

A Magic-Realist Critique: Deconstructing History in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*

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Abstract

*Magical realism has been in use as a critical mode of narration since its application in art in the 1920s. In the contemporary fictional narratives, postcolonial authors and critics have used it as a narrative strategy to present realities to readers in a fascinating manner than that of the realist tradition in fiction. By challenging and subverting the notion of objective reality, it critiques effects on colonization, and it works as decolonizing device to examine the political, cultural and historical realities of the colonized. In this line of argument, I examine and explore Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* that challenges the traditional linearity and objectivity of historical narratives through a magic-realist lens, offering a critique of history's patriarchal and constructed nature. This study utilizes history as a narrative open to reinterpretation, where suppressed perspectives can emerge. Winterson positions her critique within deconstruction framework, aligning her narrative with a broader political project to question authority and reclaim agency for the disempowered. Ultimately, this study argues that history is not a fixed truth but an evolving story, constantly shaped by power and perspective. By deconstructing historical certainty through magical realism, Winterson invites readers to reconsider how history is told and who controls its telling.*

Keywords: Magical Realism, Deconstruction, Reinterpretation, Subversion, Resistance, History

Magical Realism as a Narrative Strategy

Magical realism on the map of the world literature has been used as a literary tool by different literary critics and authors across the globe, but majority of the magic realist writing is set in the postcolonial texts and contexts. As a dominant literary mode of creative expression that conglomerates fantastical elements with grounded realism in the contemporary literary scholarship, magical realism has often been used to interrogate and deconstruct historical narratives. It has served as a powerful means of expression especially in the former colonized countries because it provides a literary ground for political and cultural criticism. In this backdrop, this paper examines and explores the use of magical realism in operation as a strategic tool in Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* to propose alternative realities in postcolonial contexts, deliberate reinterpretations of the official version of history. By blending the real and the surreal, this mode challenges the authority of official histories, offering alternative perspectives that foreground marginalized voices and experiences. The contributions of Carpentier, Slemmon, Bhabha and Faris elucidate how magical realism serves as a lens to deconstruct history.

Winterson blends fantasy and historical fiction to destabilize boundaries between reality and imagination, exposing history as a subjective, power-driven discourse. Central to this deconstruction is the novel's use of temporal fluidity, where past, present, and future collapse, illustrating history as an artificial structure rather than an absolute truth. By embedding fantastical elements into historical settings, magical realism serves as "the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world" (Bhabha). Winterson amplifies of marginalized

the erasure voices especially women by dominant historical records. The protagonist Jordan's fantastical voyages and the Dog Woman's grotesque, yet empowering presence symbolize resistance to historical silencing. Magic realism becomes a tool to challenge the fixed hierarchies of time, gender, and narrative authority. Winterson's reinvention of alternate histories further undermines traditional storytelling paradigms, emphasizing history's malleability.

Review of Literature

This review provides a critical survey of the historical roots, developments, concepts, and features, and proliferations of magical realism as a literary device and a mode of narration in the contemporary literary scholarship to explore its connections with postcolonial and deconstructive theory, to survey critical receptions to Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*.

As an art movement in 1925, German art critic and historian Franz Roh, in "Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism," has described it a new form of post-expressionist painting which "tried to capture the mystery of life behind the surface reality". He defines magical realism as an art in which "the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpates behind it" (Roh). He contrasts the exotic and transcendental painting of Expressionist to return to reality. His derivation of the term stems from a need to define a style in painting that gravitates more toward the real than does the abstract style of the expressionist paintings that preceded it. He indicates the demise of expressionism.

Alejo Carpentier describes what he argues is "a uniquely American form of magical realism". He exposes magical realism as a distinctly Latin American form of art, in that it serves as an "amplification of perceived reality required by and inherent in Latin American nature and culture" (77). Carpentier's coinage of the term 'marvelous real' remains motivated by his desire to distinguish Latin American literature from European literary movements, such as surrealism and impressionism, to stress its independent character as well as the "unique aspects of Latin American".

