# Silence, a New Narrative Discourse in The Age of Globalization: Jeanette Winterson's Fiction

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**Rezumat:** *Lucrarea de faţă îşi propune să demonstreze că în această eră a globalizării, în care discursul se confruntă cu un grad înalt de stereotipizare şi limbaj de lemn, scriitorul contemporan se confruntă, la rândul său, cu o nouă provocare: aceea de a reda experienţa personală printr-un limbaj care să fie inteligibil, dar să-şi păstreze calitatea artistică. În acest context, proza scriitoarei contemporane britanice Jeanette Winterson este 'ancorată în tăcere' (Winterson 169), o tehnică narativă pe care aceasta o foloseşte pentru a-şi reda propria experienţă de două ori problematică: cea de femeie şi de lesbiană. Tăcerea naratorială este realizată prin mecanisme textuale variate menite să reducă caracterul referenţial al limbajului şi să redea unicitatea experienţei personale. Astfel, lucrarea de faţa îşi propune să demonstreze că, deşi în epoca contemporană uniformitatea prosperă, înovaţia şi individualitatea artistică sunt încă posibile. Proza lui Winterson este un exerciţiu de exprimare a caracterului inefabil al identităţii prin discursul narativ.*
**Cuvinte-cheie**: *globalizare, discurs narativ, limbaj de lemn, identitate*

The close study of Jeanette Winterson's body of fiction reveals her intense preoccupation with forging new means of expressing problematic identities. This is obviously the result of Winterson's own marginal identity: on the one hand as a woman, which situates her fictional explorations next to those of other women writers striving for legitimacy, on the other as a lesbian, which throws her discourses outside the binary framework. Her interest lies more in exploring suitable means of expression, rather than of representation. As twice outside norms and canons, Jeanette Winterson creates a body of fiction which paradoxically denies the reactionary stance so common to feminist writers. Instead, she opts for generating narratives which I have called therapeutic, narratives which transcend binaries at all levels. By introducing the third term into the binary, she renders the binary visible, but she also dissolves all oppositions.

In many ways, her fictional efforts parallel Derrida's critique of binary logic, where difference as a concept is challenged by the free play of centres and norms. Similarly, Jeanette Winterson's fiction refuses to operate a radical closure in matters related to gender identity. Unlike feminist writers, whose fictions strengthen the irreconcilable difference between genders, Winterson performs a *de-gendering* of the narrative at all levels, refusing to conceive of difference as generating opposition. Her narratives emphasize the importance of transcending binaries in order to obtain a more refined understanding of the world and of experience, which functions as a re-enchantment of them both. However, this re-enchantment is not at all meant to replicate the ideology of religion or mythology and lead to the proliferation of roles. Rather, I interpret it as a form of narrative therapy, one which has, in fact, contaminated the entire discoursive arena today. Its purpose is to soothe the unbearable fragmentation of identities, whether queer or not, which modernity's symptomatic relativism has aggravated. In Winterson's case, this re-enchantment can only be performed by de-gendering the narrative, as in her quest for the self, binary difference emerges as obstructive. Re-enchanting the world in the post-postmodern age becomes, for her, a condition for survival.

Echoing to a certain extent Virginia Woolf's search for a language which would best represent the continuous flow of consciousness, Jeanette Winterson contextualizes her concern with language within our contemporary age, where the illusion of a fixed reality has evaporated. Apparently, Winterson's concern for language may be accounted for as 'postmodernism's revenge of parole' (Hutcheon 28). However, a deep investigation of her fiction reveals the fact that Winterson reconfigures language as part of her re-enchantment of experience, which is far from postmodern. The poetic narrative becomes a soothing therapy for female identity, but most importantly for queer identity, illustrating the queer's

pursuit for harmony and reconciliation. Since 'sexual liberation cannot be achieved without changing the laws of language that relate to gender' (Irigaray *Je, Tu, Nous* 33), Winterson strives to reconfigure these laws. In this respect, the queer discourse follows the pathway of feminine discourses and their explorations of language. As Nancy Walker explains,

> women's fascination with language proves the author's distrust of the power of words to define and confine women's experience; moving from silence to language, women reformulate the concept of power (Walker, 187).

