

Post-Apocalyptic Themes and Postmodernism in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*

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Abstract

The postmodern narrative strategies of *The Stone Gods* are fragmentary and non-linear, using such devices to present a nuanced commentary on cyclical human self-destruction on Orbus, a dying planet on its last days, and two other apocalyptic realms: the defunct Easter Island civilization and post-nuclear Tech City. The novel uses both narrative lines running simultaneously to show how different human civilizations share similar dynamics concerning/propped up by identical mechanisms of environmental degradation, resource exploitation, and societal breakdown.

The postmodern narrative devices: temporal dislocation, metacommentary, and repeated characters serve to confront not merely specific narrative readers but civilization generally with aspects of what is termed The Fractured Reality of the Anthropocene. The introduction of Spike, a synthetic cyborg with authentic human emotion and consciousness, serves to deconstruct humanist notions of consciousness and intersubjectivity, extending such notions to other beings. The novel transcends postmodern irony and nihilism to embrace what critics call Metamodernism, fluctuating separately between apocalyptic urgency and knowledge about cyclical human failure.

This dual characterization is literally embodied in both disjunct narrative confusion and passionate prosaic expression a combination rejecting simplistic solutions to these apocalypses while nevertheless upholding intersentence functions concerning love, connection, and meaning-acting both on a mere rational level and embodied on more intuitive substructural senses associated amaze particularly secured on latter. Using ecocriticism and queer theory, *The Stone Gods* places the fate of both environment and human civilization exemplarily within and simultaneously outside overarching narratives about Capitalist patriarchies and/or Heteronormativities.

The final project is to offer to such a civilizational threatened scenario one on which there is established this asymptotic constructively pessimistic vision ported toward necessarily coupling probability estimates concerning civilization's cyclical constructive self-destruction with necessary engagement therewith on both love and knowledge fronts within our contemporary normalized called The Anthropocene Epoch.

Keywords: Postmodernism; metamodernism; climate fiction; ecocriticism; Anthropocene; narrative fragmentation; cyborg theory; posthumanism; environmental catastrophe; queer theory; Jeanette Winterson; *The Stone Gods*; constructive pessimism; narrative recursion; simulation theory; biopolitics; queer temporality; geotrauma

I. INTRODUCTION

Today's world faces a lot of very serious problems. Our air and water are polluted. There are wars, which destroy countries and cities. Machines and technological advances become increasingly powerful each year. Yet we seem to be unable to refrain from repeating the same mistakes over and over again. We see history repeating itself, and humanity doesn't seem to learn anything from its past mistakes. In 2007, British author Jeanette Winterson wrote a book called *The Stone Gods* which illustrates exactly this problem. The book gives us stories related to three different times and worlds, and in each instance, humanity destroys itself and its environment in almost identical ways. This is an endless pattern, a circling generated over and over again without escape. Jeanette Winterson is known as a writer of experimental, obviously difficult novels. Her writings are habitually experimental, playing with traditional stories, the weaving of different times and perspectives and kinds of writings together. *The Stone Gods* was published during a time of rising concern about climate change and the wars resulting after the year 2001.

It has some of the elements of science fiction, but carries a deep warning for environmental destruction. But this is not a simple story which carries its warnings in simple terms. Instead, the author uses literary devices which are complex in such a way that the reader is brought to question reality itself. The narrative is divided into three main sections, which take place in three different worlds, the overcrowded planet Orbus, which is on the brink of destruction, a moment in history on Easter Island in 1774, and a projected Tech City after World War Three. These three worlds are linked by more than just time, they are the subject of the shared themes of ecological disaster, human greed, and the cyclical collapse of civilization.

It is the contention of this paper that the reason for this is that Winterson employs post-modern literary techniques (that is, non-linear time, self-referential narrative, and recurrence of the character Billie), to produce a highly effective critique of the predictable cycle of destruction of human civilization. The book shows us how the suspicion of progress, together with the compelling and always recurring need in man for love and companionship produces what literary critics call a "feeling structure". This structure of feeling oscillates between two irrevocably opposed forces: the fatalistic view that apocalypse is inevitable, and the obstinate hope that redemptive companionship and love are still important. *The Stone Gods* do not throw up easy answers or simple solutions. They show us that post-modern literary devices are the only valid ways to think about and represent a world that is probably faced with multiple catastrophes at once.

