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# SEEKING SOLID SUBJECTIVITY VERSUS SPOTTING TRANS-SUBJECTIVATION IN JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *GUT SYMMETRIES*

## Abstract

The present paper intends to closely explore the process of identity formation in the characters of Jeanette Winterson's novel *Gut Symmetries* in light of Catherine Malabou's notions of plasticity, destructive plasticity or trauma, and trans-subjectivation. Identity as an inconsistent procedure of becoming would be intensely explicated in *Gut Symmetries* through the viewpoint of the characters, in particular Alice. Identity as a mere space or crack, which constantly provides the opportunity for the subject to observe himself/herself, could be introduced as Catherine Malabou's notion of plasticity of the subjectivity or trans-subjectivation in the novel. The juxtaposition of the pliability of quantum physics and trans-subjectivity in the novel would be highlighted to emphasize that presence, time, identity, and even being could be nothing other than plasticity or ever-fluctuating matter and non-matter. Plasticity as the absolute nucleus of existence, identity, and love would be manifested as perceptible in the form of trans-subjectivity. Sadism as a form of destructive plasticity would be spotlighted as the death drive in the novel and it corroborates the plasticity of love, which could be

transformed into hate. Spotlighting femininity as essenceless, Alice and Stella would be represented as the instances of femininity that is mutable and erratic.

**Keywords:** corporeality, destructive plasticity (trauma), plasticity, sadism, temporality, trans-subjectivation, Jeanette Winterson, *Gut Symmetries*.

## Introduction

Broadly accredited as one of the most noteworthy British writers, Jeanette Winterson's works demonstrate flitting in time, deconstructing the concept of space and undoing the deterministic and bounded notion of identity. Owing to her reputation as one of the most original voices of the 1980s, to her stunning style and narrative, she was named one of the 20 Best of Young British Writers by the literary magazine *Granta*. Winterson's obscurant spectacle on the perception of love and gender shies away from the conventional and anticipated narratives of her time on infatuation and sexual category and dislodges the acknowledged cultural conventions.

As an audacious and provocative novelist, Winterson passionately parallels two inner and outer quests for destination and lime lights that a dominant closure in this pursuit could never be gained. In *Gut Symmetries*, Winterson explores the affinity between physics and human identity formation via the symmetries of the Grand Unified Theories (Gut) in quantum physics and cosmology. Putting time and subjectivation adjacent, Winterson distorts the boundaries of subjectivation via expressing trans-subjectivation as always-already occurred in the subjects.

The present paper first provides the literature review on *Gut Symmetries*. Then, the Malabouean critical concepts of destructive plasticity, plasticity, and trans-subjectivation shall be presented. Consequently, the core section of the study will be presented as "The Plasticity of Presence and Trans-Subjectivity" and "The Quantum Physics of the Physique: The Plasticity of Corporeality." Finally, the findings of the research will be addressed in the concluding section.

## Literature Review

Several scholarly articles, dissertations, and researches have been published on Winterson's *Gut Symmetries*; yet this work has not been analyzed through

Catherine Malabou's perspective. The researches have been mainly focused on narration, intertextuality, and femininity to maneuver over Winterson's writing style. The interwoven notions of creation and writing have been lime-lighted in some research works as well.

Emphasizing the close affinity between one's brain and identity, Annemarie Estor in *Jeanette Winterson's Enchanted Science* asserts that "in her treatment of 'self'. . . in *Gut Symmetries*, where the traditional notion of 'self' as a coherent entity dissolves . . . Stella describes how her self is dispersed through time" (77). She continues that "[e]ven the most intimate knowledge, the knowledge of one's own being, one's own identity, is lost in confusion" (78). Estor juxtaposes the concepts of "fragmentation" and "prophetic certainty" in her book and elaborates on the common features of the characters in Winterson's novels.

Ann McClellan has juxtaposed British female scientists and female characters of *Gut Symmetries* in "Science Fictions: British Women Scientists and Jeanette Winterson's *Gut Symmetries*." She claims that the "feminized view of science and the postmodern world" (1057) represented in Winterson's novel places her among outstanding writers of the time. Moreover, the amalgamation of alchemy, physics, Jewish Kabbalah, Tarot, and Superstring Theory provides a feminine realm of narration in which femininity manifests itself in spiritual understanding of the cosmos.

Diane Leblond in "Visual Pragmatics of Intertextuality: Ghosts from Wonderland in Jeanette Winterson's *Gut Symmetries*" puts emphasis on intertextuality in Winterson's text. She presupposes that "in their visual liminality and stubborn reluctance to signify, intertextual creatures remind us that meaning is not within the sign, but emerges in the provisional, possibly infelicitous interaction between linguistic entities" (Leblond 1309). Expressing intertextuality as a type of hunting, Leblond focuses on the verbal and visual items in Winterson's novel.

## Theoretical Framework: Critical Concepts

### 1. *Destructive Plasticity (Trauma)*

Catherine Malabou in her *The Ontology of the Accident* redefines trauma through the perspective of neuroscience and elaborates that the transformation of identity after an extreme strain first manifests itself in the brain and then its implications could be visible. "Destructive plasticity enables the appearance or

formation of alterity where the other is absolutely lacking” (Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident* 11) and “by contrast, the flight identity forged by destructive plasticity flees itself first and foremost” (Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident* 12). She emphasizes the philosophical aspect of trauma and asserts that “what destructive plasticity invites us to consider is the suffering caused by an absence of suffering, in the emergence of a new form of being, a stranger to the one before” (Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident* 18). She further develops her unique view of trauma as destructive plasticity by asserting that “even if the destructive and disorganizing explosive power is present virtually in each of us, ready to manifest itself, to take body or self-actualize at any moment, it has never received a name in any field whatsoever” (Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident* 5). She refers to the phenomena of coldness and indifference as the “characteristics of destructive plasticity, of this power of change without redemption, without teleology, without any meaning other than strangeness” (Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident* 24). In Malabouean standpoint, trauma or destructive plasticity equals the transformation or mutation of body into another body and hence, another identity absolutely diverse from the previous one.