Similarly, Winterson strives for an *ecriture lesbienne* (Onega 34), which is meant to replicate, in approach and breadth of scope, Cixous's *ecriture feminine.* 'I noticed that women have a private language. A language not dependent on the constructions of men but structured by signs and expressions, and that uses ordinary words as code-words meaning something other' (Winterson *Sexing the Cherry* 31), Dog-Woman argues in *Sexing the Cherry.* Consistently, the language Winterson uses is non-referential and highly non-mimetic. It transcends binaries, goes beyond dichotomies, and openly defies Saussure's dialectical account of the linguistic sign. Her poetic language goes beyond feminist claims to a feminine language which would recuperate meaning from the male tyranny. Winterson is not at all concerned with issues of power or with challenging male domination, as was the case of Angela Carter. Using what Hutcheon calls a rhetoric of both/and (Hutcheon *The Politics of Postmodernism* 166), Winterson's language both reflects and produces an identity which reconciles binaries but which, quite ironically, finds it impossible to be reconciled with the others. As Susana Onega argues, Winterson defines both art and identity through linguistic parameters (Onega 8), but the language she specifically refers to is the one imbued with poetic features, that language which 'is not our mother tongue' (Winterson *Art Objects* 6). Unlike everyday language, the poetic language that Winterson chooses to bring to the fore through her fiction is very similar to music, the purest art form, in that it does not convey a message other than through reflecting upon itself. Onega argues that Winterson's reverential attitude to language, which is clearly discernible in her refusal to abuse and desecrate the Word, may certainly be viewed as a consequence of her strict religious upbringing (Onega 8). 'I grew up not knowing that language was for everyday purposes. […] I still think of language as something holy' (Winterson *Art Objects* 153), Winterson confesses in *Art Objects,* explaining her attachment to that Word which transcends contingency.

Along this line of thought, *Written on the Body* (1993) draws its aesthetic value from the use of language. This is poetically concentrated on describing the beloved's body and on love-making, as a sacred act. Winterson briefly refers to this in the essay that concludes *Art Objects*:

> What have I said in Written on the Body?
> That it is possible to have done with the bricks and mortar of conventional narrative, not as monkey-business or magic, but by building a structure that is bonded by language. Anyone who reads epic poetry knows to skip those plain embarrassing stanzas where mundane material necessary to the story has to be conveyed in verse. […] Must poetry be on one side and prose on the other? (Winterson, *Art Objects*, 190).

Large parts of *Written on the Body* are poetry in prose form, as language becomes the central character. In spite of clear references to lesbian sexual practices, which caused much controversy at the time of the novel's publication, nothing shocks, nothing is overtly represented, nothing is meant to hurt or upset. This is entirely the merit of Winterson's poetic language, which alludes and eludes. The body and bodily practices are metaphorically transformed into pure poetry which refuses gross realistic description.

*Written on the Body* represents Winterson's attempt to undo all the linguistic clichés attached to the description of the erotic experience, as well as her search for a fundamentally different code which could adequately render queer passion, desire and love. In this respect, Winterson's use of poetic language becomes indissolubly bonded with queer identity and part of the queer narrative. "I love you' is always a quotation' (Winterson *Written on the Body* 9), the narrator acknowledges at the beginning of the novel, complaining about the incapacity of language to appropriately render all the nuances of the erotic conundrum. 'Love demands expression', s/he continues, making it clear that what is to follow represents a daring exercise in reconfiguring language. Just like love, the language that Winterson proposes in *Written on the Body* will not 'stay still, stay silent, be good, be modest, be seen and not heard, no'. 'It will break out in tongues of praise' (Winterson *Written on the Body* 9), it will defy referentiality and break free from the prisonhouse of mere representation and utilitarianism. Winterson does not *use* language, she *recreates* it:

> My lover is an olive tree whose roots grow by the sea. Her fruit is pungent and green. […] The sun is in your mouth. The burst of an olive is breaking of a bright sky (Winterson, *Written on the Body*, 137).

