

Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*: A Postmodern Warning

Jeanette Winterson'un *Taş Tanrılar*'ı: Postmodern Bir Uyarı

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Abstract

Jeanette Winterson attempts to provoke a new consciousness of existence in her 2007 novel *The Stone Gods* and stir the masses to re-evaluate the human condition under the encroaching shadow of death awaiting our mother earth. *The Stone Gods* can be read as the continuation of her 2005 novel *Weight* where she already implied an alternative perception of space/universe. Along with its apparent postmodern tissue, *The Stone Gods* offers a lament for the human condition which is acutely suffering from the deprivation of dreams, future hopes and sense of reality on one hand, the ongoing corruption of our ecological system on the other. In the novel the citizens of Orbus (an unknown future world) are presented as dehumanized figures for whom "age is only an information failure" stemming from the body's loss of fluency, nerve disconnection and cell mutation occurring in DNA nucleus. This paper aims at analysing how Winterson detects the postmodern superficiality, obsession with appearance, lack of hope, memory and conscience in *The Stone Gods* which, contrary to being a postmodern text, concentrates on giving a moral message with its satiric as well as parodic double voice about the changing experience of ageing for man and mother earth in the new millenium.

Key Words: *The Stone Gods*, postmodern fiction, satire, ageing, ecology.

Özet

Jeanette Winterson 2007 tarihli *Taş Tanrılar* adlı romanında dünyanın yaklaşmakta olan sonunu ekolojik olarak değerlendirirken aynı zamanda insanlık durumunu analiz eder. *Taş Tanrılar*, Winterson'un 2005 yılında çıkardığı, uzay ve evren ilişkisine göndermeler yaptığı *Ağırlık* adlı romanının devamı gibi okunabilir. *Taş Tanrılar*, yapı olarak ne kadar postmodern gibi dursa da aslında bir yanıyla insanlık durumuna, insanın kaybolan hayallerine, gelecek umutlarına ve gerçeklik algısına, diğer yanıyla da dünyamızın bozulmakta olan ekolojik dengesine bir ağıt niteliğindedir. Romanda, uzak bir gelecekte yaşayan Orbus diyarının sakinleri gayri insani özellikleriyle betimlenir. Bu insanlar için yaşlanma sadece DNA'da görülen bir sistem hatasıdır ve kolaylıkla onarılabilir. Bu çalışma Winterson'un postmodern yüzeyselliğe, görüntü saplantısına, umut eksikliğine, bellek ve vicdan yitimine bakışını incelemeyi hedeflemektedir. Romanın postmodern, parodik ve oyunbaz

yapısının altında gizlenen yergi unsurlarına ve yeni milenyum insanına yaptığı eleştirilere de ışık tutulacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Taş Tanrılar*, postmodern roman, yergi, yaşlanma, ekoloji.

Introduction

To those who are acquainted with the novels of Winterson, her obsession with life writing, her keen interest in history, and her relish for metafiction and intertextuality are obvious. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* she narrates her life by interweaving the Bible and Arthurian romance; in *Boating For Beginners* she uses the story of Noah's Ark as pretext; in *Sexing the Cherry* she grafts it with a grotesque tale set back in the 16th century; in *The Passion* she camouflages it with a carnivalesque Venetian tale told in the time of Napoleon; in the *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* she disguises it as myth. *The Stone Gods*, her 2007 science fiction, with its semi-autobiographic content, is no exception among the others. It is again about a person who is left by her real parents, brought up by adopted parents and whose life is self-made. In other words, Winterson dearly enjoys the Deleuzian "maximum difference arising from maximum repetition." However, in this paper, I will try to offer a reading of *The Stone Gods* focusing on its dystopic, satiric content which is framed by a postmodern treatment of science fiction. I will analyse these elements in connection with Jean Baudrillard's theories on the human condition in the late capitalist, globalized, free market economic system which is underlined by the mania of consumption as manipulated by mass-media and information technologies.