The postcolonial authors have used magic realism to reconstruct the original history. In that sense, those writers are intending to rewrite the established official history to produce new meanings and interpretations of human relations. In other words, these writers intend to forget painful memories of the colonial subordination by using the narrative techniques of magic realism. In a similar fashion, Hutcheson considers magic realism for a conceptualization of post-modern text, considering that a "text that self-consciously reconstructs its relationship to what comes before" by retracing connection between magical realism and history.

Jeanette Winterson's novel *Sexing the Cherry* has received significant critical attention for its inventive narrative structure, postcolonial and postmodern themes, and engagement with gender and history. Scholars have explored its intertextuality, treatment of identity, and subversion of conventional narrative forms. The focus remains on the experimental approach to storytelling. Similarly, Susana Onega highlights how Winterson uses intertextuality and a fragmented structure to challenge linear narrative traditions and to explore the fluidity of time and identity (Onega: *Jeanette Winterson*). These critiques underscore Winterson's innovation in narrative techniques, which aligns her work with broader postmodern literary trends.

Research Methodology and Critical Perspective

In this paper, the author plan to inquire into agenda and experiences of political history in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* in a post-positivist research paradigm. The Author's investigation of the reinterpretation and reinvention of history in this research design reconstructs the twentieth-century imperial history. As a matter of fact, this study assumes that the reality lies beyond the representation of numbers and quantification of data of the real world. In that sense, people's perceptions of realities with time and space, race and culture e cannot be quantified in numbers. Such issues require postpositivist paradigm of research to invoke plurality of the world view and multiplicity of interpretation.

With an interpretive mode of inquiry, this study extrapolates core issues in data of the texts in the

qualitative research design. The values of the people and the damages caused by foreign power in the native location have been brought under scrutiny in the analysis section. As qualitative research, this study reviews the data that are beyond the quantification: the values and perceptions, the imaginative speculations, and literary representations of national history in the form of fiction have been taken under scrutiny. Primarily, the study investigates into issues and cases from the text using magical realism as a narrative strategy. Going beyond mere numerical representations of issues and speculations, this study interprets and analyzes details and arguments to see the political goal of magical realism as a narrative strategy adopted in the non-Western world.

Textual Interpretation

Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* was published in 1989, similar to *The Passion*, it is also marked as one of the prominent examples of the magical realist novel. The deconstruction of historical reality, the rejection of the traditional notions of time and space, mixture of real and bizarre, hybridity, metanarrative and carnivalesque are some of the major concerns of the novel. The narrative encompasses two periods in the British history: one is the seventeenth century, which tells the story of Dog-Woman and her son, Jordan. However, the second reflects the last decade of the Twentieth Century which is the story of Nicholas Jordon and Woman Ecologist who represent the characters of the first part. These characters represent their contemporary age and social beliefs.

As the novel is the magical realist fiction, *Sexing the Cherry* comprises many fragmentary stories about different characters but the focus remains on the deconstruction of certain historical events and the traditional notions like time and space. Winterson points out, "The Hopi, an American Indian people, have no tenses for their verbs. Instead, they locate time in space. Thus, I can stand beside yesterday or next week. All time exists. That which will be and that which has been are together now" (85). It questions the Western concept of linear historical progression, presenting time as a spatial and simultaneous phenomenon. It destabilizes the conventional narrative flow of history.

Magical realism combines the fantasy and the reality in the narrative *Sexing the Cherry* that depicts this feature prominently as it mixes the factual space of history and uncanny space of the fiction. Like other magical realist fictions, the novel juxtaposes the fantasy and the realistic events of the history. Winterson writing in the tradition of magical realist fictions blends history with the fantastic world. She critiques history, "History is the story told by the winners, and I want to be able to tell it my way" (Winterson 62). Here, Winterson highlights how history is a construct influenced by power dynamics, suggesting that the "truth" of history is subjective and mutable, often privileging dominant voices.

