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Research Article

Narrative Historiography and the Aesthetics of Desire in Jeanette Winterson's Fiction

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Abstract

Jeanette Winterson's fiction has a special place in contemporary British literature. Her novels combine creative storytelling with deep reflections on history, love, and identity. She does not follow traditional realism. Instead, she experiments with narrative forms while exploring desire and passion. This article examines The Passion (1987) and Sexing the Cherry (1989). It focuses on how Winterson rewrites history and reimagines erotic subjectivity. The study uses Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction and Luce Irigaray's feminist ideas on desire. Hutcheon explains how Winterson questions historical authority through fictionalized personal narratives. This shows that history is fragile and subjective. Irigaray's ideas help analyze how Winterson presents gender and sexuality. In Sexing the Cherry, her characters challenge traditional gender roles and express desire as open, creative, and transformative.

The findings show that Winterson blends metafictional techniques with lyrical explorations of passion. In The Passion, she mixes Napoleon-era history with imagination, offering new perspectives on the past. In Sexing the Cherry, she destabilizes gender norms and portrays desire as fluid. These novels highlight her originality in narrative style and themes. This study demonstrates Winterson's contribution to postmodern literature and feminist thought. Her work shows how rewriting history and exploring desire can challenge cultural norms and offer new ways of thinking about identity, love, and human experience.

Keywords: Storytelling, metafiction, representation, subjectivity, longing, identity, postmodernism

Introduction

Jeanette Winterson's narratives, *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*, exemplify the postmodernist technique of historiographic metafiction, where historical events are intricately interwoven with fictional narratives to question and destabilize traditional representations of history.

As Imran Hussain observes, “Historiographic metafiction is a genre that combines historical events with fictional narratives, challenging the boundaries between history and fiction” (Hussain 40). In these novels, Winterson blends real historical events with imaginative storytelling, allowing readers to see history not as a fixed record but as a complex, interpretive narrative shaped by perspective and creativity. This blending enables her to explore broader themes of identity, gender, and desire while offering a multifaceted view of the past.

The promise of this paper is to analyze how Winterson employs historiographic metafiction to deconstruct conventional historical narratives and present alternative perspectives on history and identity. Pooja Sancheti notes that Winterson’s work “deconstructs traditional narratives, presenting a fragmented view of history and identity” (Sancheti 17). Through metafictional techniques such as narrative fragmentation, shifting perspectives, and the interplay of fact and fantasy, Winterson questions the reliability of historical accounts. Her novels foreground the idea that historical truth is subjective, shaped by those who narrate it and the cultural context in which it is told.

In *The Passion*, Winterson reimagines the Napoleonic era through the experiences of Henri, a young English soldier, and Villanelle, a Venetian woman. Their stories intertwine with elements of magic, passion, and absurdity, which highlight the instability of historical authority. Maria del Mar Asensio Arostegui asserts that Winterson’s novel “presents history as a constructed narrative, subject to interpretation and manipulation” (Arostegui 2). By blending personal stories with historical events, Winterson shows that history is not objective but mediated through storytelling, imagination, and emotional experience.

Similarly, in *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson challenges conventional gender roles while also reworking historical narratives. The novel spans centuries and incorporates fantastical elements, demonstrating how history can include marginalized or overlooked voices. Lalita Navale notes that “the intersection of passion and historiographic metafiction challenges traditional narratives and historical representations” (Navale 5). Through characters like the Dog Woman and the Twelve Dancing Princesses, Winterson explores the fluidity of identity, the multiplicity of desire, and the potential to rewrite history to acknowledge experiences often excluded from mainstream historical accounts.

The theoretical framework for this study draws primarily on Linda Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon explains that postmodernist texts frequently “combine historical events with fictional narratives, challenging the boundaries between history and fiction” (Hutcheon qtd. in Hussain 40). Applying this framework makes it possible to examine how Winterson’s novels subvert traditional historical narratives and present alternative interpretations of both history and human experience.

