

**PHALLIC AND VULVIC MOTHERS OF JEANETTE WINTERSON:  
ORANGES ARE NOT THE ONLY FRUIT AND SEXING THE  
CHERRY\***

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**Abstract:**

Sigmund Freud's notion of the "phallic mother" is a significant concept to examine gender, sexuality and power relations not only in social life but also in a literary work. Although phallic mother/woman concept is mostly used to describe omnipotent women in many texts, mostly based on its psychoanalytic origin, this study argues that it is an inadequate portrayal to describe feminine potential and power. In this respect, this study aims to propose another concept that should be used to describe powerful, feminine, securing, un-authoritatively maternal, and freeing mother/woman as "vulvic mother/woman" instead of "phallic". To examine the differences between phallic woman and vulvic woman, the study analyzes two woman/mother characters from Jeanette Winterson's two novels – *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and *Sexing the Cherry*. Based on the theories from psychoanalysis and a survey on mythology, this study tries to take attention to feminine conceptualizations in relation to the analyzed novels.

**Key words:** Phallic Mother/Woman, Vulvic Mother/Woman, Jeanette Winterson, Desire, Power.

**INTRODUCTION**

*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world...* The well-known statement by Ludwig Wittgenstein, the twentieth century's one of the most influential philosophers, has inspired many people to re-think on the power and limits of language. In the twentieth century, like in many other fields, literary criticism focused on language to decipher the latent functioning of ideology, power, and hierarchy infused into language in every respect. Today, it is a well-accepted remark that language is not innocent but all powerful to construct, deconstruct, and even reconstruct our minds. This study that started with the idea of analyzing the mother figures in two novels by Jeanette Winterson, who also fights against the language of patriarchy in her works, can be read as a reaction to the feeling of entrapment in the net of

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patriarchal language. This study uses the terms of psychoanalysis, the language of which has given birth to many speculations since its founder Sigmund Freud. Thus, the net that traps us when talking about gender roles and figures is that of psychoanalysis itself. In this sense, to analyze two mother figures in Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1990 [1989])<sup>1</sup>, firstly the concepts of "phallus" and "phallic mother or woman" will be depicted and later a female-oriented alternative, "vulvic mother or woman", to Freud's male-oriented concept "phallic" will be proposed in relation to the mother figures in Winterson's novels.

### 1. PHALLUS: WHAT A THORNY CONCEPT!

The position of phallus as "*His Majesty the Signifier*" (Ian, 1993, p. 45), especially since psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, should be under erasure to understand the subliminal connotations it involves. This term is "*a loanword from Latin phallus, itself borrowed from Greek φαλλός (phallos), which is ultimately a derivation from the Proto-Indo-European root \*b<sup>h</sup>el- meaning 'to inflate, swell'*" (Online Etymology Dictionary). The term that is known as having been used since the 1610s as an image of erect penis has included a symbolic context within the language of psychoanalysis. Freud's theories on Oedipus complex and phallic stage focus on the existence and lack of penis. In Freudian psychoanalysis, not only the castration complex of boys but also "penis envy" of girls is theorized within the ontological analysis of penis as a powerful organ. Freud had thought that during the phase from about 3 to 5 years old, "*only one genital, namely the male one, comes into account. What is present, therefore, is not the primacy of the genitals but the primacy of the phallus*" (Freud, 1923, p. 142).

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the phallic phase defines both boys and girls as mother-desiring subjects who conceive "phallus" as the main determiner lacking on mother's body. To achieve mother or to be the desire of the mother, they try to identify with phallus in order to be a whole with her. Thus, here the main dialectic is "to have" or "not to have" the phallus. According to Freud, not only the boys who can separate from mother and identify with father but also the girls who are similarly separated from father and identify with mother are able to get over the phallic phase. However, the girls' penis envy turns into a wish for a baby which stands as a substitute for penis in their adulthood (Freud, 2010 [1933], p. 162-163). "*For Freud, it is the male genital organ alone that plays the central role for both sexes, and any account of this role privileges the masculine*" (Missonnier, 2005, p. 1262).

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<sup>1</sup> The novels will be referred as *Oranges* and *Sexing* from now on and the references to the novels will be given in parenthesis with the abbreviations of *O* and *SC* including page numbers.

Jacques Lacan, who is accepted as the re-founder of psychoanalysis, grounds his theory again on phallus as the basic signifier in the construction process of the unconscious.

*“For Lacan, castration involves the process whereby boys accept that they can symbolically ‘have’ the phallus only by accepting that they can never actually have it ‘in reality’ and girls can accept ‘not-having’ the phallus once they give up on their ‘phallic’ identification with their mothers” (Homer, 2005, p. 55).*

By this way, Lacan attributes a symbolic function to phallus which contributes to the separation process of the child from the mother. The castration of the child’s desire that is to be the phallus for mother, in other words to be whole with mother, by No-of-the-Father (Non-du-Père) makes it a subject in the symbolic order according to Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan, 2002 [1958]). Thus, phallus is defined both as the archaic object cause of the subject’s desire and its primary lost object. Though later on, in 1972-1973, Lacan explains the construction of the subject’s sexual identity in accordance with the type of *jouissance* that is explained with femininity and masculinity, instead of phallus, his theory has re-established phallus as a central and primary, the absolute signifier, of the unconscious.