I believe *The Stone Gods*, as a science fiction, is a prolific and vivid illustration of Baudrillard's prophetic critique of postmodernity and the dehumanization of mankind. Interestingly, Douglas Kellner, in his book on Jean Baudrillard, notes that Baudrillard's texts are also "arguably quite good science fiction [and] rather problematical as models of social theory. Like a good science fiction writer, Baudrillard often illuminates aspects of reality frequently overlooked, by utilizing the vantage point of a future intensification of present social trends [...] One can thus read Baudrillard as providing some great dystopic fiction in the tradition of *1984* and *Brave New World*, which takes current trends to possible conclusions and provides instructive warnings about certain social tendencies and phenomena." (1989: 203).

This is exactly what Winterson does in *The Stone Gods*. She constructs her novel with a didactic warning: "if things go on like this, this is what will happen", and translates Baudrillard's theories into a highly parodic, yet satiric fictional narrative which is rich with visual imagery. Winterson on her website summarizes *The Stone Gods* as follows:

The Stone Gods is written in four parts; the first part begins on Orbus, a world very like earth, and like earth running out of resources and suffering from the severe effects of climate change. This is a world where everyone is bio-enhanced and

bored to death. It is a world that has run out of possibilities. Then, a new planet is discovered, perfect for human life. This planet, Planet Blue, has only one drawback – the dinosaurs. A mission leaves Orbus to get rid of the dinosaurs. Our guide through the novel is Billie Crusoe, a disillusioned scientist in Parts 1, 3, 4, and a young sailor, (Billy), in Part 2, which is set on Easter Island in the eighteenth century. Billie is part of the mission to Planet Blue, and so is Spike, a perfect robo-sapiens. What happens between them explores the boundaries between carbon and silicon life forms – in other words, what is a human being, how do we define what is human, and how do we define what is love and what is possible when love is present? (Winterson, on “*The Stone Gods*”)

The Stone Gods

The book has four parts -Planet Blue, Easter Island, Post-3 War and Wreck City- and the whole narrative is told from Billie and Spike’s points of view. The first part, Planet Blue, forms the main body of the work. In this part, Planet Orbus is introduced as a dying planet whose resources have been used and abused beyond the point of possible renewal. Planet Blue, on the contrary, is a newly found planet which is green, clean and fresh. Orbus people witness their chance of a lifetime, for “they are running out of planet and have found a new one”, a new home, a second chance. The narrative starts in the middle of Orbus people’s plans about colonizing Planet Blue which is advertised on TV every second. Orbus is divided into three continental states: Central Power, Eastern Caliphate and SinoMosco Pact, the most powerful of which being the Central Power. Billie Crusoe is a citizen of this state. She is a thirty-year old woman who works in the Enhancement Services as PR staff. She is a dissident figure who is suspicious about the state of humanity in a seemingly civilized and democratic world. In that, she can be perceived as a descendant of 1984’s protagonist Winston Smith. She is an anti-humanist when the future of the planet and its ecological system are concerned. Spike, on the other hand, is a sexy, dark-haired, green eyed robo sapiens who is the latest achievement of the hi-tech civilization. They fall in love and leave Planet Orbus together to start a new life in Planet Blue. The second part, Easter Island, breaks the science fiction frame of the book by presenting an eighteenth century version of man’s discovering a new land and destroying it with imperialistic desires. After all “She is all states, and all princes I, Nothing else is...”, and this line from John Donne’s “The Sun Rising” provides the leitmotif upon which the sole criticism of the book is structured. Earth is all states, human being is all princes and nothing else is. In this part, the characters Billy and Spickers are the altered-incarnations and male counterparts of Billie and Spike on Orbus. The novel owes its title to the Moai (the idols made of stone) which were found in Rapanui, the original name of the Easter Island before being colonized by Europeans. History repeats itself and man keeps on building and destroying stone gods. The third and fourth parts take us back to the beginnings of postmodernism in 1980s and provide us with a background about

how planet Orbus as described in the first part became what it is. In this version of postmodernity, however, the third world war has taken place and people have been suffering the consequences of mass nuclear explosions and radioactive dissemination. Post-3 War divides the states into Tech Cities and Wreck Cities. Wreck City is very much like the Proles of *1984*. It feels like the edge of the world, a no man's land. It is where you live when you can't live anywhere else: no insurance, no assistance, no welfare and no police (*The Stone Gods*, 2007: 151). These flashbacks enable the reader to rationalize the current situation of Planet Orbus. In these four parts, Winterson's synchronical approach to past, present and future stems from her belief that "everything is imprinted for ever with what it once was." (207) For her, future can be treated as a remembered past and *The Stone Gods* is the story of "a repeating world." (146)