Passages like the one above make up the essence of *Written on the Body,* which stands out as a wonderful elegy for love lost, but also as an admirable reconfiguration of verbal expression. By way of contrast, what would probably make the plot of a conventional narrative is condensed in a few dry lines which show Winterson's contempt for referential language. This is only used to render raw contingency, like the moment when the narrator learns about the lover's incurable disease:

> The facts Elgin. The facts.
> Leukaemia.
> Since when?
> About two years.
> […]
> What kind of leukaemia?
> Chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (Winterson, *Written on the Body*, 102).

Just like love, disease is turned into poetry. 'It's the clichés that cause the trouble', the narrator confesses, sarcastically mocking at type-phrases like 'Love makes the world go round', 'Love is blind', 'All you need is love' (Winterson *Written on the Body* 10). Experience cannot be contained by conventional language, Winterson almost furiously argues. One needs to step out of the prisonhouse of clichéd expression and make a language of their own, one which should be cast in flesh and blood, like *Written on the Body*. In this sense, Winterson significantly muses upon the power of language to ontologically represent different realities, and upon the importance of the word, as constitutive to language, in *A Work of My Own,* the last essay in *Art Objects*:

> The writer has to choose a word, every word, that is solid enough for its meaning and powered enough for its flight. The word will have to cross time, the word will have to survive assault. […] The word, every word, will have to hold its own in the sentence, in the paragraph, in the chapter, in the book, on the bookshelf, in the library, as chanted, as whispered, as defamed, as ignored, as seized, […]. The choosing of the word is something like the arming of a knight and if it seems ritualistic, obsessive, absurd, then remember that its perils and its obligations are sacred. (Winterson, *Art Objects*, 167).

For Winterson, the way to figure a problematic identity, which would neither be circumscribed to the anti-patriarchal ideology of feminist writers, nor to the undeserved centrality of male discourses, is a matter of continuous linguistic investigation.

In *A Work of My Own,* the last essay of *Art Objects*, which suggestively echoes Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own,* Jeanette Winterson writes:

> My work is rooted in silence. It grows out of deep beds of contemplation, where words, which are living things, can form and reform into new wholes. What is visible, the finished books, are underpinned by the fertility of uncounted hours. […] It is sometimes necessary to be silent for months before the central image of a book can occur. (Winterson, *Art Objects*, 169).

Correlating this statement with the fact that all the narrators of her novels share a common preoccupation with writing and language, it is perhaps easier to understand why silence emerges as a recurrent trope in Winterson's fiction. Not only the silence which is figured as such in the narrators' discourse, but also the silence which occurs at the narrative level in the form of omission.

