Queering Narrative, Desire, and Body: Reading of Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* as a Queer Text*

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I. Introduction

Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* has undergone controversy and debate because of its hyper textuality which can be re-written (or re-read) in a different light according to the way readers assume the first person narrator’s sexual and gender identity. In other words, Winterson opens up her text to multiple readings by concealing the sex and gender of the narrator. Focusing on the narrator’s desire for knowledge/power over the body of Louise who is a married woman, some critics see the narrator as a male replicating the heterosexual and masculine paradigm of “mapping” and “Othering” a female body. Valerie Miner, for example, claims that Winterson “promises a subversive portrayal of androgynous passion” but the story ends up with a romance that is “disappointingly conventional” (21). On the other hand, Cath Stowers argues that the female narrator “excavates the female body in a re-appropriation and parodying of the power of the phallus” and “the narrator’s turning away from the path of masculine models of conquest and possession to a more reciprocal duality of desire . . . leaves me [Stowers] with little doubt that this narrator is indeed female” (90, 92). Thus, Stowers reads this novel as a lesbian (feminist) text that tries to re-map, celebrate, and re-appropriate female body and sexuality against patriarchal and heterosexual definitions of femininity while Miner sees the narrative as conventional heterosexual romance.

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*I* In this essay, queer does not simply refer to homosexual tendency. Acknowledging that queer as a theoretical term is still being debated among scholars, I follow David Halperin’s definition of queer as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (62). Thus, when queer is used as a verb in this essay, it can be best defined as a word combining ‘eroticize/destabilize in a creative way/subvert.’
Interestingly, however, those readings of the narrator as one of either sex/gender demonstrate how (academic as well as general) readers have been accustomed to the gender-based reading habits in which textual meanings are dichotomously arranged along the lines of sex and gender of characters. In addition, whereas “Winterson avoids writing a lesbian text about the affair between two women shattering a rotten marriage” by concealing the sex/gender of the narrator (Duncker 81), those gendered readings put her experimental/queer text back into an essentialist framework by placing the narrator on one of either sex/gender. Challenging those dualistic “gendered” readings, this paper will try reading Winterson’s Written on the Body as a queer text which interrogates, troubles, and subverts the heterosexual concepts of narrative, desire, and body without reducing the narrator’s identity to the essentialist sex and gender system. More specifically, this paper examines how the narrator’s (un-/over-) determined sexual and gender identity queers the narrative structure of author-character-reader; how the narrator’s queer (fluid) desire is passing and traveling across categorical contours of masculine/feminine/lesbian desires; how Winterson challenges the concept of a coherent body and queers the concept of body as a hermeneutic text with myriad textual grids which are not coherently mapped by power but randomly inscribed by nomadic desires.

II. Narrative

In Written on the Body, the ungendered narrator troubles readers with “classificatory confusion” (to use Homi K. Bhabha’s words) because s/he is located outside the dichotomous order legitimating the heterosexual stream of desire (Bhabha 91). With many elusive descriptions of the narrator’s sexual and gender identity, Winterson places the narrator outside the gender and sexual categories until the end of the story. In a crucial moment when readers can get some knowledge about the narrator’s identity, Winterson deliberately frustrates them with another duplicitous description: “When I[Louise] saw you two years ago I thought you were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen” (84). As a matter of fact, the narrator’s identity appears not to be pre-given by the author but to be discursively “constructed by the stories s/he tells, with different identities evoked by various memory flashbacks typically beginning with ‘I had a girlfriend once’ or ‘I had a boyfriend once’”