

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Sexing the Cherry: A Postmodernist Approach to Gender Roles

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Abstract

Feminist discourses have traditionally been suppressed by power structures such as the patriarchal system. The marginalisation of female experience is the result of male dominance. In addition, patriarchy has reinforced traditional gender roles that othered women. The exclusion of women perpetuates inequality as well as lack of representation. Postmodernism gave the opportunity to many authors to foreground the female experience by introducing literary devices such as intertextuality and historiographic metafiction. This dissertation will examine the effort of Jeanette Winterson, one of the most important English authors from the Postmodern movement, to subvert traditional gender roles and give agency to marginalised women in her novel *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). By presenting marginal narrators, she shows the plurality of female identity and the instability of conventional gender roles and norms through the figures of the Dog Woman and the twelve princesses. The use of intertextuality, historiographic metafiction and the rejection of metanarratives are devices that help to promote Winterson's feminist discourse. The analysis of the novel also includes the revision of the dichotomy man/woman, which is materialised in the story through the motif of grafting.

Key words: postmodernism; intertextuality; historiographic metafiction; gender roles; feminist discourse.

Resumen

Los discursos feministas han sido tradicionalmente suprimidos por estructuras de poder como el sistema patriarcal. La marginación de la experiencia femenina es el resultado de la dominación masculina. Además, el patriarcado ha reforzado los roles de género tradicionales que discriminan a las mujeres. La exclusión de la mujer perpetúa la desigualdad y la falta de representación. El postmodernismo dio la oportunidad a muchos autores de poner en primer plano la experiencia femenina mediante la introducción de recursos literarios como la intertextualidad y la metaficción historiográfica. Esta disertación examinará el esfuerzo de Jeanette Winterson, una de las autoras inglesas más importantes del movimiento postmoderno, para subvertir los roles de género tradicionales y dar agencia a las mujeres marginadas en su novela *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). Al presentar narradores marginales, muestra la pluralidad de la identidad femenina y la inestabilidad de los roles y normas de género convencionales a través de las figuras de the Dog Woman y las doce princesas. El uso de la intertextualidad, la metaficción historiográfica y el

rechazo de las metanarrativas son recursos que ayudan a promover el discurso feminista de Winterson. El análisis de la novela también incluye la revisión de la dicotomía hombre/mujer, que se materializa en la historia a través del motivo del injerto.

Palabras clave: postmodernismo; intertextualidad; metaficción historiográfica; roles de género; discurso feminista.

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Literature has largely been used as a tool to convey meaning and send important messages to readers; in particular, postmodernist literature played an important role in looking at society with a critical eye. Postmodernism is a late 20th-century intellectual stance that challenges Enlightenment rationality. Postmodernism is associated with relativism and scepticism, that is, it criticises universalist ideas of objective reality, morality, truth and human nature among others (Duignan, 2024). Postmodern authors usually define knowledge claims as socially-conditioned, categorising them as products of political, historical and cultural discourses and hierarchies. In this sense, postmodern literature is considered to be highly self-reflective about social and historical issues. Moreover, it is characterised by the use of playfulness, intertextuality, historiographic metafiction and fragmentation, which are consistent features with the challenge to Enlightenment rationality and universality. In particular, it is worth mentioning that postmodernist literature is a literary and critical theory that coexisted together with, among others, the course of the first and second wave of feminism. Many postmodernist authors exploited literature as a resource to voice their own statements about women's situation. One of the most prolific postmodernist English authors is Jeanette Winterson (1959, Manchester). Winterson is greatly known for her first and semi-autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), in which she introduces topics such as homosexuality and religion among others. However, she has written many other novels that explore the complexities of gender binaries and sexual identity. One of these novels is *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), whose plot focuses on the fantastical journey of the Dog Woman and Jordan. However, it also deals with gender issues which, thanks to postmodernist literary traits such as intertextuality or the inclusion of marginalised characters, are approached from a critical perspective. The purpose of this essay is to analyse the way in which Jeanette Winterson gives voice to female characters such as the Dog

Woman, a marginalised woman, and the Twelve Dancing Princesses, whose story relies on intertextuality, in order to subvert and break with traditional gendered stereotypes given to women by power structures such as the patriarchal system.

