

# Deconstruction and Reconstruction: Metafictional Strategies and the Critique of Authoritative Narratives in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

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## Abstract

**This article analyzes Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* from a narratological perspective, focusing on its metafictional critique of authoritative narratives. Drawing on Patricia Waugh's theory of metafiction, it argues that the novel challenges conventional coming-of-age narratives through self-reflexivity and narrative experimentation. By foregrounding the fictionality of narrative, Winterson exposes how religious, gendered, and historical discourses construct alternative realities while claiming narrative authority. The novel's rejection of realist transparency, achieved through non-omniscient narration, narrative fragmentation, and direct authorial intervention, destabilizes fixed meanings, and invites readers to reflect on the nature of storytelling itself. Intertextual rewritings further undermine dominant narrative frameworks by revealing their dependence on convention. Ultimately, the novel reconstructs narrative as an open discursive space in which meaning is contingent, plural, and resistant to singular authority.**

## Keywords

**Metafiction; Authoritative narratives; Self-reflexivity; Intertextuality.**

## 1. Introduction

*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is the debut novel by contemporary British women writer Jeanette Winterson. Told from a first-person point of view, *Oranges* is the coming-of-age story of Jeanette, a girl adopted into the family of a Pentecostal couple who continue to run away from her family and the church. The book became an instant hit upon its release in 1986. The novel won the Whitbread First Novel Award in the UK and was then selected as one of *The Guardian's* 1,000 must-read novels. In addition, Winterson's own adaptation of the hit BBC series of the same name won a BAFTA and Best Screenplay at the Cannes Film Festival. Winterson is a brilliant and highly controversial author known for her lesbian themes and creative writing. Many of her novels challenge traditional writing styles through different new themes and narrative techniques. While her works have been analyzed mainly from the perspectives of postmodernism, feminism, lesbian themes, gender, society and culture, this essay will analyze her novel from the narrative perspective. The novel subverts the framework of the traditional coming-of-age novel with a striking narrative experiment, and its self-reflexivity and deconstruction of authoritative narratives is like a "metafictional bomb" thrown at literary conventions. Winterson introduces readers to a discourse on the nature of narrative, exposing both its fictionality and the alternative realities that are obscured by conventional narratives [1]. Using Patricia Waugh's metafictional theory as a framework, this essay will analyze how *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* deconstructs the authority of religious and gender discourses through the construction and deconstruction of fiction and ultimately rebuilds the truth on the ruins of narrative.

## 2. Metafiction

The term Metafiction was first coined in 1970 by William H Gass, but in fact metafiction is as old as literature and has been around for a long time. Many theorists have attempted to define metafiction. David Lodge argues that metafiction is “fiction about fiction,” that is, “novels and stories which draw attention to their fictional status and to their own processes of composition” [2]. Larry McCaffery defines metafiction as a type of fiction that “examines fictional systems themselves,” explores “how they are created,” and investigates “the way in which reality is transformed by and filtered through narrative assumptions and conventions” [3]. Patricia Waugh understands metafiction as a form of fictional writing that “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its own status as an artefact” and questions “the relationship between fiction and reality”. By reflecting on its own methods of construction, metafiction examines the basic structures of narrative and explores the possible fictionality of the world beyond the text. Patricia Waugh also summarizes four characteristics of metafiction: “a celebration of the power of the creative imagination together with an uncertainty about the validity of its representations; an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions; a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality; a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naïve style of writing”.

Metafiction questions the narratives of realist fiction of the past. Metafiction theorists have argued that the relationship between language and the world is no longer self-evidently “reflection,” and have recognized that people’s understanding of the “real” and the related knowledge is controlled by the conventions of discourse. The authors of metafiction are often good at using imagination and innovative techniques to subvert traditional forms of expression; they pay more attention to language and writing methods than to reality; they deliberately blur the boundaries between fiction and reality to reveal the fictional nature of the novel; and they use parody and other techniques to expose the statute and constructed nature of traditional narratives. It can be briefly summarized as “their novels have tended to embody dimensions of self-reflexivity and formal uncertainty” and “they all explore a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction”.