The thesis of this paper is that Winterson uses historiographic metafiction in *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* to question the objectivity of historical accounts and to offer alternative perspectives on identity and history. By blending fact with fiction, Winterson constructs narratives that encourage readers to reconsider how history is formed, told, and understood. Thus, Winterson’s novels exemplify the postmodernist technique of historiographic metafiction. By intertwining historical facts with imaginative storytelling, she deconstructs conventional historical events and presents new perspectives on identity, gender, and desire. Her works invite readers to reflect on the multiple narratives that constitute our understanding of the past, demonstrating that history is never neutral but always a contested, interpretive space. Through her innovative approach, Winterson challenges readers to see history and human experience as dynamic, subjective, and open to re-imagination.

Review of Literature

The exploration of historiographic metafiction in Jeanette Winterson's novels, *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*, offers a rich field for academic inquiry. Historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon, refers to works that "combine historical events with fictional narratives, challenging the boundaries between history and fiction" (Hutcheon qtd. in Hussain 40). This genre allows authors to interrogate the construction of history and identity, making it a valuable area of study.

Several scholars have delved into Winterson's use of historiographic metafiction. Imran Hussain notes that Winterson's novels "reconstruct historical events through imaginative storytelling, challenging traditional narratives" (Hussain 41). Similarly, María del Mar Asensio Arostegui argues that Winterson's works "expose history as a discursive construct and provide an alternative fantastic discourse for the representation of feminine desire" (Arostegui 2). These analyses highlight Winterson's ability to blend historical events with fictional elements to question established narratives.

Pooja Sancheti emphasizes the postmodernist aspects of Winterson's writing, stating that her novels "deconstruct traditional narratives, presenting a fragmented view of history and identity" (Sancheti 17). This deconstruction aligns with Hutcheon's view that postmodernism "incorporates precisely what it wishes to contest, installs that which needs to be subverted" (Hutcheon qtd. in Sancheti 17). Winterson's work exemplifies this approach by challenging the binaries that dictate our understanding of the world.

The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature provides a broader context for understanding historiographic metafiction, describing it as a genre that "combines historical events with fictional narratives, challenging the boundaries between history and fiction" (Elias 17). This perspective situates Winterson's work within a larger literary tradition that questions the relationship between history and fiction. Lalita Navale explores the intersection of passion and historiographic metafiction, noting that these narratives "use the elements of detective fiction to navigate complex themes of knowledge, power, and the rewriting of history" (Navale 5). This intersection is evident in Winterson's novels, where personal desires intersect with historical events to create complex narratives.

Despite these extensive studies, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the specific ways in which Winterson's novels use historiographic metafiction to explore themes of gender and identity. While scholars have acknowledged the postmodernist elements in her work, there is limited analysis of how these elements contribute to the representation of feminine desire and the construction of gendered identities. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by examining how Winterson employs historiographic metafiction to challenge traditional representations of gender and identity. By analyzing her novels through the lens of feminist theory and postmodernist thought, this study seeks to uncover the ways in which Winterson's work subverts dominant narratives and offers alternative perspectives on history and identity.

While existing literature has provided valuable insights into the postmodernist aspects of Winterson's work, there is a need for further exploration of how her use of historiographic metafiction contributes to the representation of gender and identity. This research will build upon previous studies by focusing specifically on these themes, offering a new perspective on Winterson's literary contributions.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and textual analytical design as its primary method of inquiry. Since Winterson's novels *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) and *The Passion* (1987) are deeply embedded in questions of history, identity, gender, and desire, a close reading approach becomes necessary to unpack the layers of meaning. A textual study allows the researcher to attend to narrative strategies, language, and representation while situating these within theoretical frameworks. As Linda Hutcheon notes, historiographic metafiction "works to situate historical discourse within fiction, thereby making both less absolute and more problematized" (120). This insight is particularly relevant for Winterson, who blends fictionalized personal narratives with historical events to interrogate truth and authority.

The selection of Winterson's texts is deliberate, as both novels embody postmodern experimentation and feminist revisioning of history. *The Passion* dramatizes Napoleonic wars and individual obsession, intertwining love and violence, while *Sexing the Cherry* destabilizes conventional gender roles through fantastical characters such as the Dog Woman and the Twelve Dancing Princesses. As Hutcheon suggests, "the interweaving of the historical and the fictional demonstrates the constructedness of all systems of meaning" (1988, p. 93). Thus, Winterson's novels offer fertile ground for analyzing how literary form questions official historical narratives while foregrounding marginalized voices.