Postmodernism is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of different esthetic practices and theories in the second half of the twentieth century. Postmodernism can be said to be a response to Modernity. During the modern period, there was a constant “guard against anything and everything labelled as ‘disorder’” (Martínez-Alfaro, 2023a, p. 3). In Western cultures, the disorder equals anything non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, which were usually silenced or marginalised. The stability that was maintained in modern societies is achieved through “grand narratives” or “master narratives” (Martínez-Alfaro, 2023a). Although grand narratives are a way to provide a framework that explains human history and experience, a proper revision leads to a beneficial development for society. The reason is that considering other alternative versions enriches cultural and historical knowledge. Consequently, one of the most important features of postmodernism is the incredulity towards these metanarratives. The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard published *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), a seminal work in which he questioned the existence of stable definitions and truths. He tried to demystify totalising narratives because they “effectively impose conformity on other perspectives or discourses, thereby oppressing, marginalizing, or silencing them” (Duignan, 2024, para. 11). One of the reasons for the rejection of metanarratives is that scepticism embraces the naturally existing chaos as well as the power of individual events. This means that scepticism understands reality as complex and diverse and rejects the exclusive existence of a grand narrative that is universally valid. Another aspect to take into consideration is that Postmodernism rejects the homogeneity of human existence that has been traditionally reinforced by power structures such

as patriarchy. Therefore, Postmodernism gives way for *petits récits* or “mini-narratives” to have a place in society (Martínez-Alfaro, 2023a).

Those metanarratives present stories that are global and totalitarian, which implies the exclusion of those accounts that are socially rejected. The rejection of those accounts is caused by elements such as “race, class, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and disability” (Lieske, 2001, p. 164). People who do not fit into the categories which were promoted by the hegemonic forces were othered. For instance, the hegemonic force of patriarchy marginalised the feminist discourse. Women’s accounts were silenced or labelled as the “Other” because the patriarchal system is based on the legitimization of men’s dominance and privilege over women (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This belief was useful to justify inequality and women’s discrimination. By analysing feminist approaches, “new spaces of interrogation, which examine the complexity and multiplicity of female subjectivity and the workings of patriarchal domination” (Lieske, 2001, p. 164) are open to discussion. This idea highly influences Jeanette Winterson’s work *Sexing the Cherry* because the rejection of metanarratives allows the author to give voice to female stories, which previously were labelled as the “Other”. The clearest instances are the Dog Woman as a narrator telling her own story and the Twelve Dancing Princesses.

Intertextuality and Historiographic Metafiction in *Sexing the Cherry*

As a postmodernist novel, *Sexing the Cherry* is an instance of intertext, which means that it connects with other texts –as is the case of “The Twelve Dancing Princesses”, a tale published by the Grimm Brothers– and with other historical periods. In this case, the historically significant period of the English Civil War (1642-1651) –with the Royalists and the Parliamentarians as the opposing sides and which resulted in the establishment of the Commonwealth– is the historical basis for the narration of the Dog Woman’s story. In Winterson's words: “What I was trying to do

in *Sexing the Cherry* was [to use] history as a way of talking about everything that was bothering me” (Winterson, 2021, p. ix). This is what Linda Hutcheon coined as “historiographic metafiction” in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction*, a term that appoints “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflective and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (1988, p. 5). In other words, those novels that are considered historiographic metafiction combine fiction and historiography in order to explore how both fiction and history are constructs that are shaped from subjective and ideological perspectives.

The Dog Woman is the narrator of her own story. Winterson chooses a homodiegetic narrator in order to tell one of those *petits récits*. The result is that, according to Kirca, the novel presents “a female narrator who not only catalogues the historical events but interprets them from her marginal position, allow[ing] a reading of the text as a means of voicing the untold histories of women as the marginalized other” (as cited in Düzgün, 2022). Therefore, the historical events mentioned in the story are not focalised from the totalitarian, monolithic perspective usually present in world history.

ALTERNATIVE (HI)STORIES TO DECONSTRUCT GENDER NORMS

The Dog Woman, a Marginal Narrator

Jeanette Winterson creates marginal narrator characters, such as the Dog Woman, Jordan or the twelve princesses, in order to provide the reader with subjective perspectives. They are marginal characters because they challenge traditional gender roles and social expectations and consequently, they would be othered by the patriarchal system. While the Dog Woman and the princesses question femininity, Jordan defies conventional masculinity. The choice of having

