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TRANS/POST-HUMANIST POETICS IN JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *THE STONE GODS*

A b s t r a c t. Among various philosophical and cultural paradigms, it is transhumanism and posthumanism that increasingly foreground an impact of technological and bioscientific advancements on the concept of mankind. Although conceptually divergent, these two theoretical approaches serve to convey utopian and dystopian tensions in Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Stone Gods* (2007), in which technology is presented both as a tool of progress and destruction. Scrutinizing an interplay between transhumanist and posthumanist poetics, the aim of this paper is to analyze the role of technology in reconfigurating the traditional idea of the human. By projecting a dystopian vision of excessive technological advancements, Winterson not only foregrounds the issue of dehumanization in a post-anthropocentric world, but she also implies a possibility of redemption through a new form of human/non-human connectedness, which constitutes a post-postmodern turn in her novel.

Key words: transhumanism; posthumanism; dystopia; post-postmodernism; human/non-human relations.

As much as radical developments in technology and biomedicine have drastically affected human lifestyles and values, so have they changed the concept of the Humanities within a post-postmodern landscape. Rather than fostering an anthropocentric view of humans as uniquely autonomous and superior beings, most new trends within the Humanities take an increasingly post-anthropocentric turn, questioning and reconfigurating the concept of the human with its fixed categories and ontological and epistemological distinctiveness. Among various philosophical and cultural paradigms, it is transhumanism and posthumanism that increasingly foreground an impact of technological and bioscientific advancements on the concept of mankind.

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Although conceptually divergent, these two theoretical approaches serve to convey respectively utopian and dystopian tensions in Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Stone Gods* (2007), in which technology is presented both as a tool of progress and destruction. Starting in an unknown, technologically advanced Planet Orbus and moving subsequently through different spatio-temporal worlds: Easter Island and the Wreck City, the novel oscillates between a utopian impulse as encapsulated by the apparently perfect society based on economic abundance and limitless consumption, and a dystopian vision of technological progress in which excessive cosmetic surgeries, genetic manipulations and robotic enhancements lead to dehumanization and social disintegration. However, the bleakness of this posthuman futurity is dispelled by a possibility of redemption through new forms of connectedness, with a human-robot relationship as a posthuman alternative to inter-human relations. Although transgressing ontological boundaries, this emotional bonding between a human and a machine underlines a post-postmodern desire "to discover new relations between selves and others, margins and centers, fragments and whole" (Huber 19).

With its repeating plots of destruction and love and recurring incarnations of the central characters, Billie/Billy Crusoe and Spike/Spikkers, *The Stone Gods* constitutes a truly complex novel, exploring the repetitive and destructive nature of human history. Starting in an unknown future, Part 1, entitled "Planet Blue", portrays a dystopian vision of the world on Planet Orbus which, with its "collapsing ice-caps, encroaching desert, no virgin forest and no eco-species left" (Winterson 9), faces an ecological destruction due to technological progress. Narrated by a dissident figure Billie Crusoe,[1] the section describes a seemingly utopian vision of a technologized society whose superficial lives, suffused with convenience technologies and aesthetic pursuits, are regulated by an oppressive corporate government called The Central Power. This dystopian projection is juxtaposed with a love story of Billie and a highly intelligent robot Spike who both set out on a mission to colonize Planet Blue, the future hope for human space colonization. However, rather than elaborating on Billie's and Spike's colonization struggle, in Part 2, Winterson switches to 1774 and presents a story of a young sailor Billy who is marooned on Easter Island with another European, named Spikkers. In this analeptic section, both of them witness a total demise of the island as the two feuding tribes cut down the last tree on the island—the destruction which implicitly refers back to the ecological

[1] An intertextual reference to *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe.

disaster in Part 1. Alternating between past and future, the final section of the book projects a futuristic post-apocalyptic vision of the world after a nuclear catastrophe called the Wreck City, a derelict ghetto area that surrounds the outskirts of the Tech City. Populated by disfigured humans and outcasts abandoned by the corporate-controlled society, the Wreck City encapsulates a bleak vision of humanity who "keep making the same mistakes again and again" (Winterson 68).

