THE CONCEPT OF (GENDERED) ALIENATION IN JEANETTE WINTERTON’S LIGHTHOUSEKEEPING

Monika Koșa
PhD Student, "Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: According to Richard Kearney, literature is not a simple imitation of reality or an abstract artistic act, but a manner to reinterpret events and emotions that shape human life. In other words, literature can be perceived as an artistic tool to explore abstract or concrete concepts from reality. Identity is one such concept and Jeanette Winterson’s writing is the perfect illustration for the assertion according to which literature cannot be reduced to be defined as an imitative act. Fantastic discourse and mythological references are significant parts of Winterson’s work, but the content of her novels reflects deeply human issues that anybody can relate to: alienation, loneliness and isolation, death, discrimination. The present paper aims to shed light on the concept of alienation in Lighthousekeeping, a complex novel that primarily focuses on female identity and spiritual isolation experienced by female characters. A true masterpiece, Winterson’s novel captures in a very unique manner a troubling symptom of the contemporary human being: alienation.

Keywords: alienation, identity, postmodernism, Jeanette Winterson, storytelling

“Fiction and poetry are doses, medicines. What they heal is the rupture reality makes on the imagination.”1 Jeanette Winterson’s definition of literature captures the quintessential quality that differentiates literature from other artistic forms: poetry and fiction redeem the misery of reality and purifies the human soul. In other words, for Jeanette Winterson, literature becomes a drug that heals the burden of existence and her imagination shapes the substance that fills the abyss of reality.

Jeanette Winterson is one of the finest British contemporary literary creators, “a rather eccentric character on the usually reserved English literary stage”2. In her long literary career, she has published several novels that deal with topics ranging from physics to witch trials. An extremely complex author, Jeanette Winterson may be the illustration of the contemporary novelist as defined by David Lodge in the crossroad-metaphor: “The contemporary novelist was therefore in the situation of a man (or woman) at a crossroads. Before him stretched the way of traditional realism, now alleged to be a very boring route, and possible a dead end.”3 This observation captures the contemporary voyage towards an unknown destination which offers endless possibilities. Traditional realism is a suffocating path towards predicted ending, while Winterson wanders on her own stairway to the highest peak of Imagination. Jeanette Winterson’s brilliant mind gives birth to words imbied in magic and her fictional universes transcend the barriers of objective reality.

If “a postmodern cult of parody and pastiche is, the pessimists conclude, fast replacing the poetic practices of narrative imagination”4, Jeanette Winterson is the living example to prove this assumption wrong; storytelling is not dead. The thematic diversity

---

1 Jeanette Winterson: Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?, ALFRED A. KNOPF CANADA, 2011, page 37
and the innovative approach to the narrative process that characterizes Winterson’s novels appears as a challenge to comprehend the depth of the human nature while her style is truly enchanting and captivating, filled with highly lyrical passages and poetic utterances, but humor always lightens the serious tone, theme and atmosphere of the novel (for instance, in the novel *Lighthousekeeping*, Mr. Pew, a character that becomes the epitome for the human loneliness, is compared to a unicorn because of his old age.)

On a more general dimension, contemporary fiction offers a depiction of the desolate human being in the maze of a fragmented existence. Richard Bradford considers that “Postmodernism is an unusual myth in that only those who have become imprisoned by its vocabulary and methodology actually believe it. (...) Novelists are not symptomatic of the Postmodern Condition; they exploit, sell it and, like many others, treat it with the Postmodern Condition sceptical detachment.” This detachment does not characterize Winterson’s creations since the first person narration suggests subjectivity, emotional attachment and a symbolic identification with the characters and thus, the creator becomes the created. The exploration of the existential dimension is lyrically depicted and the whole novel becomes the quest for a spiritual anchor that provides a sense of totality in an alienated universe.