Similarly, in the context of fiction, the fictional representation of the real world cannot be considered as totally fictional. Because, though it is a fictional representation, it always covers the contemporary social issues. Besides this, another important point is that the psyche of the author is constituted by the socio-cultural space, and the experiences depicted in his fictional world are the result of his exposure to the outer world. Hence, these authors utilize the historical facts to re-contextualize it in a magical world of the novel, which discovers the multiple ways of its interpretations. The magical elements of the novel provide a space, where the concept of linear time is abandoned, and is split according to the dreams, illusions and memories of the characters.

The novel reveals the years preceding and leading up to the Civil War in England. This Civil War ended with the defeat of the King, which was followed by his forged trial and death sentence to the king. This defeat of King produces a political turmoil in England. The proclamation of the 'Republic of England, Ireland and Scotland' in 1649 replaced the age-old monarchy with the parliament. The novel reflects the political history of England with a critical commentary. For instance, Dog-Woman comments, "It is true that the ferment in the city is due not only to the heat, but also to the King seeming to turn Papish on us, and Parliament being in uproar, and Cromwell with his lump-shaped head stirring it and stirring it" (22). This is a reference of the political turmoil in 1649, which reveals the public opinion of the contemporary age. In the historical discourses, this event is depicted in detail but it is impossible in History, to depict the public opinion.

The above quotation, in fact, is a personal response to the political development of the age. What common people think about the execution of the King and how they respond to the republic government are in fact the concerns of the novelist, rather than mere a historical event. Next reference of the history occurs on the page twenty-six where Dog-Woman refers to the Civil war, in order to sense a time, “one morning, soon after the start of Civil War that should have been over in a month and lasted eight years, ...” (26). The allusions of the political events and the passing references of the significant political personalities reveal the undercurrents of political turmoil of the age.

Sexing the Cherry encompasses the historical and political events like, execution of Charles I, the public hanging of the regicides, the plague, and the Great Fire of England in mid-17th century. From the beginning of the novel, it is apparent that Winterson not used the time in the conventional manner. The historical events are also not explored in length or explained in detail but they are fragmented. The novel, in fact, is fragmentary manifestation of history, time and self. But in the fictional context, they have not emerged as separate entities but on the other hand, form a flux or a systematic whole. Therefore, Sexing the Cherry not merely remains as a revision of the historical events but it attempts to perceive something more which otherwise might be skipped due to the limitations of the History.

As the novel is a magic realist fiction, its sole concern is not the revision of history but on the contrary, it is concerned with the deconstruction of it. This motif is achieved through the representation of history with the personal opinions, rumors, and the magical elements. Besides the history and politics, the magic realist style helps the novelist to reflect religious, philosophical, and especially, scientific features of the seventeenth-century England. The initial part of the novel encompasses the historical time between 1930 in which, Dog- Woman seems to have found Jordan on a day to a date, which marks the outbreak of the Great Fire of London. Besides this, some critics define this social scene as “the worst period of religious fanaticism and patriarchal totalitarianism in British history” (Onega: Postmodernist Re-Writings of the Puritan Common

Wealth). Along with these political, historical and social events, the novel also gives the glimpses of two cataclysmic events: the Great Plague and the Great Fire of London.

Though the character, Dog-Woman is represented as a giant, she represents a common citizen who is committed to her nation. Her responses to the historical, political and the catastrophic events are the responses of the common man on the contemporary England. These responses concepts like ‘God’ still govern their minds. When the plague kills the one third of the population reveal that though the period is the spring point of the scientific developments, the transcendental of the London, Dog-Woman thinks that it is a “God’s judgment on the murder of the King” (138). Further she admits, “We are corrupted. There is no whole or beautiful thing left...” (141) and when the Great Fire burnt the entire London, she responds:

