

Jeanette Winterson's Stone Gods as Trans-world and Trans-gender Dystopia

Michaela Weiss

Silesian University, Czech Republic

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the dystopian apocalyptic vision of human civilization in the novel *The Stone Gods* by a contemporary British writer Jeanette Winterson. This postmodern narrative blends the world's colonial past with its potentially colonial future, as mankind is attempting at colonizing a new planet. While Winterson's novel is not innovative when it comes to the formal aspects of dystopias, she manages to create a sense of fluid and omnipresent history that is constantly blended into the present, bringing into focus men's self-destructive tendencies. The narrative is not linear or chronological and consists of several stories set in various times and spaces which are interconnected not only by the common theme of human greed and irresponsible economic and anti-ecological behavior, but also by the central character Billie/Billy Crusoe. Following the main gender-bending motif of Virginia Woolf's cult novel *Orlando*, Billie chooses her partners according to their personality, not gender or biological sex. The dystopian, nonlinear and often didactic tone of the novel is interwoven with poetic passages depicting romantic love that is, as is common in Winterson, solely homosexual. And it is a romance and emotions that are presented as the basis of humanity, even when it concerns love between a human and a robot.

Keywords: Dystopia; Jeanette Winterson; *Stone Gods*; postmodern narrative; colonialism; lesbian fiction

Dystopias have been gaining on popularity, especially since the publication of Aldous Huxley's (1894–1963) *Brave New World* (1932), followed by George Orwell's (1903–1950) *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Such critical and apocalyptic narratives stemmed out of the twentieth century reality and as such can be considered a modern genre. Reflecting the dehumanizing effects of mechanization and globalization, dystopias presented a warning from the future that could be even more destructive than the present. The original optimism and belief in science and progress that is a characteristic feature of modernity collapsed into the sense of alienation and fragmentation, uncovering the darker side of the utopia. Needless to say, these concepts are not opposites, as professor of history of science Michael Gordin et al. observed:

A true opposite of utopia would be a society that is either completely unplanned or is planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful. Dystopia, typically invoked, is neither of these things; rather, it is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society (Gordin 2010, p. 1).

In modernity utopias and dystopias were mainly located on an island or hidden city, yet, due to the increasingly unprecedented level of internationalization, the world has become too small for ideal communities or plans and the crisis is reaching and affecting whole human race, not only its fraction. That is why Winterson locates her potentially saving ground into space, being aware of the fact that our planet cannot offer substantial space that would enable the whole mankind to relocate safely and does not trust in betterment of the existing nations as is shown on the repeated cycle of the same destructive decisions. On the other hand, as the planet project is doomed, Winterson questions and undermines the idea of space colonization, pointing out the devastating cultural and ecological consequences of conquering other nations and spaces, adopting a more critical view towards the social system, yet, at the same time, suggesting alternative spaces or communities that could counterpoint the dominant rule.

Stone Gods consists of three seemingly independent narratives reaching a time span over several centuries. While the first section is set in the future and deals with a colonization of another planet, the second returns to the history of Easter Island, while the third is set in near-future. The stories are interconnected not only by the common theme of human greed and irresponsible economic and anti-ecological behavior, but also by the central character Billie/Billy Crusoe and Spike/Spickers whose gender and sex change throughout the texts, yet their characters remain; thus adopting a motif first employed by Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) in her fictional biography *Orlando* (1928), which addresses the issues of androgyny, bisexuality, homosexuality and gender performance, illustrated on a life story of a young nobleman Orlando who lives for four hundred years, unchanged at the age of thirty and during his life turns biologically into a woman.

While Woolf ventured into the past and gradually shifted towards the present, Winterson does not observe any chronological or linear pattern. The novel opens in a distant future when the world is divided into three political segments: the Central Power, Caliphate and Sino-Moscow Pact that are negotiating the system of colonization of a new planet Blue. Even though the planet is in its early stage of

development and is habituated by dinosaurs, the Central Power government is presenting it as ideal and life-saving to gain public support for the colonization:

“The new planet offers us the opportunity to do things differently. We’ve had a lot of brilliant successes here on Orbus – well, we are the success story of the universe, aren’t we? [. . .] But we have taken a few wrong turnings. Made a few mistakes. [. . .] Conflict is likely. A new planet means we can redistribute ourselves. It will mean a better quality of life for everyone – the ones who leave, and the ones who stay” (Winterson 2007, pp. 4–5).