## 3. Metafictional Strategies in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: A Typological Analysis

The paper will analyze five types of metafictional strategies in *Oranges* to explore Winterson's writing practices. The classification of these four types is based on an emphasis on the reflexivity of different novel elements. Due to the complex and intricate nature of metafictional techniques, there may be overlaps of multiple types in specific cases.

### 3.1. Author

One manifestation of reflexivity is when the narrator is aware of their relationship with the author and deliberately mentions the author's writing actions within the narrative. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are the same person. The narrative of the story unfolds in the first person, so the narrator and the character are the same person. Winterson names the main character Jeanette after herself and uses her personal experiences as part of the novel's content, blurring the line between autobiography and fiction. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* breaks through the structure of traditional realist novels, but it is not an extremely experimental novel. Patricia Waugh argues: “literary texts tend to function by preserving a balance between the unfamiliar (the innovatory) and the familiar (the conventional or traditional). Both are necessary because some degree of redundancy is essential for any message to be committed to memory” [4]. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* follows this principle, with both a linear coming-of-age novel narrative and fragmented,

experimental interludes. This allows the reader to both read and understand smoothly, and at the same time experience the effects caused by Winterson's creatively subversive approach. Another way Winterson breaks from traditional realist novels is by giving *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* an open-ended conclusion. The central conflict in the coming-of-age story, namely the conflict between Jeanette and her mother and the church, remains unresolved by the end of the novel, with neither a happy reunion nor a complete break. This creative ending is foreshadowed in the earlier parts of the novel. This creative ending is hinted at earlier in the novel. When the mother tells Jeanette a story, she always tells it incompletely, "Quite often, she'd start to tell me a story and then go on to something else in the middle, so I never found out what happened to the Earthly Paradise when it stopped being off the coast of India, and I was stuck at 'six sevens are forty-two' for almost a week." This narrative strategy creates an "unfinished" reading experience for the reader, thereby achieving a defamiliarization effect. It encourages the reader to become aware of the artificial construction of traditional narrative conventions. In addition to this creative shift, the coming-of-age portion of *Oranges* is also disjointed. The novel consists of eight chapters, seven of which contain Jeanette's coming-of-age narrative. However, in the sixth chapter, the author directly engages with the reader, offering a critique of her own handling of historical authenticity.

### 3.2. Text

The emphasis on the self-reflexivity of the text mainly focuses on two aspects: the use of a non-omniscient perspective and the combination of criticism and writing. Patricia Waugh argues that "the conflict of languages and voices is apparently resolved in realistic fiction through their subordination to the dominant 'voice' of the omniscient, godlike author" Winterson rejects the use of this discursive strategy which has subject-constructive nature and subverts it. The part of coming-of-age novel is always told from Jeanette's point of view, which begins as a child's naïve perspective and slowly shifts to that of an adult. Due to the naïve attributes of children and their non-constructive nature, through the child Jeanette's discourse Winterson is also revealing the constructive nature of authoritative narratives for human beings. For example, in the authoritative discourse of the Christian religion there is a rejection of other religious customs. As a devout and fervent Christian, Jeanette's mother dislike the gypsies, chastising them for "making a mess and staying up all night", and she "called them fornicators". However, Jeanette's impression of them was that the gypsies made food that "taste wonderful," and she thinks "on the whole they got on very well". This non-omniscient perspective strategy reveals the fictionalization of the story in two ways: firstly, the overly detailed descriptions of long-ago memories; and secondly, the inclusion of descriptions of the narrative action in the narrative. The overly detailed descriptions can be found in Jeanette's childhood depictions of specific conversations, such as a depiction of a church assembly when Jeanette was seven years old. The scene records what everyone in the assembly is saying: Mrs. Rothwell focusing on the food says, "does anybody want this piece of cake?"; Pastor Finch giving Christian interpretation of Jeanette's age, "How blessed, the seven days of creation, the seven-branched candlestick, the seven seals."; Mrs. Finch's exhortation to Pastor Finch to rest "Eh, steady on Roy" [5]. Descriptions of narrative action also occur several times in the novel.