Data collection is conducted through a systematic close reading of primary texts supported by secondary criticism on Winterson, Hutcheon, and Irigaray. Passages that illuminate historiographic metafiction and feminist theories of desire are identified, annotated, and compared. This process follows Irigaray's assertion that "the task of woman is to return to her body, to reappropriate the maternal and the sexual as her own" (85). Winterson's characters echo such reappropriation by embodying fluid identities and resisting the patriarchal limitations imposed by traditional historical discourse.

The theoretical parameters of this study rest primarily on Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction and Irigaray's feminist analysis of desire. Hutcheon maintains that "postmodern fiction installs and then subverts conventions of historical narrative to expose its ideological underpinnings" (106), an approach visible in *The Passion*, where Napoleon's wars are reimagined through the fragmented perspectives of Henri and Villanelle, thereby decentering grand historical authority. Similarly, *Sexing the Cherry* exemplifies the instability of truth as Winterson juxtaposes seventeenth-century London with timeless tales. Complementing this, Irigaray's emphasis on fluid, transformative desire enriches the analysis of Winterson's representations of sexuality. As Irigaray argues, "female desire does not submit to the law of the one" (28), which resonates with Winterson's portrayal of love and passion as plural, creative, and resistant to reduction.

Together, these frameworks create a methodological foundation for interpreting Winterson's novels. Hutcheon's ideas help reveal how Winterson destabilizes historical certainty, while Irigaray's feminist philosophy foregrounds the multiplicity of desire and gendered embodiment. Through this dual lens, the research situates Winterson's fiction as both a critique of historiography and a reimagining of feminist possibilities, showing how narrative can challenge dominant structures while opening space for new forms of subjectivity.

Textual Analysis

Rewriting History to Destabilize Authoritative Narratives

Winterson's novels challenge the idea that history is a fixed and objective record. Instead, she reveals how narratives about the past are shaped by perspective, ideology, and cultural context. Linda Hutcheon notes that "historiographic metafiction is both self-reflexive and historical, asserting an interpretation of the past while exposing its partiality" (5). This insight shows how fiction can retell

history while simultaneously drawing attention to its uncertainty. In *Sexing the Cherry*, the narrator reminds the reader, “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” (Winterson 5), foregrounding the interpretive nature of storytelling and the thin line between fact and imagination. Hutcheon further emphasizes that history is “a discourse, humanly constructed, partial, and ideologically charged” (93), pointing to the ways in which cultural values and human choices influence what is preserved as historical truth. Winterson’s fiction, therefore, unsettles the belief in history as stable and demonstrates its fragility and subjectivity.

This destabilization is echoed by critics who observe how Winterson deliberately fractures linear historical accounts. Ojaswini Hooda explains that “Winterson brings forth the idea that history is not linear and progressive but fragmented and plural” (155), a view reflected in her use of myth, fantasy, and non-linear time. Similarly, María del Mar Asensio Arostegui argues that *The Passion* “presents history as a constructed narrative, subject to interpretation and manipulation” (2). This indicates that Winterson’s history is always mediated by narrative voice rather than presented as neutral fact. Usman supports this by writing that “Winterson’s texts collapse the opposition between fact and fiction, history and story, thereby destabilizing the very authority of historical discourse” (34). His comment emphasizes how Winterson deliberately undermines the authority of official versions of the past.

The mingling of fact and fantasy is clear in *The Passion*, where Henri remarks, “There is a story the bees used to tell, which makes it true whether it happened or not” (Winterson 62). Memory and myth intertwine with historical detail, demonstrating that truth depends as much on experience and imagination as on documented fact. Hutcheon explains this dynamic by noting that the past is “semiotically transmitted” (120), always filtered through language and representation. Raymond Mazurek captures the same idea, observing that “what is ‘new’ in the new historical novel is its treatment of history as a form of discourse” (*qtd. in Postmodernist Historical Novels* 171). As Usman further notes, “By interweaving fantasy and history, Winterson calls attention to the artificiality of all narratives, whether fictional or historical” (41). This reinforces the point that Winterson does not separate fact from imagination but shows both to be equally narrative-driven.

