



More Sins Were Committed Than Anticipated: Analysing the Threat of Religious Zealotry in Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985)

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Abstract

This article examines how religious zealotry poses a significant threat to queer identities within Christian communities, analysing Winterson's 1985 queer-themed novel *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*. In zealous Christian contexts, ingrained perceptions and beliefs about sexual orientations and gender identities (i.e., queer identities) cause negative experiences and challenges for queer individuals. Consequently, religious zealots often inflict lasting harm through fanatical dogmatism. Given this context, our study shows how Winterson's (1985) novel raises awareness of queer characters under intense religiosity. Although much research exists on the novel, we argue that there is a research gap regarding analysing the additional number of "theological sins" committed by the lesbian characters. We situate our analysis within Critical Theory and Queer Theory and treat tolerance as a supporting lens. The method of data generation employed qualitative document analysis, with thematic content analysis as the data analysis strategy, focusing specifically on theological sin. While prior critics highlight Winterson's subversion of orthodox faith, the main findings of this study revealed that religious zealotry acted as a threat to the lives of Jeanette, Melanie, Mrs Jewsbury, and Katy since the extreme judgement compels queer characters into new acts of defiance or sin (regarding homosexuality, self-deception and duplicity, betrayal of trust, zeal without love and fear of man, dishonesty, and lust) than anticipated. This study introduced a novel angle: religious zealotry not only oppresses queer individuals and polices queer existence, but paradoxically multiplies perceived sin in the eyes of the church, showcasing that extreme dedication to disciplining a religion has damaging effects on identity, religion, and sin, leading to spiritual resistance, concealment, erasure, or delayed self-acceptance. Practical applications (such as education practice, faith-based and community interventions) were also included for creating awareness and understanding about religious zealotry in heteronormative contexts.

Keywords: lesbian characters, *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, Queer Theory, religious zealotry, tolerance

1. Introduction

Religion and ingrained opinions about queer identities influence the views and beliefs of many individuals. Globally, there is political pushback against queer individuals. For example, Hungary approved a constitutional amendment that effectively prohibited Pride gatherings and made LGBT depictions to children illegal (Shaw, 2025). Following a United Kingdom Supreme Court decision in Scotland regarding single-sex spaces and legal pressure from gender-critical organisations, politicians are re-evaluating trans-inclusive measures (Learmonth, 2025). In a 6–3 ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Tennessee’s prohibition on providing gender-affirming medical therapy to children (Bravin, 2025). Ghana introduced a strict anti-LGBT bill that required the reporting of LGBT individuals and invoked imprisonment for same-sex activities (Slinn, 2024).

Consequently, due to the political resistance, it may be challenging for heterosexual individuals in certain contexts to respect an individual’s queer identity and for queer individuals to live in heteronormative societies. Nonetheless, many individuals believe that the various queer identities – lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, abrosexual, questioning, asexual, aromantic, demisexual, and allosexual, as provided by Ervin et al. (2023) – should be acknowledged in the traditions and cultures of heteronormative societies (The Other Foundation, 2016:23). Accordingly, heteronormative societies could be more inclusive of queer individuals, specifically where religion is a major aspect of life. Tietjen (2023:1) explains that “religious zeal, as one possible expression of the human quest for the infinite, is both a promise and a threat”. Therefore, religious zealotry is considered a threat when fanatical dogmatism about something or someone leads to (additional) sins being committed by both queer and non-queer individuals.

Jeanette Winterson’s (1985) *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* addresses religious zealotry in a Christian context. Castaño Méndez (2010:6) affirms that “Winterson challenges dominant binary patriarchal and religious views related to gender roles and sexual politics”. Accordingly, we critically explored and analysed the portrayal of the lesbian characters in the novel together with the following research question: How does religious zealotry in Jeanette Winterson’s novel *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* influence the religious beliefs and moral self-perception of lesbian characters?

The purpose of this paper is to create awareness of queer characters’ experiences and challenges in a religiously zealous context.

2. Literature Review: Religious Zealotry and Theological Sin

Many straight or queer individuals form part of a religion to derive comfort and find a sense of belonging (Palm 2019:4). The World Population Review identifies Christianity as the religion that has the most followers (2.38 billion). Nell and Shapiro (2011:20) explain that the Christian religion may pose challenges for many queer individuals, as the views on queer identities differ among religions and religious leaders. Some religious individuals tolerate or accept diverse queer identities, but some reject anything other than heterosexual.

One’s relationship with God is an aspect that is addressed in all the world’s main religions. However, theologically, sin ruins the relationship between God and humanity, and it is impossible to minimise the phenomenon of sin as it pervades every aspect of human life (Addai-Mensah, 2023). Couenhoven (2009:563) agrees that sin involves the “transgression of divine law”, but they also state that “evil” does the same thing. Therefore, the definition of “sin” is limited to which sins create evil or not. Even though sins are transgressions of the Word of God, they do not necessarily create evil. For example: If an individual identifies as

queer, it is a sin (according to the Christian religion – e.g., Genesis 19:1–29; Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26–27), but how they live their life will determine if evil is a consequence or not.