## 2. Plasticity

As the core argument of Catherine Malabou, neurobiology has offered an innovative standpoint on subjectivity. Borrowing the notion of plasticity from neurologists, Malabou claims that she has encountered “another plasticity” or the philosophical definition of plasticity for the first time in Hegel’s classification of the subject in the process of subjectivation. Considering Hegel’s formulation of the modern nature of human subjectivity, Malabou presupposes that he applies it to divine subjectivity. In *The Future of Hegel*, Malabou asserts that, in Hegelian view, the process of representation “seals into one the divine *kenosis* and the *kenosis* of the transcendental subject” (112). It could be asserted that Hegel’s human and divine subjectivities benefit from similar reading as self-othering and kenotic. Elaborating on the issue of divine alienation as the demonstration of temporalization, Malabou asserts that “each persona consists of a progressive alienation that is not a manifestation of a lack but the appearance of a new ontological guise of time” (*The Future of Hegel* 113). Spotting temporalization as a linear becoming of an event or the incarnation, Malabou opens up a new vision on the Hegelian notion of the divine subject and carries on that “God envisages himself as a moment” (*The Future of Hegel* 119), a vital

one, which has to be passed. Maintaining the subject's kenotic alienation similar to God's, Hegel's theoretical interpretation of Christianity lays plasticity into the core definition of the human subject. According to Clayton Crockett in the foreword of Malabou's *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, the subject

sees himself as a moment of time in which he is a part, a manifestation of temporalization that achieves the fulfillment of his essence in history even as it ends. The plasticity of temporal subjectivity *relaunches* or drives the dialectic forward and beyond itself even as it cancels itself out as it progresses. (xii)

Reconciling neurology and Hegelian philosophy, Malabou elucidates that their divergence is not radical as plasticity in both perspectives stands for a certain sort of organization. In either the system of absolute knowledge/subjectivity or the nervous system, plasticity, in Malabouean view, serves as the same functioning and provides the same being and economy.

### 3. *Trans-Subjectivation*

In "A Conversation with Catherine Malabou," by Noelle Vahanian, Malabou gives details of trans-subjectivation and reveals that the subject "trans-subjects itself constantly" (4); however, "trans-subjectivation does not mean that you become different from what you used to be" (5). Delineating the notion of trans-subjectivation, Malabou throws light upon the issue that in trans-subjectivation absorbing the other's diversity could be unattainable as well. Illuminating the presence of a space within oneself between two forms of self, Malabou claims that trans-subjectivation is the experience of two opposing forms of self within oneself.

Defining it as a journey within oneself, Malabou affirms that plasticity and trans-subjectivation could be two sides of the same coin. Consequently, Malabou's notion of plastic self could bring about a political and an emancipatory outcome as the plastic subject is capable of transforming its way of being. In *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, Malabou intertwines the concepts of subjectivity and plasticity and states that "between the upsurge and the explosion of form, subjectivity issues the plastic challenge" (82). In other words, Malabou argues that in the journey from self to self, the distance between self and self could be considered as the product of transformation, which she names trans-subjectivation.

## Investigating *Gut Symmetries*: A Malabouean Reading

### 1. *The Plasticity of Presence and Trans-Subjectivity*

The present section aims to meticulously analyze the plasticity of presence and identity via the plasticity of quantum physics including time and matter. The GUT or the Grand Unified Theory would be expressed as the plasticity theory, which could be capable of explicating the ever-mutable nature of matter, identity, and time. Moreover, the Tarot as the volatility of chance in life would be lime lighted due to the focus of Jeanette Winterson on the issues of possibility and probability entitling each chapter according to one card in tarot. The process of trans-subjectivation as the discovery of an observant crack inside would be illustrated and the contradiction in quantum physics and trans-subjectivation would be juxtaposed.

Commencing with the title *Gut Symmetries*, it could be delineated that through the word GUT, which stands for Grand Unified Theory or the theory of everything, Winterson juxtaposes this issue with Gut as in Gut feelings. Spotlighting the plasticity of quantum physics and even matter, the narrator endeavors to do away with solid and stable facts of science and portray more svelte notions of identity and love. On her website, Jeanette Winterson explicates that

[i]t's a play on words. GUT stands for Grand Unified Theory – the theory of everything science wants to discover – and it's Gut as in Gut instinct, the feelings that lead us on much more than we like to admit. Symmetries, well, it's the search for a perfect parallel universe, the one just like ours but without the problems. I suppose that's what we look for when we fall in love. ("*Gut Symmetries*")

Titled "The Fool," the first chapter of *Gut Symmetries* introduces the card zero of the deck to emphasize the element of the unknown. However, it might be asserted that the ship of fools could refer to "a medieval conceit. Lunatics/saints sailing after that which cannot be found" (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 3). The physicist Alice, who is the protagonist of the novel, connects the concept of becoming with the notion of being and claims that the Greeks were concerned with "physis, that is, nature, the nature of things; spirit, man, the observable world, the heavenly bodies" (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 5). Bringing Heraclitus on the stage, Alice puts more emphasis on "eternal becoming, flux not fix, and identity of perpetual change, process not substance" (Winterson, *Gut Symme-*

tries 5). Presupposing that “becoming was challenged by being” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 5) by Parmenides, Alice explicates that “unalterable Being and perpetual Becoming could not be reconciled” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 5). Claiming that quantum physics has abolished the security of “the mechanistic, deterministic, mind/matter of cosmic reality,” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 11), Alice believes that Einstein’s *Special Theory of Relativity* was the inauguration of Quantum physics.