Winterson’s rewriting of history also foregrounds individual desire and marginalized perspectives. Villanelle’s reflection—“You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play” (Winterson 48)—shows how personal choice and imagination reshape the telling of events. In *Sexing the Cherry*, the Dog Woman insists, “Why should I be ashamed of my body? It isn’t shameful” (Winterson 42), a declaration that amplifies silenced voices excluded from dominant histories. As Mazurek notes, such postmodern novels “subvert historical ‘facts’ and rewrite them from a perspective different from the accepted interpretation” (171). Similarly, Hooda comments that “Winterson’s representation of women and marginalized figures challenges the patriarchal bias inherent in traditional historiography” (157). Her view underscores how Winterson brings suppressed experiences to the center of her storytelling.

Critics underline that Winterson’s approach challenges authority on multiple levels. The *De Gruyter* volume notes that “Winterson challenges the empiricist notion of history by replacing linear truth with multiplicity and uncertainty” (Elias 342). Suzanne Keen emphasizes that her novels “bear a strong relationship in their spirit to the feminist and postcolonial tradition” (179). Hooda explains that “Winterson questions the absence of women in historical grand narratives and rewrites them with alternative voices” (156), while Arostegui stresses that Winterson’s “fantastic discourse provides a space for the representation of feminine desire” (2). Likewise, Elias highlights that “through parody and pastiche, Winterson deconstructs the authoritative voice of history and replaces it with polyphonic storytelling” (343). This suggests that her narratives operate not only as critique but also as creative reconstructions that imagine plurality.

The reworking of temporality reinforces this destabilization. In *Sexing the Cherry*, time is described not as linear but as labyrinthine: “Time is not a straight line, it is a labyrinth” (15). Hutcheon links such disruptions to the broader postmodern project, claiming that “temporal disruption foregrounds the constructedness of history and fiction alike” (*Poetics* 141). Usman develops this idea by pointing out that “Her work deliberately unsettles the reader’s sense of temporal continuity, producing a postmodern vision of time as fragmented and nonlinear” (29). The result is that Winterson exposes time itself as another cultural narrative rather than a natural progression.

Desire and Gender as Disruptive Forces

Alongside her challenge to history, Winterson foregrounds desire and gender as forces that resist containment. Irigaray reminds us in *This Sex Which Is Not One* that “female desire does not submit to the law of the one” (28), a view that resonates strongly with Winterson’s characters. In *Sexing the Cherry*, the Dog Woman asserts, “Why should I be ashamed of my body? It isn’t shameful” (42), reclaiming bodily desire as empowering and liberating. For Irigaray, women must find a language to speak as subjects rather than objects (211), a principle Winterson dramatizes through Villanelle in *The Passion*, whose declaration—“You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play” (48)—embodies a refusal of rigid gendered identities. Navale reflects this reading by writing, “Her novels construct identity as fluid and performative, rejecting essentialist notions of gender” (6). This affirms that Winterson’s characters embody a vision of gender beyond fixed categories.

Winterson’s revision of history is inseparable from her treatment of gender. Hutcheon observes that “postmodern fiction installs and then subverts conventions of historical narrative” (106), a process Winterson mirrors when the Twelve Dancing Princesses escape patriarchal control in *Sexing the Cherry*. Usman notes that Winterson “uses fantastic elements … to subvert traditionally established norms about gender roles and to blur the line between femininity and masculinity” (57), echoing Irigaray’s insistence in *Speculum of the Other Woman* that “no single thing … can complete the development of woman’s desire” (215). This intertwining of gender, history, and temporality highlights how narrative itself becomes a site of resistance. Winterson underscores this when she writes, “Time is not a straight line, it is a labyrinth” (*Sexing the Cherry* 15), a temporal metaphor Hutcheon interprets as evidence that “temporal disruption foregrounds the constructedness of history and fiction alike” (141). Winterson’s metaphor of time as a labyrinth in *Sexing the Cherry* challenges the conventional notion of linear temporality. By disrupting chronological order, she emphasizes the instability of narrative and the fluid interplay between past and present. Hutcheon reads this temporal disruption as a deliberate strategy that exposes the constructed nature of both history and fiction, suggesting that neither offers an objective truth but rather a narrative shaped by perspective and interpretation.