Beagan and Hattie (2015:92, 94) state that queer individuals almost unavoidably have a relationship that is conflicted with religion: “the condemnation by mainstream faith traditions has inflicted considerable harm on sexual and gender minorities”. Thus, religious queer individuals are negatively affected when condemned by religious heterosexual individuals. According to the researchers, there is convincing evidence for the emotional and psychological damage that the conflict between queer identities and religious teachings can have on queer individuals. Barton (2010) agrees and states that, for example, when an individual’s eternal soul is threatened, the individual in question has much to lose, because the fear of one’s soul going to hell frightens religious queer individuals who struggle to control their orientations or identities. Fischer (2010) also explains that powerful emotions are evoked by the evangelical conversion, and that Christians believe that queer individuals are sinners by nature, as they are only human, and that they depend on a merciful God to be saved. Subsequently, the fear of God’s judgment after one’s death makes sense. Christians are taught of Jesus Christ’s selfless sacrifice and resurrection for salvation, but it seems that this “full confidence in redemption was misplaced, for no one could ever fully overcome the human penchant for sin” (Fischer 2010:13–14). Subsequently, it is human nature to sin, and even though Christians want to be sinless to strive towards holiness, like Christ, sin is unavoidable. As a result, fear could contribute to queer individuals being forced to leave a religion, convert to another religion, or renounce religion; fortunately, this fear may also lead an individual to grow stronger in their religious beliefs and form a stronger bond with God.

Regarding global perspectives, Aguilar Contreras (2024:1) explains that Latin American queer theology rethinks martyrdom and notes that “queer theologies configure a resistant theological community that empowers queer bodies as a territory of hope of resurrection and transformative political action that does not disregard the suffering and the injustices perpetrated against them”. Ashok and Saranya (2025) provide a narrative study of queer Indians (specifically non-binary and transgender individuals) across Hindu, Muslim, and Christian faiths, and report that these individuals create “counter-theologies based on embodiment, resistance, and reclamation” – scripture is reinterpreted and personal rituals are developed, showing how queer Indians from different religions navigate faith. Similarly, Mdokwana (2024) introduces an African theological critique of religion and queer issues by examining African reconstruction theology and warns that uncritical cultural nationalism can worsen homophobic violence. Additionally, Goh (2023:1) found that transgender Catholics in Malaysia resist being labelled as “religious dissidents” by embracing theological failures and personalising their faith in defiant, empowering ways.

3. Theoretical Frameworks: Critical Theory and Queer Theory

3.1 Critical Theory

Jansen (2021:23) defines critical theory as an approach that is concerned with “the critical meanings of experiences as they relate to gender, race, class and other kinds of social oppression”. In other words, oppressive experiences are viewed from a critical point of view to comprehend the dynamics of human relations. Jansen (2021:23) continues to explain that societies – from one generation to another – reproduce and contribute to inequalities. Nieuwenhuis (2021:69) also contributes by stating that critical theory views social reality as a continuous creation process and proposes that discourses produced in shifting fields of social power influence social reality and its understanding.

3.1 Queer Theory

Butler (1988) defines gender as neither a fixed identity nor a site of agency from which different actions originate. Instead, it is an identity that is created by a stylised act of repetition over time. Therefore, gender must be viewed as the everyday way in which numerous bodily enactments, gestures, and motions create the perception of a persistent gendered self. In addition, Butler (1998) explains that gender is not defined by patriarchy, nature, the symbolic, or language, nor is it passively scripted on the body. Rather, it is the constant presentation of gender under everyday constraints of pleasure and anxiety. Considering Butler's explanation, Ruhsam (2017) notes that queer theory critically investigates how power institutionalises some queer identities while stigmatising others. Queer theory questions and opposes gender and sexuality norms, inflexible identification categories, and the oppression and violence that these hegemonic standards legitimise. Thus, queer theorists reject the idea that queer identities are essentialist biological categories that can be empirically assessed using predetermined moral and truth standards, and that it rather promotes and permits a variety of unrestricted interpretations of the cultural phenomenon.

4. Conceptual Framework: Tolerance

Brown (2008) explains that tolerance is coping with the presence of the undesired and the flawed, and that tolerance is not enough because it is merely a coping mechanism and does not result in a solution. Therefore, definitions of tolerance make it apparent that there is neither neutrality nor respect for what must be tolerated. According to Nieto (2010) and Dean-Ruzicka (2012), the term "tolerance" is frequently used when discussing proper reactions to differences, and tolerance alone is insufficient to promote diversity as it just encourages individuals to refrain from acting on their feelings of resentment and hatred – Author Y (2016) agrees that to bring about change, one must go beyond tolerance. Nieto (2010) and Un (2021), therefore, urge respect to go hand in hand with tolerance. Nieto (2010) contends that to transcend tolerance, one must embrace, respect, affirm, and critique. Accepting differences does not always mean endorsing them; rather, it means realising that they are different. Un (2021) agrees that tolerance is the attitude of acknowledging the existence of other individuals, particularly their right to hold other opinions, even while this acknowledgement does not equate to agreement with such opinions. Many individuals may be reluctant to talk about sensitive topics and themes (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and culture), yet avoiding them will not make them disappear – by critically examining complicated topics, one can arrive at a sophisticated stance that moves beyond tolerance (Author Y, 2016).