Delving into the issue of selfhood and subjectivity, Alice asserts that “I cannot tell you who I am unless I tell you why I am” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 6). Confirming the plasticity of both reality and truth, Alice claims that “what I call light is my own blend of darkness. What I call a view is my hand-painted *trompe-l’oeil*” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 6). Struggling to find a definition of identity, Alice thinks that the self is always-already split: “I am civilised but my needs are not. What is it that lashed in the darkness?” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 6). Elaborating on the issues of image and the affinity between the image of the subject and the subject, Alice brings identity and subjectivation into question:

What or who? I cannot name myself. The alchemists worked with a magic mirror, using reflection to guide them. The hall of mirrors set around me has been angled to distort. Is that me in the shop-glass/ is that me in the family photo? Is that me in the office window? Is that me in the silver pages of a magazine? Is that me in the broken bottles on the street? Everywhere I go, reflection. Everywhere a caught image of who I am. In all of that who am I? (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 6)

In *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, Catherine Malabou merges the concepts of plasticity and reflection and argues that plasticity “far from producing a mirror image of the world, is the form of another possible world. To produce a consciousness of the brain thus demands that we defend a biological alterglobalism” (80). In other words, Malabou, in the above-mentioned book, observes self and subjectivity as the reflection of the brain activity as “the brain makes possible the fundamental organic coherence of our personality, our self. The self is the result, the reflection, of the ordered functioning of the neuronal networks comprising the brain” (*What Should We Do with Our Brain?* xiv). Being sentient of the plasticity of the brain as the outburst of identity, Malabou distinguishes the aloofness of plasticity from flexibility.



In the foreword of Catherine Malabou's *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, Marc Jeannerod further points out that

[w]e clearly have no consciousness of the plastic mechanisms forming our personality and guaranteeing its continuity. Yet by trying to become conscious of them we may, Malabou proposes, acquire a new freedom, that of imposing our own organization on the world rather than submitting to the influences of a milieu. Plasticity, in effect, is not flexibility. Let us not forget that plasticity is a mechanism for adapting, while flexibility is a mechanism for submitting. Adapting is not submitting, and, in this sense, plasticity ought not to serve as an alibi for submitting to the new world order being dreamed up by capitalism. To be conscious of the plasticity of one's brain is to give oneself the means to say no. (xiv)

Mulling over the notions of identity and subjectivation, Alice crystallizes the plasticity of identity and mutable selfhood as she asserts that "I could not define myself in relation to the shifting poles of certainty that seemed so reliable" (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 7). Observing herself and the other of herself as the opposite of the former, Alice claims that trans-subjectivation includes monitoring of at least three phases of the subjectivity. Seeing herself as a trans-subject, Alice depicts herself as "I was a glove turned inside-out, softness showing" (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 7). In other words, it could be argued that plasticity *per se* would be the presence of being for Being. In Malabouean perspective, trans-subjectivation refers to the plasticity of being and identity providing a realm in which the subject is capable of opening a space from which the self and the other of the self are recognizable. The crack in the I could endow the opportunity of multiple perspective of the subject from itself. The image of a glove turned inside-out as a projection of Alice's identity is another stance in which Malabouean trans-subjectivity would be vividly expressed.

Evading the concept of the other and singling out the notion of alterity without transcendence, Alice ponders that 'being' could not façade the other; yet the other of 'being' is within 'being,' which makes it transform. Alice thus equates 'being' with the Malabouean conceptualization of plasticity. Implying the plasticity of being, Alice raises a question of "what happens when the sea itself plunges away?" (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 10). If plasticity is, according to Malabou, "the capacity to annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create" (*What Should We Do with Or Brain?* 5), the notion of identity could then



be understood as resilience because “the formation of each identity is a kind of resilience, in other words, a kind of contradictory construction, a synthesis of memory and forgetting, of constitution and effacement of forms” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 77). Alice’s view of identity formation coincides with Malabou’s outlook in which the plasticity of trans-subjectivation creates a form of pliability within.

Rejecting submission to the culture of compliance, Alice asks herself “what would happen if the image smashed the glass?” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 10). The glass shattered by the representation of the object vividly manifests the Malabouean notion of the unconscious plasticity, which leads to the formation of identity or I. Juxtaposing being and knowing, Alice observes that “we are what we know. We know what we are. We reflect our reality. Our reality reflects us” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 10). In *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, Malabou further discusses the massive outcomes of being alert about the plasticity of trans-subjectivation and doing away with flexibility: “to refuse to be flexible individuals who combine a permanent control of the self with a capacity to self-modify at the whim of fluxes, transfers, and exchanges, for fear of explosion” (*What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 78). Simply put, knowing could rewire being in *Gut Symmetries* while being or trans-subjectivity is always-already contradictory within.