*“The phallus incarnates or ‘makes flesh’ the S1 of the master signifier. For this reason, identification with the phallic signifier operates as identification with the master signifier. What links these terms is the process of symbolic identification in which the phallic signifier is a master signifier that produces the subject” (Campbell, 2004, p. 67).*

Despite Freud’s and his follower Lacan’s phallus-centered theories, some psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein have revised the status of phallus in terms of castration complex. To Klein, the main traumatic experience is not the castration complex that is caused by the idea of the castration of mother as a penis-lacking-object, but the trauma resulted from weaning (Thomas, 2008, p. 211). As the real castration complex is related to the separation of the child from the mother’s breast in Kleinian psychoanalysis, castration is based on the relationship between mother, child, and the object. In this respect, Klein appoints the status of primary signifier to breast not penis. In terms of penis envy, she mentions that breast envy is more common and valid for both sexes. “[T]hereby challenging one of the bastions of male superiority: it is women’s possessions and attributes which are originally more valued and therefore envied than men’s” (Segal, 2004, p. 21). According to Klein, women’s wish for having a baby is not related to the wish to compensate the lack of penis as Freud mentioned in his theory.

*“Many women, Klein thought, under the influence of the depressive position, want babies because in phantasy they want to restore to their mothers the babies they damaged in her in phantasy*

*when they were small, but they are hopeful of being able to do this with help from a man. [...] They want a baby to love and care for as on a deep level they feel they have been loved and cared for” (Segal, 2004, p. 53).*

Klein’s another female-oriented idea is that “*infants of both sexes experience genital desires directed towards their mother and father, and they have an unconscious knowledge of the vagina as well as of the penis*” (1975, p. 416). It is undeniable that Melanie Klein has deconstructed many psychoanalytic aspects based on a male-dominated theorizing. Her focus on the significance of mother and maternal effects on child in the process of identity development has opened a new way to evaluate psychoanalysis. However, her terminology, in certain points, uses that of a male-oriented one. While she attributes power to breast and so to maternal aspects, she still identifies the powerful mother “*uncastrated, the womb of penis and phallic mother*” (Thomas, 2008, p. 211). Then, the question is who is this phallic mother or phallic woman that is described with the *absolute signifier!* which does not belong to her body?

## 2. PHALLIC MOTHER OR WOMAN

In psychoanalytic theory, phallic mother, in the most general sense, “*is a mother who is fantasmatically endowed with a phallus*” (Missonnier, 2005, p. 1261). In *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, it is defined as “*the fantasy that the mother has a penis, or symbolically, the experience of a mother with masculine personality traits*” (VandenBos, 2015, p. 787). Accordingly, in *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*, phallic woman is defined: “*An image or fantasy of a woman endowed with a phallus, often discussed in psychoanalysis, where it is given an interpretation in the light of the phallic stage. Also called a phallic mother [...] combined parent-figure*” (Colman, 2003). The concept of phallic mother is based on Sigmund Freud’s works on the formulation of sexual theories of children. According to his theory, in the phallic stage, the child substitutes the phallus for the organ and believing that all people should have a phallus, s/he constructs a phallic mother imago. “*The fear of the phallic mother imago tacitly affirms the threat of castration, while at the same time defensively negating it along with all its oral and anal pregenital foundations*” (Missonnier, 2005, p. 1261). Freud’s some later works developed on the idea of maternal phallic imago in relation to fetishism and masculine homosexuality. The fetishist and the homosexual who fear castration unconsciously develops a defense mechanism based on a chosen object as a substitute for the maternal phallus. As the special status and predominance that is attributed to phallus continued after Freud, though in various forms, the phallic mother/woman concept have been used since then.

The term phallic woman refers not only to the image of a woman endowed with a phallus but also to “*the fantasy of the woman retaining the*

*phallus internally after coitus*” (Desprats-Péquignot, 2005, p. 1263). Thus, as a representative of castrator, phallic woman is attributed a castrating power. The woman endowed with the imaginary powerful penis, as Freud calls her in his lecture on “The Psychology of Woman” (Freud, 1949), has complete psychic power on the infant. Marcia Ian states in her book *Remembering the Phallic Mother* that according to psychoanalysis the phallic mother is:

“[A]t once the object of every psyche’s secret fear and its deep desire. She represents the absolute power of the female as autonomous and self-sufficient; at the same time she is woman reduced to the function of giving suck. She is neither hermaphrodite nor androgyne, human nor monster, because she is emphatically Mother. And yet she hardly resembles anyone’s actual mother—except in one’s own fervid imagination, and that is precisely the problem” (1993, p. 9).

The problem is that the ontology of phallic mother is determined in terms of the discourse of psychoanalysis. A psychoanalytic “fact” is created based on woman’s castration as if having the phallus is the primary and accepted condition of a complete body. In this respect, Ian’s comment on the existence of phallic mother as a concept of fetish is note-worthy. Ian asks: “*In short, she has, she bears, she is, the fetish—but whose?*” (1993, p. 9) To her, phallic mother is “*shared epistemological ‘fetish’*” (Ian, 1993, p. 60) of psychoanalysis and modernism. The significant point lies where she focuses on the “*patriarchy’s hypervaluation of its own masculinist authority as fetishistic*” (Ian, 1993, p. 90) and she says that “*Freud’s reflexive definition of fetishism [...] is itself fetishistic [...]*” (Ian, 1993, p. 90). So, “[t]he overdetermination of this phallus as both connector and signifier, as bearer of meanings political, psychological, and historical, constitutes fetishism” (Ian, 1993, p. 165).

