

The Ungendered Narrator in Jeanette Winterson's  
*Written on the Body* and in Encarna Castejón's  
*Escrito en el cuerpo*

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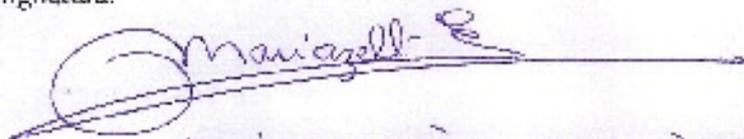
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Jeanette Winterson once asserted in an interview that she wanted her books to make readers think (1997). The novel in question, *Written on the Body*, is not an exception because it requires a close look in order to unravel its meaning and purpose. Two main topics that shape this narrative are sex and gender, which Susan Lanser defines and differentiates by stating that the former gathers all the “biological designations of male and female” (2013, 2), while the latter implies the “social identities, roles and behaviours associated with a specific sex” (2).

This paper is concerned with the ungendered narrator in both Winterson’s *Written on the Body* and Encarna Castejón’s Spanish translation, focusing on the author’s choice and purpose as regards gender indeterminacy and its consequent effect upon the readers. I will also discuss the linguistic devices to represent the narrator in the text, whether or not gender is an inherent feature of words and how close *Escrito en el cuerpo* is to the original book, taking into consideration the grammatical differences between the source and target languages, i.e. English and Spanish, respectively. Bearing in mind that translations must convey the same meaning to the original novels, to what extent can we claim that Castejón is faithful in terms of Winterson’s choice of gender ambiguity and the effect that the novel has upon its readership?

The ungendered narrator has definitely caused more trouble than the clichés. As Jennifer Gustar states, the unsettling and “controversial aspect of the novel...is the fact that gender...remains undeclared” (2005, 28) all throughout the novel. Lisa Bradford, Ute Kauer and Natasha Walter add that not only Winterson willfully hides gender but also she avoids revealing the narrator’s name (Bradford 1998, 62-3), age, appearance, beliefs, historical and geographical context (Kauer in Makinen 2005, 21) and so readers are introduced to a character with neither childhood nor colour, but for a succession of male and female lovers

(Walter 1992). And because this apparent ambiguity, Samantha Requena argues that readers are compelled to imagine the narrator's appearance (2009) based on the few clues given.

Winterson claimed that though the narrator is highly unreliable because of the lack of explicit information, defining gender would have made her story weight in a way she did not want (1997). However, the figure of the narrator has a precise function in the text. Brian Finney, Carolina Sánchez-Palencia and Antje Lindenmeyer argue that the ungendered narrator is Winterson's deliberate attempt to unsettle and erase gender distinctions (Finney 2000; Sánchez-Palencia 2002, 106; Lindenmeyer 1999, 48).

In order to achieve these purposes, Winterson constantly challenges any gender assumption by sometimes identifying the narrator as a man (Winterson 1993, 18), a woman (1993, 10) or even engaging the character in relationships with both men (92, 143, 152) and women (12, 16, 21, 24, 41-2, 59-60, 75-6, 77). I believe that Marilyn Farwell is right when she argues that the narrator "displays an ambiguous variety of stereotypical markings" (in Makinen 2005, 114). To put some examples, even though power, dominance and strength are socially considered masculine traits (while women appear to embody opposite roles, such as weakness, subjection and passivity), the narrator's multiple, unstable and contradictory nature (Tapia 2011, VII) will suffice to avoid specific gender labels. Since Winterson skilfully plays on a constantly changing role reversal, readers cannot assume an exact gender when the character appears to be engaged in fights (Winterson 1993, 86; 170-2) or exploring Louise's body (20), a trope culturally codified to men (Tapia 2011, 31; Lindenmeyer 1999, 56; Fåhraeus 2008, 90).