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Qualitative Document Analysis

Given (2008:24) defines document analysis as "the study of the written text". In agreement, Nieuwenhuis (2016) asserts that textual data is concerned with the insights that are provided by various written communications about the relevant topic. Given (2008) goes on to explain that the conventional method of document analysis concentrates mostly on the contents of the document. Documents are, therefore, seen as conduits between the writer or reader and the many types of literature and the important messages they convey.

Furthermore, interpretations can be developed using documents. The type of document used and the research topic of the study will determine the analysis approach. Regardless of the analysis approach, the researcher will attempt to contextualise the documents in a social setting and consider the writer's intentions and the intended audience.

To understand the phenomenon of the highlighted social difficulties, such as lesbian characters' experiences in a religiously zealous environment, we analysed a fictional novel, a document, which was the primary text for this study.

5.2 Primary Text

The main topic of *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (Winterson, 1985) is a lesbian's relationship with religion in a religiously zealous context (Author X, 2020). Adopted Jeanette is brought up by her devout mother as a member of God's chosen people, but Jeanette departs to be herself after being denounced by the church for being queer and challenging the faith.

5.3 Thematic Content Analysis

Thematic content analysis entails identifying connections and discrepancies within the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Usually, the researcher starts by thoroughly examining the data to find important themes. Following the identification of the themes, codes can be created for each topic (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). These codes are then applied to the text being analysed to indicate where particular themes appear across the dataset. To discover, group, and thematically cluster different bits of data as they relate to the study's research questions and findings across the data set, researchers utilise codes (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Accordingly, by analysing the queer-themed novel, we identified religious zealotry as a prominent theme of the novel and applied the following Biblical theological sin concept codes within a zealous context: homosexuality, self-deception and duplicity, betrayal of trust, zeal without love and fear of man, dishonesty, and lust.

5.4 Ethical Considerations

This study involved no human or animal research. The EduRec Ethics Committee of University X granted permission for this study to take place: XXX-01612-19-A2.

6. Analysis

6.1 Homosexuality

Hall et al. (2021) mention that common milestones queer individuals experience in life are: "becoming aware of queer attractions, questioning one's sexual orientation, self-identifying as LGB+, coming out to others, engaging in sexual activity, and initiating a romantic relationship". Regarding *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (Winterson, 1985), Jeanette and Melanie do not know from a young age that they are lesbians – there is no indication in the novel that they had been exposed to any queer identities before their sexual attraction realisations, unaware that it was considered "unnatural passions" by the Holy Bible and their church (Winterson, 1985:22). Nevertheless, Jeanette and Melanie do engage in a sexual relationship, regarded as a sinful act of same-sex individuals.

Katy, a secondary character in the novel, is a religious lesbian character who has a secret sexual relationship with Jeanette for years in the Society for the Lost: "We weren't cold, not that night nor any of the others we spent together over the years that followed" (Winterson, 1985:156). Additionally, Mrs Jewsbury is the only known adult character who is a lesbian. At the beginning of the novel, the reader believes Mrs Jewsbury to form part of the society's heteronormativity and condemnation of queer identities other than heterosexuality, but learns later that she is not open about her queer identity.

There is no denying that homosexuality is considered a sin, as stated in the Holy Bible. For example, in Leviticus 18:22, it is stated, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination". Accordingly, from a Christian theological perspective, homosexuality has been historically considered a sin based on specific Biblical interpretations.

6.2 Self-deception and Duplicity

In addition to the sin of homosexuality, Mrs Jewsbury is a character who denies her lesbianism and disguises herself as a straight individual in her community (Çeker 2016:58) – the sin of self-deception, as a protective measure, is committed. She is a member of the church as she conducts the Sisterhood choir and plays the oboe, but the inference can be made that she would be rejected by the church (like Jeanette and Melanie) should they become aware of her queer identity. Thus, she is a product of the heteronormative panic (Sedgwick, 1990) that polices public and private selves while suppressing her lesbianism, conforming to the sin of self-deception and duplicity.

6.3 Betrayal of Trust

Due to her ignorance concerning lesbianism, Jeanette shares her attraction towards Melanie with her mother: “Soon afterwards I decided to tell her how I felt. I explained how much I wanted to be with Melanie, that I could talk to her, that I needed that kind of friend” (Winterson 1985:131). The “naturalness” of her lesbianism is evident as she considers Melanie not only as a friend, but rather as a soulmate (as there is a romantic relationship), an individual in whom she can confide, like her mother. However, the sin of betrayal of trust is committed by Jeanette’s mother and Pastor Spratt when they expose Jeanette and Melanie in front of the church’s members. Proverbs 11:13 states that “A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter”. Jeanette’s mother betrays her daughter’s confidence and, together with Pastor Spratt, exposes her and Melanie publicly.

6.4 Zeal Without Love and Fear of Man

Matthew 7:1 states, “Judge not, that you be not judged”; James 4:11 states, “Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge”. Considering the Biblical verses, condemning judgement could be considered zeal without love.