At this point, there is an alternative to the fear of the castration of phallus. The castration anxiety can be shifted from the realm of phallus to another place that involves both male and female experience. This is the primary place of Being, namely the birth place. According to Michael Balint, the fetish [namely the substitution for vaginal castration] represents also the vagina: “*[I]t conflates the two by symbolizing as well their psychic precursors, the parents’ feces, giving the fetish a close connection with the anal theory of birth and coitus*” (1956 [1934], p.172, quoted in Ian, 1993, p. 88). Thus, the theory of birth can be conceived as conflating the castration anxiety of both sexes because both male and female new-born are castrated from the body of the mother in the first place. Jeanette Winterson mentions the significance of birthing as well and its relation to mother’s body as follows: “*Birthing is a wound all of its own. [...] The baby’s rupture into the world tears the mother’s body [...]. The child is a healing and a cut. The place of lost and found*” (Winterson, 2011, p. 222). In this respect, the primary position of phallus over

mother's vagina should be re-evaluated as many theorists and writers have discussed and opposed.

According to Ian, phallus is "*a phobic substitute for something else. That something else would be the umbilical cord*" (1993, p. 21). It is possible to say that phallus is a phobic substitute of birth process in the most general sense. As some other theorists such as Rank and Groddeck accept, birth is the first experiment of anxiety and thus female genitals worry people (Ian, 1993, p. 22-3). However, birth, according to Georg Groddeck, is "*both the source of primal anxiety and the origin of primal pleasure*" (Ian, 1993, p. 24). Then the problematic issue is the denial of the positive existence of the vagina in psychoanalysis as Karen Horney had also mentioned earlier (1967, p. 160). When psychoanalysis designs phallic mother as the archetypal object of desire, the non-existence of female genitals is a worth-pondering issue though it has the undeniable power of birth. At that point, Virginia Held focuses on womb envy which psychoanalysis has not mentioned before because of patriarchal concerns:

*"With respect to the body, instead of seeing women as, for instance, lacking a penis, feminist thought notices that women possess, among other abilities, a capacity men lack: the capacity to give birth to new human beings. When psychologists look for it, they can indeed find evidence of womb envy in little boys"* (2006, p. 60).

The pseudo non-existent status that is attributed to female body and its components has been analyzed and criticized by some theorists. As mentioned above, Melanie Klein, focusing on breast not phallus, "*believed that within the framework of the pregenital stages of the oedipal conflict, the baby projected onto the maternal breast the destructive drives of its own penis*" (Missonnier, 2005, p. 1261). To Klein, the castration anxiety lies in the oral relation to the breast, which takes the status of phallus. The baby may conceive the breast as a good or bad object. This early identification with mother's breast results in later oral-genital relations according to Klein. Another name, Sándor Ferenczi "*described the sexual organs of the mother both as a cavity and as penile*" and Ernest Jones attempted to "*relativize the exclusive predominance that the Viennese gave the phallus*" by mentioning phallus castration anxiety as "*partial and secondary*" to an early identification with the mother and her parts (Missonnier, 2005, p. 1261). Though their theories shifted the direction from phallus to breast and womb of mother, they still used Freud's indications. At the heart of these theories, "phallus" existed as the ultimate signifier of physical penis and vagina (Nasio, 2008, p. 53). For this reason, all the explanations for mother are based on its relation to phallus though mother/woman has primarily vagina not penis.

If the primal space of human being is accepted as the womb of the mother, as many theorists suggest above, from which the baby is castrated,

then there should be some other conceptualizations related to maternal and maternal body. In this sense, the concept of “phallic mother (or woman)” that is mostly used to describe powerful mother (or woman) is not enough. Instead, it represents an evil power that castrates the desire of the child. If there exists a *phallic* mother, it should be defined again. That’s why, a Lacanian reading of castration that is based on the castration of *desire* and a Kleinian reading of phallic mother as the castrator of *desire* will be illuminating. However, there is still a question that should be solved: Is there another way to describe omnipotent mother/woman without using the features that belong to male body? If phallic mother will be handled as a representative of evil power that castrates desire, its opponent that also represents power but on behalf of to promote desire and freedom is proposed in this study as “vulvic mother”. Then, two representatives of mother figures that are phallic and vulvic can be understood better when analyzed within Jeanette Winterson’s two novels which picture two conflicting mothers. While in *Oranges*, Mrs Winterson stands as a representative of phallic mother, who is powerful but restrictive and anti-desirous, the Dog-Woman in *Sexing* is a representative of vulvic mother, who is also powerful but liberating and desire-supporter. Firstly, to focus on Kleinian phallic mother and its reflection in *Oranges* will be a beginning to make distinction between “powerful” mothers and their attitudes to the desires of their children.

### **2.1. Mrs Winterson: Representative of Phallic Mother**

“According to Klein, the formidable weapons of the phallic mother are an absent breast that threatens the child’s survival, an orally intrusive breast, a devouring mouth/vagina, and an anally penetrating phallus” (Missonnier, 2005, p. 1261). Klein’s theory focuses on phallic mother as a combined parent-figure or hybrid parent who is endowed with paternal phallus after the intercourse. According to the phantasy of the infantile, the castrating mother with phallus “represents the mother and father in a menacing combination” (Missonnier, 2005, p. 1262). Symbolically, phallic mother has a castrating power on desire. As the theory indicates, during the intercourse, powerful mother castrates the phallus of the father, namely she castrates his desire. This desire-castrating mother bears the same threat for the infant. That’s why, although phallic mother is defined as powerful, this power is destructive rather than productive. In this respect, Klein’s definition of phallic mother seems the most attention-grabbing as it is theorized more detailed. Jacques Lacan, following Klein, focuses on the devouring mother figure. In his theory, weaning, being separated from the mother by the Name-of-the-Father and alienation are significant to enter into the symbolic order. However, when this separation process is blocked by an omnipotent mother figure, the child’s psyche is exposed to psychoses or neuroses. This mother figure as an engulfing power that has the potential to devour the child should be considered symbolically as she engulfs the child’s desire and castrates it in a way. That is

the problematic point in which the child has to identify herself/himself with the mother, “*the crocodile opening her mouth waiting for swallowing her baby*” (Soysal, 2009, p. 606), and her/his desire with that of the mother. The phallic mother that will be discussed related to *Oranges* should be considered that of Kleinian and Lacanian phallic mother that devours the child’s desire and tries to penetrate her own.