The psyche of a character absorbs the outer meaningless and becomes a mirror of a postmodern philosophy of solitude. Jeanette Winterson’s characters are the embodiment of this philosophy since they are the Original in a crowd that lacks essence. Her great masterpieces capture the haunting emptiness that characterizes the contemporary humans. Through language, she creates and destroys fictional universes and reconstructs on a metaphorical scale a world where abstract concepts such as love, loneliness, loss and longing come to life. From a critical perspective, the recurrent motifs and symbols in her fiction provide an inexhaustible spring for interpretation.

The narrative strategy employed by Winterson places her novels among the great literary achievements of contemporary fiction and the thematic richness guarantees the diversity of her creations. Storytelling remains authentic and not an artificial craft even if time devours the frames of originality and *Lighthousekeeping* is the written proof of this affirmation: “yes, the stories are dangerous, she was right. A book is a magic carpet that flies you off elsewhere. A book is a door. You open it. You step through. Do you come back?”

Storytelling as a concept that transcends time and space is a recurrent theme in the Wintersonian universe and it metamorphoses into a parallel dimension with reality and a spiritual refugee from the superficial condition of the (post)modern human being. *Lighthousekeeping* is a collage of colours, sensations, feelings and stories and words mirror the search for a meaning in a despondent cosmos. The narrative shifts from one image to another and the dynamic sentences become a magical rollercoaster. If Winterson were a painter, *Lighthousekeeping* would be an abstract portrait of the alienated self.

The concept of alienation is a recurrent theme in literature and can possess a revelatory role in the close analysis of a character. Moreover, as an existential condition, it sheds light on the growth and decay experienced on the psychic level and it offers a glimpse to the quintessential features that define a human being. Richard Kearney asserts that the mimetic function of narratives cannot be viewed as “a mere mirroring of reality”, but “as the transformative plotting of scattered events into a new paradigm.” Thus, Jeanette Winterson’s *Lighthousekeeping* offers the reader not only a literary mirror that

---

6 Jeanette Winterson: *Lighthousekeeping*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005
reflects certain aspects from reality, but also a tool that reshapes and conceptualizes abstract notions by providing them a new semantic implication. Moreover, Terry Eagleton views literature as a form of ideology: “literature does not exist in the sense that insects do, and that the value-judgements by which it is constituted are historically variable, but that these value-judgements themselves have a close relation to social ideologies” (14). In this context, the novel becomes a tool to explore and expose social issues and the clash between personal and social set of behaviours.

Brier considers that alienation denotes “more than isolation or separateness, more than marginal existence which he experiences.” This distinction is important insofar it highlights the deeper level of involvement when referring to the subject who experiences the state. Moreover, the emotional restraint, and the questioning of one’s existential being are inner diseases which alienate the individual both on a concrete and a metaphorical level. The narrative discourse can depict in words this state and the fictional universe becomes real through exploring this theme of estrangement which is both a deeply human quality and an abstract concept which operates on the level of the psyche. On a symbolic level, alienation blurs the human consciousness and places the human being in a self-exile. In postmodernism, this alienation is perceived on a deeper layer of consciousness since the fragmentariness of the universe is embodied in the individual.

*Lighthousekeeping* is the quintessential Wintersonian masterpiece and it paints the story of Silver, an orphan girl who becomes absorbed in a world of stories, fairy-tale like imagery and biblical allusions. The novels opens with stating the identity of the narrator: “My mother called me Silver. I was born part precious metal part pirate” (page 4). Silver is a suggestive name and it comprises several metaphorical qualities: the metal can suggest force, but also durability; its shininess may reflect the inner richness; its colour the emptiness and greyness of existence, and the preciousness her value and authenticity. The narrative offers a retrospective view on her infancy and her story seems dominated by the image of the sea from the beginning. Her father lived and died on the sea and thus, it becomes a paradoxical entity: it creates and destroys as life and death culminate in its image.