The name Orbus is an allusion to Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Tlön, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius". Borges' story is about another repeating world, this time, a speculative unknown world which -according to different sources- has three names (Tlön, Uqbar or Orbis Tertius). The story is constructed in such a simulative way that, during the course of reading, this unknown world transforms the reader into one of its inhabitants. We can have the same feeling while reading *The Stone Gods*. Baudrillard's interpretation of science fiction confirms this feeling of *deja vu*: "There is nothing prophetic about science fiction. It has no prophetic value. It contains little in the way of structural invention; but it is an inexhaustible mine of imaginary solutions to stereotyped needs...In a way, science fiction is the apotheosis of tinkering. But while its true exploratory value may be feeble, it supplies us with a wealth of information on the unconscious" (in Kellner, 1989: 128). Science fiction, then, has nothing new to say and always talk about the present state of humanity. Here it is important to note that Borges has been a rich source of inspiration not only for Winterson in forming tales about history and repetition, but also for Baudrillard in examining the essence of simulacra.

If we return to the first part we see Billie questioning whether Orbus people deserve a second chance or not. She is an eccentric who lives on a farm, at a time when farms no longer exist; reads books, although books are no longer printed; and, has a knowledge of history, although historical consciousness too is being erased (Dennison, "The Stone Gods"). The people of Central Power are governed and controlled by a corporate infrastructure named MORE. MORE, in capital letters, signifies the system's greediness and hunger for excessive consumption which is encouraged by libidinal economy. The society is a hi-tech, hi-stress, hi-mass post industrial society which assumes to be highly democratic and civilized. Yet, behind this seemingly democratic world is the totalizing power of media and fashion system which colonizes and manipulates the masses. The metropolis is the agglomeration centers of the masses (the alienated crowds) where they share the same illusion of an advanced civilization. However, for the system, they are just statistics and commodified objects. Baudrillard's interpretation of New York is similar to the Tech City in Orbus: "Why do people live in New York? There is no relationship between them. Except for an inner electricity which results from the

simple fact of being crowded together. A magical sensation of contiguity and attraction for artificial centrality. There is no human reason to be there, except for the sheer ecstasy of being crowded together” (Baudrillard, 1988: 15). For these postmodern collectivities, or, to allude to Jose Ortega y Gasset, the masses, we might say that there is no possible culture to inhabit them as cultivated, individual beings who have noble causes to live and fight for. This new type of man is not an intellectual, he has no taste for aesthetics, no knowledge of history, a simple illiterate or barbarian who wants his motor-car and enjoys it, believing that it is a spontaneous fruit of an Edenic tree (Ortega y Gasset, 1961: 55, 62). This consumer society, for Baudrillard, creates the illusion by offering the individual the possibility, for the first time in history, of total liberation and self-realization. The nihilism of consumption is thus effectively countered by a “new humanism” of consumption. But the individual in consumer society is free as a consumer and only as a consumer, and this emancipation is just an illusion (Baudrillard, 1996: 201-204). This new humanism, for Lyotard, implies inhumanism. Lyotard amply notes that this new perception of human is poisoned by the lie of development. The striking thing about this metaphysics of development is that it needs no finality. Development is not attached to an Idea, and it has no end (Lyotard, 1998: 7).