Endeavoring to bring an end to the conformity, Alice redefines the concepts of love, time, subjectivity, and gender. Struggling with being in love with a couple, Alice attempts to lower her self-controlling guard against the conceptualization of love and affection. Giving the priority to the brain, even in emotional issues, Alice confesses that “I don’t own my emotions unless I can think about them. I am not afraid of feeling but I am afraid of feeling unthinkably. I don’t want to drown. My head is my heart’s lifebelt” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 14–15). Catherine Malabou also dwells over the point that being aware of the plasticity of the brain uncovers “that in a certain sense the brain does not obey itself” (*What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 79). Malabou adopts an optimistic view on the issues of plasticity and trans-subjectivity in reaching biological alter-globalism:

to cancel the fluxes, to lower our self-controlling guard, to accept exploding from time to time: this is what we should do with our brain . . . Perhaps we ought to relearn how to enrage ourselves, to explode against a certain

culture of docility, of amenity, of the effacement of all conflict even as we live in a state of permanent war. (*What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 79)

Advancing toward self-realization, Alice profoundly experiences herself as a gap that observes herself: “If I am so ignorant of my own self, how can I claim knowledge of another human being?” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 16). Making up her mind to re-delineate the established social, cultural and moral concepts, Alice terminates the process of being flexible. Resisting flexibility and surviving in a “city, an alchemical vessel where dirt and glory do effect transformation” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 15), Alice believes that trans-subjection enables her to repudiate flexibility: “Is it crazy to act crazy in a crazy situation? It has logic. It may even have dignity if dignity is what hallmarks the human spirit and preserves it. I was not going to sink for him” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 20). Simply put, apposing flexibility and plasticity, Alice reinforces herself as a trans-subject while opposing the defined social structures and values. In the concluding chapter of *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, Malabou similarly claims that

[t]o ask “What should we do with our brain?” is above all to visualize the possibility of saying no to an afflicting economic, political, and mediatic culture that celebrates only the triumph of flexibility, blessing obedient individuals who have no greater merit than that of knowing how to bow their heads with a smile. (79)

While Alice depicts the love triangle of Stella, Jove and herself, she presupposes that “he was me I was him are we her?” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 22) and that “the only thing I can claim to own is myself, and look I shall give it to you” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 22). If plasticity is the “relation that an individual entertains with what, on the one hand, attaches him originally to himself, to his proper form, and with what, on the other hand, allows him to launch himself into the void of all identity, to abandon all rigid and fixed determination” (Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 80), Alice indicates that the connection between the two subjects inside her appears to be unattainable as she detects not only a split subjectivity but also two diverse subjects within.

Alice identifies herself as a trans-subject by claiming that “what I see, what I touch is interior, either I am inside it or it is inside me . . . It is as though there is an entirely other way of being that makes no sense to my world, any more than

tries 28). Reflecting on the premise that the subjects could not be in command of their brain activity and hence their subjectivity, Alice states that “dreams do dream us, don’t they? We are not the ones in control” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 28), which confirms the idea of the plasticity of the brain and identity formation in the Malabouean perspective. In the foreword to Malabou’s *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, Clayton Crockett thus maintains that

[t]he plasticity of the brain is so radical that we create our brains, and making a brain is not simply a mechanical or even an organic process. We think that our brains make us, forgetting that we also make our brains and never glimpsing the possibility of becoming- brain, that is, a pure time- image. (xxii)

Projecting the past, the future, and subjectivity as mere images, Alice claims that struggling to know oneself encounters one with the fact that one does not exist. Being could define itself within the walls of time and due to the fact that the past and the future are merely images, what or who one defines himself/herself as, is sheer nothing. Yet, facing this nothingness, space or rupture within paves the ground for experiencing trans-subjectivity:

I can’t go back into the past and change it, but I have noticed that the future changes the past. What I call the past is my memory of it and my memory is conditioned by who I am now. Who I will be. The only way for me to handle what is happening is to move myself forward into someone who has handled it. As yet that person does not exist. (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 27)

In other words, the plasticity of identity and the plasticity of time could be amalgamated owing to the fact that time could be regarded as plasticity itself. Moreover, the essence of presence could limelight the totality of time, which is always-already amalgamated with the notion of being. So, if “the spacing of temporality is becoming a brain, and the brain is the incarnation of time in a body” (Crockett xxii), then “time is plasticity itself, absolute plasticity” (Crockett xxii). Merging temporality and brain, Alice concludes that knowing could be the ever-mutable experience of being.

Delving into the concept of knowing, Alice argues that “what you see is not what you think you see” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 50), hence it could be plausible to consider knowing malleable. Combining the material and the

non-material, Alice sees the brain as the material manifestation of temporality. Additionally, she draws attention to the sexual connotation of the notion of knowing, mainly in religious texts. Evincing the plasticity of comprehension, Alice implies that knowing could be manifest connection and becoming as “in the Torah, the Hebrew ‘to know,’ often used in a sexual context, is not about facts but about connections. Knowledge, not as accumulation but as charge and discharge. A release of energy from one site to another” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 50). Delineating plasticity in matter and non-matter, Alice believes that knowing is the pliable process of becoming. Providing an instance from quantum physics, Alice spotlights the plasticity of matter and draws it to the realm of consciousness to expound the plasticity of truth.

Explicating the plasticity of electrons, Alice recounts Robert Oppenheimer’s stance on electrons and observes that “if we ask whether the position of the electron remains the same we must say no. If we ask whether the electron’s position changes with time, we must say no. If we ask whether the electron is at rest we must say no. If we ask whether it is in motion we must say no” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 50). Paradoxically, the knowledge of the solid fact could make its mutability and plasticity certain. Alice even dares raise the question if the “truth [is] what we do not know?” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 50). Shying away from accepting any firm belief as ultimate truth, Alice further poses a question: “what is the separateness of things when the current that flows each to each is live?” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 51). Juxtaposing livingness and plasticity, Alice shows that the livingness *per se* could be defined as the plasticity of being.

