



**Feeding the Flame: Nutrition, Queer Desire, and Identity in Jeanette Winterson's
Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit and Melissa Broder's *Milk Fed***

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May 2024

'Women possessed the influence to shape their families through food' (Parkin 80)

It is no surprise that food is implemented in literature as a powerful metaphor for desire: the enjoyment of food is synonymous with pleasure, dietary overindulgence is considered gluttonous, and the deprivation of nutrition is a restriction of human instinct. The same descriptions could be given of sex or love. This is why food becomes an especially adept vehicle for exploring queer desire, something pleasurable, yet often viewed as wrong or hedonistic, and frequently restricted. Published in 1985, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson is arguably the most blatant and famous example of this connection; food is used as a constant motif. Oranges signify the narrator's resentment of her mother's unchanging religious convictions. Jeanette pulls away from oranges and thus, the normative, instead longing for 'grapes or bananas' (113). Being a more modern example of the trope, Melissa Broder's *Milk Fed* (2021) centres around nutrition and dietary control, and is thus able to blur the idea of sustenance with the attainment of sexual pleasure. While both of these novels focus on identity outside of heterosexual terms, it is important to consider how queer theory is applied more generally as a lens before further delineating this metaphor. While the word 'queer' is often used to refer to the expression of LGBTQ+ identities, literature categorised within this term could simply be defined as a broad church of anything existing outside the boundaries of the normative canon, with the word being 'a signifier for that which cannot be clearly or concisely defined, or for that which resists definition altogether' (Giffney 8). Hence, when food becomes correlative with desire, it is not always representative of sexual gratification but of a wish to flee from a heteronormative reality, a theme interwoven throughout both texts, as Winterson and Broder explore how diet intersects with religion, becomes a tool of restriction, and lastly, comes to represent acceptance.

Restrictive diets or fasting create the idea of withholding need or want, a concept enmeshed with the protagonist's attitude towards sex in *Milk Fed*. Broder's narrative centres around Rachel, who, in a first person narrative, recounts her experience with an eating

disorder. She describes how ‘at night [she] lay awake, envisioning vegetables’ (88), a phallic expression of the wish to be able to sustain herself both dietarily and sexually. This want to correlate sustenance with enjoyment, is further developed into a way of describing sexual pleasure throughout the novel, as Rachel feels inherently starved and is thus unable to determine ‘whether it was food or sex [she] wanted’ (179). It is only through meeting Miriam, her sexual partner, that the protagonist is able to reconcile her relationship with dietary restriction. Working at a frozen yoghurt shop, Miriam’s character is intrinsically linked with satiation, as she presides over a ‘kingdom of yogurt’ (92), representative of a satisfaction unattainable to Rachel at the beginning of the narrative. This connection is extended further, as sexual acts in the book are described through the implementation of confectionary, as Rachel eats ‘milk chocolate drops’ (56) off Miriam’s neck. Discussing the socio-political relationship between the female body and disordered eating, Sarah Sceats deems that these patterns are fuelled by a fear of ‘the transgression, or potential transgression, of boundaries’ (69) necessary in order to maintain a contemporarily accepted physique. It is thus clear to see how depriving oneself of nutrition and, ergo survival, can become linked to denying self-acceptance of one’s sexuality. This connection is made explicitly clear by Broder as Rachel sees both eating and acting upon her queerness as an act of defiance, displayed through her reluctance to do so. Food therefore becomes an adequate way of masking forbidden pleasure throughout the text.

In Winterson’s novel, restrictions on queer expression are not self-administered but applied by family and community members with evangelical beliefs. A monotonous diet of foods such as ‘black peas [...] in a thin gravy’ (6) and ‘potted beef’ (21) is used to reflect these confines. Throughout the text, the reader sees how Jeanette’s mother, controlled by her own devotion to God, is the protagonist’s principal influence, controlling her behaviour. This power manifests not only in exiling Jeanette for her relationship with Melanie, and outlawing

‘Sex (in its many forms)’ (2) but in the control of Jeanette’s diet, telling her to ‘be thankful’ (21) for what she is given. Unlike in *Milk Fed*, where sustenance eventually becomes synonymous with acceptance, it acts as a manner of control in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. In “Queering the Cookbook”, Vester discusses how cookbooks have ‘narrated a transitioning gender ideology and the ideal of the heteronormative nuclear family’ (133), suggesting how food and nutrition can enforce tradition rather than become representative of liberation. Upon asking why the family cannot have chips for dinner, Jeanette’s mother replies that there is not time to do so as she has ‘feet to soak’, a ‘vest to iron’, and ‘requests for prayer’ (21) to look at. Here, it is obvious how desire and pleasure are subjugated by religious duties, just as Jeanette’s sexuality is disregarded in order to maintain evangelical purity. This leads Jeanette to be afraid of her own desires, worrying about working at a fruit stand when she is forced to leave home, due to the enticement of ‘Spanish Navels, Juicy Jaffas, Ripe Seviles’ (137). Oranges have been used up to this point to convey uniformity, being ‘the only fruit’ instead of ‘fruit salad, fruit pie, fruit for fools, fruited punch. Demon fruit, passion fruit, rotten fruit’ (29), yet here are subverted as a metaphor for temptation, connoting how the protagonist is afraid to defy her mother by living in an alternative manner. The full stop in between ‘fruited punch’ and ‘Demon fruit’ exemplifies a dichotomy in the way nutrition is represented in the novel. Although both halves of the clause refer to fruit and categorise it as an object of fear, the first half of the sentence represents the distress produced as a result of the control that Jeanette’s mother exerts within the home, whereas ‘Demon fruit, passion fruit, rotten fruit’ are all representative of a temptation that is equally as petrifying. Winterson hereby echoes Broder’s portrayal of the pleasure sought from sustenance as both forbidden and something to be feared.