The narrator makes the readers examine, question and deconstruct their impressions, assumptions, clichés and binaries about love, gender, and behaviour (Kauer in Berry 2007, 24; Gustar 2005, 28; 30; Front 2009, 9; Lanser 2013; Bradford 1998, 53; Tapia 2011, 4; Sánchez-Palencia 2002, 103; Fludernik 2009, 69; Arman 2012, 3). Therefore, the narrator's

fluidity appears to trouble these apparent permanent and inherent aspects of the human condition (Tapia 2011, 23), finally revealing that rather than biologically built, [gender] is socially, historically and culturally constructed (Front 2009, 11; Van de Winkle 2013, 1; Moi 1989, 122; Butler 2007, 8) and so the novel attempts to challenge what has been written (and rewritten) on our bodies (Fåhraeus 2008, 87).

The inability to assign a stable gender to the narrator causes a certain anxiety to the readers, who are in constant need to find out the gender (Schabert 2010, 86) even by means of misleading clues. As we cannot conceive a world without labels, readers need to term the narrator. As defining the character as either man or woman seems to be problematic, readers might find other names, such as bisexual, pansexual (Gustar 2005, 28), “unstably gendered”, as Heather Nunn comments (in Makinen 2005, 117) or “queer” (Lanser, 2013, 17).

Moreover, in an attempt to recreate the text (Torras 2008, 220), readers tend to ascribe to the narrator’s persona the author’s sex (Schabert 2010, 76), that is, a woman. Nevertheless, Susan Lanser argues that the constant markings that prove the contrary (in Schabert 2010, 76), as I have been previously dealing with, simply frustrate and dislocate the search of identity (Schabert 2010, 90), positioning readers among possibilities, plurality, rather than contradictions (Berry 2007, 4; Front 2009, 13), even though society makes us understand the world in dichotomies, such as male or female (McAvan 2011, 437).

Winterson’s open sexuality and her portrayal of love between women in her novels have been used to distort and judge *Written on the Body* as lesbian (Tapia 2011, 51; Finney 2000; Requena 2009). Probably because of Winterson’s deliberate ambiguity, Patricia Duncker argues that the author refuses to write an ‘out’ lesbian novel (in Finney 2000) even though Cath Stowers asserts that the novel presents an undeniable focus on female sexuality (in Makinen 2005, 123), which I attempt to prove that it is not straightforward.

Moreover, some critics have understood Winterson's "flesh of my flesh" (1993, 129) as one gender hint that fosters mutuality, reciprocity and sameness, an expression of sexuality, which according to them establishes a homosexual relationship (Wekker in Tapia 2011, 58; Farwell 1996, 191). That is perhaps why Farwell links the capital 'L' to 'Lesbian' (in Makinen 2005, 116) and Carolyn Allen imagines the 'I' as Louise's woman lover (in Tapia 2011, 52-3).

Marvel rightly challenges lesbian interpretations of the novel when he postulates that *Written on the Body* is "a love story [and] love should [not] be a gender-bound operation" (in Finney 2000; Tapia 2011). Besides, reading the text as lesbian implies missing Winterson's point (Gane in Makinen 2005, 112; Van de Winkle 2013, 12; Finney 2000) and so the enquiry about gender has to remain as a question (Genette in Tapia 2011, 60). Together with Steward, I believe that in order to classify the novel as lesbian, critics have just selected the passages where the narrator is temporarily female (In Finney 2000), even though further than socially and culturally inscribed, dress code and behaviour cannot determine gender. After all, the author is "not a lesbian who happens to write" (Winterson 1996, 104).

As Schabert claims, "fiction, which evokes a world through language, allows creating genderless characters" (2010, 75). *Written on the Body* is a homodiegetic narrative, since the overt and active, authorial and autodiegetic character (main protagonist) tells a first-person singular story (Genette in Jahn 2005, Kauer in Makinen 2005, 120; Tapia 2011, 3; Fludernik 2009, 31 & 21). Even though Lucy Hallet argues that the pronoun 'I' clearly defines an ungendered narrator (in Finney 2000; also Schabert, 2010, 90, Arman 2012, 14), its use points to a physical presence and a sexed body (Schabert 2010, 75). Because of this reason, I also disagree with critics who prefer to use the term 'it' (Tapia 2011, 70) by claiming the narrator's gender instability and lack of human status.