The house in which Silver lives with her estranged mother is also a metaphor: “I lived in a house cut steep into the bank.”(4) This image of the house is a closed microcosm which encapsulates Silver, assimilates her and imprisons her. While recounting her childhood memories, Silver asks rhetorical questions which possess a revelatory role: “Why didn't we move house?”(5) The memory of the house does not evoke nostalgia or absence, but a regret and highlights the character’s loneliness. The concrete spatial dimension is further explored and the narrator reveals her home-town: “Salts. My home town. A sea-‼ung, rock-bitten, sand-edged shell of a town. Oh, and a lighthouse.” (6) The haunting image of the town is completed with sea imagery and the rocks and the sand dominate the place. The image of the lighthouse is as powerful as the symbol from Virginia Woolf’s highly acclaimed *To the lighthouse* novel and it becomes a central metaphor that functions as a token of the alienated individual. The lighthouse appears as the leitmotif of the novel and its significance in perceivable from the beginning.

The town itself suggests pervasive forlornness and the atmosphere is suffocating: “It had its rituals and its customs and its past, but nothing left in it was alive. Years ago, Charles Darwin had called it Fossil-Town, but for different reasons. Fossil it was, salted and preserved by the sea that had destroyed it too.” (22) Fossil defines the quintessential

---


Section: Literature
nature of the town, but it’s also a metaphor for the novel itself.” In my previous novel, Lighthousekeeping, I had been working with the idea of a fossil record. Now I was there again – the sense of something written over, yes, but still distinct. The colours and forms revealed under ultraviolet light. The ghost in the machine that breaks through into the new recording.”

The narrator expresses her dissatisfaction/disgust with human beings because of the great importance given to physical appearance, that is, appearance that prevails over essence. The judgmental nature of the human beings is criticized and the actions of a dog are superior to those of human because an animal does not take notice of things that are perceived by society as abnormal. In the narrator’s words, “he suffers none of the morbid introspection of the human race, which notes every curve from the norm with fear or punishment.” Silver herself is seen as a lonely child by other, judged by her own mother, and she seeks for refugee in stories. Thus, the stories paradoxically become the antonym of alienation: while fiction opens the gate to metaphysical universes and absorbs her psyche, stories also save her from the cruelty of the other and the harshness of reality.

The figure of her mother dominates her memories and her words seem to be the lock to Silver’s prison cell: “You're not like other children,' said my mother. 'And if you can't survive in this world, you had better make a world of your own.” Her mother urges her to alienate herself into her own universe because Silver is peculiar, but not fit to survive in the world precisely because of her peculiarity and her status as an outsider. These words are impregnated on the narrator mind and seem to haunt her even after her mother’s death, since she remembers clearly her words. The death of the mother is a turning point in the child’s life and she concretely remains alone in a hostile universe. A part of her past is closed when she leaves the house with Mrs. Pinch: “Then she locked the door behind us, and dropped the key into her coffin shaped handbag.” This action is suggestive and can be interpreted as a symbolic act in which Silver’s past comes to end or the house may be the material embodiment of the character’s alienated psyche. The lost key in the coffin-like bag may represent Silver’s connection with the surrounding universe. Furthermore, Miss Pinch’s house also reflects Silver’s mood and state of being: “Then she let us in to a gloomy hallway, and bolted and barred the door behind her.” The place imagery becomes the visual reflection of a desolated child, but also betrays the gloomy existence of the owners. The image of the barred door may symbolize the gate between the outside and inside. The loneliness experienced by Silver is culminated in a phrase uttered by Miss Pinch: “you have no home”