Thus, when we go back to the “developed” world of Orbus, we see that air pollution and global warming are at the highest levels due to the destabilization of the planet in the name of progress and economic growth. Orbus people cannot go outdoors without their pollution filtering masks. Orbus has no natural fauna and flora left. Thanks to the advances in micro and molecular biology, meat and vegetables are cloned in labs and mass-produced in factories. Organic food is perceived as diseased and dirty. Moreover, since robots are doing all the work for them, the minds of Orbus people have atrophied. Literacy has plummeted, and Orbus people rely more than ever on the Central Power to do things for them. Robots of all kinds are substituting for human beings in every aspect of life. They are so various and multifunctional that they can be used as pets, house cleaners, cops, cars, partners, computers and so forth. People of Orbus are no longer using their brains and bodies since robots are the new generation of labourers. BeatBots are used as traffic wardens, Nifties for underfloor heating and foot massage, Kitchenhands for cooking, Flying Feet to run errands and play football with kids, Tourbots as tourist guides and Lobots for cleaning. These robots are reminiscent of Baudrillard’s definition of gizmos or gadgets “whose nature is a mystery to everyone though everyone is sure it does have a use” (Baudrillard, 1996: 123). Gizmo signifies nothing more than a formal operation: serving to the belief that for every need there is a mechanical answer. For Baudrillard, “Every object in the system claims to be functional, just as every regime claims to be democratic” (1996: 67). The most evolved type of robot in Orbus is Robo-sapiens. It thinks, remembers, knows, evaluates, criticizes, and examines everything for human beings. However, although it is created as thought rather than emotion, neural rather than limbic, it finds itself, in the case of Spike, evolving from an all superego slave into an individual with a strong ego. It can love, have sex, read poetry and feel its

sentiment. While robots are being evolved into a higher, dignified being, man is being reduced to an object in the colonizing system of signs. The Orbus people have low IQs because they do not read and write. They use the language of advertisement which is devoid of syntax and formed by signification. Instead of books, pens and notebooks they are using Speech Pads. "Single-letter recognition is taught at schools" (*The Stone Gods*, 10), and "etymology is one of the victims of the state-approved mass illiteracy" (13). These examples coincide with Baudrillard's thesis on the universal impoverishment of language caused by the Esperanto of signs, and the result is Newspeak. Fashion system is manipulating and remotely controlling man's brains, desires, feelings and dreams. "Brains are shrinking" and the gap between the Neanderthal and homosapiens is narrowing down (*The Stone Gods*, 14). Man in Orbus is regarded as a machine rather than a living organism and his bodily parts can be enhanced. After falling in love with a *robo sapiens*, Billie 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" (81). The inhuman system causes this fundamental mutation in the ecology of human species.

People are artificially beautiful. Everyone, in fact, looks alike, "except for rich people and celebrities, who look better. That's what you'd expect in a democracy" (19). The corporate infrastructure of Tech City does everything to satisfy the needs of the citizens. It is also responsible for the manipulation of needs, but it is impossible to distinguish between true and false needs. Plastic surgery, DNA modification and genetic age fixing are widespread, and no longer optional. The system prohibits natural ageing and becomes a hell of sameness. As Spike points out, "Every human being in the Central Power has been enhanced, genetically modified and DNA-screened. Some have been cloned. Most were born outside the womb" (63-64). Baudrillard foresaw the future of genetic studies in his essay "Clone Story". He says: "Already, biophysicoanatomical science, by dissecting the body into organs and functions, begins the process of the analytic decomposition of the body, and micromolecular genetics is nothing but the logical consequence, though at a much higher level of abstraction and simulation –at the nuclear level of command cell, at the direct level of the genetic code, around which this whole phantasmagoria is organized" (Baudrillard, 1991: 98). Baudrillard believes, by reference to Benjamin, that the age of mechanical reproduction will result in a loss of aura in human beings as well. What is lost is the original, the natural and the real human and what is created is a simulation of it. Donna Haraway shares these views by stating that "the distinction between human and machine no longer makes sense: we have all become cyborgs, which is at once a result of the rapidly increasing developments of medical technology, which provide us not just with replacement prostheses such as artificial legs or hearing aids but also with mechanical devices to replace key organs such as the heart, and also an outcome of the imaginations of contemporary culture that is intensified with robots that have become humanized" (Haraway, 1991: 149). Thus, cyborg is our new ontology, and post-industrial consumption culture is our new nature. For this system aged and old looking people are disgusting.

