

## On the vulnerability of being in love in *Be with me*

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### Abstract

*Hence perhaps Theresa's greatest gift is forgiving those around her and extending hospitality to those around her where she has experienced rejection and cruelty. As a citizen of God rather than of the world, Theresa extends charity to those around her regardless of her own circumstances and gives where she hardly receives. This is much akin to Christ's act of giving sacrificially of his own life for atoning our sins without receiving anything in return but mockery and scorn instead. Hence perhaps the greatest statement of the film is that love is a gift which should not expect anything in return and be unconditional.*

Eric Khoo's *Be with me* is a meditation on the vulnerability of being in love. All the characters experience love as an absence in some form, an old shopkeeper who mourns his terminally ill wife, two lesbians who have a short lived romance, an obese security guard who longs for a high flying executive but who knows deep down she lies beyond his reach, and Theresa Chan, who is sealed off from the world by her condition of being both blind and deaf but somehow still manages to give love by teaching at a school for the disabled and performing a lot of charity work. It is implied that in our modern urban setting, alienation is more dominant than fulfilling relationships and connections and at the heart of the urban condition is loneliness and loss. But this seems only half the story as the film is illuminated by the presence of Theresa Chan who is by her condition of being blind and deaf unable to experience love but somehow manages in place to be a giver of love to those less fortunate than her.

The lesbian romance captures the idea of puppy love and the idea that experimentation with homosexuality is a phase which does not last into adulthood. The two teenagers involved do all the romantic things couples are meant to experience- chatting online, going out on dates, making out, shopping, clubbing and generally enjoying the warmth of each other's company till Samantha falls in love with a male and starts brushing Jackie off. This of course breaks Jackie's heart as she was truly and deeply in love with Sam.

However the film does not end the segment on a note of despair as though Sam breaks Jackie's heart and Jackie attempts suicide, she is shown surviving the suicide though she kills the love lorn security guard in her suicide attempt, perhaps signaling that her time on earth is not up and there are perhaps greater things in store for her beside doomed lesbian relationships, perhaps she will eventually find love with someone who treasures her more, it might even be a man rather than another teenage girl.

The fact that she kills the security guard however might be an event of divine punishment for his hubris in seeking and longing after things that are out of his reach such as the high flying executive who would probably be stopped cold in fear at the fact that he is stalking her. It is probably a punishment for stalking and an indication that this is an unhealthy thing to do which will probably end up in some kind of crime on the security guard's part if he continues his habit of stalking her.

Another novel by Winterson examines the lesbian choice. Winterson's novel *Oranges* are not the only fruit celebrates the lesbian choice, but does not seem to be mindful of the consequences this choice has for women. Indeed to Winterson it is the authentic choice. But to become a lesbian is to be alienated many times over, from the church, from society, from one's family, there is a high price to pay for non-conformity, and it seems that Winterson romanticized the liberating thrill of escaping societal norms without considering the high price to be paid for living outside those societal norms. Indeed in her introduction to the book Jeanette Winterson describes herself as living in poverty and extreme decrepitude.

She manages to escape this poverty by writing a bestseller that is semi-autobiographical, but how many lesbians can make the same claim to fame and success? The ugly truth is that for most lesbians, they live in shame and secrecy at the fringes of society without the glamour and fame Jeanette Winterson enjoys. Hence while Jeanette Winterson may have successfully escaped a life of slavery to a man, she has chosen a path that is dangerous and unfulfilling for most others who choose it because of the high amount of rejection one faces from society as a consequence of that choice.

Indeed, Winterson writes that oranges are not the only fruit, meaning that men are not the only choice, but to me it seems that she has exchanged one form of servility for another. Servility to a man might be demeaning, but servility to a woman risks the loss of one's reputation and respectability as well as rejection by the whole church and all of society. Indeed Winterson does not seem to realize she has just chosen a different master. Her new master is woman rather than man.

Escaping servility to a man does not necessarily mean escaping servility when one becomes involved with a woman. Indeed, the fear, loathing and rejection with which most of her female lovers treat her with after being confronted by the church shows that she has chosen servility to females at the price of her name and mental health, which is why she is reduced to working in an asylum. So indeed, Jeannette Winterson's novel does come across

as highly political and polemical, but it is also blind to the fact that the alternative she chooses might not be as glamorous as it seems.

Hence Winterson's novel may be viewed as a diatribe against the hypocrisy of the Christian faith which endorses heterosexual love while profaning homosexual love when heterosexual marriage in Jeannette Winterson's novel is depicted as something of a sham. Her adoptive parents barely love each other, and the women in the novel are all complaining of the trap that marriage has lulled them into, leading them to marry drunkards and gamblers. At the same time one wonders if Jeannette Winterson, being led by her lesbian politics, has depicted heterosexual marriages fairly. To be sure, not all heterosexual marriages are as dysfunctional as the ones she describes. There are genuinely loving heterosexual families, and men who do not seem to be merely beasts or simply desire sex objects and slaves in their households, yet all this seems glossed over by Winterson in her desire to glorify the lesbian choice.