Oscillating between a technological dream and nightmare, the first part of the novel with the technologically-advanced planet Orbus and its genetically-enhanced inhabitants clearly echoes transhumanist ethics advocating that "the prospective developments in the so-called 'NBIC'[2] suite of technologies will soon allow humans an unprecedented control over their own nature" (Roden 13). Owing to enhancement technologies, humanity will be able not only to create a superior human being[3] by transgressing biological boundaries but also more favourable conditions for human progress and growth (Hauskeller, Bostrom). A range of possible techno-futuristic enhancements and developments encompasses:

> radical extension of human health-span, eradication of disease, elimination of unnecessary suffering, and augmentation of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities. Other transhumanist themes include space colonization and the possibility of creating superintelligent machines, along with other potential developments that could profoundly alter the human condition. (Bostrom)

Seen in this light, transhumanism perceives technology as "a manifestation of human liberation from bondage to nature, finitude, and the vagaries of disease, decay and death" (Graham 9).

Accentuating a belief in enhancing human physical and intellectual capacities by means of technologies, transhumanist ethics in *The Stone Gods* resonates predominantly in a projection of technologically enhanced human beings whose bodily functions can be largely controlled. The realization of this evolutionary endeavor is facilitated by scientific experiments, such as DNA modifications, which enable the autocratic state to create a longer and healthier living society freed from undesirable natural processes such as ageing. All of the Tech City citizens are subject to a genetic manipulation called 'genetic fixing'—a procedure which programmes a human body to a predetermined age for one's entire lifespan: "[m]ost men prefer to fix

[2] The acronym stands for "Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Information Technology, and Cognitive Science" (Roden 13).

[3] In this respect understood as 'posthuman' (Bostrom, Hauskeller).

younger than [late-forties], and there are no women who Fix past thirty" (Winterson 10–11). Labelled as "The DNA Dynasty", the society seems to pursue a utopian dream of eternal youth as the system prohibits natural processes to ensue social sameness and homogeneity: "Every human being in the Central Power has been enhanced, genetically modified and DNA-screened" (Winterson 77). According to Luna Dolezal, the eternally young citizens of the Central Power implicitly allude to the "'ageless generation' of contemporary celebrity culture" (98). As she further points out, although implemented to eradicate differences and inequality, the pressure for eternal youth in fact only intensifies patriarchal gender dichotomies as women feel more obliged to look youthful than men (Doelzal 98).

The advancements in biotechnologies allow people not only to control natural processes but also to actualize their aesthetic fantasies, as technology enables them to enhance their bodies. To facilitate an eternal quest for beauty, the state offers widespread cosmetic surgeries which enable the citizens to eliminate or improve their physical defects or flaws. These excessive corporeal alterations lead to an artificially beautiful sameness, as everyone looks alike "except for rich people and celebrities, who look better" (Winterson 19). In their obsessive quest for aesthetic perfection, celebrities transgress the limits of existing technologies in enhancing human bodies. As Billie states:

> Celebrities are under pressure, no doubt about it. We are all young and beautiful now, so how can they stay ahead of the game? Most of them have macro-surgery. Their boobs swell like beach balls […] They are surgically stretched to be taller, and steroids give them muscle-growth that turns them into star-gods. Their body parts are bio-enhanced, and their hair can do clever things like change colour to match their outfits. (Winterson 19)

Even though technological enhancement seems as an empowering tool of eradicating social ills connected with physicality, it serves primarily as a vehicle for creating unrealistic body ideals and exacerbating social inequalities and perversities. The latter is acutely exemplified by the ubiquitous sexualization of culture (Yazgünoğlu 151) in which children like Little Seniorita constitute cultural icons and sexual objects: "[n]ow that everyone is young and beautiful, a lot of men are chasing after girls who are just kids. They want something different when everything has become the same" (Winterson 21). Thus, rather than engendering sameness and harmony, the realization of the utopian dream of youth and beauty through bio-technological engineering leads to further social and cultural abnormalities. Eternally young and beau-

tiful, the people of the Tech City pursue their hedonistic lifestyles immersed with reality shows, shopping, sex, gambling and drinking as "the Government built a super-casino in every city, licensed twenty-four hour drinking, legalized prostitution" (Winterson 133). Although technologically transgressive, these obsessive preoccupations with cosmetic surgeries lead to cultural and intellectual impoverishment, as the society indulges itself solely in narcissistic pleasures. By portraying an overtly hedonistic landscape of the Tech City, Winterson seems to allude to the excesses and superficialities of modern life, with the vision of the human as an uncultured primitive (Dolezal 96).