The prominent theme in *Oranges*, an autobiographical novel, is “*the nature of the mother-child relationship*” (Andermahr, 2009, p. 45) which is also focused on Winterson’s non-fictional book *Why be Happy When You Could be Normal?* In *Oranges*, Winterson, an adopted child, begins her story from the age of seven and ends it at the age of twenty including the process of gaining her identity. In the story, the “heavy” existence of her mother marks the narration. As a representative of phallic mother, the novel’s mother figure Constance Winterson should be analyzed in terms of two concepts, power and desire, which specify the phallic mothers of Klein and Lacan.

In the book, Mrs Winterson is defined primarily as powerful, dominant, and having a sense of leadership. Her status in the family precludes Mr Winterson who is referred by Jeanette as “Mother’s husband” (*O*, 52). His passive and secondary status in the family is apparent: “*My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle; it didn’t matter what. She was in the white corner and that was that*” (*O*, 3). Mrs Winterson’s attitude reveals that she thinks herself superior to his husband: “*‘He married me and he found the Lord.’ [...] So she married my father and reformed him and he built the church and never got angry. I thought he was nice, though he didn’t say much*” (*O*, 36). The dominant and powerful position of Mrs Winterson is undeniably significant in the novel while Mr Winterson, “*not the one to push himself*” (*O*, 8), is mentioned only a few times throughout the narration. In the “Genesis” part, Winterson’s words define Constance as a firm and concrete being:

*“She hung out the largest sheets on the windiest days. She wanted the Mormons to knock on the door. At election time in a Labour mill town she put a picture of the Conservative candidate in the window. [...]*

*Enemies were: ● The Devil (in his many forms) ● Next Door ● Sex (in its many forms) ● Slugs*

*Friends were: ● God ● Our dog ● Auntie Madge ● The Novels of Charlotte Brontë ● Slug pellets”* (*O*, 3)

Mrs Winterson has established her own truths and she has power to carry out them. Jeanette tells that Mrs Winterson has revolted against her own “furious” father to marry Mr Winterson and started her financially poor but spiritually rich life with the Church community. In those respects, she is powerful and can be regarded as a representative of phallic mother. Jeanette the writer, talks about her step mother Constance Winterson’s “monstrous



qualities” (Andermahr, 2009, p. 45) out of her fiction. In *Why be Happy?*, she writes: “*She was a flamboyant depressive; a woman who kept a revolver in the duster drawer, and the bullets in a tin of Pledge. A woman who stayed up all night baking cakes to avoid sleeping in the same bed as my father*” (Winterson, 2011, p. 1). Mrs Winterson in *Oranges* is one of the reflections of Jeanette Winterson’s own step mother Constance Winterson who emerges “*repeatedly in her work, represented in the grotesque features and attributes of power and violence of her maternal figures*” (Andermahr, 2009, p. 45).

Susana Onega evaluates Mrs Winterson’s behavior towards Jeanette in *Oranges* as a reflection of the relationship between a fairytale heroine and a cruel stepmother:

*“Like Cinderella’s stepmother, Jeanette’s foster mother expects perfect obedience from her, never thanks her for doing all types of odd jobs and errands, and is totally blind to the child’s sense of shame or self-respect. Thus, she hires her to do the washing up at Trickett’s while she is having a cup of Horlicks with her friends (O, 82), and when Jeanette falls ill with an inflammation of the adenoids she leaves her unattended for days on end” (2006, p. 20).*

Mrs Winterson’s attitude towards Jeanette is not affectionate but cold-hearted many times. She is strong and powerful but not to support her daughter but to exercise her sovereignty over Jeanette. This combined parent figure holding power and sovereignty over Jeanette becomes a representative of phallic mother much more when her attitude to “desire and desiring” is reconsidered.

Mrs Winterson, “*a strong maternal figure who is eccentric, domineering and zealous, and with whom [Jeanette] has a love/hate relationship*” (Andermahr, 2009, p. 51), is in conflict with her daughter in relation to desire. “*Like Winterson’s own mother, the fictional Jeanette’s foster mother is a militant member of the Pentecostal Evangelical Church and has taken great pains to educate her daughter in her faith*” (Onega, 2006, p. 18). Mrs Winterson wishes Jeanette to become a missionary until Jeanette’s same-sex tendency is disclosed. Sex is such a sore point for Mrs Winterson that she is even against begetting of children. According to Jeanette: “*[I]t wasn’t that she couldn’t do it, more that she didn’t want to do it. She was very bitter about the Virgin Mary getting there first. So she did the next best thing and arranged for a foundling. That was me*” (O, 3). Her refraining from *desire* and trying to make Jeanette refrain from *desiring* makes her a phallic mother much more. When she learns her lesbian relationship, she “*betrays Jeanette by siding with the Church fathers against her*” (Andermahr, 2009, p. 55). To convert her into faith again, they perform derogatory deeds to Jeanette including locking her into her room without giving food. They want her to strive for forgiveness though Jeanette does not believe in the wrongness of falling in love with a

female. Besides, even if there is such a thing as forgiveness, Mrs Winterson is not a type to forgive. Bristling with anger, she collects “*all the letters, all the cards, all the jottings*” of Jeanette and burns them in the backyard: “*There are different sorts of treachery, but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it. She burnt a lot more than the letters that night in the backyard. I don’t think she knew. In her head she was still queen, but not my queen any more, not the White Queen any more*” (O, 112).