From Winterson's entire body of fiction, it is perhaps her eighth novel, *Lighthousekeeping,* which best speaks of silence. Because Winterson teaches us that silence can and should be spoken of. Overall, the novel says nothing, which might prove offensive for Winterson's fans, so well accustomed to bold statements and compelling stories. However, the novel claims to be about storytelling, and it is, but only in theory. In fact, it is my contention that *Lighthousekeeping* could be best described as hovering. From its initial epigraphs which puzzlingly read 'Remember you must die' and 'Remember you must live' to the curious substance of the protagonist, who is 'part precious metal part pirate' (Winterson *Lighthousekeeping* 3), the text hovers in between worlds, refusing the gravity of either. This oscillation is not new for Winterson's readers who remember that hovering is one of her favourite metaphors. From the weightless Dancing Princesses in *Sexing the Cherry* to the web-footed Villanelle who can walk on water in *The Passion* and the virtual wanderer Alix in *The Power Book,* Winterson's protagonists endorse the trope of hovering. Silver, the child in *Lighthousekeeping* is literally hanging above a precipice, roped to her mother as if through an umbilical chord. When the mother can no longer hang on and falls, Silver faces the ultimate childhood nightmare. However, the trope of hovering endures as she goes at sea to live with an old lighthouse keeper. Nothing else happens. Perhaps that is why the *New York Time* review claimed that this novel concentrated the worst qualities of Winterson's writing. 'It eschews description, characterization, scene/setting and psychology - the components of fictional reality -- in favor of drifts of metaphor' (Kunkel C1), precisely because this novel foregrounds silence. As Silver at one point says, 'some people say that the best stories have no words' (Winterson *Lighthousekeeping* 135). In fact, through Silver's voice, Winterson utters her distrust with traditional language understood as an instrument for communication. Much attached to the poetic language, which reflects upon itself and not upon another reality, Winterson realizes that in order to narrate her problematic identity, stories are necessary, but they have to be retold in a different language. I believe that the silence she puts forward in *Lighthousekeeping* is the ultimate version of that qualitatively different language, one which cannot be attacked because it says nothing. Silence occurs in that space between words, where meaning is produced. And in between words, queer identity can be narrated.

At a theoretical level, Winterson's exploration of silence can be viewed as an enactment of the poststructuralist presumption according to which meaning emerges from a play of presence and absence, and not from an overt and irrefutable exposure of the sign. Moreover, as argued before, it echoes Derrida's *differance* with its constant oscillation between difference and deferral, presence and absence. As if to subvert the traditional Saussurian definition of the sign, Winterson's Silver claims that 'words are part of silence that can be spoken' (Winterson *Lighthousekeeping* 135). In telling the story again, she follows her mother's advice which says 'if you can't survive this world, you had better make a world of your own' (Winterson *Lighthousekeeping* 5). And, as a child not like the

others, she does it through words and silence, through a fundamentally different language, just like Winterson herself. For Silver, as for Winterson, 'stories are so vital, they are necessary for survival' (Showalter C1), but these stories have to be told with a difference, that difference which hovers above either/or.

On a more prosaic level, narratorial silence plays a very important part in Winterson's novels, as it paradoxically moves the focus on its very subject. Through meaningful omissions, authors can redirect the readers' attention towards those aspects which make the subject of these very omissions. Thus readers find themselves in the position of trying to fill out blank spaces within the narrative. They become active participants in the sense-making process and in the writing of the narrative itself. Blank spaces or gaps in information do not represent a new narrative device, as they are common to quite a number of narratives. Yet, what Winterson's fiction introduces is complete silence as far as the gender and sex of narrators is concerned. It is very difficult to obscure sex and gender, especially in the case of first person narrators who are involved in the plot, precisely because a large amount of information has to be held back. This requires quite an effort from the part of the author, as Susan Lanser argues in her essay *Queering Narratology,*

> a considerable degree of information has to be omitted from an autodiegetic narrative for both sex and gender to remain unmarked (Lanser in *Ambiguous Discourse*, ed. Kathy Mezei, 264).

In novels such as *Written on the Body* or *The Power Book* it is practically impossible to make assumptions related to the narrator's sex and gender, as there is complete silence in this sense. Although the narrators in both novels are instances of what Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan classifies as *diegetic narrators* (Rimmon-Kenan 95), i.e. narrators involved in the plot as characters, there is a clear authorial intention in obscuring their sexes and genders. Silence becomes meaningful and illustrates Winterson's creed according to which accepting a norm-deviant identity can only be achieved by transcending all differences. Authorial silence underlines Winterson's extreme preoccupation with identity-related issues and with legitimating a different type of discourse. As the narrator in *Lighthousekeeping* metafictionally comments, in a gesture which breaks the conventional boundaries of his own narrative,

> Turn down the daily noise and at first there is the relief of silence. And then, very quietly, as quiet as light, meaning returns. Words are part of silence that can be spoken. (Winterson, *Lighthousekeeping*, 135).

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