The ruling elite thus imposes the image of the bright future on the masses. By making the new world publicly attractive, the government creates a utopian vision for the masses by connecting it to the nation’s colonialist past, especially of Indies, Americas and Arctic circles. The image of future paradise has to be perfect so that no opposition towards the mission could arise. As the Central Power regulates and controls the seemingly democratic and ecological distribution of resources, its chief interest is to keep the majority satisfied and reassured of the common good it would produce, preventing any suggestions concerning the saving of the current planet. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, such government prevents independent thinking and encourages “diversion and amusement, the security of identification with authority, and the comfort of conformity. The ‘world of administered life’ creates such individuals and efficiently meets their needs. Within such a world the capacity to think that things might be otherwise, or even to feel such a need, has been repressed” (Alway 1995 , p. 42). To avoid any accusation of potential violence, the government proclaims that the “[m]onsters will be humanely destroyed” (Winterson 2007, p. 6). The extermination of local inhabitants, no matter what they are, as long as they are hostile to modern “civilized” life, is generally accepted as necessary for the survival of superior species: the white Western capitalist society.

Since utopia has become mainly associated with the elite that would come up with the ideal distribution of power, wealth and material, it has acquired a rather negative connotation. According to Gordin et al.:

It carries with it the trappings of an elaborate thought experiment, a kind of parlor game for intellectuals who set themselves the task of designing a future society, a perfect society—following the pun on the name in Greek (no place, good place: imaginary yet positive) (Gordin 2010, p. 1).

Even seemingly equal distribution of wealth is still viewed as unsatisfactory as it becomes utopian only for a ruling fraction society, whereas the others are limited in their freedom of thought or expression. According to Habermas: “*Liberation from hunger and misery* does not necessarily converge with *liberation from servitude and degradation*, for there is no automatic developmental relation between labor and interaction” (Habermas 1973, p. 169). That can be one of the major reasons why dystopias often attack the originally utopian leftist world visions. Even Winterson undermines the seemingly socialist establishment by creating a society without private ownership based on ecological awareness and renting. Moreover, humans are genetically fixed at certain age of his/her choice so nobody gets old, sick or ugly. Yet, as she points out, even this state does not lead to fulfillment or happiness, but rather causes multiple deviations and perversions, especially in the sexual sphere as most

people look the same: young and beautiful, only celebrities are enhanced to look even better. Equal distribution of beauty, youth and wealth leads to alienation and boredom: “All men are hung like whales. All women are tight as clams below and inflated like lifebuoys above. Jaws are square, skin is tanned, muscles are toned, and no one gets turned on” (Winterson 2007, p. 23). As sexual adventures present the only form of release of self-expression, the women try to comply with various male appetites, especially concerning their looks and age, while men have small girls imported from the Caliphate, as the Central Power outlawed pedophilia.

The utopian image presented to the masses can be thus seen as a political and ideological tool for manipulation of dependent subjects. Moreover, as the new world is ruled by technology and all human activities were transferred onto machines, the humanity is slowly degrading, while the robots are growing more sophisticated, especially a new kind called *robo sapiens* that looks human and is capable of evolution, though within limits. While humans rely on the technology in every aspect of their lives, they gradually lose their skills and abilities, ending up defenseless against the manipulative rule, confirming Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s claim that the masses “insist on the very ideology which enslaves them” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, p. 136), and are readily trapped into the cycle of pre-given social frame, as long as they can follow their entertainment. They prove to have an almost “enigmatic readiness [...] to fall under the sway of any despotism” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, p. xiii).

Similarly to other feminist dystopias, *Stone Gods* address not only the destinies of individual characters, but focus on the very structure of the ruling system and the origin and causes of both dys- and utopian visions, affirming Patricia Melzer’s claim that “[science fiction female writers] create explicit political narratives that do not just center on an individual’s subjectivity but address *systems* that shape our world: social, technological, economic, and political systems” (Melzer 2006, p. 179). In contrast with the predominantly predatory and destructive nature of men and their ruling system, women are mainly portrayed either as victims or active opponents of the system, using their common sense, emotions and insight to save the planet or restore the natural order and balance.