marginal narrators remarks Winterson's aim to present history "as consisting of a multiplicity of stories told by many voices" (Martínez-Alfaro, 2023b, p. 9). In other words, she sets forth stories that once were silenced, erased or unwritten in order to provide non-mainstream versions of History. It also involves "the rejection of totalizing and absolutist categories of truth and falsehood, of history and storytelling" (p. 9). That is to say, Winterson deconstructs the idea that patriarchy is the ultimate power structure that imposes a unique and male perspective over the whole society. It is widely known that human history is a construction that has been mainly written from the perspective of the powerful in order to privilege their own ideology. *Sexing the Cherry* focuses in particular on dismantling the male perspective that privileges the male, the linear, the heterosexual. According to Bom, "our objective history and our perception of gender are merely collections of socially coded information and biased impressions" (as cited in Kaur, n.d.). However, *Sexing the Cherry* is an attempt to deconstruct the established ideas about both history and gender. Hence, Winterson uses historiographic metafiction to give an alternative to the 'phallogentric history' and modify history that "focus on or integrate women's experience and the issues of gender" (Kaur, n.d., p. 39).

The novel relies on historiographic metafiction in order to give an alternative perspective on those events that have been established as universal and true. The analysis of the Dog Woman's narrative gives some instances about the fact that those universal truths have been presented from the perspective of those in power and have silenced other marginalised stories.

One of the greatest examples that shows the importance of having a female narrator happens in the Spitalfields brothel. The Dog Woman goes to the brothel where "a pig was driven into the room, wild with fright. The man leaped at it and, holding it fast between his legs, continued his pleasure [...]" (Winterson, 2021, p. 97). In the next room, she sees that "a woman

was being entered in the usual position, but on top of the man was another man” (p. 98). She soon realises that these men are Preacher Scorggs and Neighbour Firebrace. The fact that this event is accessed through the Dog Woman’s perspective stresses Puritans’ hypocrisy. The reason is that, at that time, Puritans considered themselves as the moral model to follow, especially regarding pleasure and sex. To have sex between two men in a brothel gathers all that seemed to be wrong for them. Her narrative is used as a tool “that reveals its own monstrous constructedness through problematising the monster-making production” (Sandelius, 2008, p. 42). This means that the monstrosity that had been attributed to the Dog Woman by the Puritans is questioned. The reason is that Puritans, as a traditional section in society, marginalises the Dog Woman for not fitting into the conventional idea of women. However, the brothel anecdote shows that the sense of monstrosity is mutual and relative. The aim of having presented the brothel anecdote from an outsider’s perspective such as the Dog Woman’s is to dismantle those who judge from a position that has been traditionally privileged by the patriarchal system. This proves that the production of certain traits only depends on the perspective that is given.

Another example in the novel is the inclusion of women’s experience during the Civil War. The Dog Woman tells the reader about the women who fixed the windows in churches: “They gathered every piece, and they told me, with hands that bled, that they would rebuild the window in a secret place” (Winterson, 2021, p. 68). Society has always known that men were those who fought for the country during a war; however, women’s roles have been traditionally overshadowed by male experience. In other words, power structures such as the patriarchal system are responsible for having spread male experience during wartime while erasing women’s accounts about their equally valuable contributions. The Dog Woman gathers firsthand female experiences in order to give voice to stories who had been silenced. After these kinds of

encounters, her “head [is] full of things that cannot be destroyed” (p. 68). Learning female experience, that may result alien to society, makes a lasting impression not only on the Dog Woman but also on the readers.

The Twelve Dancing Princesses, an Alternative to the Princess Archetype

Fairy tales constitute one of the earliest ways of indoctrinating children. The reason is that their principal audience are young children and tales have a “significant effect on societies’ cultural and literary existence in terms of shaping, reflecting and handing down their traditional values and norms” (Öztemel & Tarakçıoğlu, 2019, p. 89). Traditional fairy tales relied on elements that favoured the dominance of patriarchy while homosexuality and female agency were suppressed. Thanks to intertextuality, *Sexing the Cherry*, as a postmodern novel, rewrites one of the most popular fairy tales by the Grimm Brothers, *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*. The novel revises elements such as heterosexuality or the superiority of men in order to subvert gender stereotypes. In this revision, Winterson “takes [that] story as a stepping stone and creates her own work with her post-modern style” (p. 90).