Mrs Winterson’s desire-castrating power makes her phallic in this sense. She cannot put up with her daughter’s own choice to desire. As a Kleinian and Lacanian phallic mother, her aim is to castrate desire that is directed to any other than herself and her wishes. To desire and to fall are given with the metaphor of orange in the *Oranges*. Mrs Winterson often gives Jeanette oranges mentioning them to be “The only fruit” (O, 29). The title of the novel is a reaction against this established truth that draws the lines and limits for people. Jeanette’s self-actualization comes in this sense when she follows her desire; she metaphorically finds “*a secret garden on the banks of the Euphrates*” and eats the forbidden fruit: “*To eat of the fruit means to leave the garden because the fruit speaks of other things, other longings*” (O, 123). However, the search for these longings is not possible to be accepted by her mother who thinks that Jeanette “*made her ill, made the house ill, brought evil into the church*” (O, 127), thus she wants Jeanette to move out calling her “*demon and devil*” (O, 136). The point is that Mrs Winterson’s discomfort of Jeanette’s homosexual tendency is not only based on her belief in Christianity but her inability to give permission to autonomy of self in general and desire in particular. Parsons states that “[t]he phallic mother can be (though need not necessarily be) an actively castrative figure, stifling her children by pre-empting all room for autonomous action” (2000, p. 109). This recognition of phallic mother is valid for Mrs Winterson that she cannot accept the autonomous sexual choice of Jeanette. Besides, she accuses Jeanette to do “*a willful act on [her] part to sell [her] soul*” (O, 128), to behave against “*the limitations of [her] sex*” (O, 134) by “[a]ping man” (O, 127) and so to give rise to her downfall.

Mrs Winterson is castrative with regard to desire which she accepts as sinful if it does not operate in established forms. Her phallic power is destructive rather than protectionist for her child: “*I think she would have preferred something a bit more spectacular, like for me and my bedroom to be consumed with flames while the rest of the house escaped*” (O, 131). In this respect, Mrs Winterson is a phallic mother that has a destructive, castrative, devouring, and dominant power leaving no place for any autonomous choice and desire. By engulfing the child’s desire, she castrates or threatens the survival of desire. Thus, the pseudo positive ontology that is attributed to phallic mother by defining her powerful is problematic. When it is accepted that she is powerful to castrate the desire of the child, there appears a need to

describe another powerful mother/woman who “empowers” autonomy and opens the doors to desires. This type of powerful mother who shares the power of phallic mother but in a different sense should also be named differently. The following part will focus on this naming process and the exemplification of it with the character of the Dog-Woman in Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry*.

### **3. VULVIC WOMAN/MOTHER AND THE DOG-WOMAN AS A REPRESENTATIVE**

Marcia Ian, in her book *Remembering the Phallic Mother: Psychoanalysis, Modernism and the Fetish*, states that “[f]or centuries the figure of the phallic woman served as an icon of sexuality and fertility for diverse religions and cultures. [...] As a psychical object, the phallic mother represents both self-sufficiency and limitless succor” (1993, p. 59). Creed writes that phallic woman “describes any woman possessing traditionally masculine characteristics” (2012, p. 157). The problem is that the tendency to label a woman having some characteristics such as sexuality, fertility, self-sufficiency, power, ability, and nurturing with the concept of *phallic* is not accurate. This is not only because of the fact that a female can have these characteristics within herself just as a male can, but a woman with these characteristics can be named with another word that belongs to her own body not of the male. Many feminists, including Jeanette Winterson, in the twentieth century have focused on language and its mind-constructive power. In this sense, naming emerges as a significant means to deconstruct the male-oriented language usage and to re-construct a female-oriented one. In *Oranges*, Winterson writes: “Naming meant power. Adam had named the animals and the animals came at his call” (*O*, 142). “Naming is a difficult and time consuming process; it concerns essences, and it means power” (*O*, 170).

Thus, the naming of the power holding mother/woman as phallic mother/woman needs to be revised. As mentioned above, the etymological meaning of phallus is “to blow, to inflate, to swell”; the connotations of power and *potentia* are attributed to phallus later. An explanation for attributing powerful characteristics to phallus or erected penis is mostly based upon mythology. For instance, in Greek mythology Priapus, the rustic fertility god, protector of plants and gardens, is one of the godly figures representing male genitalia and power-phallus relationship (Erhat, 2007, p. 254). However, there are female deities who are defined both powerful and feminine in bodily aspects as well as male deities. An analysis of female deities makes it explicit that those powerful deities are defined with external genitalia of the female. At this point, there exists the female equivalent of phallic deities, which are identified with their vulva. An analysis leads us to Latin word for the female genitalia that is called “vulva” which means “womb, female sexual organ”, “perhaps literally ‘wrapper,’ from *volvere* ‘to turn, twist, roll, revolve’” (Online Etymology Dictionary). In this respect, “vulva” both as one of the

primary objects of worship and as a concept going back to the 14 AD (while historical etymology of *phallus* is given going back to 1610s in Online Etymology Dictionary) precedes the concept of “phallus”.