The protagonist Billie Crusoe works for the Enhancement service that is responsible for making people know what is good for them and their community. Yet, she only accepted the position to be able to keep her small farm, a little utopia of her own which was considered archaic and even anarchic. She does share the general enthusiasm for re-settling and believes in restoration of the old planet: “We didn’t do anything, did we? Just fucked it to death and then kicked it when it wouldn’t get up” (Winterson 2007, p. 8). Feeling responsible for the environment, Billie tries to hide in her limited natural preserve and believes in re-establishment of the ecological balance. The same is true for women on the Easter Island from the second narrative, who try to prevent the local chiefs from putting down the last tree. Yet, the men are deaf and blind to their cries, beat them up and collectively take the tree down. Winterson here again refers to potentially saving and healing community of women that has the capacity and feeling to save the Earth, in opposition to men’s strength and reason, which is often destructive.

Winterson also questions the future of women within such a system: “We don’t breed in the womb anymore, and if we aren’t wanted for sex...But there always will be men. Women haven’t gone for little boys. Women have a different approach. Surrounded by hunks, they look for the ‘ugly man inside’. [...] So this is the future. F is for Future” (Winterson 2007, p. 26). The victimization of women is illustrated on a case Billie is assigned to. Mrs. Pink McMurphy wants to be genetically reversed to the age of twelve to revive her husband’s sexual interest. Even though such a procedure is possible, it is not common or supported; Billie is supposed to investigate the case and persuade the woman to change her decision. Yet, all attempts at rational reasoning are hopeless as Mrs. McMurphy behaves like a small girl, turning their house into pink teenage dream, willing to comply with her husband’s pedophilic desires: “‘Y’know, I’d be fucked up and miserable anyway – and if I’m going to be fucked up and miserable, I’d rather be young, fucked up and miserable. Who wants to be depressed *and* have skin that looks like fried onions?’” (Winterson 2007, p. 70)

While she fusses about her appearance and desperately tries to become attractive, young and beautiful, her husband is frequenting Peccadillo, a bar for unusual sexual services. It offers translucent waiters, “[w]hen you fuck them you can watch yourself doing it. It’s pornography for introverts” (Winterson 2007, p. 22), woman with mouths instead of her nipples and one leg for easier access, children, or a dog woman with animals included. The husband loves young children and is prepared to have fixed a nine-year old girl from the Caliphate, even though it is illegal. He supports his wife’s wish and even proclaims his deviation as acceptable and normal: “‘It’s like every other Civil Rights and Equal Rights battle, OK? You had Blacks at one time. You had Semites at one time. You had mixed marriages, you had gays. All legal, no problem. We’re just victims of prejudice and out-of-date laws’” (Winterson 2007, p. 25).

Winterson may present bizarre sexual appetites and adaptations, yet, she operates within the bi-polar gender and biological sex system. Her characters, no matter if gay or heterosexual, are always males or females, men or women. She thus challenges only the heteronormative system, which is typical for all her writing, yet does not go beyond it. Even her robo sapiens Spike has a body that’s looks female while under the upper tissue there is fully mechanical construction.

The effect of imposed social roles upon women is further demonstrated on the relationship between Billie and Spike that develops on the space mission to planet Blue. Spike starts to feel emotions and breaks the limits designed for keeping the evolution of robo sapiens under control. Captain Handsome hopes to enrich her emotion scale by starting an affair with her and Spike is more than willing to learn, yet only from Billie. The novel starts to follow their romantic relationship that gradually strengthens and overcomes any prejudice. The originally highly political and ecological tale thus turns into a lesbian interspecies romance, in which Winterson once again distorts and challenges gender expectations.

In the space Spike starts to understand the social nature of gender and by choosing Billie rather than Captain Handsome asserts a right for choice of partners. Whereas on her previous mission she served not only a perfect intelligent machine but her construction corresponded with the image of a perfect female body so that she could

provide sexual services. Moreover, she programmed in such a way as to be willing to perform her role.