One of the ways in which Winterson achieves the subversion of gender stereotypes is through the manipulation of archetypes. According to psychologist Carl Jung, the “human mind has ‘collective unconscious’ which are the hidden deep things that influence people although they are unaware of them” (Öztemel & Tarakçıoğlu, 2019, p. 90). Those hidden patterns are known as archetypes. Öztemel & Tarakçıoğlu state that “an archetype is a repeated pattern of a character, image, or an event recurring in a story [...] regardless of culture and historical period” (p. 90). Jung describes the characteristic archetypes as “people or beings that serve as a representative of an ideal such as the hero, mentor, damsel in distress or a devil figure” (p. 90). Postmodern authors adapt archetypes to their own interests by subverting and reconstructing

them. Winterson undermines the conventional idea of femininity on the basis of the deconstruction of the princess archetype. The vast majority of fairy tales, as it is the case of *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, present the princess archetype as “a princess or princesses [who] are destined to lead a passive and uneventful life and awaits the hero [...] to rescue her from some danger or enchantment” (p. 94). In Winterson’s case, she preserves the twelve princesses of the tale but she gives them agency in order to tell their story from a different perspective, a feminist perspective.

The Grimm Brothers’ fairy tale narrates the story of twelve princesses who mysteriously wear out their shoes even though they are locked in a room. The king looks for a person who solves the mystery and the reward is the right to marry one of the princesses. A soldier discovers that the princesses escape at night to secretly dance in an underground palace. The soldier chooses the eldest sister and the twelve sisters are cursed. This tale reflects traditional patriarchal themes such as heterosexuality, male authority and control over female behaviour, which are recurrent themes in fairy tales and build on the female character archetype of the princess.

The second chapter of *Sexing the Cherry*, whose title is “The Story of The Twelve Dancing Princesses”, rewrites the ending of the original fairy tale. Assuming that eleven out of the twelve princesses have married princes, Winterson writes the princesses’ post-marital life from their own perspective. She claims: “I like to take stories we think we know and record them differently. In the re-telling comes a new emphasis or bias, and the new arrangements of the key elements demands that fresh material be injected into the existing text” (Winterson, 2006, p. 18). The outcome is a story in which both original and new elements converge in order to produce a fresh text whose aim is to explore the identity of those female characters –the twelve dancing princesses, in this case– who were previously silenced or marginalised. In addition, Winterson

satirises the heteronormative ending typical of fairy tales by presenting the sisters' stories as failures. According to Öztemel & Tarakçıoğlu, "princesses are destined to lead a passive and uneventful life" (2019, p. 94). However, as the first princess asserts, "[...] and as it says lived happily ever after. We [the sisters] did, but not with our husbands" (Winterson, 2021, p. 48). The sisters' post-marital lives reject the traditional heterosexual relationship between a prince and a princess. Instead, they choose their own path towards happiness. The first princess anticipates that all of them "parted from the glorious princes and were living scattered, according to [their] tastes" (p. 48).

Most of their post-marital lives are striking for the reason that "Winterson's sequel [...] corresponds to Bakhtinian carnivalesque since in the novel 'unacceptable behaviour is welcomed and accepted'" (Öztemel & Tarakçıoğlu, 2019, p. 94). The princesses' eccentric behaviour is interpreted as humorous and a necessary response to become happy women. One of the anecdotes that corroborates this is the eighth princess's story that narrates that when she asked for poison to a salesman, he thought that it was for the rats but, actually, it was for her husband. Another princess tells about his husband: "I flew off his wrist and tore his liver from his body, and bit my chain in pieces and left him on the bed with his eyes open" (Winterson, 2021, p. 59). The second princess does not want her husband to deprive her of her own hobbies. She is presented as a non-stoic wife. In fact, once his husband interfered with her hobbies, she "wrapped her own husband in cloth [...] until she reached his nose. She had a moment's regret, and continued" (p. 49). Their outrageous behaviour is presented as a funny reaction to the oppression that the heterosexual marriages entail.

Postmodernist writing allowed the princesses to have some agency on the story. They acquire an active and rebellious part in their marriage. For instance, the tenth princess' story

sticks to the ideal of an independent woman. She says: “I considered my choices. I could stay and be unhappy and humiliated” (Winterson, 2021, p. 61) but she decided to leave. She gives preference to the things that build her agency and identity, which contrasts with the stereotype of the typical flattering wife. This example supports the idea that “Winterson reverses the roles of character archetypes and reconstructs the women’s roles with a feminist perspective by subverting the nucleus ideas of the fairy tale” (Öztemel & Tarakçıoğlu, 2019, p. 94). The choice, being made by the wives, of breaking their marriage proves wrong the traditional passivity of women and reinforces the instability of the traditionally praised heterosexual unions.

