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Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* as a Feminist Cyborg Story

Abstract

Jeanette Winterson's 2007 novel *The Stone Gods* is an admonitory tale about human environmental irresponsibility: in a highly gendered narrative the novelist demonstrates how the patriarchal domination inherent in human civilization leads to the destruction of the planet. Drawing upon the theoretical framework provided by posthumanist studies, especially the feminist perspective of Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti, the article interprets Winterson's novel as a critique of the masculinist domination of human culture. It shows *The Stone Gods* as one of Haraway's "feminist cyborg stories", demonstrating that a female robot might prove to be a model for new human subjectivity which could lead our civilization away from the path towards self-destruction.

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In an essay analysing contemporary women's apocalypse fiction, Susan Watkins enumerates some differences spotted by feminist criticism between male- and female-authored science-fiction and dystopias. Women writers often use these genres as an effective vehicle for challenging patriarchal beliefs which lead to the objectification of women and their fixation in conventionally established structures of heterosexuality, marriage and the family. Hence, such novelists tend to focus their fiction on "the defamiliarization of the body, gender, and sexuality" (Watkins 2012: 120). Feminist science-fiction and dystopian narratives often view science and technology as domains overshadowed by long-established patriarchal domination. Quite in line with postcolonial apocalyptic fiction, feminist-inclined works attempt to revise the patriarchal, and often imperialist, plots "by rethinking the relationship between technology, science, gender, and empire" (Watkins 2012: 120).

In her 2007 novel *The Stone Gods*, Jeanette Winterson approached a new literary territory, producing what a reviewer calls "a digressive, intermittently philosophical piece of science fiction" (Adams 2007). Ursula Le Guin points out that Winterson has followed a trend according to which "formerly deep-dyed realists are producing novels ... full of the tropes and fixtures and plotlines of science fiction" (Le Guin 2007). Yet, in truth, Winterson is not such a thoroughgoing realist: she has previously engaged in the realms of myth, fairy-tale, magic realism, cyberspace and allegory. She employs literary strategies which evince her propensity to literary experiment: non-linear plot lines, repetitiveness and circularity, unexpected point of view, a savoury, metaphorical style. Sonya Andermahr notices typically postmodern undecidability at the heart of the novelist's literary technique: "she disparages realism with its focus on narrative storytelling, yet extols storytelling as a human need and aesthetic principle" (2009: 27).

The Stone Gods is essentially "a keen lament for our irremediably incautious species" (Le Guin 2007); it is an admonitory tale about the environmental irresponsibility of Homo sapiens, who, through their heedless actions, are likely to bring destruction upon themselves and upon the whole planet. However, as the narrative features a trans-species lesbian love affair between a female scientist and a female robot, it is also a philosophical speculation about the development of the posthuman condition. *The Stone Gods* is a highly gendered narrative which demonstrates how the patriarchal domination inherent in our civilization leads to the destruction of the planet. This article endeavours to interpret Winterson's book as a narrative critical of the masculinist dimension of human culture. Some of the theoretical framework

is provided by posthumanist studies, especially the feminist perspective of Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti. In my analysis, I attempt to demonstrate that *The Stone Gods* can be seen as one of Haraway's "feminist cyborg stories", showing that a female robot might provide a model for new human subjectivity which could lead our civilization away from the path towards self-destruction.

Structurally, Winterson's novel is arranged in three different plot lines set in disparate space-times, but clearly echoing one another. Each story features a similar pair of protagonists: they bear (almost) the same names — Billie (or Billy) and Spike (or Spikkers) — and are involved in homosexual romantic relationships. The three narratives centre on the same theme: the threat of a dire environmental disaster caused by humanity's reckless actions. The first location is planet Orbus, whose ecosystem is so acutely disrupted that its human civilization has to seek refuge through relocation to a newly discovered, pristine Planet Blue (which, as we later learn, is actually Earth from 65 million years ago). Billie, a woman scientist, and Spike, a female Robo sapiens, are members of a team travelling to this new world to examine its living conditions. The second story is set on Easter Island in the eighteenth century. Billy is one of Captain Cook's sailors, accidentally left stranded on the island, where he falls in love with Spikkers, the son of a Dutch seaman who had landed there two years before. They witness the pernicious consequences of the islanders' imprudent decision to cut down all the trees and use the wood to transport and erect the giant statues, the *moai*, the stone gods which gave the novel its title. The novel's third part is an apocalyptic vision of the Earth's future in the aftermath of World War 3, a nuclear conflict which has devastated the biosphere. A global company called MORE controls, economically and politically, the society inhabiting "Tech City", ghettoizing the defiant part of the population in "Wreck City", an area ridden by poverty, pollution and anarchy. This narrative's Billie is a scientist entrusted with the task of programming into a cyborg, Spike, relevant information about the human race, so that the artificial intelligence might one day guide the world powers.