Jeanette Winterson thus seems to be writing with the political purpose of creating a lesbian utopia, a utopia in which all the men as beasts are expelled from the paradise of women living together with authentic passions. But indeed again, one would highly question if only lesbian passion is authentic passion. To be sure, the high amount of rejection each clandestine lesbian relation ends with ends up with a highly dystopian form of love instead. Winterson's utopia of lesbian love might be ideal in her eyes, but cannot come into fruition as long as most of society is heterosexual and heteronormative.

Indeed, Winterson has accurately observed that it is religions like Christianity which uphold the heterosexual norm and oppress the lesbian alternative. But Winterson does not seem to dwell on the consequences for choosing the lesbian alternative, shame, secrecy, rejection, God's wrath, madness and so on. Living on the fringes of society might be extremely romantic to Winterson, but not all women are willing to pay that price.

Having said that, Winterson has indeed written a compelling critique of the heterosexual norm in societies and the religious orthodoxy that reinforces it. The hollowness of orthodox marriages in the novel in contrast to the fiery passions she finds in the arms of women seems to reinforce the idea that homosexual love is more authentic than heterosexual love. It is also true that because of Biblical scripture, women in heterosexual marriages experience a high degree of subordination to men.

Women are commanded to bear children and be domestic keepers while men can have all the alcohol and affairs they want while seeming to get away with it, and thus it would not be surprising that Winterson finds women receiving the losing end of the bargain when it comes to marriage. Indeed the very institution of marriage is something of a joke in the Winterson household.

Hence it is this servility to men Jackie and Sam wish to escape in their fling, but perhaps the film *Be with Me* comments that due to the social stigma that goes with being

lesbian, these relationships are unable to last. Jackie and Sam are happy being with each other only when they are alone in each other's company, but the highlight is that they are alone when they are in each other's company, shut off from the world and in the meantime stigmatized for being homosexual. Indeed it is not so much a lack of romance that kills the relationship as the stigma which accompanies it and thus making it unsustainable for the long term because society has so much against homosexual relationships.

While strides in the gay rights movements have legitimized homosexual marriages in some parts of the world, the religious backlash against homosexuality remains strong and will always be at odds because it is scripturally forbidden by most monotheistic religions. The film is not a disapproval of such relationships but a comment that due to the high amount of stigma such relationships suffer, these relationships lead to heartbreak and suicide. The film as such is not a moral condemnation of such relationships but a comment on the high amount of existential difficulties such relationships face.

Perhaps the greatest statement that the film seeks to put forth is that self-serving relationships will always lead to despair. Hence, the lesbians fall out of love when one party loses interest due to preference for a more socially conforming relationship, and the death that stalking a person out of your social reach leads to. However in place of these self-serving relationships is the remarkable story of Theresa Chan who does not so much seek to take love from someone as give love unconditionally even when she is impaired by her circumstances from doing so.

Born blind and death, Theresa Chan's story is similar to Hellen Keller's, about the indomitability of the human spirit and the perseverance to overcome all odds despite being physically disabled. The amount of courage and sacrifice that goes into Theresa Chan's daily living makes the lesbian plot look shallow and insipid in comparison.

While these two girls selfishly seek romantic fulfilment from each other which is short lived and conditional on maintaining the other party's interest, Theresa's bold love for humanity is unconditional and seeks to give where she experiences hardly any from society as a handicapped person. Courageously, Theresa conducts lessons for disabled students and even despite her disabilities does charity work around the world for those less fortunate than herself.

This is the paradox of Christian charity, it gives and takes the place of sin and wrongdoing, in response to wrongdoing, one is told to turn one's cheek, in response to one's enemies, one is told to forgive, in response to debts accumulated and owed, one is called to cancel one's debt and forgive, it is a giving in place of receiving, taking the place of he who has sinned and replacing indebtedness with forgiveness and cancellation of debt.

While this may seem impossible to worldly eyes, Derrida precisely views Christianity as an impossible religion. As Christianity is essentially an otherworldly and spiritualized religion, it is impossible to conceive of a material Christianity or a Christianity separate from

the transcendental beyond that it is essentially premised upon. Derrida's intervention is not that Christianity is an impossibility but an impossible possible enabled through difference and iterability.

Theresa Chan's life is an embodiment of Christian sacrifice. Perhaps the film's greatest comment is that true love lies in giving rather than receiving, it is Theresa's unconditional love of humanity despite her experience of rejection from the world for being handicapped, which is the greatest love of all.

It is the impossibility of Christ's incarnation and forgiveness of sins that makes the law possible as Christ came to fulfil the law rather than to defeat it. Derrida's injunction to forgive the unforgiveable and move into a Derridean third space of thinking the impossible forgiveness of sins and holding one accountable to the death penalty for transgressions committed is an extension of his meditations on hospitality and forgiveness, extending Christian charity, forgiveness and hospitality as a move that exceeds the law and exceeds the thinking of the possible but it is precisely this impossibility of grace, mercy, Christian charity and forgiveness which makes the law possible just as the exception is necessary to thinking the rule.

Hence perhaps Theresa's greatest gift is forgiving those around her and extending hospitality to those around her where she has experienced rejection and cruelty. As a citizen of God rather than of the world, Theresa extends charity to those around her regardless of her own circumstances and gives where she hardly receives. This is much akin to Christ's act of giving sacrificially of his own life for atoning our sins without receiving anything in return but mockery and scorn instead. Hence perhaps the greatest statement of the film is that love is a gift which should not expect anything in return and be unconditional.

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