The sin of zeal without love is also committed by Jeanette’s mother and Pastor Spratt when they expose Jeanette and Melanie:

“These children of God [...] have fallen under Satan's spell.” [...] “These children of God have fallen foul of their lusts” [...] “These children are full of demons.” A cry of horror ran through the church [...] “Listen to Satan's voice [...] How the best becomes the worst” (Winterson 1985:134).

Negative words such as “Satan”, “fallen foul”, “lusts”, “demons”, and “the worst” are used as verbal, emotional, and psychological violence to describe, accuse, and insult the two teenage girls (i.e., showcasing how language and the church shape and control queer individuals) – in front of the congregation – who experience love, and not lust, for each other while also loving God: “I [Jeanette] love you [Melanie] almost as much as I love the Lord” (Winterson, 1985:133). It becomes clear in the quotation that Jeanette even loves God more than Melanie, but the church rejects her expression – it seems to the church that Jeanette’s love for Melanie overshadows Jeanette’s love for God. Jeanette’s own experience regarding how she expresses love is disregarded, as it is dismissed and dictated to her. Additionally, the church also overlooks Melanie and her attending church with Jeanette to learn more about Christianity. The focus is rather placed on both these characters’ lesbianism instead of the love they experience for each other and their interest in Christianity and God.

Pastor Spratt, together with Jeanette’s mother and the church as a whole, functions as a religious Ideological State Apparatus, the distinct and specialised system of the church (Althusser, 1971), that enforces heteronormativity through shame, isolation, and exorcism.

Jeanette is punished, confined, and starved for her sexuality and for deviating from the dominant ideological stance.

After being “exorcised” (which is masked by Pastor Spratt, Jeanette’s mother, and Mrs White as disciplinary, intended to correct aberrant behaviour, rather than being spiritual and lacking compassion and grace) and prohibited from communicating with Melanie, Jeanette – who joins the Society for the Lost as a missionary – meets Katy. Jeanette does not repent her relationship with Katy once their sexual relationship also becomes known. “Jeanette portrays a headstrong character who knows she is queer and refuses to ‘become’ heterosexual” (Author X, 2020:176), since she knows she will live a lie and not be true to herself should she succumb. Even though Jeanette’s mother and the church (whom Jeanette now identifies as hypocritical servants of God, as they are supposedly faithful but ruthless towards homosexuality, justifying cruelty and control in God’s name) object to her simultaneously loving God, Melanie, Katy, or any other woman, she – in turn – refuses to listen to them and remains a believer of God: “[I] did have a genuinely spiritual dimension” (Winterson, 1985:156). Hence, her mother and the church do not succeed in weakening her faith, even though they cause damage to the relationship that Jeanette has with God. Jeanette remains a representation of a character whose relationship with God continues, though damaged due to religious persecution, but her sustained belief in God is an example of queer spiritual resistance (Santiago, 2005) – she refuses the dichotomy that says one must choose between being queer or religious, directly challenging compulsory heterosexuality and religiosity. Nevertheless, an additional sin, that of zeal without love, is now – ironically – also committed by Jeanette.

Melanie also becomes a character who is outed by Pastor Spratt for being a lesbian and also suffers the embarrassment of his negative reaction. Following her exposure, Melanie, unlike Jeanette, immediately repents and surrenders to the heteronormativity of her religiously zealous community out of fear, which is considered a fear of man, a sin: Proverbs 29:25 states, “The fear of man brings a snare [...]”.

He turned to Melanie. “*Do you promise to give up this sin and beg the Lord to forgive you?*”

“Yes.” She was trembling uncontrollably. [...]

“*Then go into the vestry with Mrs White and the elders will come and pray for you. It's not too late for those who truly repent*” (Winterson 1985:134).

The “sin” Pastor Spratt refers to is unquestionably the queer identity, homosexuality, that is different from heterosexuality. The condemnation of hell is also repeated when he mentions that there is still time for Melanie to repent and be saved.

Following these events, as mentioned by Al-Shara (2015:241), Jeanette refers to Melanie as a vegetable. In the Garden of Eden, as explained in Genesis 3:6, the Original Sin (i.e., the disobedience of man) was committed when Eve ate from the “fruit” of the tree of all knowledge (which God made clear was forbidden). Therefore, according to Jeanette, if one replaces the fruit (i.e., disobedience) with a vegetable (i.e., obedience), one is permitted to eat a vegetable in the Garden of Eden. Thus, if one replaces queer identities (i.e., disobedience) with heterosexuality (i.e., obedience), one may attend church and love God (even if the individual – such as Melanie – is not truly heterosexual), whereas the fruit (which in Jeanette’s metaphor now represents queer identities and herself) is forbidden.