In many cultures, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, vulva, which has the “yoni” shape, also known as “the female delta”, has been symbolized variously by a down-pointing triangle. “[Y]oni yantra (*down-pointing triangle*) is the symbol of female creativity. From it, or her, all male and female life forms develop [...]” (Walker, 1988, p. 106). The yoni shape or triangle that represents vulva is one of the primal images and it represents the Great Mother –the source of life. In general, mother-earth-goddess is symbolized with yoni shape, namely the triangle. For instance, in the Greek sacred alphabet, the delta or triangle stood for the Holy Door, vulva of the All-Mother Demeter (Mother Delta) and in ancient India, the triangle yoni yantra “was one of the oldest and most meaningful, representing the pubic area of a woman’s body and many philosophical concepts centering on this reality: creation, birth, love, motherhood, sexual attraction, fulfillment, cyclic time” (Walker, 1988, p. 40, 44). Most ancient symbol systems recognized the triangle as a sign of the “Virgin-Mother-Crone trinity” and the genital (womb) of the Great Goddess as “holy place,” “source of all life” (Walker, 1988, p. 34, 330). That’s why, an intercourse with women would be thought as a transmission of life-sustaining sources to male body rather than a castrating act. “The sign of the yoni was meant to convey the shape of external female genitalia, which the ancients clearly recognized as the seat of female sexual power. Tantrics viewed that power as the source of all creative action” (Walker, 1988, p. 18).

The earlier cultures and mythologies have made vulvic female power explicit in their narrations and visual representations. However, the patriarchal attitude and ideology passes the vulvic woman off as if it never existed. Especially, some fantastic fictions about female genitals have been formed, one of which is “vagina dentata or the toothed vagina” representing the idea that a woman may eat or castrate her partner during intercourse. As the symbol of devouring mother, vagina dentata exists in mythology, Christianity and modern works of psychoanalysis, although it is a clear production of the fear and sublimation of vulvic desire. In these narrations, female genital is attributed an uncanny position which Freud strengthened by mentioning the idea of castration threat at the sight of the female genitals (1962, p. 216). The archetypal image of “castrating” and “devouring” female genitals is still alive today that even to describe devouring mother, phallic symbol is used – probably to compensate the fear of castration. Many theorists, including many female psychoanalysts, and even feminists strangely use *phallic* for both devouring and omnipotent female genitalia, which is in fact vulvic.

At this point, the argument of this study is that if there should be a concept to describe omnipotent mother or woman figure, it should signify the female characteristic not of male. That's why, to describe a mother figure that is positive, powerful, desire-constructive not desire-castrative, harboring not devouring, both protecting and freeing when necessary, with the concept of vulvic instead of phallic seems more suitable to serve the purpose of *écriture féminine*. To define and exemplify the characteristics of vulvic mother in relation to the Dog-Woman in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* – “narrated by the narrators who reject the essentialist identities and traditional gender norms” (Erkan, 2010, p. 7) – will make the issue more illuminating.

In *Why be Happy When You Could be Normal*, Winterson points out the Dog-Woman “suffers because she is too big for her world. She was another reading of my mother” (2011, p. 36). However, the Dog-Woman differs in many ways from the reading of Mrs Winterson in *Oranges*, another reading of Constance Winterson. That's why, the concept of phallic mother cannot be attributed to the Dog-Woman although there are many comments in this manner. Susan Onega writes that the actions of the Dog-Woman present her as “Freud's vagina dentata and her counterpart, Joseph Campbell's ‘phallic mother’, the castrating mother of primitive male fears” (2006, p. 82). Onega gives the idea that “all-devouring, womblike facet of her Mother-earth personality” (2006, p. 83) and the chapters which are narrated by the Dog-Woman with the drawing of a banana on the first page make her an example of “the male/female duality of the phallic mother” (2006, p. 95). Similarly, Sonya Andermahr comments that while a banana stands for the decidedly phallic Dog-Woman, a pineapple is for the adventurer-explorer Jordan” (2009, p. 68). Without doubt, their comments on the Dog-Woman as “phallic” are based on the tradition to label powerful mother/woman *phallic* that was discussed above. However, in *Sexing*, “phallus” and the powerful status that is attributed to it is deconstructed in many ways. When the Dog-Woman first sees a banana that is imported to England, she ridicules and trivializes both phallus and its representative fruit. Another time, she mocks men's senseless sexual appetite saying: “I discovered [...] that men's members, if bitten off or otherwise severed, do not grow again. This seems a great mistake on the part of nature, since men are so careless with their members and will put them anywhere without thinking” (SC, 106). Moreover, the whole fiction is based on the power of femaleness represented with an enormous female body and genitalia, namely vulva. The focus on the Dog-Woman's vulva is associated with her genital power that is exemplified in many events such as her pulling a man in, “balls and everything” (SC, 106) during an intercourse, and her swallowing the penis of a man entirely “biting it off with a snap” (SC, 41) when she takes the literal meaning of the man's wish to be eaten. In this respect, the emphasis on excessive femaleness, female body and its parts, of which vulva is the most significant, arises the need to call the Dog-Woman a

*vulvic mother/woman* instead of *phallic*. Then, the characteristics of a vulvic mother should be analyzed in *Sexing* in relation to its archaic definitions within the example of the Dog-Woman.

