

Écriture Feminine in the Narration Level of Jeanette Winterson's *The Powerbook*

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Abstract

This writing examines the narration level in Jeanette Winterson's novel The Powerbook (2000) by focusing on the concept of écriture feminine, referring to the structure and the form of narration. Jeanette Winterson is one of woman writers in English literature whose works indicate a form of écriture feminine as a counter discourse for phallogocentrism. Winterson's works in the narration level exhibit the difference from the conventional narration forms. In The Powerbook, écriture feminine in the narration level is shown in the form of fragmented narration that comes in three different forms, namely: narcissistic narrative, public narration and demythologizing history. The result of the research points out that the narration form of the novel is a resistance toward phallogocentrism by demonstrating women's writing that manifests the way women make sense of their world.

Key Words: *écriture feminine, Jeanette Winterson, narration*

Introduction

The issue of women's sexuality in literary works, especially novels, have been frequently discussed by many literary scholars and critics. Sexuality in literary works is not always displayed in its content of the story alone but also in the way the story is served. It means that the way in which a novel tells its story also participates in delivering the theme of sexuality it carries. One of woman writers who shows such concept in her many works is Jeanette Winterson.

This article discusses how Jeanette Winterson's novel titled *The Powerbook* (2000) exhibits the way in which the story is told in a nonlinear and fragmented manner as the manifestation of its feminine writing form. Feminine writing or *écriture feminine* is a term proposed by the French literary scholar Helene Cixous in her essay "*The Laugh of Medusa*" (1976). The phrase refers to how a woman writes her body in the language and text as a form of resistance toward phallogocentric discourse.

Cixous (1976: 876) calls women to write their bodies by saying, "And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you: your body is yours, take it". Not only writing, women are also called to write in their own way and style by reclaiming their bodies. This is what Cixous means by feminine writing, namely "writing gets done by women that goes beyond the bounds of censorship, reading, the gaze, the masculine command" (Cixous, 1981:53). The writing that frees itself from the masculine command is what Cixous refers to as the true texts of women, namely female sexed texts (Cixous, 1976: 877). It underlines the idea that what is considered as feminine is not the writer of the text but rather the text itself. In other words, Cixous proposes the idea of writing in a different language which can accommodate women's experience, hence a woman's language.

To write in women's language means to write in a different way from men's language and from their sexuality that is centered in the phallus. According to Irigaray (1985:25), "women's desire would not be expected to be the same language as men: women's desire has doubtless been submerged by [men's] logic..." Therefore, unlike men's writing and centered sexuality, women's sexuality is not determined by and limited to one area of their body but is instead spreading (Irigaray, 1985). Women's sexuality is consequently reflected on their writing form, which is not linear, unlike what is commonly found in conventional writings, but in pieces or fragmented. Such form of writing is discussed by Lanser in "*Towards Feminist Narratology*" (1989) by focusing the importance of such occurrence as a form of resistance of women's writing toward the logic of phallogocentrism.

Lanser (1989: 466), quoting Maria Brewster, said that plot in a universal view reflects the "discourse of male desire recounting itself through the narrative of adventure, project, enterprise, and conquest". Consequently, the plot in women's story, which does not adhere to such style, "is condemned simply to negative definition—plotlessness, or story without plot" (Lanser, 1986: 465). A narrative that gives an impression of not having a plot is shown in *The Powerbook* (2000) novel by Jeanette Winterson. The fragmented plot in *The Powerbook* is

constructed through multiple narratives along with its setting of time which regularly changes from the present, past, and future.

Besides a fragmented narrative, a feminine writing also demonstrates its difference from phallogocentric discourse in the form of narcissistic narrative. This term comes from Linda Hutcheon's (1980) theory, referring to texts which are aware or conscious of the fact that they are texts or fictions. According to Hutcheon (1980), the fact that a narrative is aware of itself is important because it minimalizes the alienation effect created by a conventional narrative. With the awareness toward its fictionality, a text gives the readers an opportunity to participate in its creation process. I found such form of narrative in the *The Powerbook* novel.

Not only stopping at the point where a text is aware of its status as text per se, a feminine writing can also be signified by reminding readers of its fictionality through a public narration, namely the narration that addresses narratees (readers) outside the textual world (Lanser, 1989). According to Lanser (1989), the form of public narration is significant for it denotes women's effort to get out of the idea that women are related to the private zone whereas public sector is of man's possession.