Though gender can easily be unspecified in English because the language does not require adjective inflection, a narrative becomes gendered when using the third-person singular subject (or possessive) pronouns (Schabert 2010, 75). I reckon the slashed forms ‘she/he’, though including both genders, would truly emphasise gender division (74) rather than inclusion, but since the novel does not show any explicit textual evidence or grammatical hints, *Written on the Body* fosters total gender ambiguity (Livia in Tapia 2011, 53-4; Bradford 1998, 62; McAvan 2011, 437).

However, Fludernik claims that by means of the paraphernalia of [our] gendered culture, we can implicitly create (and represent) biological sex (in Arman 2012, 7-8), such as categorizing ‘beautiful’ women but ‘handsome’ men. Apart from being used for things (Winterson 1992, 21, 23; 78), the author employs the word to mainly refer to women (29, 34, 35, 102, 144; 161); except in two instances that describe the narrator (84; 85), whose gender is unknown.

*Collins Dictionary*, *Cambridge Dictionaries*, the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* and the *Oxford Advanced* define ‘beautiful’ when qualifying an attractive, good-looking and pleasing to the senses person, though they exemplify the word with women and children (2008, 116; Hornby 2010, 119-120). *Collins Universal* and *Pons Online* make no gender distinction (2005, 1116; 2008) but *Longman Dictionary* and *Oxford Learner’s Thesaurus* show that ‘beautiful’ tends to collocate with women and girls first than men (2008, 53). Even though the word is exclusively used for women in Modern English (Mott and Mateo 2009, 149), “calling the narrator ‘beautiful’ cannot determine the gender” (Van de Winkle 2013, 5). Winterson’s game in “the most beautiful creature, male or female” (1992, 84) is a deliberate emphasis on ambiguity (Tapia 2011) with the purpose of breaking gender connotation in words, which finally shows that if words carry gender is because society applied it.

Many critics acknowledged that since English does not need to be gendered, translators will have to cope with obstacles (Lanser 1996, 257; Livia in Schabert 2010, 74), such as adjective inflection (Lanser 1996, 257) and “singular gender marked forms to refer to both the narrator and Louise and the lover” (Schabert 2010, 90). Joan Smith wonders how Winterson’s translators, faced with Latin languages, will adopt the ponderous circumlocutions to maintain the pretence (1992) in the target language, even though I agree with Hoepffner in the sense that creating a new sexually unmarked text is easier than translating (in Schabert 2010, 89), since latter involves knowledge of the two languages, which will determine the translator’s quality and faithfulness to the original text (Mott 2011, 17).

The Spanish translation has been partly claimed to have problems with regards to the narrator’s gender indeterminacy. Bradford acknowledges the difficulty of suppressing the gender in Spanish, arguing that Castejón reproduced the ambiguous attitude in the text with neutral and natural solutions for adjectives (1998, 67-8). Nevertheless, she points out that the only flaw is the wrong choice of word when rendering the word ‘nipple’, which in English refers to both genders (67-8; Hornby 2010, 1033). She argues that had Castejón used the word ‘tetilla’ instead of ‘pezón’, she would not have fallen into a lesbian story (Bradford 1998, 67-8). However, Castejón not only employs ‘pezón’ in the text to refer to women (1994, 13, 29; 148) but also to the narrator (194) and a man (112).