ALTERNATIVE CHARACTERS TO DECONSTRUCT GENDER NORMS

Destabilising Notions of Femininity: The Dog’ Woman’s Physicality and Behaviour

The main point of writing from a female perspective is giving voice to marginal figures such as the Dog Woman. Postmodernist novels privileged relativism and ambiguity. This playfulness should be “interpreted as a celebration of pluralism, diversity and difference” (Martínez-Alfaro, 2023c, p. 2). The Dog Woman is precisely defined as a woman who is different from the notion of womanhood that had been traditionally taken for granted. The Dog Woman is not the typical kind of woman, whose figure serves to subvert the patriarchal myth of the female body and behaviour. Consequently, the Dog Woman is a female character who is not shaped according to the traditional understanding of femininity. She describes herself physically:

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. (Winterson, 2021, p. 19)

Her appearance does not fit the traditional concept of beauty set by the patriarchal system and this makes her the most unconventional female character. She is described in terms of monstrous physicality, that is, her breasts are huge, her body is grotesque and she has enormous strength. Although she is anatomically and biologically a female, the whole does not totally correspond to the conventional idea of a female as she is not 'feminine' enough. The adequate description of 'feminine' has largely been related to traits such as weak, fragile, and submissive. It is emphasised that the Dog Woman's sex is female because terms such as "girl", "mother" or the pronoun "she" are used; nevertheless, "her physique makes it impossible for her to act in a feminine way, which reinforces that possessing a body-sexed female does not define one as a woman" (Hançer, 2023, p. 1220). For instance, she explains that she "swept [a man] from his feet" in order to kiss her but he "fainted dead away" (Winterson, 2021, p. 35). She once "pulled [another man] from his horse and popped his eyeballs with [her] thumbs" (p. 95). Her behaviour does not really correspond to what the average reader may expect from a woman and much of this is given by her physical appearance. It is her physique that seems to be an obstacle to reach the ideal of woman that has been traditionally set by patriarchy. This proves that Winterson's aim is to destabilise the notions of gender identity and femininity by exposing how "these are mere cultural constructs and not something which is natural and inherent" (Hooda, 2015, p. 155). So, although the Dog Woman is both a woman and a mother, she does not conform to the behavioural norms, notions of motherhood, femininity that have been traditionally defined by the patriarchal system. The fact that there is a subversion of some of the qualities attributed to femininity implies the "[t]ransgression of the physical reality's hierarchical and discriminating boundaries" (Kurt, 2021, p. 92). At the same time, this allows feminists to open a non-hierarchical and non-discriminating ground for all the women to be included.

Celebrating Diversity: Postmodern Playfulness and Gender

The inclusion of marginal figures such as the Dog Woman entails the reconsideration of feminine identity. Winterson destabilises the notions of gender and sex. The result is a much broader space for the inclusion of all kinds of women. This is greatly based on Simone de Beauvoir's dictum: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (2015, p. 273). In other words, she expresses her feminist view that womanhood is a social construct rather than a natural essence. Consequently, limits are blurred since a more inclusive definition of womanhood is taken into account. The first issue to be considered is the "discrepancy between the roles that evacuates the essentialism in gender" (Kasurka, 2020, p. 98). The philosopher Judith Butler argues that Beauvoir's dictum "makes a distinction between biological sex and culturally coded gender" (p. 99). There is not a natural relation between sex, gender and behaviour. The Dog Woman conforms to the destabilisation of these notions because she does not entirely fit into what society has constructed as feminine or masculine.

The most obvious element that signals this in the novel is the small pictures that separate Jordan's narrative from the Dog Woman's. The unusual thing about them is that the pictures are of two fruits. These pictures may be rather considered two symbols of the destabilisation of sex, gender and behaviour because "Dog Woman's speeches are signalled by a drawing of a phallic banana; the speeches of Jordan are signalled by a drawing of a fecund, round pineapple" (Hopkins, 1992, p. 72). Moreover, she does not internalise the social script that sets the roles that had been usually attributed to women but she reverses them in order to show their constructed nature. According to Lazăr, "Dog-Woman is an embodiment that thwarts expectations and social regulations regarding the 'weak' female body and translates this physical strength onto the discourse" (2013, p. 45). Jordan says about her: "I want to be like my