Another idea that is also resisted in a feminine writing is the glorification of history or the dichotomy between history which is regarded as fact or reality and fiction which is regarded as creation or invention. Kilic (2004) refers to the effort of resisting such idea as the act of demythologizing history. This is important because by merging a history and a fiction, a text "...problematize[s] the validity of history, as well as the validity of the traditional view that the historical and fictional are separate" (Hutcheon as discussed by Kilic, 2004: 127).

By considering the importance of aforesaid narrative form in a feminine writing, this research is directed to identify how the novel is playing with traditional narrative's convention and how such play signifies the text's effort to speak in the form of feminine writing. Therefore, this research aims to describe the way the novel's playing toward traditional narrative's standards and to exhibits the text's effort to speak in the feminine language through such plays.

Method

The novel *The Powerbook* (2000) by Jeanette Winterson exhibits an act of playing with traditional narrative's conventions in various ways. For that reason, I began conducting this research by categorizing textual symptoms in the novel according to the issue. Afterwards, text passages that belong to the same issue were discussed by compatible theories.

The umbrella term or the big issue that covers specific issues in the novel is fragmented narration because the novel is composed of the fragments of stories set in the past, present, and future. To discuss this main issue, I applied Susan Lanser's feminist narratology theory which argues that feminine writings are frequently considered as plotless because it does not flow in a straight line.

I subsequently entered into the discussion of the specific issues. The first one is the text's awareness toward itself. To discuss it, I utilized Linda Hutcheon's theory on narcissistic narrative in her book *Narcissistic Narrative The Metafictional Paradox* (1980).

Afterwards, I discussed the public narration which is signified by the fact that the novel's addressing the narratee outside the textual world. In discussing it, I benefit from Lanser's (1989) theory arguing that public narration in a feminine writing is significant because in phallogocentric discourse, the public is considered as man's domain and women are related to the private one.

The last issue is history demythologization. The novel frequently shows allusion to legends and history, indicating the merging of fiction and what is considered as nonfiction. To analyze it, I utilized Kilic's (2004) writing in "*Demythologizing History: Jeanette Winterson's Fictions and His/Tories*" which discusses the merging of fiction and history in Winterson's work in general. All these steps were carried out to answer research questions mentioned in the previous part in order to come to the research conclusion.

Discussion

The discussion of the narration level of *The Powerbook* is carried out by first discussing Jeanette Winterson's works and how they generally indicate the form of feminine writings. In order to show it, I discuss three novels of Jeanette Winterson that I have examined in my previous research (Shihab, 2014). This is relevant to provide a context before I further discuss the *The Powerbook*. The discussion of *The Powerbook* is carried out

by first mentioning two important reviews given by critics toward this novel. This is essential to give my research a position between those reviews.

Jeanette Winterson and Feminine Writing

Winterson first reached her recognition from her first novel *Oranges are not the only Fruits* that succeeded in claiming a *Whitbread Award for a First Novel* in 1985. The novel tells a story about a teenage girl named Jeanette and how she has to face the pressure from her religious family and environment when she begins to find out that she is a lesbian. The resistance showed by Jeanette as the main character towards her surrounding norms is displayed in not only the content of the story per se but also in the technique of telling the story itself.

This novel tells its story in a nonlinear plot which is constructed by the change of the time of narrated and the time of narrating without visible marks. The nonlinearity of the plot is also established by inserting other narratives in between the main narratives. This inserted narratives take form of fairytales and do not possess any relevance or coherence to the story about Jeanette as the main story.

I also found the nonlinear narration technique in other Winterson's novel, *The Passion* (1987). Set in the Napoleonic era, the novel uses the first point of view in telling its story. The narrators consist of two main characters who take turn in telling the story in their own point of view, namely a male French soldier named Henri and a red-haired, web-footed daughter of a Venetian boatman named Villanelle. From the aspect of narrative, the novel is toying with the concept of (sexual) identity by showing how Villanelle works in a casino by disguising herself as a man and with the concept of heteronormativity by showing how she falls in love and have a romantic and sexual relationship with a woman.

From the aspect of narration, the nonlinearity of the novel's plot is constructed through the changing of narrators in the same narrative body without any visible marks. In addition to the nonlinear plot, the novel also shows the way it is playing with the traditional narrative technique by showing its awareness toward the fact that it is a text and by addressing narratees outside of the textual world. In addition, the novel also merges Henri's rational world with Villanelle's magical world which, in Henry's point of view, is not logical or does not make any sense.