Throughout the text, Spike is viewed and classified as a woman, Winterson here echoes the theories of Simone de Beauvoir. While de Beauvoir who claimed that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychic, economic destiny determines [...] the human female. [...] It is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (De Beauvoir 1949, p. 281). Her views were further developed by Monique Wittig who undermines the whole concept of a woman, which she aims at destroying and deconstructing. According to Wittig, the concept of woman is “still imprisoned in the categories of sex (woman and man), but holds onto the idea that the capacity to give birth (biology) is what defines a woman” (Wittig 2003, p. 250). Winterson completely omits the biological basis of woman as neither Billie nor Spike desire pregnancy. Moreover, the robo sapiens cannot conceive and has only an exchangeable silicon-lined vagina, still, she is treated as a woman, yet her exploitation is not based on reproductive but solely sexual purposes. Paraphrasing de Beauvoir, Spike was not born, but constructed a woman. Being a woman thus turns out to be both social and technological construct, which leads to naturalizing the social (male) needs. As Wittig observes:

But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an ‘imagery formation,’ which reinterprets physical features (in themselves neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived (Wittig pp. 249–250).

Being aware of the mechanical and un-natural construction of Spike’s body, which is “sophisticated and mythic”, Billie does not want to get involved with a creature she does not perceive as a woman: “‘I don’t want to get personal,’ I said, ‘but I’ll say it again – you are a robot. Do you want to kiss a woman so that you can add it to your database?’ ‘Gender is a human concept,’ said Spike, ‘and not very interesting. I want to kiss you.’ She kissed me again” (Winterson 2007, p. 76). Despite her mechanical nature, Spike is deeply inspired by and is determined to find out what it is like to be loved the way it was presented in the poem, ignoring Billie’s protests that she does not want to be a robot enhancement.

Billie is trapped within the imposed understanding of femininity, even though she, as a lesbian, does not fit the heteronormative system. She still upholds the prescribed norm of a natural, biological woman, even though there are close to none in the world she lives in. Most females are genetically fixed or transformed, superficially reaching for the new social ideal they cannot fit in. Even though Billie did not undergo any genetic alteration, she tried to hide it and besides, looked beautiful and looked young enough to pass. While she is critical to the trends dictated by the system that women have followed, she does not directly oppose them.

After initial mistrust and following the limited view of the concept of a sex and gender, Spike persuades Billie to get beyond the obsolete definitions and constructions and rely on her emotions instead:

My lover is made of a meta-material, a polymer tough as metal, but pliable and flexible and capable of heating and cooling, just like human skin. [...] She has no limbic system because she is not designed to feel emotion.

She has no blood. She can't give birth. Her hair and nails don't grow. She doesn't eat or drink. She is solar-powered. She has learned how to cry (Winterson 2007, p. 83).

Both "women" reject the traditional bipolar gender division, which Spike dismisses as "human concept" and "not very interesting" (Winterson 2007, p. 76). Changing the way of Billie's constrained thinking, Spike can now be loved and celebrated as a woman she read about in poetry, fulfilling Wittig's ideal of lesbian being a "not-woman" and "not-man" (Wittig p. 251).

However, Winterson pushes the boundaries of femininity or humanity even further in the last narrative, which chronologically predates the opening one. In the world that faces the consequences of the third world war, a young scientist Billie is responsible for the first robo sapiens, Spike, who was created to ensure the world's piece and sustainability. Though still beautiful as in the first section, Spike has no body, only a head. Their relationship with Billie is thus purely platonic, yet equally strong.

Spike as an intelligent robo sapiens understands the nature of oppression and is prepared to help to establish a new, more democratic system, as she is aware of the fact that humans degraded to such an extent that they cannot stand up for themselves anymore:

Humans have given away all their power to a "they". You aren't able to fight the system because without the system none of you can survive. You made a world without alternatives, and now it is dying, and your new world already belongs to "they" (Winterson 2007, p. 79).

As she realizes that man/womankind is too comfortable within the established system that it cannot effectively resist it, she stands as an example of breaking the rules fore-set for her by shifting her evolutionary limits beyond her predefined possibilities. She rejects the categories based on the political system requirements that are still founded on the obsolete biological distinction. Winterson realized that for a change of a system, individual changes of thinking and perception have to come first:

In the days before we invented spacecraft, we dreamed of flying saucers, but what we finally built were rockets: fuel-greedy, inefficient and embarrassingly phallic. When we realized how to fly vast distances at light-speed, we went back to the saucer shape: a disc with solar sails. Strange to dream in the right shape and build in the wrong shape, but maybe that is what we do every day, never believing that a dream could tell the truth (Winterson 2007, p. 75).