The prominent characteristic of a vulvic mother as a representative of Mother-earth is its being omnipotent or all-powerful. Accordingly, the Dog-Woman is all-powerful in many aspects. She is so enormous, “*much more heavier than an elephant*” (SC, 24), that no man-power can compete with her. Her wrath against hypocrite Puritans results in the murder of sixty men in a day and her slaughtering many other Puritans and preachers who visit the brothel of her women friends. However, her “natural capacity for murder” does not make her a criminal as her actions “are not motivated by thought of gain, only by thought of justice”: “*I have searched my soul to conclude that there is no person dead at my hand who would be better off alive*” (SC, 129). Her power fairly operates as a punishment to those who exercise unfair power over the others. In this respect, the devouring and castrating characteristic of the Dog-Woman as vulvic mother appears only against patriarchal oppression and oppressors such as Puritans and his own father, who wants first to exhibit her because of her unnatural body and then sells her “*to a man with one leg*” (SC, 107), which results with her first murder that of her own father. As Onega mentions, “*it is only with men, especially Puritans with a double standard of morality, that she displays the all-devouring and deadly facet of her Mother-earth personality*” (2006, p. 81-2).

Those men, “who feel their phallogocentric symbolic order threatened” by her, find the Dog-Woman monstrous and frightening though her adoptee, Jordon, is never afraid of her mother (Onega, 2006, p. 85). Susan Onega describes this characteristic as “the monstrous embodiment of the phallic mother” for Puritans, but for Jordon as “Lacanian *je-idéal*” with whom he identifies as the ideal substitute father figure (2006, p. 86). It is true that the Dog-Woman is an ideal parent figure that Jordon wants to identify with. He says: “*I want to be like my rip-roaring mother who cares nothing for how she looks, only for what she does. She has never been in love, no, and never wanted to be either. She is self-sufficient and without self-doubt*” (SC, 101). In this respect, she is not a phallic mother for Jordan but a vulvic mother who is mostly feminine and maternal. However, it is still possible to say that she is castrative against patriarchy as she overcomes it by castrating the patriarchal desire upon female and female autonomy. In this sense, she reminds the story of the goddess Artemis, who does not want to get married and have children, but just to hunt. Like Artemis, the Dog-Woman is another representative of vulvic woman, which is autonomous and powerful. “*Clearly, Artemis is a mythical counterpart of the Dog Woman, since they are both females who refuse to accept the role prescribed for them by patriarchy and defend the liberty to choose their way of life to the point of murder*” (Onega, 2006, p. 96).

It is important to mention that in *Sexing*, powerful woman is not limited to physical power. As well as the physical strength of the Dog-Woman and Artemis as symbols of potential female power, the stories of the twelve “light” (SC, 97) princesses depict omnipotent vulvic women. Additionally, the environmental young activist who is “*a chemist with a good degree, and an attractive woman*” stands as the “*alter ego*” (SC, 125) of the Dog-Woman in contemporary world. Like the other vulvic characters, she is a patriarchy-challenger. Thus, all of them as representatives of vulvic women resist physically or mentally against androcentric power.

The other characteristic of vulvic mother, which differs from the phallic one, is related to her birth-giving origin which makes her both feminine and maternal. At this point, besides the fact that the “*Dog-Woman represents an excessive femaleness, which is the source of both her power and her power to disturb*” (Andermahr, 2009, p. 71), her maternal side is not on the back burner. While a phallic mother/woman is generally described with a powerful apparatus and within feminine characteristics, mostly femme fatale, one of the prominent features of woman that is *being a mother* or *care giver* is ignored. However, in *Sexing*, as an adoptive mother, the Dog-Woman is highly maternal compared with Mrs Winterson in *Oranges*. The general tendency to separate womanhood from motherhood is deconstructed in *Sexing*. In this sense, “*fixed subjectivity and gender norm are denied for the sake of identities of phantasy and multiple selves*” (Erkan, 2010, p. 8). As an example of vulvic mother, the Dog-Woman is both an “*excessive woman*”, in Cixous’s words, and excessively maternal. Like her own mother who “*was so light that she dared not go out in a wind*”, but “*could swing [her] on her back and carry [her] for miles*” contrary to her father who never touched her “*except with the point of the whip he used for the dogs*” (SC, 25), the Dog-Woman is a representative of *harbouring* mother-earth. She is not the *devouring* mother that Klein and Lacan describe in their theories as phallic mother but the *harbouring* vulvic mother that secures and assures her child. When the Dog-Woman says “*[Jordan] was always happy. [They] were happy together*” (SC, 26), the reader is assured the presence of a secure and protected coexistence of mother and child: “*Jordan loves his huge mother because she has the solidity of a rock and makes him feel secure and protected*” (Onega, 2006, p. 81).

However, this protectionist attitude of the Dog-Woman is not such a thing that of Lacanian imaginary wholeness with the mother. The Dog-Woman, harbouring but also freeing, does not exercise a Mrs Winterson-like capturing and possessing power upon her child. As Susana Onega states:

“*[The] Dog Woman’s relationship with Jordan lacks the possessiveness of Kristeva’s abject mother, as she makes clear when she observes that she had decided to call the foundling baby ‘Jordan’ because she wanted him to have ‘a river name not bound to anything,*

*just as the waters aren't bound to anything' (SC, 11). Further, when he grows old enough to undertake long journeys to remote lands, she never complains about his frequent absences, although she sorely misses him" (2006, p. 85-6).*

Thus, as a vulvic mother, she knows that it is a maternal virtue to free her child when necessary: "*Safe, sound and protected. That's how I wanted Jordan to be. When he left me I was proud and broken-hearted, but he came from the water and I knew the water would claim him again*" (SC, 83). She is well aware of the fact that to free the child is the natural necessity of motherhood: "*When a woman gives birth her waters break and she pours out the child and the child runs free. I would have liked to pour out a child from my body but you have to have a man for that and there's no man who's a match for me*" (SC, 11). The Dog-Woman, unlike the authoritative phallic mother Mrs Winterson, respects for autonomy of her child. Instead of dismissing her child because of his choice –though she does not want him to leave her– as Mrs Winterson did, she delivers him to the rivers back, to the arms of mother-earth. Here, the river as a representative of amniotic fluid, will keep Jordan within the maternal world, but free not confined.