Alice also argues that the identity is not only fragmented but also possibly inexistant: “Is identity a deceit? A make-shift, and should we hurry to make any pattern we can? Or is there a coherence, perhaps a beauty, if it were possible to find it? I would like to convince myself about myself but I cannot . . . I am unfrightened by the unexpected” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 69). Seeing her identity as a jigsaw, Alice suspects that “there is no picture” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 69) in the jigsaw of ‘being.’ Deeming that identity “cannot be calculated” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 69), Alice observes that “I should have said that whatever the picture is, it will not be the one on the box” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 69). Alice thus asserts that identity could not be predetermined by genetics, environment or even nurture. Identity equals the nameless ever altering nothingness, which, in accordance with Catherine Malabou’s notion of trans-subjectivity, is an open space between self and self.

Proclaiming that her real name is actually Alluvia – “that which is deposited by the river” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 71), Alice reckons that the mere route to self-realization is through experiencing the empty space between herself and herself. Juxtaposing Moses and herself, Alice states: “walk with me. Walk the broken past, named and not. Walk the splintered plank, chaos on both sides, walk the discovered and what cannot be discovered. Walk the uneasy peace we share” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 71). Similar to Moses who split the Nile and was rescued, Alice thinks that to be liberated one should explore identity to be able to ascertain trans-subjectivity. Observing the other (the beloved), Alice presupposes that it equals studying oneself: “this self on self, self as desirer and desired, had a frankness to it I had not been invited to discover. Desiring her, I felt my own desirability. It was an act of power but not power over her. I was my own conquest” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 72). Alice thus monitors herself by opposing the other of herself, which is paradoxically herself. Confessing that “I sometimes think my personality is a troopship’s atoll; invade me” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 74), Alice sees trans-subjectivity contradictory and wonders “would I be the conjuror or the conjured?” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 77). For that reason, Alice perceives herself as an open space undergoing experiences that could be inconsistent and incompatible.

Portraying herself as a wound, Alice further lime lights that she, as an open space or a rupture, has been soaked into love to the extent that she has gone beyond love: “If I am a wound would love be my slave?” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 77). Seeing herself as the alchemists’ third element, Alice then puts alchemy adjacent to identity formation and assumes that the third element could be regarded as the ever-opened space within which there are two opposing selves whose recognition is the only way to explore one’s identity. As the third person in a love triangle, Alice compares her role to a catalyst: “what do the alchemists say? . . . The third is not given, whatever it is that reconciles two opposites. If I was here to reconcile them were they planning to dump me overboard when the job was finished?” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 84). Narrating a story within the main narration, Alice puts emphasis on the significance of a gap or a crack in the process of self-realization. In her narrative of three friends, Alice incessantly points out that on their quest they seek “that which cannot be found” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 85). By repeating “what is it you seek? ‘That cannot be found’” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 86) three times, Alice ultimately concludes that “it has found you” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 86). Putting the narration

next to the story's love triangle, Alice asserts that identity could be the ever-alterable dialogue between I and I while the third element as a crack observes it.

It could be concluded that identity as never solid and ever svelte has been vividly manifested in *Gut Symmetries* through the perspectives of the characters, particularly Alice. In her attempt to define her affection for the couple, Alice sees herself as a mere space or crack that consistently observes herself and the other of herself. Identifying herself as a rupture, Alice juxtaposes the malleability of quantum physics and trans-subjectivity to assert that presence, time, identity, and even being could be nothing other than plasticity or ever-mutable matter and non-matter. Love as both physical and non-physical trigger of self-realization paves the ground for spotlighting the plasticity of subjectivation or, in Malabouean view, trans-subjectivity.

### **The Quantum Physics of the Physique: The Plasticity of Corporeality**

The present section intends to closely explore the Malabouean concept of plasticity in quantum physics and identity formation in Jeanette Winterson's *Gut Symmetries*. The attempt would be to explore the manifestation of ever-mutable identity encountering death, love, sex, and body. Furthermore, masochism would be spotlighted as the transformation of sadism toward oneself in order to limelight the plasticity of brain and consciousness. The notions of shame and guilt would be focused on as associated with the notions of masochism and sadism and hence the plasticity of identity or trans-subjectivation.

Constantly emphasizing the supremacy of narration in identity formation, Alice once more demarcates the boundaries of subjectivation based on the narration of one about herself/himself:

Walk with me. Hand in hand through the nightmare of narrative. Need to tell a story when no story can be told. Walk the level reassuring floor toward the open trapdoor. Plank by plank by to where the sea begins. This is a sea story, a wave story, a story that breaks and ebbs, spilling the boat up on the beach, dragging it out to a tiny dot. Life assails on its own tears. (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 96)

Seeing narration or writing as a gateway to self-realization or trans-subjectivity, Alice presents recounting as healing. Juxtaposing the materiality of writing and the effects of recounting, Alice observes that the materiality of body and

the non-materiality of subjectivation could be in fact the two sides of the same coin. To extend it further, Alice claims that being, subjectivation or specifically her own identity operate as a gap between herself and other people. She thus gives a piece of advice to the reader to “walk the plank. The rough, springy underfoot of my emotions. The ‘I’ that I am, subjective, hesitant, goaded from behind, afraid of what lies ahead, the drop, the space, the gap between other people and myself” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 96). In accordance with Malabou’s views that identity is as a gap observing the transformation of the self and the other of the self, Alice utilizes narration as the digger of the gap more profound to the next level:

there is thus a very close relation between the metamorphosis of an identity that survives with a wound and the story of this metamorphosis—as if the plasticity of writing supported that of systems; as if writing itself repaired the wound that, as it repairs itself, nourishes writing. (*The New Wounded* 187)

If the self, according to Malabou, consists of the moments of transformation, its core has to be temporal. The paradoxical term of ‘temporal core’ thus manifests the plasticity of identity as well as being. Malabou carries on the point that identity “is not the expression of unity. Indeed, the ‘self,’ at its very core, is not gathered; its manifestation is fundamentally temporal: the self exists only insofar as it lasts and produces itself from instant to instant” (*The New Wounded* 44). Such a construction necessarily requires the in-between ruptures that pave the ground for trans-subjectivity.