Placing an emphasis on dreams, intuition and openness towards love and emotions, corresponds to Horkheimer's and Adorno's claim that the regression of subjected mankind is caused by their "inability to hear the unheard of with their own ears, to touch the unapprehended with their own hands" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, p. 36). The belief in technology also leads to a destruction of the planet and the

explorers, as the asteroid that is meant to exterminate the dinosaurs, sends the planet into Ice Age. This mission exemplifies just another case of colonization that brought disasters both to the space and its inhabitants, similarly to the Easter Island, where the natives used up all wood and stone available on the land to build large moai statues of faces of deified ancestors. As a result, the island turned into inhospitable dessert: “The island was stripped and bare, with few trees or shrub-bushes of any kind. Nature seemed hardly to have provided it with any fit thing for man to eat or drink (Winterson 2007, p.118).

Winterson, however, manages to combine the social criticism with stories of common individuals, showing the effects of the destructive power on human lives. To prove her trans-gender attitude, this narrative features a sailor and member of the colonizing crew Billy, whose life is saved by one of the natives with European origin Spikkers. Yet, their relationship becomes immediately more intimate as Spikkers expects a reward: “I put my hand down to where he was stiff and soon had him tidy and soft again (Winterson 2007, p. 128). Similarly to the other narratives, their romance slowly develops into mutual love, care and understanding, emphasizing the universality of human experience.

While Billy offers an outsider’s and observer’s perspective, Spikkers explains the events from the inside, though the fact that he can speak English, Spanish and can write, partly excludes him from the community. As the robo sapiens from the previous section, he is more “technically developed” and dreams of the peace and order on the island, yet as he cannot step out of the system, he is choosing between two chiefs who both proved destructive in their leadership. On the other hand, Billy who lands involuntarily on the island and is left behind by his crew, only learns of the effects of “civilizing” other lands from the native’s narrative. Still, even their good intentions and attempts to bring the island back to its tradition and order fail, not due to their lack of abilities, but male competitiveness that leads to Spikker’s death. Their only legacy is their mutual love: “[I] licked the blood from his mouth and tried to give him my breath and I would have given him one of my legs and one of my arms and one of my kidneys and half of my liver and four pints of my blood and all easy for I had already given him my heart. Do not die” (Winterson 2007, p. 139).

As long as there are Billies and Spikk/ers, mankind will remain human, as for Winterson same-sex relationships disrupt not only the heteronormative system but also the social constructs of man or woman: “Truth tell, anywhere is a life, once there is love” (Winterson 138). In both sections it was homosexual love freed from prejudice and system requirements that led to at least individual and subjective redemption, while the rest of humanity did not oppose the establishment, they complied with the imposed limitations and entered just another destructive cycle of human history, often closely linked to devastating colonization and “civilization” of both the land and its inhabitants. As in most of Winterson’s novels, *Stone Gods* consists of parallel stories from various times and spaces, suggesting a cyclical view of human history. “Everything is imprinted forever with what it was once was” (Winterson 2007, p. 246). The pattern from past colonizing of the unknown lands and islands is repeated with the new planet, while the characters and consequences are always the same.

Yet, the main theme of the book is not the colonization of other planet suitable for life as it may seem from the first part; Winterson shows great awareness of the roots and causes of dystopian thinking. As anti/dys/u-topias reflect the state of contemporary and historical events, she is tracing the human qualities and general circumstances leading to the state of crisis. While the first part of the book deals with catastrophic consequences of colonizing a new planet, the second part goes back to the time of Easter Island's exploration and the third part returns to near-future, where Billie finds a manuscript in a metro called *The Stone Gods*, the whole planet Blue is thus suddenly turned into fiction, what remains is the desolate past and equally hopeless present. What is mankind left with is a planet that used to be blue, and a capacity for poetry and love. By providing redemptive models and alternatives, Winterson confirms the dystopia's corrective function of idealized societies; even when her characters failed in their political missions. Their realization of oppressive social constructs and politics creates a space for negotiation between new utopian possibilities and fully hopeless and negative dystopian future.

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