One of the core characteristics of metafiction lies in internalizing literary criticism within the creative practice, allowing the text to simultaneously construct itself while reflecting on and deconstructing itself and tradition. Waugh call this as "the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion". This unity of creation and criticism is embodied in Winterson's writing strategy: she repeatedly uses her characters to critique literary conventions, as well as the authenticity of both the literary world and the external world.

In Winterson's writing, Bakhtin's concept of the "dialogical" nature of the novel is realized. The novel is filled with various social voices: the languages of different professions, generations, and ideologies intersect within it. The language of each character bears the imprint of their origin and purpose, forming a "dialogical" relationship with the language of other characters [6]. The needlework teacher at Jeanette's school had little knowledge of religion and therefore did not understand Jeanette's embroidered Bible verses. Winterson describes Jeanette's feelings about her teacher like this: "My needlework teacher suffered from a problem of vision. She recognized things according to expectation and environment. If you were in a particular place, you expected to see particular things". Winterson draws on her comments about the teacher to stress her non-omniscient technique in the writing. Winterson's metafictional practice reflects Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, but it does not fully coincide with it. Bakhtin argues that the multiple voices in the novel should ultimately be unified under the authority of an omniscient author. In metafiction, however, the voices engaged in writing and cultural critique resist such unification. A clear example can be found in one of the interpolated stories, where the act of storytelling is directly addressed.

Of course that is not the whole story, but that is the way with stories; we make them what we will. It's a way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained, it's a way of keeping it all alive, not boxing it into time. Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently. Here, Winterson enters the novel directly as an authorial voice and addresses the reader, rejecting any simple correspondence between story and reality. Reality, as the passage suggests, is constructed through individual narratives rather than discovered as an objective truth. As Linda Hutcheon similarly observes, "fiction does not mirror reality... fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality". This plurality of "realities" opens a space for marginalized subjects within authoritative narrative structures. For characters such as Jeanette, as a feminist and a member of a sexual minority, this narrative openness represents a crucial first step toward the deconstruction of dominant discourses.

Fiction is not a complete reflection of reality, but it still serves the function of helping people understand the world. Just as the Bible is considered fiction but still serves as a guide for its followers. When Jeanette is hospitalized because she is deaf, Elise who is a member of the church community comes to the hospital every day to take care of her, "Elsie came every day, and told me jokes to make me smile and stories to make me feel better" In addition to her storytelling, Elise also told Jeanette that "stories helped you to understand the world." In Winterson's view, the relationship between narrative and reality is neither a simple correspondence nor an absolute separation: Some people say there are true things to be found, some people say all kinds of things can be proved. I don't believe them. The only thing for certain is how complicated it all is, like string full of knots. It's all there but hard to find the beginning and impossible to fathom the end. Through the central metaphor of the "string full of knots," Winterson vividly reveals the complexity and irreducibility of reality itself. This metaphor suggests that linear and orderly literary language inevitably encounters fundamental limitations and selectivity when attempting to represent a web-like, entangled reality.

In addition to critiquing fiction in general, Winterson also directs her criticism toward a specific narrative form: history, by interrogating its claim to truthfulness. David Lodge argues that the fictional nature of history is deeply concealed: "History may be, in a philosophical sense, a fiction, but it does not feel like that when we miss a train or somebody starts a war" [7]. Winterson, by contrast, fully exposes this fictionality to the reader. She suggests that people deliberately distinguish between "history" and "storytelling which is not fact" in order to "know what to believe and what not to believe." Using the biblical story of Jonah and the whale as an example, she demonstrates the coercive and constructed nature of historical truth: "How is it that no one will believe that the whale swallowed Jonah when every day Jonah is swallowing

the whale? I can see them now, stuffing down the fishiest of fish tales, and why? Because it is history". People selectively believe in order to gain some kind of entitlement, for example "It built an empire and kept people where they belonged, in the bright realm of the wallet." She uses the lens as a metaphor for the selective recording of facts in history, because "the lens can be tinted, tilted, smashed," and the goal is "order is seen to prevail". These descriptions imply that history is a field of power discourse, both as a product of, and as a tool for, sustaining authoritative narratives. Although the deconstructive strategies of metafiction cannot reflect or resolve real-world problems in an era marked by pervasive skepticism and the diversification of power, they have nevertheless "offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems," thereby opening up new possibilities for cultural criticism [8].