In each of its narratives, then, Winterson employs an apocalyptic scenario to raise the issue of environmental devastation. Orbus, the novel's closest equivalent of present day Earth, is about to forfeit its habitable conditions as its biosphere is becoming irrevocably damaged. The planet suffers from heavy pollution and climate warming caused by human reliance on fossil fuel dependent technologies, although alternative sources of energy are already developed. When the reserves of oil are running out and drinking water is becoming scarce, the world has moved to the brink of a large-scale military conflict. People's contact with nature is distinctly limited; they live in artificial surroundings, relying on genetically modified food produced in greenhouses and on meat of cloned animals, while natural farming is discouraged by the governments as hazardous. The war, which threatens the inhabitants of Orbus, has already taken place in the world represented in the novel's third part. In this narrative, the biosphere of the planet has been wrecked more immediately, through contamination caused by nuclear holocaust. The damage suffered by the natural world is clearly immense; many human survivors also suffer long-term noxious effects of heavy radiation, which manifest in atrocious mutations. In the shortest narrative, placed in between the two which foreshadow the possible future of humanity, Winterson returns to a historical account. The bitter story of Rapa Nui, a civilization living separately on a remote island, synecdochically represents the possible fate of humanity. The inhabitants deforest Easter Island in order to construct and move their stone giant statues, heedless of consequences. Their thoughtless felling of the island's forests

leads to the serious disturbance of the rich ecosystem: some plants and animals become extinct, soil erosion decreases crop yields. As lack of timber also means losing the ability to construct fishing boats, the famine menace leads to a ferocious civil war which curbs the population.

In some way, the environmental disasters occurring in *The Stone Gods* might be viewed as a reflex reaction of the Earth, a counteraction of the planet's immunity system meant to suppress the damage wreaked by humans. Eliminating the *Homo sapiens* species is a necessary condition for the self-purification process that nature can implement. As one of the characters observes, Orbus, which represents the Earth, is not "dying", as it is generally believed, but "evolving in a way that is hostile to human life" (Winterson 2008: 8). This vision closely relates to James Lovelock's theory of Gaia, which posits that the Earth resembles a uniform living system, built of inanimate and animate elements, capable of self-regulating fundamental components of its environment in order to preserve its habitability conditions. Although Lovelock conceives of Gaia as "a physiological system [which has] the unconscious goal of [keeping] a comfortable state for life" (2007: 19), he does not think of "the Earth as alive in a sentient way, or even alive like an animal or a bacterium" (20), but employs the anthropomorphic concept in a metaphorical sense. This opinion is further elaborated by Bruno Latour, who argues that this perception of Gaia should not be understood mystically or linked with the ideas of Providence, but that it is "a *scientific* concept, ... a set of contingent positive and negative cybernetic loops" (Latour 2015: 29, emphasis original) which do not have any inherent teleology. Latour departs from Lovelock's metaphor by proposing that Gaia is not "ontologically unified" or "endowed with any sort of unified agency" (29). Still, the long-term self-regulatory goals of the Earth might demand the eradication of the human race, which parasitically disturbs the equilibrium of its ecosystem: "we live on a live planet that can respond to the changes we make, either by cancelling the changes or by *cancelling us*" (Lovelock 2007: 21, emphasis added). In Winterson's novel, the inhabitants of Orbus are aware that "Nature seeks balance" (2008: 73) and it performs some kind of "recycling" (37) of the environment, so that their planet is "becoming hostile to human life after centuries of human life becoming hostile to the planet" (73).

By means of reiterating the theme of the environmental cataclysm in three various space-time contexts, Winterson emphasises that humans are not only detrimental to its biosphere, but also ultimately incorrigible. As one of the Billies admits, "Human beings aren't just in a mess, we are a mess. We have made every mistake, justified ourselves, and made the same mistakes again and again. It's as though we're doomed to repetition" (Winterson 2008: 216). This circular repetitiveness is articulated through the narrative structure of *The Stone Gods*: the novel features many notable cross-references between the three narrative lines, suggesting inexplicable coincidences between characters and events from different space-times. As Rachel Loewen Walker notes, by way of mingling past, present and future, Winterson's novel challenges our perception of its chronology, "displacing the reader's reliance on a linear narrative" (Walker 2014: 47) and "refus[ing] to provide a sequential tale of cause and effect" (53). In effect, the novel juxtaposes the circular notion of history with the Indian notion of *samsara*, or Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence. The book's very last sentence — "Everything is imprinted for ever with what it once was" (Winterson 2008: 246) — hints at the idea of cyclicity of all life and matter, referring to rebirth, reincarnation and wandering existence, as well as pointing to hidden patterns of repetition across different times and worlds.

