” (129). The narrator indicates that the love between her/him and Louise is sprung from one and the other. This sentence is taken from the Bible and is spoken by Adam after God has created Eve from one of Adam’s ribs (Genesis 2:23). The Biblical allusion functions to break another traditional perception by describing a lesbian relationship.

In the lesbian love affair, the depictions of female and lesbian desire take new forms. While the heterosexual relations have portrayed the female lover as submissive, the lesbian lover is violent and fierce. At one point Louise is compared to a wild animal: “After sex you tiger-tear your food, let your mouth run over with grease” (118). This

description reinforces the female as a strong character embracing her lusts. The narrator describes the sex act between man and woman by a reluctant alienation for the female body: "And you don't ask him to put his head between your legs because you think he'll find it distasteful" (45). However, the interaction between Louise and the narrator shows no such feelings: "I crouch down to taste the salt, to run my fingers around the rim. She opens and shuts like a sea anemone" (73). Here the female sex organ is compared to a sea anemone which the narrator tastes and explores, finding the experience pleasant rather than distasteful.

Evidently, Louise becomes a metaphor for the strong female and the active lesbian lover. Throughout the novel Louise is described in accordance with traditional female traits. Elgin sees her as a prize to show off, and as Louise says, "He knew I was beautiful, that I was a prize . . . He wanted to go up to the world and say look what I've got" (34). Therefore, when Louise engages in a love affair with the narrator she remarks, "I don't want to be another scalp on your pole" (53). However, Winterson abandons the trite conventions of female passivity, and in the lesbian love affair Louise becomes powerful: "She smells like a gun. My lover is cocked and ready to fire" (136). This passage shows a change in the description of Louise, where the comparison to a charged weapon reinforces the reversal of the typical depiction of women as the hunted rather than hunters. It is similar to the line in Emily Dickinson's poem, "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -" (1), Louise has, in the role as woman and wife, stood back, but in the lesbian relation with the narrator she transforms into a strong female being.

The reconstruction of Louise's body and of heterosexual desire is essential for the interpretation of *Written on the Body* as a lesbian narrative, but Elgin is also of importance. Apart from the brief mentioning of old boyfriends, Elgin is the only explicitly male character in the novel. Here, Winterson breaks the traditional narrative plot by interrupting the possibility of heterosexual male bonding. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that this bonding is central to the heterosexual discourse and that the relation between male characters reinforces the patriarchal structure (qtd. in Farwell 2). However, if the love story in *Written on the Body* is interpreted as a lesbian one, the absence of male bonding opens up the opportunity for female bonding to take place. As a lesbian couple, the narrator and Louise reverse the traditional narrative system that has been dominated by male bonding. Furthermore, Elgin tries to break the female bonding

by reclaiming Louise. Since the patriarchal discourse “also depends on the disruption or exclusion of female bonding” (Farwell 41), Elgin’s attempt seems to be a way to stabilize his power. This attempt fails when Louise refuses to get back to him.

The principal reason for arguing that *Written on the Body* is a lesbian narrative is because the lesbian subject posits itself outside of gender divisions. For instance, lesbian critics “define lesbian as a figure beyond the phallogentric categories of gender” (qtd. in Farwell 64). Interpreting *Written on the Body* as a lesbian narrative not only serves to oppose the heterosexual norm, but also the patriarchal hegemony. Furthermore, Farwell states that the term lesbian goes beyond the notion of women loving women and becomes a metaphor for the feminist woman (16). As the lesbian subject, Louise is active, strong and no longer defined by male paradigms. After the section where the narrator rewrites Louise’s body she remarks, “[Louise] was free. Is that you flying over the fields with the wind under your wing?” (172). It is not until after the narrator has reconstructed Louise’s body, positioning it as a lesbian body, transcending beyond the definition of male and female, that the ‘lesbian narrative space’ is created. In the end of *Written on the Body* the narrator says, “This is where the story starts . . . Beyond the door, where the river is, where the roads are we shall be” (190). Repositioned as lesbian lovers, Louise and the narrator start a new story which is not characterized neither by the patriarchal discourse nor the heterosexual.

## **Conclusion**

Evidently, gender and sexuality are of great importance in an interpretation of *Written on the Body*. Winterson’s use of an ungendered narrator that throughout the novel keeps his/her gender identity hidden raises questions of society’s notions of the male and female persona, as well as the suppression of sexualities other than the heterosexual one.

The binary relationship between male and female gender identities is challenged when the narrator constantly juxtaposes gender identifications, male and female behaviour and appearance. Since the passages where the reader might see the possibility to define the narrator’s gender are always contradicted, the reader never stops questioning the stereotypes depicted in the novel. For instance the reader has to reconsider why suits are usually connected with the male dress-code or why a love-sick

lover is associated with the female persona. However, it can be noticed that the novel foremost aims to deconstruct female gender conventions. *Written on the Body* thus becomes a post-feministic work, which reaches beyond the search for a female persona and further on deconstructs the very notion of female identity.

Moreover, the narrator deconstructs the binary relation between heterosexuality and homosexuality by reversing biases against same-sex love. In the novel it is the heterosexual marriage that is dysfunctional and drives Louise and Elgin to infidelity. It is also shown that homosexual love does not automatically have to signify a 'sterile' relationship since there are other ways to create a family bond. Thereby, the heterosexual institutions of marriage and the nuclear family are replaced by other constellations. From the perspective of queer theory the questioning of these institutions in *Written on the Body* implies that heterosexuality should not be considered to be the only norm in society.

Deconstructing and destabilizing gender and sexuality is a part of both feminist criticism and queer theory. The reconstruction, however, occurs when the novel is interpreted as a lesbian love story. *Written on the body* aims to reconstruct the stereotypical feminine attributes, and therefore it has to escape the heterosexual discourse by positioning the love story as lesbian. Since the lesbian subject goes beyond the notion of male and female roles this problematizes the heterosexual definition of gender conventions.

Most interpretations of *Written on the Body* involve a discussion of the genderless narrator. Some critics such as Miner and Shepard are negative to the use of a genderless narrator, while others like Kauer and Farwell perceive this strategy as positive. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the presence of the narrator creates a debate about gender and sexuality, a debate that might not have existed without this narrative strategy. The existence of the ungendered narrator is therefore highly important.

Finally, *Written on the Body* goes beyond discovering the narrator's gender and sexuality. Instead it becomes a work which questions gender and sexual identity, and society's need to categorize these identities as binary relationships in opposition to each other. Additionally, the use of an ungendered narrator gives Winterson the opportunity to show that gender is indeed a fluent continuum, performed and stretching over the boundaries of the notion of male and female. It is difficult to completely disregard

stereotypical gender conceptions, however, works like *Written on the Body* creates the space for fruitful discussions to take place. Just like other authors before her, Winterson writes about oppressed, marginalized groups, claiming a space and place for them.

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