Melanie starts adhering to her community’s heteronormativity and role of a woman, to survive socially, as she marries a man and bares his children: “So I [Jeanette] didn't object to Melanie getting married, I objected to her getting married to him. And she was serene, serene to the point of being bovine” (Winterson 1985:157). Jeanette refers to Melanie as being unintelligent when she compares Melanie to cattle; like cattle, she obediently follows the

cowherd (i.e., the church) and falls in line without critically questioning their authority. Furthermore, Wang and Yin (2016:22) explain that when Melanie accepts the heterosexual norm and denies her queer identity and her love for Jeanette, she loses her lesbianism, also creating an opportunity for the reader to wonder if she truly loved Jeanette at some stage, as Jeanette loved her. Furthermore, Wang and Yin (2016:3) observe that Melanie is also “tragically suppressed by male discourse” as she suffers from the church and the patriarchal society (a double oppression), and their views on queer identities and marriage – her eventual heterosexual marriage internalises societal expectations and conforms to the patriarchal norm, effectively becoming a symbol of how ideological power normalises oppressions (Sharma, 2021). Jeanette, paradoxically, believes that Melanie is at peace, but that her spirit has been extinguished as a result of religious zealotry; she struggles to come to terms with Melanie’s choice of rejecting not only herself and Jeanette, but her lesbianism, too, and conforming to heteronormativity: “[Melanie] made me want to shake her, to pull off all my clothes in the middle of the street and yell, remember this body” (Winterson 1985:217). The reader is reminded that the connection there once was between Jeanette and Melanie was true and not contaminated with lust – the relationship Jeanette had with Melanie, and later, Katy, is spiritual, emotional, bodily, and pure, and not oriented around patriarchal productivity and lust, as the church assumes and interprets. However, Jeanette displays a somewhat strong intolerance here towards Melanie and her choice, as Melanie is clearly unable to withstand the negative onslaughts of the church members. As a result, not only does Melanie commit sin dishonesty, choosing human approval and living a lie as a heterosexual individual, and rejecting her inner truth, but Jeanette also judges Melanie, her sinning zeal without love again – ironically, Jeanette reproduces the same critical judgement that harmed her, showing that the oppressed can internalise and deploy oppressive logistics against others, displaying bitterness and a lack of forgiveness.

Additionally, even though Mrs Jewsbury’s lesbianism is not known to the church, Mrs White, a member of the congregation, states that Mrs Jewsbury is “not holy” (Winterson, 1985:34) – Mrs Jewsbury is already receiving condemning judgement from Mrs White, even if her queer identity remains a secret. Since Mrs Jewsbury fears being exposed as a lesbian in her religiously zealous society, she leaves the church and its context: “‘She’s living in Leeds,’ Elsie told [Jeanette] [...] She’s not living alone’” (Winterson, 1985:170). Elsie seems to be the only tolerant heterosexual character in Jeanette’s community, and it does not go unnoticed that she makes it clear that Mrs Jewsbury is living with another woman. It is implied that Mrs Jewsbury, after years of keeping her lesbianism a secret, has accepted her queer identity once she leaves the community that judges her, just like they do with Jeanette.

6.5 Dishonesty

Following Jeanette’s exposure, she does not surrender to the church in question’s insistence on heteronormativity and religious zealotry. She also does not, at first, repent of her lesbian relationship with Melanie, but pretends to repent to be released from her confinement (being locked in a dark room without food and water). As a result, Jeanette is compelled to be dishonest to save herself from this harsh treatment, being a symbol of a counter-hegemonic queer performative act, actively constructing and reconstructing her identity under pressure (Öztürk Yağcı, 2022), destabilising the assumption that gender and sexuality are fixed (Butler, 1988), but it comes at the cost of community, family, and safety.

Additionally, Exodus 20:16 states, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour”, and Jeanette sins dishonesty when Katy and her are caught having sex – to protect Katy from the torment Melanie and Jeanette experienced years earlier, Jeanette takes full responsibility and conjures an untrue story that allows Katy’s lesbianism to remain a secret: “I [Jeanette] told her [the treasurer] that my affair with Melanie had never really ended. That Melanie had

written to me for months and that finally, torn with love myself, I had begged Katy to help me arrange a meeting” (Winterson, 1985:167). Katy, who experiences fear of being exiled, remains an unexposed lesbian as she receives a second chance in her religiously zealous community – she chooses to remain closeted and to deny the truth. Jeantte and Katy show how the closet is sustained not only by silence, but by active narrative manipulation. Ironically, though, this silence directly links to Foucault’s repressive hypothesis, “an increasing repression and confinement of (natural) human sexuality” (Keat, 2013:24) – the more society tries to silence queer desire, the more it is amplified.

6.6 Lust

When Jeanette is exiled from the church, the reader becomes aware of Mrs Jewsbury’s lesbianism when she has intercourse with Jeanette:

And she began to stroke my head and shoulders. I turned over so that she could reach my back. Her hand crept lower and lower. She bent over me; I could feel her breath on my neck. Quite suddenly I turned and kissed her. We made love and I hated it and hated it, but would not stop (Winterson 1985:136).

Matthew 5:28 states, “*But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart*”. One cannot exclude the idea that there may be some measure of exploitation and an imbalance of power here, as Mrs Jewsbury follows her sexual desires with Jeanette, who is much younger. It may be seen as a mentorship concerning lesbianism, but sexual grooming of the vulnerable. There is no doubt that Jeanette is not herself during this event, because she hates the idea of having sex with Mrs Jewsbury (when there is no love involved, but lust). Nevertheless, Jeanette does not resist Mrs Jewsbury’s advances. It can be that she feels indebted to Mrs Jewsbury for having supported her, but it also falls under sexual immorality and possibly abuse of authority or trust.