The importance of the story telling in the construction of trans-subjectivity is further emphasized by Antonio Damasio in *The Feeling of What Happens*:

[t]he story contained in the images of core consciousness is not told by some clever homunculus. Nor is the story really told by you as a self because the core you is only born as the story is told, within the story itself. You exist as a mental being when primordial stories are being told, and only then; as long as primordial stories are being told, and only then. You are the music while the music lasts. (191)

It could thus be asserted that the brain is the birthplace of the stories in which one could comprehend his/her own being. As “the cerebral self represents itself without presenting itself” (Malabou, *The New Wounded* 44), the parts of the self



or identity are always-already hidden. The blurring boundaries of being and non-being commence in the brain and in the process of cerebral auto affection, which is, according to Catherine Malabou in *The New Wounded*, “the biological, logical, and affective process by which finitude is constituted within the living core of subjectivity without ever being able to become the knowledge of a subject” (44). As the being could be minimized to mere vibration for Alice, everything, in particular people, is in fact unsolid and floating. Not only is subjectivity erratic, but also the physical world could be equally regarded as inconsistent and unstable: “the table itself is notional . . . in fact it is a vibration as unsolid as ourselves” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 97). Furthermore, Alice asserts that due to the plasticity of time, space could be observed as mutable and therefore the whole universe could be considered as an ever-transformable illusion:

[a]ccording to quantum theory there are not only second chances but multiple chances. Space is simply not connected. History is not unalterable. The universe itself is forked. If we knew how to manipulate space-time as space-time manipulates itself the illusion of our single linear lives would collapse. (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 97)

Alice also draws attention to the fact that chance in its core represents the concept of plasticity.

The next point to support our discussion is to be found in Catherine Malabou’s analysis of automaton, a formula that could be deemed equal to plasticity. Derived from *automatismos*, which indicates something that occurs on its own, automaton “must be understood in two ways: what happens on its own can do so if it bears its own necessity within itself, and what happens on its own can also do so, inversely, by pure chance. In this case, contingency is its self-justification” (Malabou, *The New Wounded* 136). This is exactly the point of the plasticity of corporeality that Alice endeavors to illuminate when she claims that the world does not exist, yet it vividly displays the tendency to exist. Juxtaposing possibility and practicality, Alice presupposes that

[q]uantum theory states that for every object there is a wave function that measures the probability of finding that object at a certain point in space and time. Until the measurement is made, the object (particle) exists as a sum of all possible states. The difficulty here, between the logical common sense world and the complex, maverick universe, is that at a subatomic

level, matter does not exist, with certainty, in definite places, rather it has a *tendency to exist*. (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 98)

The tendency to exist or the plasticity of being manifests itself in every aspect of life as the process of transformation is, to the extent, similar to the theories in quantum physics where everything could be regarded as open space: “if the Superstring theory is correct there is no table. There is no basic building block, no firm stable firm principle on which to pile the rest” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 97). If the soul is merely a “wave function,” then “Hindu mystics put it centuries ago, ‘smaller than small, bigger than big’. We are and we are not our bodies” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 98). Merging macrocosm and microcosm, Alice concludes that “the entire universe [operates] as a wave function” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 98) believing that the existing and non-existing co-exist.

Demonstrating the inseparability of the observer and the observed, Alice asserts that “if we accept Hawking’s idea that we should treat the entire universe as a wave function, both specifically located and infinite, then that function is the sum of all possible universes, dead, alive, multiple, simultaneous, interdependent, co-existing” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 98). For Alice, plasticity is “the simultaneous absence and presence of matter” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 102), thus “the sense of who I am, is strengthening and weakening simultaneously” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 114). Similarly, even though God has been considered the source of life, facing him signifies death: “‘Who shall look on God and live?’ To Papa this was the central paradox of his religion, for there is no life without God and yet to approach God means death” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 109). The concurrent absence/presence brings about the rupture, the crack or the space not only within everything but also of everything as becoming or an empty space.

Putting apprehension and perception vis à vis with each other, Alice clarifies that the “matter has at best a tendency to exist, and will, it seems, divide infinitely because there is no there there. There are vibrations, relationships, possibilities, and out of these is formed our real life” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 126). Alice further sees plasticity as the “string paradox of the restless and the formed” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 126) and claims that “we are neither alive nor dead” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 126); hence, consciousness could be merely regarded as the observant empty space between the two forms of the self. Expanding the notion of plasticity to the plasticity of self and time, Alice

hypothesizes that there could be no subjectivity except trans-subjectivity. She wonders who she is: maybe just a “temporary imprint in a temporary place. Since the beginning of time you and I have been sitting here, talking, listening, sliding the bottle between us, but it was not us, or it was some other us, marked out, firm for a moment, fading, disappearing, replacing ourselves” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 127). Consequently, Alice interweaves the concept of trans-subjectivation with the notion of concurrent unity and plurality of existence.

Positing the multiplicity and unity of trans-subjectivation, Alice sets forth to observe the matter as malleable as trans-subjectivity. She asks: “what do you not know that there is in you now, a Caesar, a Raphael, a tear of Mozart, the ended bowel problems of Napoleon at Waterloo?” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 128). Rejecting the belief in any fixed form for/of life: “if life, constantly escaping from the forms it inhabits, leaving behind its shell” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 129), Alice asserts that life as well as being consists of pliability, which the notion of plasticity could reveal the best. That is the reason why Alice decrees that “what we are doing does not exist” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 129) and Jove claims that “everything possible to be believed is an image of truth” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 130). Convinced that “the most plausible explanations usually are lies” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 130), Alice claims that matter, temporality and movement are the items that force us to accept the illusion of reality.