Such technique is also exhibited in other Winterson's novel, *Gut Symmetries* (1997). The novel tells a triangle love story between Stella, Allice, and Jovel. Just like previous two novels, in the aspect of the story, this novel also shows a resistance toward heteronormativity by delivering love story between two female characters, Stella and Alice.

In the aspect of narration, this novel also employs a technique similar to the other two novels. *Gut Symmetries* is told alternately through the three character's point of view. The novel's plot's nonlinearity is fashioned through the changing of the time of narrated and the time of narrating as well as the changing of narrators in the same body of narrative without any visible marks. In addition, *Gut Symmetries* shows its consciousness toward its fictionality by mentioning that it is a story as well as addressing the narratee outside of the textual universe.

The ways the three Winterson's novels above play with narration techniques are also exhibited in *The Powerbook*, both in relatively similar techniques and other different forms. In discussing it, I begin by first talk about two different and rather opposing reviews toward the novel by two literary critics.

The Narration Level of *The Powerbook*

Jeanette Winterson is an English writer who is famous for her works which deconstruct the limits of conventional narratives (Méndez, 2010:7). Such play of Winterson's works is also viewed as an effort to transgress phallogocentric narratives (Front, 2010) by delivering a nonlinear narration employed in traditional literary works (Terzieva-Artemis, 2007:1).

I found such judgment in Elaine Showalter's review, saying that *The Powerbook* is a literary junk food with nothing to say (Showalter, 2000). Showalter claimed that her disappointment is not placed in the narration style of *The Powerbook* but rather on the love-and-affair theme that is frequently exhibited in many other Winterson's works. However, I see Showalter's view as one of the cases mentioned by Terzieva-Artemis (2007:1), that "*Jeanette Winterson is a novelist who has conspicuously defied traditional literary standards in her work in the past twenty years and yet critics are constantly tempted to define her against such standards*".

I found a rather different nuance in Kelly Kellaway's review. Unlike Showalter's, which takes a focus in the novel's thematic aspects, Kellaway's review pays more attention to *The Powerbook's* narration style. She more optimistically views that "[t]he computer is, for [Winterson], a conceit, an invitation to explore, a way of

making narratives come and go faster than the speed of light. It never holds her up or back. Her writing is graceful, jargon-free, light as thistledown” (Kellaway, 2000). Harmonious to what is argued by Terzieva-Artemis, Kellaway chooses to value Winterson’s novel by detaching it from traditional literary standards that tend to focus merely on the thematic issue like what Showalter does.

The difference between Showalter’s and Kellaway’s focuses shows a strong relation to Lanser’s theory of feminist narratology. Lanser (1989) argues that a text consists of two levels, namely the content of the story or what she calls a *histoire*, and the way the story is told or what she calls a *récit*. She states that “*récit* and *histoire*, rather than being separate elements, converge, so that telling becomes integral to the working out of story” (Lanser, 1989: 466). Therefore, aside from the difference of Showalter’s and Kellaway’s focuses, I argue that the importance of *The Powerbook* lies on both aspects of the novel and how those two are intertwined to produce the wholeness of its story. As a result, before specifically discussing textual symptoms exhibited in the *récit* level, I first discuss the novel’s content of the story or the *histoire* level.

In the level of *histoire*, the novel is centered on an online fiction writer named Ali who falls in love with a married woman. This female character’s name is never mentioned in the whole story. The novel only gives a hint on the character’s identity as a woman by addressing her in the pronoun “she”. Different from the anonymous character, the text does not explicitly tell the reader whether Ali, who plays a center role as the narrator, is a male or female character. This novel only implies that Ali is a woman in several parts of the story. For example, in a chapter set in the past, there is a story of Ali being a woman who disguises herself as a man.

Those textual symptoms indicate the novel’s playing with sex and gender discourse. The novel shows that, as Butler argues (1990: 7), sex and gender is probably not a different thing. The blurring of Ali’s identity and the anonymity of the female character mentioned before are in line with Butler’s view (1990) that sex and gender is an intelligible frame that helps, but also limits, one’s effort in identifying a human being, and that sex and gender are performances.