Apart from the techno-optimistic vision of enhancing human nature, the transhumanist ethics resonates also in the depiction of an increasingly technologized society infused with convenience technologies, liberating people from every day burdens. Run entirely by commercial interests, the society in the Tech City is governed by a corporate infrastructure called MORE which does not only regulate the lives of its citizens through ubiquitous surveillance, but also implements multifunctional and technologically advanced robots to eradicate the need for human labour. Among various futuristic machines and gadgets: "[t]here's Kitchenhand for the chores, Flying Feet to run errands or play football with the kids. Garagehand—that's the big hairy one that's good with a spanner. There's Lend-a-Hand too, for the temporarily unpartnered" (Winterson 3). The increased technologization is acutely exemplified by the most evolved type of a robot called Robo *sapiens* which is "the first artificial creature that looks and acts human, and that can evolve like a human—within limits" (Winterson 35). Solar-powered and self-repairing, this highly intelligent, rational and emotionless entity forms a hybrid creature that serves to take "neutral, objective decisions for the global good" (Winterson 198). Designed as intelligent rather than emotional, rational rather than affectionate, Robo *sapiens* exemplifies a technologically advanced cyborg which serves to unburden people of their mental efforts as well as responsibilities for decision-making. As the narrator, Billie Crusoe attests: "we have no need for brains so our brains are shrinking. Not all brains, just most people's brains—it's an inevitable part of the progress" (Winterson 17). This implied intellectual deterioration of mankind is manifested not only by mass illiteracy: "nobody reads and writers any more—there's no need" (Winterson 9) but also by impoverishment of language, which confined solely to the simplified advertisement slogans, is devoid of complex syntax and meanings. Instead of books, pens and notebooks, the citizens of the Tech City use Speech Pads. "Single-letter recognition is

taught at schools", and "etymology is one of the victims of the state-approved mass illiteracy" (Winterson 13).

The transhumanist celebration of technology as a tool for enhancing human lives and creating the utopian future of progress recurs also in the depiction of the economic system in *The Stone Gods*. Much of the transhumanist approach is based on a premise that: "economic wealth is clearly seen as both necessary and sufficient for permanent human happiness" (Hauskeller 13). In this view, technological progress is seen as a prerequisite of prosperity and a tool of eradicating social inequalities. Its potency seems to be recognized by the corporate infrastructure of MORE which substitutes the capitalist free market economy with the economics of purpose, which is not "about making money: it is about realigning resources" (Winterson 139). Copying with the Post-3 War realities, the corporate MORE: "realized that a company's survival could no longer be about selling things, though, it could be about supplying things" (Winterson 113). With the exhaustion of the capitalist system, they transform the economy based on ownership into one based on rental: "renting is genius: we still pay, but we don't own, It was a relief when money was gone" (Winterson 117). By substituting the traditional monetary system with jeton scheme, the corporate MORE does not only eliminate unequal distribution of wealth but it also creates a dependable and steerable society with a semblance of freedom: "Capitalism has gone back to its roots in paternalism, and forward into its destiny—complete control of everything and everyone, and with our consent" (Winterson 139).

However, this essentially transhumanist celebration of progress as epitomized in the hedonistic lifestyle and the economy of purpose is deconstructed by projecting dehumanizing effects of technological developments. Rather than resulting in "evolution to a higher level of compassion and accomplishment" (Roco and Bainbridge 6), the apparent techno-utopianism leads to mankind's commodification and deprivation of freedom as it is the state that decides how the citizens should live "their lives in a way that is good for them and good for the Community" (Winterson 9). By engaging the society in narcissistic body projects and by manipulating them through the power of media, the corporate MORE government does not only debilitate people's intellectual aptitude and cultural sensitivity, but it also eradicates emotional and social bonds among people. Consequently, the Tech City is an agglomeration of alienated crowds devoid of any sense of purpose and belonging: "There's a line of hands on the rail … I know it's not the rail they're holding on to—it's life. There's too many people here who can't

hold on: it's the press of the rest that's keeping them upright, an then, later the carriage will empty" (Winterson 153). Their lack of self-determination and connectedness is most notably exemplified by their passiveness and inaction in the face of the environmental destruction. Even though Planet Orbus is facing an ecological catastrophe, as it becomes completely inhabitable, the citizens still pursue their hedonistic lifestyles rather than unite for the common good. By emphasizing social alienation and inaction, Winterson undercuts transhumanist utopianism with posthumanist disenchantment with technological advancements which bring about "dehumanization and the erosion of the spiritual essence of humanity" (Graham 2). Seen in this light, the employment of transhumanist poetics serves not only as a conceptual vehicle for projecting a seemingly utopian society, but it also serves to interrogate the impact of technological achievements on the social structure.