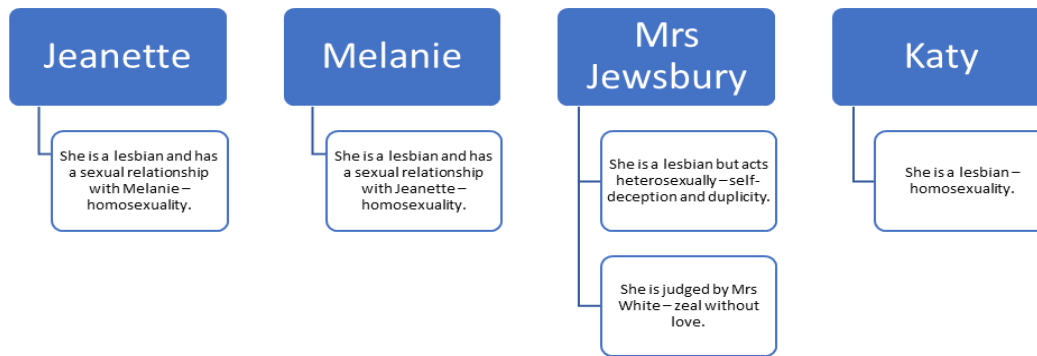
7. Discussion

The original sin Jeanette is guilty of entails homosexuality. The sins that follow are dishonesty (since she falsely repented twice), having multiple sexual homosexual relationships (i.e., Melanie, Mrs Jewsbury, and Katy), judging the church in return for being hypocritical servants of God and Melanie for being submissive – zeal without love.

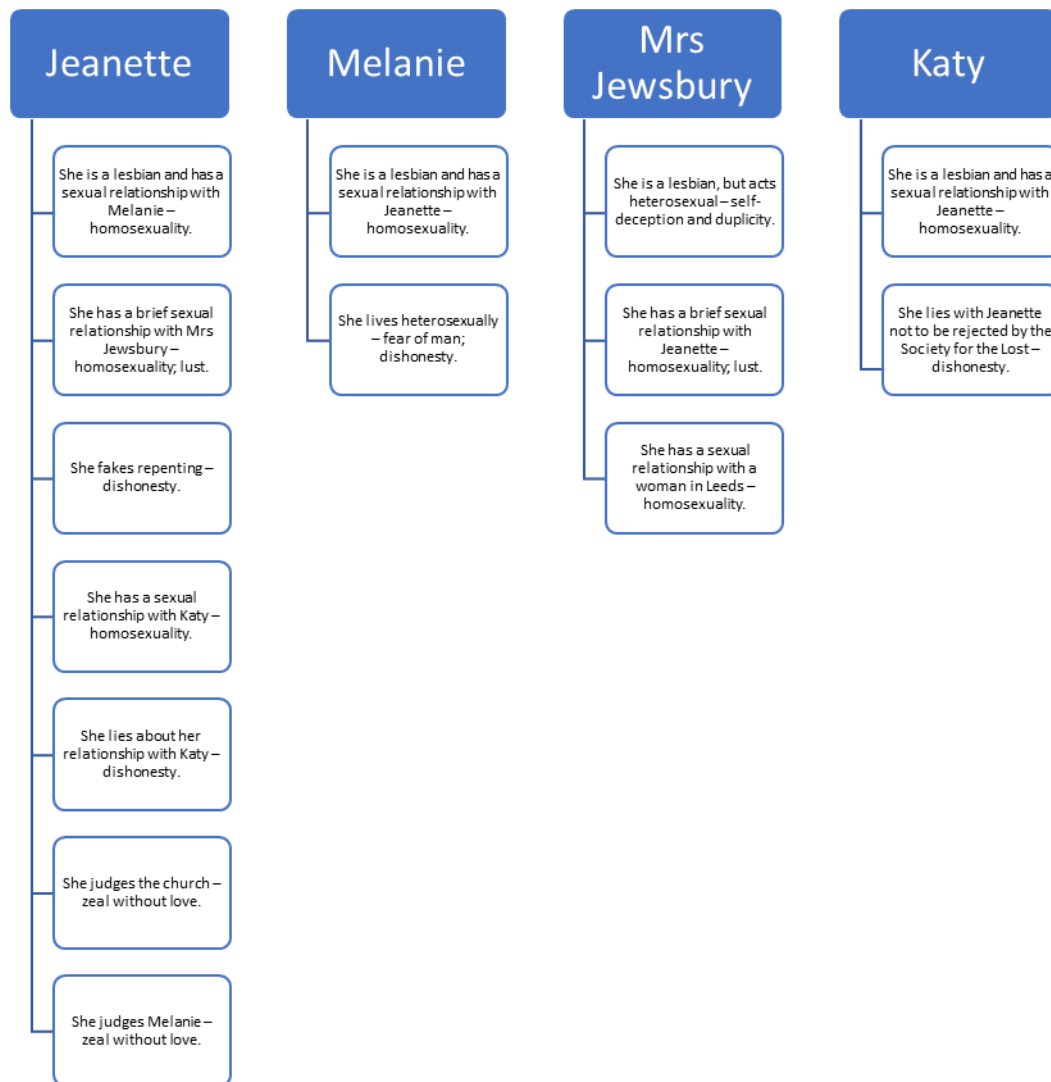
The number of sins of Melanie, Mrs Jewsbury, and Katy due to the church’s religious zealotry also increase. Besides all of them being lesbians (i.e., homosexuality), all lived a lie, Melanie and Mrs Jewbury pretending to be heterosexual individuals while Katy does not take accountability for her sexual relationship with Jeanette (i.e., dishonesty; self-deception and duplicity). These three characters also have more than one sexual relationship, with Mrs Jewsbury’s exploitation of and lust towards Jeanette considered an evil.