rip-roaring mother who cares nothing for how she looks, only for what she does [...] She is self-sufficient and without self-doubt” (Winterson, 2021, p. 116). These are features that contrast with the dependent, passive kind of woman who has been usually promoted by the patriarchal system. Another important feature about her identity is motherhood. She is Jordan’s mother but she is not her biological mother. She found him in the river Thames so she did not give birth to him. This again is a way of “unveiling and rejecting all the traditional discourses inscribed on women’s bodies, and their primary function – reproduction – [so that] female liberation becomes concretely possible” (Maioli, 2010, p. 43). There is an ironic passage that makes reference to the act of giving birth and that, at the same time, relates to her not very feminine way of communicating and behaving. She is talking to a soldier when he asks her to stand up from her wheelbarrow, and she says: “‘I cannot, sir,’ I cried, ‘for I have the Clap and my flesh is rotting beneath me. If I were to stand up, sir, you would see a river of pus across these flags’” (p. 74). The pus running in-between her legs is a reference to when waters break before giving birth to a baby. Moreover, she tells at the beginning of the novel:

When a woman gives birth her waters break and she pours out the child and the child runs free. 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, 2021, p. 4)

Again, Winterson presents the act of giving birth and the Dog Woman’s not very feminine physique in relation to one and another. Although this quote seems to express that her physical appearance is the obstacle to fulfil her desire to become a mother, the anecdote about the clap reverses it through the use of irony and sense of humour. Moreover, she says: “I am too huge for love. No one [...] has ever dared to approach me. They are afraid to scale mountains” (p. 32). This quote suggests that she is something worthwhile. It could be understood as her trying to

subvert the fact that she is rejected for how she looks. Instead, the mountain is a symbol of something overwhelming and something you have to put a lot of effort into in order to reach its top. On the one hand, she is someone you have to get to know in order to feel affection for. On the other hand, this does not mean that she is inferior to the rest but that she has the power to reject those whom she considers not enough for her because, as she says “there are worse things than loneliness” (p. 40). The Dog Woman asserts that being single should not be a burden for women. This reference to loneliness also subverts the traditional belief that women should both marry a man and be submissive when being imposed on who they have to spend their lives with. Toril Moi explains that the Dog Woman is a monster woman who “refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell—in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her” (2002, p. 57).

Gender and Performance: Identity Construction

Identity, according to Butler, is not only defined by biological sex. Instead, it is constructed around the notions of sex, gender and performance. Butler argues that there is a need to make a “distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (1990, pp. 337-38). Consequently, it is necessary to take into consideration three different dimensions: “anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance” (pp. 337-38). Then, the Dog Woman’s identity is constructed through gender performance. Despite her looks, she wears a “ribbon in her hair” (Winterson, 2021, p. 20) and she understands that the appropriate behaviour of a woman is also linked to the way of eating: “And then he bit into his and spurted juice right over himself. Cautiously I bit into mine, but in a more ladylike fashion” (p. 17). However, she has some behaviours that distance from those feminine ways. For instance, she “could scarcely step outside without sweating off [her] enough liquid to fill a bucket” (p. 16).

The Dog Woman's appearance does not correspond to the ideal female body either. The conception of femininity that she embodies is defined not only by her looks but also by her size and strength. The funny anecdote in the circus proves this:

One night, [...] I thought to try and outweigh Samson [an elephant] myself. I had taken a look at him and he seemed none too big for me. So I got hold of the man who was [...] jeering at the crowd to pit themselves against a mere beast and said I would take the seat. [...] I [...] threw myself at the seat with all my might. [...] I opened my eyes and looked towards Samson. He has vanished. [...] Far above us, far far away like a black star in a white sky, was Samson. (Winterson, 2021, pp. 20-21)

She is completely aware of her strength and, at the same time, her awareness contrasts with the passive attitude and beauty which are usually associated with feminine gender identity. In fact, she has an enormous strength that allows her “ [to run] straight at the guards, [break] the arms of the first, [rupture] the second and [give] the third a kick in the head that knocked him out at once” (p. 71). The Dog Woman goes against the patriarchal system through the use of physical force; that is, she rebels against the established relation between man/strength and woman/weakness. The fact that the Dog Woman is such a transgressive character “paints an awkward picture of gender imbalance and demystifies the idea of a clear-cut line between genders, or even the idea of a gender binary” (Lazăr, 2013, p. 46). The idea is that the same character acts in two ways that have been set as opposite according to gender binaries: woman vs man or feminine vs masculine. The result is a hybrid character whose identity is not defined either by strict masculine or feminine traits; in other words, her identity is not shaped solely by her anatomy or her behaviour.