I had been drinking with my friends the bakers all night, or, rather they had been drinking and it was fortunate for them that I was able to pull their bodies to a safe place. I did not start the fire - how could I, having resolved to lead a blameless life- but I did not stop it. Indeed the act of pouring a vat of oil on to the flames may well have been said to encourage it. But it was assign, a sign that our great sin would finally be burned away. I could not have hindered the work of God. (143)

This response is a representative response of the contemporary society. It is sufficient to understand the social unrest for the political developments and religious beliefs of the society. For Dog-Woman, the fire is an anger of God who wants to burn down the socio-political corruption of the age. This response should be analyzed as an anger of the society against the execution of the Charles I. Like Carpentier’s notion of *lo real maravilloso*, she challenges Eurocentric historical frameworks. By doing so, magical realism becomes a vehicle for re-enchanting history, presenting colonial and postcolonial experiences in a way that resists reductionist narratives.

But, at the same time, a significant silence about the Cromwell’s protectorate indicates that the contemporary subject wants a revolution. This historical period is rightly described by Davies as:

The fratricidal hostility simmering just beneath the surface of English social life, even in the relative political calm of the Restoration, was everywhere incipient. The experience of plot, plague and fire blend their implications into one another, so that the seditious “overturning” of the Civil Wars was understood in terms of the sickness of the body politics, and mobs were understood both literally and metaphorically to be carriers of plague. Plague might be God’s punishment for plots, as might fires, ignited by plotters wishing to overturn the framework of society. (Winterson 135)

The novel, on many occasions, suggests that it is a period in the history of England, in which the society is self-conscious, critical about the traditional conducts, and highly fertile for the scientific innovations and the social reform. But, it is also revealed that this is the period of social unrest and political anarchy. The year of 1649 is, thus, significant particularly in the history of England and in general in the history of human being on the broader canvas. In it, for the first time, the religious beliefs are shattered by the scientific inventions. The rebellious spirit overthrows the burden of the traditional restrictions and the religious banalities. The society witnessed the decline of the faith that the ‘monarch as a god’ which is resulted in the killing of Charles I and subjection of Anglicanism. Apart from this, the period is also marked by the sea voyages (Jordan’s Sea Voyage) and the marginal tribes merged in the main stream of the society (Dog-Woman’s entry in the social life).

The last part of the novel situates its action in the year 1990, the last decade of Twentieth, which is marked as a century of a Science and Technology. Approximately, three hundred e skipped from the novel. The cluster of the character is also changed. This period is inhabited by Nicolas Jordan and a Woman Ecologist who stand for the Seventeenth Century characters of Jordan and Dog-Woman respectively. This ellipsis of three hundred years suggests that nothing has changed fundamentally, and the new appearances of the characters suggest that social, political, and cultural issues are same but they are appeared in the new dress. Much has been discussed about the selection of the historical periods and ellipsis of three hundred years in the novel. The

question is that ‘why Winterson has selected the Seventeenth century as a setting of this novel?’ and some of them think that it is abrupt. For instance, Rose Tremain thinks:

The traumatizing events of the mid-17th century - the execution of Charles I, the public hanging of the regicides, the plague and the Great Fire - are dutifully recorded, and we get a sniff at the filthy waters of the Thames, but this is all. There seems to be no attempt to inhabit the age, gither in image or in language, so that in the end the choice of century seems arbitrary. (Winterson 29)

The period selected for the novel is a potential one as it is the spring point of the scientific progress and technological advancements along with many philosophical schools of thoughts. The ‘dilemma of God’s existence’, ‘the spirit of rebel’ and ‘political anarchy’ make this period highly dramatic and potential for fiction writing. The period is still controversial as it is represented differently in the various historical documents. The causes of the ‘Great Fire of England’ and ‘the plague’ are still the issues of investigation. This ambiguity and uncertainty helps the author to serve her motif of deconstructing historical reality.