Challenging ontological superiority and distinctiveness of the human species, the posthumanist impulse in *The Stone Gods* resonates particularly in questioning "the immutability of boundaries between the human and the non-human" (Graham 1). According to posthumanist critics, the concept of 'the human' is an ideological construct and the existing dichotomies between human and non-human "function to domesticate and hierarchize difference within the human (whether according to race, class, gender) and to absolutize difference between the human and the nonhuman" (Halberstam and Livingston 10). In *The Stone Gods*, Winterson disrupts binaries and dualistic thinking by portraying how technological advancements, such as genetic modifications and DNA-based interventions, not only enhance lives by eradicating poverty, ageing or death but also how they conceptually obliterate physical and cognitive boundaries between man and machine. The technologization of the human body by means of genetic and DNA modifications performed on the citizens of Orbus epitomizes an ongoing process of dehumanization in which a man becomes a machine rather than a living and thinking organism. As Billie Crusoe asks herself: "What is a robot? A moving lump of metal. In this case an intelligent, ultra-sensitive moving lump of metal. What is a human? A moving lump of flesh, in most cases not intelligent or remotely sensitive" (Winterson 81). Paradoxically, the deconstruction of the human/nonhuman dichotomy is most notably accomplished through the character of Spike, an artificial yet sentient Robo *sapiens*, designed to make rational leadership decisions. As the names suggests, Robo *sapiens*, merges the words robot and human linguistically and also the notions of the human and nonhuman conceptually. With this implied fusion and

sameness of humans and machines, Winterson clearly seems to challenge an anthropocentric understanding of the human as a privileged and cognitively superior being.

In questioning the dichotomies intertwined in the concepts of the human and nonhuman, Winterson goes in so far as to challenge the concept of sexuality and gender. In doing so, she constructs characters whose ambiguous names, looks as well as sexual preferences blur the boundary between the masculine and the feminine, thus puts into question the concept of gender as such. To illustrate, the narrator and the protagonist of the story—Billie—is a beautiful robot Spike. During the course of the novel, both characters disrupt further gender binaries by making the reader try to determine their gender and sexuality. In the following narrative threads, a lesbian female Billie becomes 18th-century male sailor stranded on Easter Island with his male Dutch lover Spikkers. In the third part of the novel, Billie appears once again and Spike now becomes a female bodiless head with a sexual preference for women. By interchanging gender categories and blurring the boundary between female and male, Winterson explores the fluidity of gender and rejects an essentialist approach to it, as Spike attests: "Gender is a human concept […] and not interesting" (Winterson 63).

In disrupting gender dualities, Winterson also interrogates a role of technology in reinforcing gender stereotypes and inequalities. As Luna Dolezal points out: "although women in [The Tech City] are effectively liberated from reproductive functions and domestic drudgery, and gender inequalities seem not to exist, the patriarchal control of women through technology, especially with respect to body has intensified" (98). Despite the fact that technological enhancements allow women to control their age and improve their looks, they still reproduce patriarchal tendencies as women's aesthetic bodily modifications are engendered by men's sexual expectations and fantasies. This kind of motivation is illustrated by one of the female characters, called Pink, who wants to "be genetically reversed to twelve years old to stop her husband running after schoolgirls" (Winterson 14–15). Likewise, despite being the most intellectually advanced member of the space-mission crew, Spike's main role, as a "drop-dead gorgeous" and "absurdly beautiful" (Winterson 15) robot, confines solely to perform sexual services for the male crew. Thus, even though biotechnologies aim at eradicating gender inequalities, with the increased obsession and control of the body they only intensify gender disparities between the sexes, by making women passive and dependent on men's fantasies.

The fluidity of boundaries between humans and non-humans and the deconstruction of an essentialist human concept is acutely highlighted by the motif of radioactive mutants presented in the last part of the novel. Being the victims of a nuclear war, mutants constitute a collective of bomb-damage outcasts who due to their monstrosity and toxicity are separated at the outskirts of the Tech City—called the Wreck City. Straddling the boundaries of humans and non-humans, the mutants form hybrid creatures whose deformed bodies "ulcerated, bleeding, toothless, blind, speechless, stunted, mutant, alive" (Winterson 232) make them resemble more monsters than human beings. In her text, Winterson asks repeatedly can these monstrous others be considered as "a definition of a human being. Souls?" (232). Ambiguous as this question may seem, Winterson answers in an affirmative way: "A man with skin to his knee and beyond—a skeleton walk, a thing dug up from the grave, but not dead, live. Human." (233). By asserting their human nature, she explicitly rejects an essentialist concept of a human as the posthuman radioactive mutants serve to mark the fragility of the boundaries "by which cultures have separated nature form artifice, human from non-human, normal from pathological" (Graham 12).