If we consider plasticity and trans-subjectivation as two faces of a coin, it could be asserted that producing form from the obliteration of form manifests itself not only in matter but also in trans-subjectivity. Uniting history and futurity as present, the open space between history and futurity as the present or the rupture between the selves within could be explained through Malabou’s notion of plasticity. As consciousness and emotions are inseparable for her, Alice claims that hate and love could be transformable due to the plasticity of both.

In a chapter entitled “Knave of Coins,” implying the duality of a person in Tarot cards, Jove in a manic attack mutilates his wife, Stella, and eats her flesh:

I made the cut so carefully. I made it like a surgeon not a butcher. My knife was sharp as a laser. I did it with dignity, hungry though I was. I did it so that it would not have disgusted either of us. She was my wife. I was her husband. We were one flesh. With my body I thee worship. In sickness and in health. For better or for worse. Till death us do part. I parted the flesh from the bone and I ate it. (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 119)

According to Catherine Malabou in *The New Wounded*, “when sadism extricates itself from the sexual drive, it seems well-suited to play the role of the representative or the phenomenon of the death drive” (190). Sketching the autonomy of death drive, Malabou claims that “if the sadistic drive can, as a partial drive, separate from the libidinal drive, it could then bear witness that the death drive has a degree of autonomy” (*The New Wounded* 191). In other words, the drive of mastery or destruction could be categorized as the death drive. The “fact remains, however, that the figures of such defusion—sadism, destruction, mastery, masochism—are all derived from *love-hate dyad*, from love inverted into hate—that is once again, from *the intrigue of pleasure*” (Malabou, *The New Wounded* 191). Malabou thus makes the death drive visible via her notion of destructive plasticity and eventually claims that the concept of destructive plasticity could shed light on the death drive and bestow it its own particular form.

In “Trauma without a Subject,” Ben Tyrer and Piotrowska elaborate on the Malabouean post-traumatic subjectivity and argue that there exists a different type of death, which Catherine Malabou “identifies as being precipitated by the radical supervention of trauma, a kind where death takes a form of life. For those subjects whom she christens ‘the new wounded,’ this is the life of a psyche that survives its own destruction” (20). That is to say, the traumatic subject could be viewed as a reborn individual whose identity has undergone destructive plasticity. In *Gut Symmetries*, surviving her own death Stella juxtaposes being a victim and a volunteer and asserts that she is able to forgive her husband Jove: “I forgive him” (Winterson 131). However, Alice is unable to express the mercy as an observer of the suffering and is shocked.

The next point of our discussion can be related to what Slavoj Žižek in *Living in the End Times* argues:

Is the trauma of which Malabou speaks not a trauma experienced as such because it is so unsettling from within the horizon of meaning – in other words, is the absence of a meaningful Self traumatic only if we expect its presence? If so, then why should we not surmise that . . . once their old persona has been erased, they enter a blessed state of indifference and only appear to us to be undergoing unbearable suffering? What if *les nouveaux blesés* are literary the new blessed ones? (299)

Winterson has brilliantly narrated this part of the novel within a chapter entitled “Judgment,” which connotes rebirth, inner calling, a moment of a deci-

sion, and judgment without condemnation. Destructive plasticity *per se* could be compared to a type of judgment and decree in which denunciation is absent. Metaphorically speaking, in the process of plasticity, either a constructive or destructive one, the verdict has been declared without any censure. Putting emphasis on the role of chance, not only has Winterson entitled each chapter according to tarot cards, but she has also narrated each chapter as a type of interpretation of that card, thus offering the reader a possibility to analyze the entire novel as a sort of card reading.

Here we have to introduce the concepts of automaton and *tuche* or *tyche*, which Malabou intertwines with trauma, explaining that *tuche* could not be regarded as a disguise of automaton, yet it could be reflected as its cause. In “Trauma without a Subject,” Ben Tyrer and Piotrowska, for example, see the Malabouean stance on *tuche* and automaton as two sides of chance:

[*t*]uche is not as Malabou asserts the mask of automaton but its cause. This doesn't mean that trauma is effective only to the extent that it resonates with some previous experience (as in the classic Freudian version): it is an external shock precisely conceptualized by psychoanalysis. *Tuche* is like destructive plasticity or Freud's *Schreck*, a violent unanticipatable catastrophe that disrupts the subject; what Malabou theorises (perhaps beyond Lacan) is thus a type of *tuche* that doesn't simply disturb automaton but irrevocably damages (or destroys) it. (30)

Perceiving *tuche* as destructive plasticity occurred by chance, Winterson presents the automaton as the concealing form of *tuche*. That is the reason why, after the traumatic event of being sliced by her husband, Stella poses the question “victim or volunteer?” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 131) twice. As the post-traumatic subject, Stella doubts that she could be seen as the volunteer for the traumatic event or the prey. In *The Anthology of the Accident*, Malabou claims that “all of a sudden these people become strangers to themselves” (13); however, in Winterson's *Gut Symmetries* Stella manages to experience a transition from destructive plasticity to a constructive one due to the existence of a feminine figure in her life – Alice. Even though “when damage occurs it is another self who is affected, a new self, unrecognizable” (Malabou, *The Anthology of the Accident* 141), Stella, nevertheless, copes with her trauma because of Alice.