Silver’s stories that enrich the narrative discourse are hauntingly captivating and they come to life through a vivid and colourful language. The figure of Reverend Dark becomes a central metaphor in the novel and Silver introduces in her story his story and it becomes in certain passages the central focus of the narrative. Reverend Dark is a fascinating character from the past and the historical facts inserted enhance the storytelling. The story of Dark is intermingled with the born of his son, Babel, and the construction of the lighthouse. Silver’s capacity to imagine beautify the long-forgotten stories and the lighthouse becomes the concrete link between past and present. The static and eternal image of the lighthouse is opposed to the ever-changing sea: “Made of granite, as hard and unchanging as the sea is fluid and volatile. The sea moves constantly, the lighthouse, never.” On a metaphorical level, the lighthouse becomes the material embodiment of alienation, because of its position, symbolism and lack of inhabitants.
After her departure from Miss Pinch, Silver returns to a present-tense narrative and the focus turns on Mr. Pew, the lighthousekeeper. He is described as being different from other human beings and thus, perceived as peculiar, but not in a positive manner. He will become Silver’s new family and the lighthouse her home. Her new life is impregnated with the mixture of light and darkness: “Our business was light, but we lived in darkness. The light had to be kept going, but there was no need to illuminate the rest. Darkness came with everything. It was standard.”(23) Darkness becomes a material entity which also symbolizes Silver’s alienated self. She learned to interiorize the darkness and consciously embrace it: “Darkness was a presence. I learned to see in it, I learned to see through it, and I learned to see the darkness of my own.”(24) Her lonely life has no anchor; she is alienated and only darkness and lighthouse represent stability in her existence. She identifies herself even with the ocean: “There were two Atlantics; one outside the lighthouse, and one inside me.”(25)

Her capacity to tell stories is fueled by her lonely existence and she explains their non-linear and atemporal quality: “A beginning, a middle and an end is the proper way to tell a story. But I have difficulty with that method.”(25) After disruptive passages about her birth and memories, Silver returns to the story of Stevenson and Babel Dark, enriching the narrative with historical dates and facts. Silver’s narrative voice blends with that of Pew and they become the epitome for storytelling. Samson’s and Babel’s dialogue becomes the focus of the main storyline and their lonely existence can be perceived symbolically as preview for the emptiness experienced by the contemporary human. The focalization shifts from one story to another and the whole novel becomes a puzzle. Dark is another representation for the alienated self and his isolation is culminated in the image of the cave: “He put his fingers to his mouth, tasted sea and salt. He tasted the tang of time. Then, for no reason at all, he felt lonely.”(106) this image is highly symbolic and depicts the vain reaching out of the human being in a desolate universe. After the disappearance of the lighthouse and Pew, Dark also vanishes from Silver’s life and her sense of alienation is heightened by the incapacity of others to understand her complex nature. Her mental breakdown and the incongruity of her following stories reflect her fragmented self after the disappearance of the lighthouse.

Brad Hooper, an illustrious scholar who has written The Fiction of Alice Munro: An Appreciation, a book that explores the works of Alice Munro, one of Canada’s most famous writers, discusses the “outsider theme” in Munro’s short stories. More precisely, Hooper connects the idea of outsiderness with gender: “the outsider theme is often played out in gender situations: girls and women who don’t want to practice/perform traditional female roles. They are not so much in rebellion against accepted practices as simply uninterested. They stand outside, looking in, but not willing to be part of the accepted “crowd”.”11 The same outsiderness can be identified in Lighthousekeeping: Silver symbolizes outsiderness by refusing to obey. Becoming part of the crowd would mean losing her identity, her stories, her world and ultimately, herself.

The ending paraphrases of the novel are an ode to fiction and love and they are constructed around the power of storytelling and the vastness of love. Another Wintersonian masterpiece, Lighthousekeeping becomes the temple of the alienated self, coloured by the pallet of Winterson’s words, a place for worship of the Beautiful.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Makinen, Merja: *The Novels of Jeanette Winterson*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005
Preda, Alina: *Jeanette Winterson and the Metamorphoses of Literary Writing*, Argonaut, 2010


Van Der Wiel, Reina: *Literary Aesthetics of Trauma*, Palgrave Macmillan UK. 2014
Winterson, Jeanette: *Lighthousekeeping*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005