Although all three linked-stories end with destruction, Winterson does offer an alternative course of action to avoid an ultimately dystopian vision of the future. In her post-anthropocentric and posthuman "universe of potentialities, waiting for an intervention to affect the outcome" (Winterson 240), she gives a possibility of redemption through a new form of connectedness as represented by human-robot relationship. As narcissistic and hedonistic-driven humans are presented as destructive agents incapable of developing close emotional bonds "we either kill each other or kill the planet or both" (Winterson 240), she offers a posthuman variant of connectedness between a human and non-human – Billie/Billy Crusoe and Spike/Spikkers. This posthuman equivalent of an inter-human relationship is validated by the possibility of evolving human attributes by machines. After being introduced to poetry, Spike/Spikkers develops an ability for human emotions and expression: "For the first time I was able to feel" (Winterson 80). Paradoxically, by unlocking the possibility for deeper cognitive and emotional feelings by robots, Winterson achieves a two-fold effect: she not only offers a posthuman alternative to inter-human relationships, but she also implies that increased technologization leads to dehumanization of relationships and bonds among people. Thus, with her statement that "Love is an intervention" (Winterson 205), Winterson implies that it is only genuine emotions and sense of togetherness that can save people from their destructive practices. With this

assertion, she raises post-postmodern questions on "'what it means to be human today', on empathy and human interaction, on existentialistic human concerns" (Timmer 361).

With an apparently utopian vision of technologically-advanced, ageless, and prosperous society and a projection of the dehumanizing effects of technological progress, Winterson intertwines both transhumanist and post-humanist poetics. In doing so, she does not only problematize the development of technological progress, but she also provides a critique of present social trends connected with increased technologization and ecological crisis. Seen in this light, the futuristic vision of the world of Orbus constitutes an allusion to our own society steered by the mass media and engaged in aesthetic and hedonistic pursuits. By expressing posthumanist suspicion of technological advances and projecting their dehumanizing effects, Winterson undercuts the utopian impulses inscribed in the projection of the society under the Central Power and reveals its oppression, inequality and intellectual and spiritual impoverishment. In this sense, Winterson echoes Rossi Braidotti, who claims: "The pride in technological achievements and in the wealth that comes with them must not prevent us from seeing the great contradictions and forms of social and moral inequality engendered by our emerging technologies" (46). By projecting a dystopian vision of excessive technological advancements, Winterson does not only foreground the issue of dehumanization in a post-anthropocentric world, but she also implies a possibility of redemption through a renewed sense of inter-human connectedness, which constitutes a post-postmodern turn in her fiction.

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POETYKA TRANS-/POSTHUMANIZMU W *KAMIENNYCH BOGACH* JEANETTE WINTERSON

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Pośród licznych paradygmatów filozoficznych oraz kulturowych teoria transhumanizmu oraz posthumanizmu znacząco uwypukla wpływ postępu technologicznego na pojęcie człowieczeństwa. Chociaż rozbieżne konceptualnie, te dwa podejścia teoretyczne służą odpowiednio do zarysowania utopijnego oraz dystopijnego modelu świata w powieści Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), w której technologia prowadzi zarówno do postępu, jak i do destrukcji. Rozpoczynająca się od ukazania zaawansowanej technologicznie planety Orbus powieść Winterson stopniowo projektuje obraz świata na skraju ekologicznej katastrofy, w którym odczłowieczone społeczeństwo obsesyjnie poddaje się manipulacjom genetycznym. Bazując na poetyce transhumanizmu oraz posthumanizmu, praca omawia wpływ technologii na tradycyjne pojęcie kategorii człowieka. W swojej dystopijnej wizji technicyzacji świata oraz ludzkiej egzystencji Winterson nie tylko ukazuje postępującą dehumanizację społeczeństwa, ale jednocześnie w posthumanistycznej formie relacji między ludźmi i maszynami upatruje możliwości uniknięcia katastrofy gatunku ludzkiego.

Słowa kluczowe: transhumanizm; posthumanizm; dystopia; post-postmodernizm; związek człowieka z maszyną.