One day Billie meets a woman who is fumbling with her mask, coughing. She goes to help her and the woman grabbing her hand says “Getting old”, and Billie wonders if she misheard because they didn’t use those words anymore. They don’t need to use them for they are irrelevant to their experience. “Getting old”, the woman says again and pulls off her mask. Her eyes were bright and glittering (an allusion to Ancient Mariner), but her face was lined, worn, weathered, battered, purple-veined and liver-spotted, with a slot for a mouth, garishly coated with red lip stick. Billie recoils for she had never seen a living person look like this. She had seen archive footage of how humans used to age, but in front of her now, was a thing with skin like lizard’s (*The Stone Gods*, 37). These sentiments of Billie are remarkable for us to understand how Orbus people consider ageing as a disease.

Orbus people celebrate their G-Days (the day of being genetically fixed) instead of birthdays since they are not ageing anymore. They call themselves “the DNA Dynasty” and for them as Billie describes: “Ageing is information failure. The body loses fluency. Command stations no longer connect with satellite stations. Relay breaks down. The body is designed to repair and renew itself, and most cells are only about a third as old as our birth years, but mitochondrial DNA is as old as we are, and has always accumulated mutations and distortions faster than the DNA in the nucleus. For centuries we couldn’t fix that- and now we can”(9).

The words “death”, “to die”, and “dead” are no longer part of their language, and they are disturbed if one uses them. The dearest fantasy of humanity has been actualized and the story of Dorian Gray has come true. But “now that everyone is young and beautiful, a lot of men are chasing girls who are just kids. They want something different when everything has become the same” (17). Making everyone young and beautiful also made them bored to death with sex, and this is a global crisis! (19) The allure of youth is now taken to the extreme. Women who have been “fixed” not to age past twenty-four are now competing with twelve-year-olds, or at least with women who look twelve. The kids are generally bought from the Eastern Caliphate. “They wouldn’t do it to the kids born in the Central Power because a) it is illegal, and b) they are civilized” (19). The irony of Orbus is that while its people are getting younger, the planet is old and dying. It only has an estimate of fifty years left. But instead of saying Orbus is dying they prefer to say “it is evolving in a way that is hostile to human life”(7).

Baudrillard noticed the postmodern inclination of excluding death from life. Similar views were formerly held by Walter Benjamin in “The Story-Teller” and Michel Foucault in “Heterotopias”. However, Baudrillard pushes this to its limits when he says: “It is the dead who are first put at the periphery of the city in order to ensure the operationality of the living, of the human... If the cemetery no longer exists it is because modern cities have assumed their function: they are dead cities and the cities of the dead. And if the great metropolis is the accomplished form of all culture, then simply ours is a dead culture” (in Pefanis, 1991: 13-14). Baudrillard finds the reason of the exclusion of death in the systematic manipulation of signs in favour of consumption. For him, there are no limits to consumption –no need to be satisfied. We consume for the sake of consuming just as we live for the sake of living. We have to go on living in order to consume more. Moreover, “consumption

is irrepressible because it is founded upon *lack*" (Baudrillard, 1996: 217-224). Baudrillard's metropolis as "the city of the dead" marks the death of the traditional, dignified human being as defined by humanism and the enlightenment. The modern body is, therefore, a marked body, a body not only marked by the signs of fashion and sexuality but also prostituted by them.

Conclusion

The Stone Gods, to conclude, vividly portrays the future of this system which results in excessive perversion and paedophilia, which are the obvious symptoms of libidinal economy: an all Eros and no Thanatos concept of life. By proposing the chance of finding an alternative planet, the novel problematizes the concept of having a second chance which will bring the notion of Apocalypse to an end. If humanity finds another planet, another "blue ball with the lucky number on it" (*The Stone Gods*, 202) teleology will be over. As we all know, life requires a final in order to make sense. We owe the possibility of all meaning to our mortality. We have created ethics, sins and redemptions according to a doom's day scenario. We all share this drive to death. Without the idea of telos, or apocalypse, human being is an ever young Dorian Gray without his portrait. To the question "Do we deserve a second chance?", the answer of *The Stone Gods* is a decisive "NO!" With this answer the book, however postmodern it may seem, becomes a satire, and functions as an apt admonition, a miraculous picture reflecting our natural/organic essence while we are standing in the threshold of the inhuman hell of sameness.

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