The *histoire* level discussed above shows the novel’s position toward phallogocentric discourse in which it resists the idea of heteronormativity and a rigid identity proposed by phallocentrism. Things that are considered as normative are toyed with in the novel by exhibiting a rather fluid (gender and sexual) identity. Such content of the story is also supported by the novel’s narration technique, or what Lanser calls as *récit*.

In the *récit* level, *The Powerbook*’s narrative, in general, takes the form of fragments which makes it a “plotless” narrative. The novel shows a plural reality which is constructed through the composition of past, present, and future. The continuously changing tense leads to an impression of a fragmented and disintegrated narrative, which consequently blurs the whole picture of the main story the novel tries to deliver. Lanser (1989: 464) argues that in the traditional point of view, such style is frequently stigmatized as a narrative that has no plot, which then leads to the impression that such text does not have a story, or cannot even be considered as a narrative whatsoever.

Each tense in *The Powerbook* is delivered in its own chapter. The chapters indicating the present time tell a story about Ali in front of her computer. She works as a writer who creates a story according to what her clients order. The chapters indicating the past are the stories that Ali writes to fulfill her clients’ demands. These stories are composed of various famous legends like those of King Arthur and Fransesca da Rimini as well as Lancelot and Guinevere, or tales related to history like those of Giovanni de Castero and George Mallory. In addition to these tales, the past-set chapters are also comprised of the story of Ali’s childhood with her foster parents. Meanwhile, the chapters indicating the future tell stories about the romantic and sexual relationship between Ali and the married woman whose name is never revealed.

The fact that three different tenses are compressed in the same big narration, *The Powerbook* inevitably creates an impression of a fragmented narrative in which the fragments possess no relevance among each other. Nevertheless, Lanser (1989) argues that in fact underneath a woman’s writing, which is considered as plotless, lies a subversive plot that signifies women’s effort to understand their world. Their way of understanding the world is seen not only from the story they tell but also from the way the story is told as well as the act of telling itself. The feminine writing’s way of telling story subsequently manifests differently from what is found in the traditional narration. In *The Powerbook*, the way of telling the story, or what Lanser refers as *récit*, manifests in the forms that are discussed below.

The first one is the text’s awareness toward itself, or what is called narcissistic narrative. This phenomenon is found in several parts of the novel, some of which are presented in the following part:

“*This is just a story*” (Winterson, 2000: 27)

“*I warned you that the story might change under my hand.*” (Winterson, 2000: 83)

“I keep telling this story—different people, different places, different times—but always you, always me, always this story, because a story is a tightrope between two worlds.” (Winterson, 2000: 119)

Those passages above show how *The Powerbook* realizes that it is a text (in the passages above is mentioned as “story”) or a fiction. In Hutcheon’s terminology, such fiction is called a narcissistic narrative or a fiction that shows its awareness as a text by referring to itself (Hutcheon, 1980: 1). Hutcheon (1980) sees that the form of self-conscious narrative is important since it undermines the glorification towards the author which consequently creates a gap between the author and the reader. She also argues that by shortening the distance, narcissistic narrative reduces the emerging effect of alienation and provides the reader the opportunity to participate in the process of fiction’s creation.

Involving the reader in a fiction also manifests more specifically in the next symptom, namely public narration. A public narration is a narration which is addressed explicitly and implicitly to the reader outside of the text (Lanser, 1989: 461). In *The Powerbook*, public narration emerges by means of the first-person narrator’s (Ali in the form of “I”) action of addressing narratee or the reader (mentioned by the word “you”) as displayed in the passages above. In addition, the text’s action of addressing the reader is also presented in the following passages:

“Then she made a speech. I suppose you can guess the line.” (Winterson, 39)

“You can change the story. You are the story” (Winterson, 2000:244).

“This is the story of Francesca da Rimini and her lover Paolo. You can find it in Boccaccio. You can find it in Dante. You can find it here.” (Winterson, 2000: 123)

“In this life you have to be your own hero. By that I mean you have to win whatever it is that matters to you by your own strength and in your own way.” (Winterson, 2000: 155)

All of the passages above show how the novel addresses narratee outside of the text, namely the reader, in the form of pronoun “you”. In the framework of *écriture féminine*, the public narration is important because phallogocentric discourse associates women to private realm and man to public realm (Lanser, 1980). By means of those aforementioned ways, *The Powerbook* novel exposes that a feminine writing can embrace what Lanser (1980) calls public audiences and therefor persuades readers to involve and take part in the story as well as the process of telling the story. The involvement is essential because through *écriture féminine* discourse, the narrator in the story “[is] sharing an experience so that the listener’s life may complete the speaker’s tale (Lanser, 1986: 467).