In an interview for *JCRT* by Pena, Catherine Malabou argues that “there is no ‘essence’ of femininity” (3) and asserts that she “will refer to Irigaray again on

this point: woman neither is nor has an essence” (4). The notion of femininity in Winterson’s *Gut Symmetries* entirely embraces the notion of plasticity as it is based on Irigaray’s view of femininity: “she does not set herself up as one, as a (single) female unit. She is not closed up or around one single truth or essence. The essence of a truth remains foreign to her. She neither has nor is a being” (Irigaray 86). The feminine could not be precisely depicted in Winterson’s *Gut Symmetries* as it does away with any essentialism in the female characters. For instance, Alice serves as a trans-subject who has an affair with both Stella and Jove; yet she is unable to label herself as a woman.

It could be noticed that essenceless-ness does not signify neutrality: “woman has no essence, but that doesn’t mean that woman is neutral either” (Malabou, “The Meaning of Femininity” 4). Relatedly, Alice puts emphasis on the form and physique of Stella and Jove as a particularity of their being and does not express the binary opposition of male/female: “Wave function of life scattered down to one dear face. How else can I know you but through the body you rent? Forgive me if I love it too much” (Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* 132). Accentuating the significance of body regardless of its gender, Stella as well as Alice succeeds in transforming her destructive plasticity into a constructive one, which reflects Malabou’s view that she does

not intend to show that these modes of being of the subject represent the masculine/feminine relationship. I am interested in showing that this relationship between form and itself is not founded on a difference. The two modes of being of the subject are not different from one another, but each of them transforms itself into the other. With plasticity, we are not facing a pre-given difference, but a process of metamorphosis. In other words, the Hegelian subjects trans-subjects itself constantly. Its form is its matter. (*What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 4)

The feminine body as indescribable reveals itself beyond expression and solidity. The plasticity of femininity as an emancipatory route for a trans-subject imposes itself in every fraction of Winterson’s *Gut Symmetries*.

It could be concluded that the plasticity of matter has been presented as constructive and destructive in *Gut Symmetries*. Plasticity as the mere core of life, being, identity, and love manifests itself in the form of trans-subjectivity. Sadism as the destructive plasticity illustrates the form of death drive in the novel and it expresses the plasticity of love that could be transformed into hate. The

paradoxical notion of God was put adjacent to plasticity in such a way that approaching God as the source of life equals death in the characters' stance. The plasticity of femininity as an emancipator of the trans-subjects expresses itself in Stella's and Alice's bond to limelight femininity as essenceless, yet not impartial

## Conclusion

As a never-unyielding and ever-erratic phenomenon, identity has been explicated in *Gut Symmetries* through the perspectives of the characters, in particular Alice. In an effort to identify her affection for the couple, Alice comes across herself as a mere space or fracture that constantly observes herself and the other of herself. Identifying herself as a rupture, Alice juxtaposes the pliability of quantum physics and trans-subjectivity to emphasize that presence, time, identity, and even being could be nothing other than plasticity or ever-mutable matter and non-matter. Love as both physical and non-physical trigger of self-realization paves the ground for highlighting the plasticity of subjectivation or, in Malabouean terms, trans-subjectivity. The plasticity of substance has been shown as the constructive and destructive one in *Gut Symmetries*. Plasticity as the sheer nucleus of existence, identity, and love makes itself perceptible in the form of trans-subjectivity. Sadism as the destructive plasticity exemplifies the form of death drive in the novel and it confirms the plasticity of love, which could be transformed into hate. The contradictory notion of God was put adjacent to plasticity in such a way that going within reach of God as the source of life is equivalent to death in the characters' stance. Moreover, Stella manages to transform her destructive plasticity into a constructive one due to the medium of femininity and feminine body of Alice. Spotlighting femininity essenceless, Alice and Stella represent femininity as mutable and erratic. Shying away from neutrality, the feminine characters of the novel limelight the plasticity of femininity and the feminine.

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# POTRAGA ZA PRAVOM SUBJEKTIVNOŠĆU NASUPROT OTKRIVANJU TRANSSUBJEKTIVIZACIJE U ROMANU *GUT SYMMETRIES* JEANETTE WINTERSON

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Rad pomno istražuje proces oblikovanja identiteta u likovima romana *Gut Symmetries* spisateljice Jeanette Winterson sljedećim pojmovima Catherine Malabou: plastičnost, destruktivna plastičnost ili trauma te transsubjektivacija. Identitet kao nedosljedan proces postajanja u romanu se analizira kroz perspektivu likova, posebice Alice. Identitet kao puki prostor ili pukotinu, koji subjektu pruža trajnu mogućnost da sam sebe promatra, moguće je predstaviti kao Malabouin pojam plastičnosti subjektivnosti ili transsubjektivacije. Pritom se u odnos dovode podatnost kvantne fizike te transsubjektivnosti s ciljem isticanja kako prisutnost, vrijeme, identitet, pa čak i biće, nisu ništa drugo doli plastičnosti ili neprestano fluktuirajuće (ne)materije. Plastičnost kao apsolutna srž postojanja, identiteta i ljubavi očituje se kroz transsubjektivnost. Sadizam kao oblik destruktivne plastičnosti ističe se u romanu kao smrtonosni nagon i potvrđuje plastičnost ljubavi, otvorene za pretvorbu u mržnju. Ističući ženstvenost kao odsutnost suštine, Alice i Stella donose se kao primjeri promjenjive i nestalne ženstvenosti.

**Ključne riječi:** tjelesnost, destruktivna plastičnost (trauma), plastičnost, sadizam, vrijeme, transsubjektivacija, Jeanette Winterson, *Gut Symmetries*