The eternally recurring patterns that Winterson reveals concern not only the biological effects of human activities, but also their socio-political dimension manifested in power struggle.

Both narratives situated in the envisaged future depict the post-capitalist form of government in which liberal democracy is replaced by quasi-totalitarian corpocracy. The world of Orbus is divided between three superpowers, and even though the state where the protagonists live, the Central Power, is described as the most democratic of them, it is still regarded by some of its citizens as “a corporate country” (Winterson 2008: 71). It is openly maintained that after the relocation to Planet Blue the colony will not be ruled by any democratically elected body but by a board of directors. The Central Power state is essentially controlled by a business syndicate, appropriately dubbed MORE, which wields unlimited authority over the society, not only imposing on people an advanced economic regime but also curbing human rights. The denizens are subject to permanent surveillance through cameras and are implanted with microchips that assist the invigilation. Even the simple activity of shopping exhibits the level of the corporate control of an average citizen: sales assistants are computer programmes which can access one’s purchasing history and are familiar with all needs and preferences. Disloyalty or defiance of the state are punished by depriving the individuals of their financial assets and social identity, turning them into “ex-citizens” who “can’t travel, ... can’t buy anything, ... can’t register for anything [and] can’t use what was [their] name” (Winterson 2008: 31). The system is inexorable, impersonalised and automated, adopting the most efficient strategies from Kafka and Orwell. Discipline is facilitated by “state-approved mass illiteracy,” which discourages writing in favour of voice and pictures under the guise of providing “a more integrated, user-friendly day-to-day information and communications system” (Winterson 2008: 15). Correspondingly, the world depicted in the narrative about Post-3 War is governed by a single corporation, also named MORE, which has readapted the model of consumer society to its needs, implementing a highly successful method of exploitation. Citizens no longer own durable commodities, such as cars, household equipment or furniture, but unceasingly *rent* them. The new economy system has made money obsolete: salaries are paid in tokens for food, for entertainment, or for renting objects; this effectively prevents accumulation of capital and enforces immediate consumerism. Individuals can theoretically choose to escape the corporate rule of Tech City and live beyond its jurisdiction. But the alternative which Wreck City offers can be hard to bear: devoid of any law enforcement system, it is a haven of anarchy and crime; lacking any welfare institution and access to modern technologies, it is ridden with destitution and disease. Showing the effectiveness of instrumenting domination by means of denying people political rights, ownership, economic means and access to education, *The Stone Gods* also signals that these are historically functional capitalist practices, but also mechanisms lying in the hegemonic tradition of male supremacy.

Another instance of hegemonic oppression of otherness is effectuated by Winterson thoroughly evoking the connection between the relocation of Orbus inhabitants to Planet Blue and the colonial practices of Western civilisation. Heather J. Hicks notes that *The Stone Gods* imbues the images of human reaction to the collapse of their habitat on Orbus “with politically complex images of colonial adventure and conquest” (Hicks 2016: 98) and “imagines a neocolonial mission in which old values are carried to the new world” (95). Planet Blue is presented as a virgin territory ideal for new settlement, analogously to historical sites of Western annexation; the members of the space mission are compared to “the men who found the Indies, the Americas, the Arctic Circle” (Winterson 2008: 6). The full name of the central character, Billie Crusoe, inescapably brings to mind Defoe’s protagonist, an archetype of a Western colonizer. The mission travels on the star-ship the *Resolution*, which, in turn, is the

name of the vessel on which Captain Cook explored the Pacific. The ship's commanding officer is Captain Handsome, a "space privateer" (56) who owns a copy of the "eighteenth century edition of Captain Cook's Journals" (59). It is arranged that the colonists will be transferred to Planet Blue by a newly constructed space-liner called the *Mayflower*. Plans for the mission also include indigenous dinosaur-like creatures: "Monsters will be humanely destroyed, with the possible exception of scientific capture" (6). As Alina Preda asserts, *The Stone Gods* "depicts worlds brought to ruins by their human colonists, as a result of harmful political attitudes motivated by power hunger [and] financial interests" (Preda 2018: 146). Importantly though, Winterson's text emphasises that damaging colonial practices are exercised by *male* subjects and that the oppression of the indigenous cultures comes from hegemonic *male* cultures.