Further, the novel skips three hundred years and represents the modern period and its Socio-cultural problems. Nicolas Jordan describes the modern world as, “There’s so little wonder left in the world because we’ve seen everything one way or another” (113). Further, in the novel, the characters frequently describe the progress of science and technology. The reference of the space research, “People say the magic has gone out of the moon now that someone’s stood on it. I don’t think so. It would take more than a man’s foot to steal the moon. We’ve everywhere in the world and now we’ve gone into space” (120). It reveals that man’s Knowledge has increased enormously in between the gap of three hundred years. Further, the problems of the modern age and especially the issues of the post-war society are discussed in the office meeting of Ecologist Women-Men in suits are discussing how to deal with the problem of the Third World. They want to build dams, clear the rain forests, finance huge Coca-Cola plants and exploit the rubber potential (122). Thus, the author deliberately focuses on the description

of the social scene and points out that though the centuries have passed and the scientific inventions advanced the human life and the problems are the same.

The two historical periods are explored in a single fictional context in order to in the seventeenth century is depicted in the first part, however the second explores what is the condition of human race in the last decade of the twentieth century. These two historical periods are highly potential to mirror the exact reflection of the social and political nature of the society. She blurs the boundaries of myth and history, “In the world of ideas, everything was fluid, free and flying, and when I tried to pin it down and give it words, it twisted away from the shape I gave it” (Winterson 104). She demonstrates the fluidity between historical fact and fictional storytelling, emphasizing the difficulty of capturing an objective historical “truth” and the interplay of imagination in interpreting the past.

In other sense, the combination of the seventeenth century with the last decade of the twentieth century can be interpreted differently. If the earlier one is the beginning of the modernity, which is marked by the materialistic prosperity, whereas, the latter one explores the damaging effect of science and technology. The seventeenth century sees a dream of ‘democratic utopia’ in which everyone will be treated equally and has the fundamental rights as a human being. On the contrary, the postmodern era points out the utter failure of the Western civilization.

Conclusion

The interplay between history and fiction has long been a fertile ground for literary exploration. Magic realism, as a literary mode, uniquely critiques the “grand narratives” of history by blending the fantastic with the real. Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* exemplifies this interplay, challenging historical absolutism through a deconstructive lens. This paper explores the contributions of key theorists to the magic-realist critique of history and applies their concepts to deconstruct Winterson’s depiction of historical narrative. She destroys the ontological distance between two which totally separate discourses of history and fiction. History records the facts of the human society, however, fiction

deals with the flights of the imagination, which is always fictional. But, as the magical realist author, Winterson utilizes the fictionality of fiction and facts of the history in a single context in order to explore the more real than real. She believes that the textual representation of an event in the context of history cannot be proved as objective or ideologically neutral like that of the magical realist authors.

In *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson employs magical realism to challenge patriarchal historical narratives. The novel’s protagonist, Jordan, and his adoptive mother, the Dog-Woman, navigate a world where time and space collapse. By presenting historical figures and events alongside fantastical elements, Winterson critiques the exclusion of women’s voices from historical discourse. For instance, the reimagining of the Twelve Dancing Princesses’ tale subverts traditional fairy-tale tropes, allowing the women to escape patriarchal constraints. Drawing on Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction, *Sexing the Cherry* deconstructs the linearity of historical time. Winterson’s narrative oscillates between the 17th century and a dystopian future, underscoring the fluidity of history. This non-linear structure exemplifies Carpentier’s “marvelous real”, where historical events are recontextualized to reveal their inherent subjectivity.

Thus, though the novel encompasses the historical and political events of the past and the problems of the future, the focus is on reliability of the narrative representation of the reality. The magic-realist critique in Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* deconstructs history by merging the real and the fantastic, challenging traditional historical narratives. The theoretical contributions of Carpentier, Roh, Hutcheon, and Bhabha illuminate the novel’s exploration of history as a subjective and contested space. By destabilizing historical “truths,” Winterson not only critiques the exclusionary nature of dominant narratives but also reimagines history as a site of resistance.

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