Additionally, Pastor Spratt, Mrs White, and Jeanette’s mother, all representing their religiously zealous church, judge Jeanette, Melanie, and Mrs Jewsbury, sinning zeal without love. Jeanette is excluded from the church while Mrs Jewsbury willingly leaves. Jeanette’s relationship with God and faith in Christianity are also damaged – the same could probably be said for Melanie, Katy, and Mrs Jewsbury.

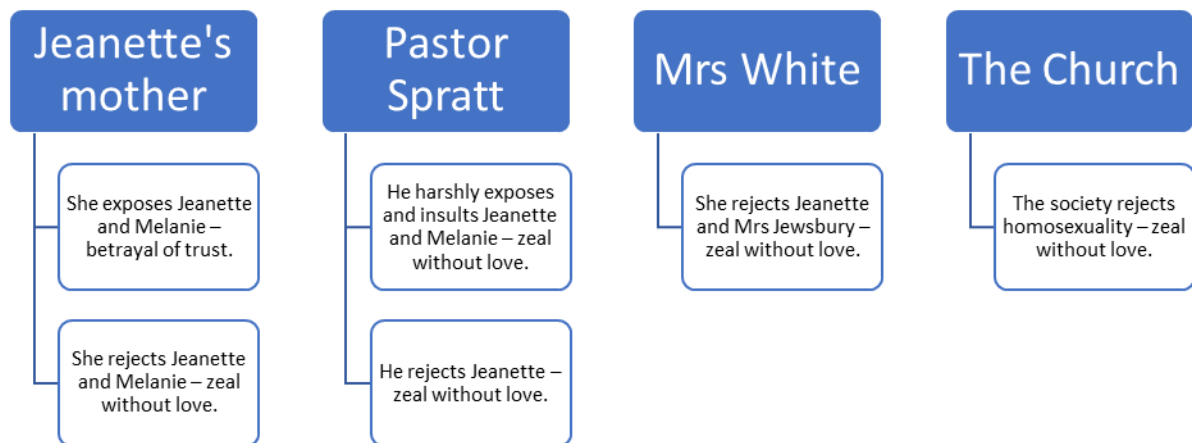
Based on the analysis, we provide three graphs to display the multiplication of the committed sins:



Graph 1: Sins committed by Winterson's queer characters, excluding exposure in a religiously zealous context



Graph 2: Sins committed by Winterson's queer characters, including exposure in a religiously zealous context



Graph 3: *Sins committed by Winterson's heterosexual characters due to enforced religious zealotry*

The research question of this article was: How does religious zealotry in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* influence the religious beliefs and moral self-perception of lesbian characters?

The reader is led into a cycle of self-denial, resistance, deceit, and redefinition as a result of the lesbian characters' religious beliefs and moral self-perception being radically distorted by religious zealotry. The novel reveals how religious zealotry, which is imposed through exorcism, public humiliation, and heteronormative indoctrination, damages the inner spiritual lives of queer individuals and complicates their moral sensibilities, leading to an increase in the number of sins they commit.

Jeanette embodies spiritual resistance. Even though she was raised in a fanatically devout environment, her faith in God has been seriously harmed. The zealotry of individuals like her mother and Pastor Spratt tries to make her choose between being queer or condemned, or heterosexual and godly. Jeanette develops a kind of queer spiritual autonomy by rejecting this duality and refusing to give up either her faith or her queer identity. However, religious zealotry, her dishonest behaviour, and her mimicking of the same zeal without love that she experienced have a significant impact on her moral self-perception. Although in different survival contexts, her actions demonstrate how the oppressed might internalise the oppressor's thinking.

Melanie chooses to marry a man and execute religious obedience after internalising the religious zealotry and conforming to heteronormativity. She repents out of fear rather than conviction, and her sexual and spiritual reality is overshadowed by this fear. Her moral self-perception becomes submissive and passive, influenced more by social norms than by her own beliefs. Her transition from queer to obedient heterosexuality is a perfect example of how zeal may stifle spiritual authenticity in favour of superficial righteousness.

Mrs Jewsbury leads a double life by concealing her queer identity while interacting with the religiously zealous community. The long-term consequences of internalised religious queerphobia are evident in her self-perception, which is rife with deceit and deception. She suggests that moral clarity and spiritual serenity can only be achieved by removing oneself from zealotry, as she only starts to reconcile her faith with her identity after leaving the community.