In fact, Winterson demonstrates that several key concerns of the novel, related to such areas as political supremacy, cultural domination and discriminatory violence, are rooted in the patriarchal structure of Western civilization. The conditions of masculine power and self-indulgence manifest in the narrative also through the objectification of the feminine. For instance, Captain Handsome returns to the myth of the pioneers when he describes Spike, a female robot, in glaringly masculinist terms of territorial conquest, as his "new-found land" (Winterson 2008: 81). Spike's objectification is quite exemplary, due to the fact that she is not a human being, but a *Robo sapiens*, and thus, in a sense, a commodity. She was used in this manner during her first space expedition, when she performed sexual services for the male crew for three years, wearing out "three silicon-lined vaginas" (34). Sexual objectification of women is also blatantly manifest in the social mores of the rather decadent population of planet Orbus. The availability of DNA manipulation allows its inhabitants to modify their bodies, both to stop (or reverse) the ageing process and to enhance their appearance. But what has initially seemed a blessing now leads to calamitous effects: when everyone looks young and attractive, albeit in a standardised manner, sexual excitement subsides and stronger stimuli are necessary: "sexy sex is now about freaks and children" (23). In effect, genetic-aesthetic treatment becomes radical. Yet this commodification of the body focuses mainly on the desires of men, not women. One of the characters, Pink McMurphy, intends to re-fix the age of her body from twenty-four to twelve, merely in order to arouse her husband's passion. At the same time, she is well aware of being perceived as an object:

'Women are just planets that attract the wrong species. ... They use us up, wear us out, then cast us off for a younger model so that they can do it all again.' ...

'Women always bring it back to the personal,' said Handsome. 'It's why you can't be world leaders.'

'And men never do,' [Billie] said, 'which is why we end up with no world left to lead.' (69)

This assertion made by the narrator of the novel's first part also expresses Winterson's powerfully gendered claim: the human thoughtless drive towards environmental devastation and consequent destruction of natural habitat is not fundamentally anthropomorphic in character but, more distinctly, remains a legacy of the patriarchally modelled culture. *The Stone Gods* articulates the destructive potential of masculinist technocracy, emphasizing pernicious effects brought about by abuses of technology which are, in essence, caused by the urge to satisfy typically male desires for domination and control. Billie observes that the human compulsion to subdue Mother Nature and conquer other planets has led to the development of a rocket technology that is "fuel-greedy, inefficient and embarrassingly phallic" (Winterson

2008: 75). The Orbus mission to Planet Blue provides an exemplary representation of this shameful male inefficiency. As the dinosaurs inhabiting the new world are inconvenient for human settlement, Captain Handsome devises a plan to manoeuvre an asteroid to collide with the planet and change its biosphere for a few months in order to obliterate the dangerous indigenous creatures. Yet the project falls through because the effect of the asteroid impact is much stronger than envisaged: it triggers an ice age which not only annihilates dinosaurs, but makes the planet uninhabitable for ages. Billie and Spike, a female human and a female post-human, are not evacuated and remain there to die, becoming two victims of masculinist foolhardy dreams of conquest. Adeline Johns-Putra calls Winterson's novel "a critique of progress" understood as "human development" which manifests in "the privileging of economic and scientific improvement", pointing out that the novel castigates "the unsustainable practices of global capitalism, consumerism and individualism" (Johns-Putra 2017: 177). Yet *The Stone Gods* is more politically gendered in its claims: it is specifically a critique of *masculinist* progress and the practices of *patriarchal* capitalist economy.

At the same time, the novel's endeavour to refocus and rewrite traditional male-engendered narratives of mastery and progress is also meant to suggest a solution to the impasse brought about by the masculinist idea of expansion which threatens even the existence of our race. Winterson finds hope in the redemptive potential of love, manifesting it in her portrayal of two parallel amorous relationships between female scientists and feminine robots, which, as Preda acknowledges, instead of suggesting the usual "much-feared technological mayhem" provide "a glimmer of hope for the deliverance of the human civilization", evoking, at the same time "a sense of posthuman subjectivity" (Preda 2018: 145). It is exactly posthuman thought, capable of surpassing the boundaries of humanist superciliousness, that becomes the appropriate mode to undertake a critique of a species which, as Orbus inhabitants, "fucked [their planet] to death and kicked it when it wouldn't get up" (Winterson 2008: 8).