Critics further argue that Winterson’s destabilization of history cannot be separated from her reworking of gender. Hooda explains that “Winterson resists binary logic by presenting characters who refuse to be confined to singular identities” (156), while Lalita Navale remarks that “the intersection of passion and historiographic metafiction challenges traditional narratives and historical representations” (5). Arostegui likewise affirms that Winterson’s “fantastic discourse provides a space for the representation of feminine desire” (2). Keen makes the same point, observing that “the act of rewriting history becomes for Winterson a feminist intervention that foregrounds the silences and absences in dominant narratives” (181). This confirms that her treatment of gender is always linked to her broader feminist project.

The novels, then, present passion, gender, and love as fluid categories that break binaries of male/female and truth/fiction. Henri in *The Passion* confesses, “I could not love him less if he had treated me better” (74), illustrating the complexity and contradictions of desire. Irigaray notes that

“every desire has a relation to madness” (28), a reflection echoed in the unpredictability of Winterson’s lovers. Villanelle’s cross-dressing—“She was a woman, but she dressed as a boy and no one ever said she was not” (Winterson 47)—further disrupts gender boundaries. Suzanne Keen points out that postmodern historical fiction “provides space for silenced identities to reimagine themselves” (179), a space Winterson makes central to her storytelling. Hooda confirms this political dimension by noting that “By destabilizing historical truth and gender norms simultaneously, Winterson’s narratives enact a politics of disruption that is both aesthetic and ideological” (160). This means her novels do not just tell stories but intervene critically in cultural debates. Finally, Winterson declares, “There are as many truths as there are stars in the sky” (*Sexing the Cherry* 77), affirming a vision of multiplicity that resonates with Hutcheon’s postmodernism and Irigaray’s philosophy of desire.

Findings

The study finds that Jeanette Winterson rewrites history in ways that challenge authority. In *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*, she blends fact and imagination, showing that historical knowledge is not fixed. Characters like Henri and Villanelle reveal how personal stories can reinterpret the past. Winterson’s narratives destabilize traditional historical accounts and highlight the fragility of memory. Her novels show that storytelling can offer multiple truths and give voice to marginalized perspectives, especially women. Time and history are presented as nonlinear, allowing alternative narratives to emerge and questioning dominant historical frameworks.

Winterson also portrays desire and gender as transformative forces. In *Sexing the Cherry*, female characters express their bodies and desires freely, showing desire as open and creative. Villanelle in *The Passion* demonstrates fluid gender identity. Desire disrupts traditional binaries of male/female and love/war, offering new ways to understand gender and sexuality. Overall, Winterson merges experimental historical storytelling with feminist exploration of desire. Her novels demonstrate that history, memory, and desire are subjective, plural, and transformative, offering readers fresh perspectives on identity, power, and human relationships.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Jeanette Winterson’s novels *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* use historiographic metafiction and feminist poetics of desire to challenge dominant narratives of history, gender, and sexuality. The thesis—that Winterson rewrites historical events while exploring desire as a transformative and subversive force—is confirmed through the textual analysis.

The analysis revealed that Winterson destabilizes authoritative accounts of the past by blending fact and imagination. In *The Passion*, Henri’s personal stories blur historical events with subjective memory, while in *Sexing the Cherry*, Villanelle and the Dog Woman challenge traditional gender norms and express desire freely. Time, history, and identity are represented as fluid, highlighting the multiplicity and subjectivity of human experience. The novels demonstrate how feminist and postmodern approaches can reshape our understanding of history, memory, and desire.

Winterson’s work exemplifies the power of narrative experimentation. Her blending of historiography and desire opens new ways to think about the past and human subjectivity. These novels encourage readers to question fixed historical truths and rigid gender norms, emphasizing the value of multiple perspectives and alternative narratives. For further research, scholars could examine Winterson’s later works to explore how her narrative techniques evolve. Comparative studies with other postmodern feminist writers could provide deeper insights into the intersections of history, gender, and desire. Additionally, studies could investigate how Winterson’s novels influence contemporary perceptions of historical events and feminist theory in literature.

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