Katy, although less developed as a character, is an example of one displaying strategic closeting; she is a queer character who quietly navigates faith and identity, and depends on Jeanette's protection to maintain good relations with the religious community. Her fear of exclusion shapes her complicit but ill-defined moral self-perception.

Even though it is the responsibility of the church to teach Christians about Christianity and sin, it should not result in the expense of a damaged relationship between God and the Christian – this can be considered another evil. The church constructs queer desire as a sin, suppressing the reality of queer love by declaring it evil without engaging its human or spiritual complexity, but Winterson (1985) reclaims it as natural and spiritual. Fortunately for these four lesbian characters, none of them left Christianity, converted to another religion, or renounced religion, but they did experience pain, anxiety and depression, low self-esteem, shame and self-loathing, and guilt (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Palm, 2019).

Even with their faults, Jeanette and Mrs Jewsbury are examples of characters who do not allow religious zealotry to cause further damage to their relationship with God – these two characters' queer identities develop through interaction and resistance.

8. Practical Applications

8.1 Education Practice

The teaching of *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (Winterson, 1985) as queer-inclusive literature in the English language classroom – a tool for social justice and classroom-empathy – can expand on creating awareness and understanding of the prejudice queer individuals experience in heteronormative societies, resulting in empathy from educators, students, and the society at large. Including queer-themed texts in language curricula “foster empathy toward marginalized groups” (Blackburn & Miller, 2017:3), helping heterosexual students relate to queer peers and giving queer students the needed representation. Research shows that teaching and learning strategies (such as class discussions and reflective writings about faith and identity, support groups or counselling approaches) make education environments safer, as there are fewer queerphobic comments and greater student acceptance (Blackburn & Miller, 2017). Understanding the destructive impact of religious zealotry underscores the need for anti-bullying policies and queer-themed education in educational environments.

8.2 Faith-based and Community Interventions

Ashok and Saranya (2025) states that supporting queer congregants' spiritual agency is vital. Therefore, religious leaders could encourage personal reinterpretation of scripture and safe ritual spaces rather than outright exclusion and rejection. Likewise, Goh's (2023) study implies that messages of God's loving support and acceptance should be emphasised in sermons to counteract the scorn of religious zealotry. Aye (2023) also contributes to faith-based and community interventions by mentioning that the clergy could be trained in affirming theology or hosting interfaith dialogues inclusive of queer individuals.

9. Conclusion

Even though the novel only portrays lesbian characters, religious zealotry is relevant to all queer identities.

The combination of critical theory and queer theory as the theoretical frameworks for this study allows for a thorough engagement of the interactions among power, identity, religion, and sexuality. *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (Winterson, 1985) critiques institutional power while celebrating the disruptive, revolutionary potential of queer love. Winterson's novel also shows how lesbianism becomes an identity of resistance and resists erasure, even in fanatically devout environments. Furthermore, examining the novel through a tolerable lens offered a critical and empathetic environment for discussing how oppressive systems distort moral judgement. It improved comprehension of the lesbian characters' internal conflicts and the external factors that shape them. The tolerance lens may result in a reading of the novel that is more truthful, nuanced, and ultimately richer.

The novel portrays Jeanette, Melanie, Katy, and Mrs Jewsbury in a religiously zealous context. Jeanette's forced repentance, Melanie's submission, and Katy's and Mrs Jewsbury's concealment are all queer survival strategies that stem from a climate of fear regarding oppression, trauma, and silence in a heteronormative society. Religious zealotry not only oppressed the queer characters and policed their existence, but also contributed to more sins being committed, leading to spiritual resistance, concealment, erasure, or delayed self-acceptance.

In conclusion, it is important to create awareness of queer characters' experiences and challenges in a religiously zealous context – through the means of practical applications (such as education practice, faith-based and community interventions) – to prevent unnecessary damage from being caused due to harsh morality, hypocrisy, and selective compassion, preaching love but rejecting any individual who does not adhere to the norm. The analyses of the lesbian characters and their experiences in the novel strongly indicate that religious zealotry without love has dire consequences for their morality, and these consequences only lead to an increased number of theological sins (i.e., homosexuality, self-deception and duplicity, betrayal of trust, zeal without love and fear of man, dishonesty, and lust) being committed. Rather than viewing queer individuals as symbols of sin and reducing them to their queer identities, they should rather be viewed from a tolerable lens and considered complex human beings with emotional depth, experiencing faith, love, guilt, betrayal, growth, and resilience, similarly to heterosexual individuals. Jeanette, Melanie, Katy, and Mrs Jewsbury are examples of literary lesbian characters being religious and loving God and represent queer individuals who, in reality, also love God and commit the sin of homosexuality.

A recommendation that stems from this research for future studies, is to explore various methods that may be applied to expose queer individuals to the teachings of religions that will not elicit fear to such an extent that these individuals feel they need to leave a religion, convert to another religion, or renounce religion. Additionally, future research may include the views of queer and heteronormative participants about the portrayal of queer characters and their challenges in texts and how such exposure may lead to understanding and maybe a change of attitude.

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