### 3.3. Intertextuality

In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, intertextuality is not used as simple quotation, but as a key strategy through which Winterson exposes the constructed nature of traditional narrative, especially authoritative forms of storytelling. She achieves an ironic effect through parody. Winterson borrows the titles of the first eight books of the Old Testament as chapter titles in the novel. This direct formal appropriation places the sacred and grand narrative structure of the Bible alongside Jeanette's rebellious coming-of-age story. A fundamental break is created between the authority suggested by the chapter titles and the subversive nature of the content, producing a deep irony toward the religious narrative framework and the single authoritative discourse it supports.

Another important intertext is *Beauty and the Beast*, which is parodied and deconstructed through Jeanette's naïve misreading of the story. Jeanette's reaction reveals the female sacrifices that are obscured by the implied patriarchal narrative of the fairy tale. Jeanette, as a child, reads *Beauty and the Beast* for the first time and gives it a different interpretation than she would under popular culture. While popular culture tends to emphasize the class ascension of the girl who marries the prince because of her goodness, Jeanette's reading highlights that males are beneficiaries in the story as well as the innocent sacrifice of the woman: "a beautiful young woman finds herself the forfeit of a bad bargain made by her father. As a result, she has to marry an ugly beast, or dishonor her family forever" [9]. The storyline in which the prince is a beast, and the young girl is expected to unconditionally accept him, is something Jeanette cannot accept. She views it as "a terrible conspiracy," one that is difficult to avoid because "beasts are crafty and they disguise themselves like you and I". Through Jeanette's naïve narrative voice, which remains oblivious to all "liberal value-systems and moral codes," its defamiliarizing effect reveals their "illiberal and amoral assumptions and consequences".

### 3.4. Language

According to Waugh, the notion that language simply reflects an "objective" world is no longer tenable. She suggests that language operates as an independent system of meaning, and that its relation to the phenomenal world is complex and regulated by convention. In one of the interpolated stories in *Oranges*, a strange tale is told about the protagonist Winnet Stonejar and a male wizard. The name Winnet Stonejar is an anagram of the author Jeanette Winterson's name. This similarity encourages readers to look for a connection with reality, or with the author's own life. However, the absurd and playful nature of the inserted story at the same time denies such a simple correspondence. Through this wordplay, Winterson breaks the idea that the novel is a direct mirror of reality and invites readers to think about how the text itself is constructed [10].

## 4. Conclusion

*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* demonstrates how Jeanette Winterson carries out a double subversion of authoritative narratives through a series of carefully constructed metafictional strategies. First, through multiple forms of self-reflexivity: the author, the text, language, and intertextuality, Winterson systematically exposes the fictional nature not only of the novel but of narrative discourse more broadly. By appropriating the chapter titles of the Bible as the framework for a coming-of-age story and by offering subversive rereading of fairy tales, Winterson deconstructs the assumed legitimacy of religious and patriarchal discourses. More importantly, she reveals how history and tradition narrative conventions as constructed narratives that serve specific power structures. Second, this act of deconstruction is a form of creative reconstruction. Through the use of a non-omniscient perspective, direct address to the reader, and the insertion of absurd and parallel stories, Winterson repeatedly disrupts the illusion of reality associated with realist fiction. She invites readers to participate actively in the construction of meaning. While dismantling the idea of a single, authoritative truth, the novel opens up a discursive space in which multiple voices and plural truths can coexist. Ultimately, Winterson's narrative experiment points toward a more inclusive way of understanding reality: just as oranges are not the only fruit, no single narrative that claims absolute authority should be taken as the sole truth through which the world and the self are understood. Through its metafictional self-examination, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* presents a vision of reality that is richer, more complex, and full of possibility.

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