A monstrous character: The Dog Woman as queer and drag

The Dog Woman's gender cannot fit into any of the categories that, until that moment, has been established by the patriarchal system, that is, the dichotomy man/woman. Many critics have used the term queer in order to better understand her identity and to approach the issue. Queer is a term that originally meant 'strange' or 'peculiar'. However, it is now used as an umbrella term to describe a broad spectrum of non-normative sexual or gender identities and politics (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014). This means that queer theory rejects binarism or the classification of gender into the two separate categories of masculine and feminine. For instance, some of the points on queer theorists' agenda are "subverting the normative categories of woman and man, heterosexual and homosexual, self and other" (Sandelius, 2008, pp. 12-13).

The biological sex and the culturally constructed gender are two concepts that clash and their relationship arises some controversy. The feminist cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin acknowledges that the system sex/gender is "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity" (as cited in Sandelius, 2008); that is, sex is somehow naturally turned into gender. Butler argues that, as sex and gender are two different categories, there should not be a natural and direct relationship between one and the other (1990, pp. 9-10). The outcome is that the distinction between sex and gender is erased. This is even more emphasised by the fact that sex, as previously explained, has much to do with performativity, with the reiteration of certain norms. It reveals that the need to repeat those acts imply a great degree of constructedness and incongruity.

On the other hand, Kristeva (1982) uses the concept of the abject to refer to the in-between, the ambiguous and the composite, that which troubles identity, system and order and disrespects boundaries. The abject is greatly connected to the idea of 'drag'. Drag is a term used

for the exaggerated performance of femininity and masculinity, involving cross-dressing among other things. The performative exaggeration entails that “the impression of a primary or constitutive gender identity is parodied” (Sandelius, 2008, pp. 16-17). In addition, the fact that gender is imitated reveals “the constructedness of the gender itself as well as the fact that gender is not self-evident and that it can be performed ‘differently’” (p. 17). Braidotti argues that the productions of differences are sometimes reflected on monsters. She claims that “[t]he peculiarity of the [...] monster is that s/he is both Same and Other. The monster is neither a total stranger nor completely familiar, s/he exists in an in-between zone” (as cited in Sandelius, 2008). Her ambiguous identity, which is the outcome of being different from conventional standards of femininity, results in the Dog Woman being considered a monster. The Dog Woman is regarded as a monstrous character because she threatens the dichotomous classification of man/woman and Same/Other. Shildrick affirms that monstrosity is explained in terms of “the pathology of abnormal corporeality” (2002, pp. 3-4). Monsters are marked by a deviant form of embodiment. Consequently, monstrous bodies fail to look like the corporeal norms. Instead, they “are always [...], refusing to stay in place, transgressive” (p. 4). The Dog Woman breaks with the normative stereotypes regarding womanly bodies. This is the reason why she is considered to be a monster. The transgression of those bodily norms is particularly useful in a postmodernist novel. It incorporates postmodernist features such as the focus on the Other and the playful approach that allows the celebration of diversity and difference. In this sense, the Dog Woman is considered a monster because she embodies multiple and diverse possibilities of those established gender binaries. She opens a space for liminality, for in-betweenness.

It is remarkable that his son Jordan is not affected by her not-feminine appearance, which contrasts with her own experience as a child. Her monstrosity used to be a problem when she

was younger because “[her] father swung [her] up on to his knees to tell a story and [she] broke his legs” (Winterson, 2021, p. 21). This accident indicates that her non-normative physicality was considered harmful and negative. However, Jordan subverts that belief. He does not ask her mother to fit into the feminine norms; instead, he admires the Dog Woman and embraces her true identity. There is “no other child [who] had a mother who could hold a dozen oranges in her mouth at once” (Winterson, 2021, pp. 21-22); still, the enormous size of her mouth, which again emphasises her not-feminine appearance, is not an obstacle for Jordan to admire her because “[h]e was proud of [her]” (p. 21).