If, as Rosi Braidotti notes, "the posthuman provokes elation" — albeit mixed with anxiety — "about the possibility of a serious de-centring of 'Man,' the former measure of all things" (Braidotti 2013: 2), this de-centring refers to the masculine concept of a human being, because, as Luce Irigaray suggests, in the patriarchal organization of culture there is no other human species than the male *Homo sapiens*. For Braidotti, the Eurocentric paradigm of Humanism relies on the "the dialectics of self and other" wherein Otherness is perceived as the negative of the ethically exemplary and universally rational subjectivity, while those branded as others are "sexualized, racialized" and "reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies" (15). Accordingly, one of the essential foundations of the posthuman turn lies in "Humanism's restricted notion of what counts as human" (16). Discussing the position of nonhuman beings, biological or cybernetic, N. Katherine Hayles observes that people "are joined in a dynamic co-evolutionary spiral with intelligent machines as well as with the other biological species with whom [they] share the planet" (Hayles 2006: 164). The critic sees the posthuman as an area where "there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (Hayles 1999: 3).

In point of fact, the exceptionally considerate and empathetic demeanour of Spike shows that Winterson does not find the dividing line between the human and the non-human in the field of ethics. Noting that, unlike in many science-fiction narratives, the robot's transformation into a simulacrum of a human being is not fearsome, Susan Watkins asserts that "Spike's

hybrid cyborg state refuses categorical distinctions between the human and the robot”, as she does not lack any “essential qualities that define what it is to be human” (Watkins 2012: 124). Through the character of Spike *The Stone Gods* quite openly invokes Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto”, with its post-gender fantasy of a society devoid of “troubling dualisms [of] self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive” (Haraway 1991: 177), no longer regulated by essentialist traditions established within Western patriarchy. Haraway perceives a cyborg as “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (149), constituting “a condensed image of both imagination and material reality” (150). Her claim that “cyborg monsters [present] in feminist science fiction define quite different political possibilities and limits from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman” (180) appears to be an observation particularly pertinent to Winterson’s Robo sapiens. Sadie Plant emphatically pronounces the significance of the cyborg as a “symptom of cyberfeminist invasion”, which constitutes an attack on the masculinist perception of “human agency and solidity of identity” (Plant 1997: 506, 503). The cyborg announces to the patriarch that “his drive for domination has led not to the perfection of techniques for ordering the world, but to cybernetics” (507), shattering “every patriarchal illusion, dragging the human into an alien future in which all its systems of security are powerless” (506), and, in essence, proclaiming that “patriarchy is doomed” (503).

Commenting on the way in which *The Stone Gods* relies on Haraway’s notion of the cyborg as a feminist category, Johns-Putra indicates that Spike and Planet Blue are “sites of resistance not to masculinism as such but to heteronormativity and reductivism together” (Johns-Putra 2017: 185). In the light of this, it has to be stressed that the romance between a female scientist and a female robot is contextualised in very special terms: Billie’s attraction to Spike is largely rooted in the robot’s antagonistic relation to the patriarchal culture of colonial conquest and capitalist technocracy in which the woman resides. At the same time, however, Spike’s approach to heteronormativity is dismissive largely because, as she points out, “gender is a human concept ... and not interesting” (Winterson 2008: 76). The cyborg possesses a humanized form of a woman, but, in Julie Ellam’s words, is constructed “in keeping with the futuristic expectations of a robot that is able to transcend the stereotypes of the masculine and feminine” (2010: 227). If Robo sapiens is to be seen as another stage in the evolution of Homo sapiens, then it is an ungendered evolution which might lead to inaugurating an ungendered society.

Yet, in the light of self-destructiveness which, as Winterson’s novel evinces, is ineluctably written in human nature, this new posthuman life form might offer us a more hopeful prognosis for the future. When Spike from the Post-3 War world remarks that she is “programmed not to over-masculinize data” in her “service of humankind” (Winterson 2008: 174), she might refer to the upcoming displacement of the patriarchal hegemony and capitalist narcissism. Accepting the cyborg as a model for new human subjectivity might turn our civilization away from the path towards the destruction of natural habitat and consequent self-inflicted doom. Haraway suggests that “feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control” (1991: 175). As “a cyborg world” produces “lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines” (154), we can, quite ironically, “learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos” (173). Likewise, we can perhaps learn from Winterson’s Spike how to escape the eternal recurrence of our self-annihilation.

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