Not only taking the readers into the tale, *The Powerbook* also involves the reader in a process of creating a history by means of telling various tales of legends and history. As I have mentioned in the beginning part of my discussion, one of the ways that contribute to making the novel’s plot fragmented is the insertion of stories set in the past. These stories possess allusion to history or several popular legends in West literature.

One of the stories set in the past is found in a chapter titled “Open Hard Drive”. Set in 1634, this chapter tells a story about a woman named Ali who was assigned by her parents to smuggle tulip bulbs from Turkey to Dutch. In order to accomplish the mission, Ali has to disguise herself to be a man. This story implies that the origin of how Netherland is famous for its tulips is because of Ali’s success in delivering the tulip bulbs, as it is displayed at the beginning of the chapter, “In the sixteenth century the first tulip was imported to Holland from Turkey. I know—I carried it myself” (Winterson, 2000: 9).

In addition to the story of Ali and tulip bulbs, another chapter which has an allusion to legends or history is the one titled “Really Quit?”. This chapter tells a story about Giovanni de Castro who comes back to Italia after completing his journey in Levant. His coming back to hometown leads to an immense advantage for Italians because Giovanni succeeds in inventing seven mountains rich of alums, discontinuing Italian from having to import alums from Turkey. In the opening of the chapter, the text tells the story in Pius’s point of view as the teller:

“In 1460 Giovanni de Castro, godson of Pope Pius II, returned to Italy from the Levant. In his memoirs, Pius himself described what happened.

[space]

While Giovanni was walking through the forested mountains, he came on a strange kind of herb.”
(Winterson, 2000: 221)

The first paragraph above depicts the opening of the tale narrated by an omniscient narrator who introduces a character who later takes over the storytelling. The next narrator is Pius whose story comes in the second paragraph, separated by a space from the first one. Afterwards, as the story arrives at the point where the alums are invented, the text turns the point of view and tells the story from the perception of Giovanni himself.

“Giovanni takes up the story himself.

[space]

“All day I had been searching for a pearl earring lost in my chamber by my mistress.” (Winterson, 2000: 222)

Giovanni, whom in the previous part of the narrative was referred to as a “he” because he was inside of Pope Pius’s point of view as the story teller, changes to an “I” and tells the story through his own point of view. Unlike Pius’s story, which attributes Giovanni’s invention as something majestic and great, Giovanni’s version in the other hand unveils that his invention on alums is something accidental as he was busy looking for his lost earring in the mountains.

The examples of allusion toward history above, i.e. Ali’s story with tulips and Holland and Giovanni’s story with alums and Italia, are coherence with what Kilic (2004) refers to as history demythologization. It suggests that first, those examples signify the text’s deliberation or purpose to argue that history is not something rigid. Second, the insertion of stories having an allusion to history in the main narration of the novel signifies the merging between the ones that are considered real and factual and the ones that are known as fictions. It signifies the text’s effort to counter the myth saying that history is a reality. For that reason, this novel “... problematize[s] the validity of history, as well as the validity of the traditional view that the historical and fictional are separate” (Hutcheon as discussed by Kilic, 2004: 127).

Conclusion

The discussion of the narration level of *The Powerbook* demonstrates that the novel tells the story in the form of feminine writing by means of its nonlinear plot which comes in pieces and fragments. The fragmentation is formed by means of a compilation of stories set in the past, present, and future in different chapters. Such plot is one of feminine writing’s characteristics which signifies its effort to make sense of its world.

In addition to the fact that the feminine writing in *The Powerbook* is signified in general by the fragmented plot, this novel also speaks in feminine language through three more specific ways, each of which signifies the effort to give a counter discourse toward phallogocentrism. First, through a form of narcissistic narrative, this novel displays its awareness towards its status as fiction and therefor undermines the glorification of the author and shorten the gap between the author and the reader. Second, through the form of public narration, this novel displays that the reader, which in the conventional narrative is considered as an entity outside of the textual world, is brought into and take part in the experience inside of the text. Third, through history demythologization, this novel withstands the idea belonging to phallogocentric discourse which regards history as something rigid. By merging the ones that are regarded as facts and those that are presumed as fiction, this novel proposes a viewpoint that these two entities are not different, but rather stories that are created.

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