Her bodily excess and shamelessness bring out monstrosity in her narrative. All these instances still contrast with other signs that acknowledge her feminine identity. For instance, she is “gracious by nature” (Winterson, 2021, p. 20). Consequently, there is a rejection of both masculine and feminine traits, whose result is a liminal space that occurs outside the traditional masculine/feminine binary, which is what makes her a monstrous character. Her figure is not coherent with the system sex-gender; instead, she is a hybrid, ambiguous person who challenges the patriarchal conception of a woman. This is not necessarily negative as she helps to deconstruct the natural link between sex and gender. The outcome is rather positive as she liberates women from the pressure of having to meet preconceptions about womanhood.

Grafting: Gender hybridity

Grafting is presented as a motif in *Sexing the Cherry*. Although it is given little attention, the metaphor of grafting permeates the whole story. In fact, it is the concept that gives a title to the novel. Jordan defines it as: “the means whereby a plant, perhaps tender or uncertain, is fused into a hardier member of its strain, and so the two take advantage of each other and produce a third kind” (Winterson, 2021, p. 87). Grafting implies joining together two different things in order to

create a new kind. Grafting is used “to destabilize the stereotypical gender binaries and to foreground the possibility of hybrid, plural identities which do not fit into the hetero-homo binary” (Hooda, 2015, p. 155). This new kind challenges the binaries that the patriarchal system relies on. Winterson writes: “There are many in the Church who condemn this practice as unnatural, holding that the Lord who made the world made its flora as he wished and in no other way” (p. 87). The most traditional parts of society see grafting as a threat to their established order which claims that gender and sexual identities are “fixed, rigid and limiting” (Hooda, 2015, p. 155).

The novel criticises those restrictive categories. Winterson puts forward a reinterpretation of grafting, taking the concept to a human field. In the novel, grafting entails breaking gender limits and expanding preconceptions about gendered bodies and sex. At the same time, as Kintzele states, grafting is an artificial process that points to “the constructedness of the human subject” (as cited in Kasurka, 2020). Again, Winterson highlights that those stereotypes associated with the female/male binary are not natural. The introduction of a third kind takes in those characters who are rejected or silenced because of their not-normative appearance or behaviour, as it is the case of the Dog Woman. She is a blank page in which features from different categories have been projected.

Another remarkable character who is also affected by grafting is Jordan. He says that “it was on the cherry that [he] first learned the art of grafting and wondered whether it was an art [he] might apply to [himself]” (Winterson, 2021, p. 87). Jordan is not the typical macho man who feels superior to women, is only interested in masculine issues and is defined in terms of strength. From the very beginning, he shows interest in better understanding women so he cross-dresses in order to be granted admittance. He says: “I have met [...] people who, anxious to

be free of the burdens of their gender, have dressed themselves men as women” (p. 29). He admits that gender has been understood as implying certain mental and physical pressure to be accepted. He does not believe in male superiority or the stereotypes that patriarchy has set on women. He comments that he “noticed that women have a private language. A language not dependent on the construction of men” (p. 29).

Jordan “constitutes a third gender that displaces the binary male-female essential structure of gender” (DeLong, 1997, p. 51). He even laughs at those of his same sex:

I watched women flirting with men, pleasing men, doing business with men, and then I watched them collapsing into laughter, sharing the joke, while the men, all unknowing, felt themselves master of the situation and went off to brag in bar-rooms and to preach from pulpits the folly of the weaker sex. (Winterson, 2021, p. 29)

Jordan is an important character because he deconstructs gender binaries and, at the same time, he also tells female experience. That is, he gives voice to silenced or ignored women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Winterson constructs stories in which feminist perspectives are the main focus of the novel. *Sexing the Cherry* revises and deconstructs the traditional notions of femininity through the voicing of marginalised characters such as the Dog Woman and the twelve princesses. As a postmodernist novel, it rejects metanarratives in order to favour feminist discourses, which were othered by the patriarchal system. Winterson also uses other postmodernist literary devices such as intertextuality and historiographic metafiction so as to present marginal experiences that deconstruct traditional gender roles and social expectations. The twelve princesses subvert the conventional princess archetype so that they acquire some agency.

The Dog Woman deconstructs the patriarchal ideas around the female body and behaviour while showing the artificiality of these notions. The outcome is the celebration of female identity's plurality. She is also described in queer and monstrous terms, which question the fixed dichotomous division man/woman that patriarchy promotes. The Dog Woman is defined as an in-between figure, which is even more emphasised by the use of the grafting motif. Jordan, whose identity is also fluid, is constructed around the motif of grafting. Consequently, the limits between restrictive gendered categories are blurred.

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