Food also possesses strong ties to religious beliefs in *Milk Fed*, yet becomes representative of religious and familial community rather than a symbol for the suppression

of queer desire. Rachel, although raised Jewish, finds solace in Miriam's more religious Orthodox family as she states after a Shabbat dinner 'I couldn't imagine anything more delicious as sitting here with Miriam and her mother, gently filled with challah' (173). The adverb 'gently' illustrates Rachel's comfort here, an emotion rarely depicted in the text. Often portrayed in literature as fraught with familial troubles, this is a rare representation of a queer person finding community in an inherently religious space, instead of a portrayal of Jewish people as 'largely wedded to the ideology of hetero-patriarchy' (Rosen-Berry 139). Rachel is thus allowed to fulfil a longing to be accepted and cared for, something not allowed by her mother 'with her archaic ideas about dieting' (20). This denotes how the provision of nutrition (occurring in communal spaces) instead of the deprivation of food, can be representative of love and wish-fulfilment for queer people. This is further illustrated by the Rabbi who appears in Rachel's dreams, who in one episode describes eating as a 'mitzvah' (220), or commandment. Here, the idea of fulfilling oneself through eating becomes linked with the idea of fulfilling a spiritual duty. With connections therefore made between food and religion but also between food and sex, 'the spiritual world and the physical world go hand in hand' (296), with the structure of this sentence suggesting the necessity of balance between spirituality and physical pleasure. In all senses here, queer identity is thus neatly placed within the framework of religious expression.

While religion and queerness do not interact in the same manner in Winterson's novel, food is still used as a way of expressing familial love, in spite of Jeanette's mother's refusal to accept Jeanette's sexuality. The metaphor of the orange extends to being representative of female communion between mother and daughter, with Jeanette's mother offering her an orange in moments of difficulty: 'here, have an orange' (39), 'let's have an orange' (74), 'want an orange?' (122). Hence, the fruit becomes a symbol, of not the acceptance of queer identity but progression towards it, with Winterson's bildungsroman arguably not focusing

solely on Jeanette but on subtle changes in her mother's behaviour, as she states the titular phrase 'oranges are not the only fruit' (172) by the end of the novel. Jesse Bordwin argues that although 'oranges appear over a dozen times in the novel' (241), they possess a lack of relevance or a 'hollowness' (241) in the narrative, referring only to the protagonist's mother's emotional distance. Yet, oranges appear to adopt a plethora of meanings within the text, and in this instance are a signifier of the want to bridge the gap between mother and queer child.

In *Milk Fed*, being provided for becomes a way of demonstrating the reception of familial acceptance, yet this concept becomes blended with the experience of queer romantic love. Throughout the novel, Miriam, both in figure and behaviour, is depicted as a maternal character. Rachel describes imagining her 'as nurse administering Jell-O' (293) and watches her eat, describing her as '*Mama*' (294). Though Rachel's view of Miriam makes us view the protagonist's relationship with her mother through the lens of her psychosexual behaviour, it is clear why Broder has chosen to cast Miriam in this manner for another reason. Neglected by her biological mother, the protagonist attempts to find acceptance through 'queer world making' (Rifkin 139), or finding kinship outside of genealogical terms (Butler 25-33), a common experience for queer people who find themselves having to exist outside of traditional family structures. Miriam is thus left to inhabit the position of mother, with her role being consecrated by descriptions of her as nurturing. This is due to traditional ideas of gender seeing the mother's position as not one of economic importance but as necessary in order for a family to be provided for dietarily. This was even enforced by the media of the twentieth century, with contemporary advertising suggesting that 'women possessed the influence to shape their families through food' (Parkin 80). Broder appears then to not only use food to allude to sex or religious community but to develop the relationship between Miriam and Rachel as one of queer solidarity.

In conclusion, food possesses much significance in both texts. In *Oranges Are Not the*

Only Fruit, cuisine carries with it religious implications, used both as a way of envisioning liberation from religious structures and to describe the confinement created by a lack of queer acceptance from a traditional family. In *Milk Fed*, the tool is used much more explicitly in order to indicate sexual enjoyment, or as a way of depicting the illicit. Both novels therefore clearly implement the metaphor with different tones, yet the authorial purpose appears the same: whether it means to be sexually satisfied or accepted in a familial context, food symbolises a most base and carnal desire that embodies something which queer people are so often denied.

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