Another point that the powerful, securing, un-authoritatively maternal, and freeing vulvic mother differs from castrating phallic mother is the attitude towards *desire*. In this sense, the Dog-Woman contrasts with Mrs Winterson as she does not adopt a castrative attitude to desiring. While Mrs Winterson bans all kinds of profane desires both for herself and her daughter Jeanette, the Dog-Woman is open to *desire*: "*For myself, I would rather live with sins of excess than sins of denial*" (SC, 67). She does not deny the ontological reality of *body* as Mrs Winterson does. Warranting desire, the Dog-Woman is significantly opposite of phallic mother who is defined with her intentional desire-castrating power. In the novel, it is apparent that the Dog-Woman seeks for pleasure, but she is unable to attain it only because of her huge bodily parts that signify her potential female power. It is stated that the reason of her inability to have an intercourse is that she cannot find a proper match because of her huge body. However, she is open to the idea of bodily *jouissance*. To accept the reality of bodily *jouissance* is an outstanding issue in *Sexing* that Cixous had defended with the idea of *écriture féminine*, "*a type of writing that stems from the admittance of bodily jouissance*": "*Thus, against the Lacanian phallus/penis/pen, Cixous sets up the female body, with its multiterogenous potential for sexual pleasure, as the basic metaphor or primary signifier of the new 'feminine writing'*" (Onega, 2006, p. 114). In this respect, it can be said that the female body endowed with a sexual potential is represented with the Dog-Woman in terms of *écriture féminine* and it would be much more appropriate to name that woman holding sexual potential with the concept of vulvic.



While the bodily sensor that Cixous stands against (1976, p. 250) operates in *Oranges* with Mrs Winterson's authoritative attitude to her daughter, the Dog-Woman's female body-oriented narration brings desire, bodily *jouissance*, and pleasure into the forefront. Furthermore, there is a Felix&Guattari-like desiring mechanism in *Sexing*. The desiring machine inside the head of the Dog-Woman is not limited to sexual desire, but it is the desire to desire freely. So, she acts according to desire instead of Reason that guides Mrs Winterson, who devours all desires of Jeanette and wishes to penetrate her own. The Dog-Woman says: "When Jordan is older I will tell him what I know about the human body and urge him to be careful of his member. And yet it is not that part of him I fear for; it is his heart. His heart" (SC, 41). Thus, as a vulvic mother, she pays homage to *desire*, not only that of bodily but also psychic.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In *Le Corps lesbien* [1973], Monique Wittig talks about "doing violence to the language of patriarchy" (quoted in Onega, 2006, p. 95-6). Psychoanalysis, having a patriarchal origin, is one of the prominent fields that used a male-oriented language throughout the twentieth century; however, the language of psychoanalysis is under erasure today. A feminine-oriented critique of androcentric psychoanalysis will make power operation be understood better. For this purpose, to describe women and conceptualize their characteristics without male-dominated terminology is crucial. This study that started with this aim has been based on the criticism of phallogocentric conceptualization of "powerful woman/mother" equalized with "phallic woman/mother". It is a continuing mistake to call powerful woman/mother "phallic" to which psychoanalysis attributes omnipotence. In this sense, while two mother figures of Winterson in *Oranges* and *Sexing*, who are both named as phallic mothers in many criticisms as mentioned earlier, are examined, it becomes better known that they differ in many ways.

In the light of earlier psychoanalytical and mythical readings of phallic mother, it is deduced that she is the one who has a castrating power. This castrating power of phallic mother is destructive, especially that of desire, not including empathy or sympathy for the other. It is mostly a Kleinian malignant mother of which Mrs Winterson could be an example in *Oranges*. However, another figure of powerful mother that we find its huge existence in mythology and some earlier faiths is harbouring, both protective and freeing. This figure is vulvic mother/woman that is the representative of mother-earth who is also omnipotent, life giving, and female. The existence of the Dog-Woman in *Sexing* is a worthy exemplification of vulvic mother; huge, powerful but still female.

The grafting in *Sexing* reminds the grafting of phallus onto female body in psychoanalysis. In the novel, although the cherry is grafted, it still remains

female. This is the image of phallic woman; although phallus is tried to be grafted onto woman, she is still female. That woman is inherently vulvic is overlooked. Psychoanalysis has a tendency to define woman as *castrated-man* and attribute an *unheimlich* status to vulva instead of accepting its nature as vulvic. “[T]he uncanny perception of female genitalia” (Masschelein, 2011, p. 32) results in a misconception of phallic mother. This misconception is to be deconstructed by the power of *écriture feminine*, which is resonated in Winterson’s work as “a simultaneously poetical and political writing that represents the feminine as both an alternative to and a critique of the masculine or phallogocentric symbolic order” (Andermahr, 2009, p. 24). As a writer who “presses the disembodied mode of writing into the service of presenting, representing, ‘re-membering’ and reliving the body” (Schabert, 2001, p. 87), Winterson has managed to challenge the phallogocentric order and this study should be read as a co-text of this challenge. In this respect, I believe that the Dog-Woman who had a name that she has forgotten (SC, 11) deserves the name of vulvic woman/mother whose body should not be dismantled by androcentric power.

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