While *Diccionari Visual Oxford* shows that ‘pezón’ is used for both sexes (1997, 116; 118), *Collins Universal* makes a difference between ‘pezón’ and ‘tetilla’ (2005, 1625). Though ‘tetilla’ seems to be exclusively used for men (*Diccionario Collins* 1972, 549), *Real Academia Española* argues that both genders have teats (2001). Nevertheless, *RAE*, Maria Moliner and *Diccionaris de l’Enciclopèdia* subtly link ‘pezón’ to women, since [it is] from where babies suck milk (2001; 2000, 1068; 2001, 802). As seen, though the word tends to be socially associated to a woman because of its feeding function, we cannot strictly frame it

since all genders have nipples<sup>1</sup>. Together with the previous discussion on ‘beautiful’, I reckon that Winterson is playing with gender and she is trying to challenge the fact that society applies gender to words. Rather than a fault, as Bradford considers, Castejón chooses ‘pezón’ wisely because a single use of ‘tetilla’ for Crazy Frank would have indeed sustained a lesbian narrator.

Some bloggers vaguely comment on Castejón’s linguistic challenges (Hermoza 2008; Ocampo 2007) though in fact, there are two revealing female gender marks that temporarily qualify the narrator: “entramos juntas” (Castejón 1994, 36) and “rodeada por mis mesas” (47). To discard typos, I compared the 1994 and 1998 Spanish editions, also considering a possible deliberate choice on the part of the translator. Without reply, I contacted Winterson, asking her feelings about gender marks in the translation, if Castejón had been faithful to her purpose and whether or not the Spanish version conveyed a similar effect.

On an email exchange with Encarna Castejón, I enquired if the first gender reference had been intentional<sup>2</sup>. She replied that gender remains undefined in the English version she used, except on one occasion: a single and revealing mark of gender, probably the author’s decision. I read and compared the 1992 and 1993 editions and I have not encountered any book or article dealing with an earlier conscious gender mark. Nevertheless, even if there had been one mark in the text, there is still another hint in the translation that can only be explained claiming Castejón’s deliberate choice.

Overall, the translation captures the gender game (Bradford 1998, 72) and though Winterson’s sexuality may influence readers, there is precise intention behind gender instability that has to be interpreted as so (Tapia 2011, 53). Though the translation is good, it

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<sup>1</sup> Email exchange with Kristel Jiménez (28<sup>th</sup> March, 2015). I am authorised to use the content of the email for academic purposes. The translation is mine.

<sup>2</sup> When I contacted her I had not found the second mark, which I did when I read the book again. I am authorised to use the content of the email for academic purposes. The translation is mine.

loses something from the original (Mott 2011, 30) because Castejón has somehow rewritten, reread and adapted the text (Jiménez 2015). The gender marks cannot be considered as a lack of linguistic resources because Spanish can reformulate them as “entramos” and “las mesas me rodeaban”<sup>3</sup>. Castejón has not been strictly faithful to Winterson’s choice and purpose. Therefore, the effect changes: instead of challenging and deconstructing binaries, the inaccuracies might lead the reader to wrongly assume that the book is just a lesbian love story.

As a conclusion, I would reassert that the narrator’s undefined and undeclared gender is a deliberate attempt to reevaluate, challenge and deconstruct the gender dichotomy that society and culture have constructed, and so the text cannot be labelled taking into account Winterson’s sexuality. I have shown that the novel unsettles the perceptions, assumptions and stereotypes about gender difference in roles, acts, behaviours and even to words, which all may carry gender connotations and associations we sometimes assume to be inherent and unbreakable.

I reckon that Castejón has been a wordsmith bearing in mind the difficulty that Spanish brings when maintaining indeterminacy and ambiguity. Probably influenced by Winterson, Castejón does not keep the gender uncovered all throughout the novel. Those marks might balance the whole effect of the text and the way readers approach it. In a way, and as a final remark, I would say that Castejón has reformulated Winterson’s intended ambiguity and specific purpose and finally built her interpretation, appropriating the translation and shaping a somehow new book.

**Work count: 2500**

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<sup>3</sup> The examples are mine. They show that gender indeterminacy can be achieved in Spanish.

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