This paper will attempt to outline more than one interconnected argument about the book. In the first instance, we will consider the post-modern literary narrative devices, which Winterson employs, not the least of which are the broken narrative time schemes, the metanarrative comments, or the intertextual references, in order to force the reader to alter their conceptions of time, progress, and truth. In the second place, we will consider the three worlds which are post-apocalyptic in the novel, and point out how, despite the different historical backgrounds, the same patterns of human self-destruction are evinced in each. In the third place, we will consider Spike, the cyborg or artificial being, who refutes the traditional humanist ideas of consciousness, feeling, and identity. In the fourth breath, we shall investigate the ecological aspects of the work and how it speaks to current environmental catastrophe. Finally, we will

examine how Winterson's work moves from straight-forward post-modern irony to what is now being called metamodernism, a synthetic condition of mind which exhibits a mixture of earnestness and scepticism, hope and realism.

II. THE POSTMODERN CONDITION AND THE STONE GODS

In order to understand what is meant by postmodernism, we must first understand what it is against. For centuries, people believed in great stories of progress, meaning, and truth. These were called "metanarratives." Men believed that through science, reason, and technology, man would improve and reach new heights. They believed that there existed one true reality and one right way to interpret the world. Postmodernism rejects all of these beliefs. Philosopher Jean-François Lyotard defined postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives," which means a disbelief or mistrust of these great stories that claim to explain everything⁽¹⁾. In *The Stone Gods*, Winterson demonstrates this incredulity. Her book is an attack on the belief that technology will save us, that progress is inevitable, or that any one great story can explain the world.

The most obvious postmodern trait of *The Stone Gods* is its refusal to tell the story in any straightforward way, or in a chronological manner. Instead of going from point A to point B and from point C to D in an orderly fashion, Winterson hops from one of three different worlds to another. The reader is never able to tell whether he is reading about the past, present, or future. Actions which seem to take place in the future are merely a repetition of actions that had taken place in the very distant past. Characters who seem to be new characters are merely the old ones again appearing at different times, in this time machine. This fragmentation is intentional. It forces the reader to work much harder in order to understand the story. It creates a confusion and disorientation – feelings that match those which we really have as we experience catastrophic change in the real world. Nothing makes sense. The time sequence is broken. The story cannot be put together again in a neat way. The technique of creating a lack of linear and clear understanding in the minds of readers is one of the essential features of postmodern fiction.

One of Winterson's most lethal postmodern critiques in *The Stone Gods* is her exposure of those what the philosopher Rosi Braidotti calls new master narratives. These are modern beliefs, which have taken the place of the old grand narratives of progression. The first new master narrative is market economics ie the belief that capitalism and economic growth are inevitable and will lead to the flourishing of man. The second is biological essentialism—the belief that our fate is genetically determined or our biological imperative is derived from evolutionary biology. In the planet Orbus section of the novel, Winterson portrays a society which is entirely constructed from these new master narratives. Money, power and consumption are the preoccupations of the people. Growing old is treated as a disease, a genetic malfunction called "information failure". Bodies themselves are no longer natural, but are continually altered by plastic surgery and genetic enhancement to provide them with youthfulness and beauty. This society is explained in the terms mapped out by the theorist Jean Baudrillard in his concept of "simulation" which has become a world where the image and illusion is more important than reality. People are no longer concerned with genuine experience. The image, the spectacle, the illusion is all important. In Orbus, man's body even

becomes a commodity to be bought, sold and perfected. The technique which Winterson has used in her postmodern account with its fragmented style and refusal of clear meaning, reflects this reality where meaning is unstable and unreliable.

III. THE POST-APOCALYPTIC LANDSCAPE: THREE WORLDS, ONE WARNING

The planet Orbus represents a civilization in its dying stage. The air is poisoned, the plant life is dying. At the very start of the story, it is learned that the people of Orbus have killed their world and are searching for another habitation. They discover what they call Planet Blue, which is really Earth. But instead of learning from their mistakes, instead of resolving to live differently on this world, they decide to kill off all the life on it, instead and strike the world with a tremendous mass of rock so large it will kill off all the dinosaurs that would be a barrier against the colonization of the world by man. This horrible proceeding is indicative of the main tragedy of the theme of the novel the carrying of their destructive patterns with them from world to world. The trouble is not in the kind of worlds inhabited by man. The trouble is in man himself, and the economic and social patterns that bring about the constant need for more consumption and expansion. (5) Orbus represents extreme capitalism carried to its last limit.

All other natural resources have been used up. All the natural eco-systems have been destroyed. And the remedy is not one of reform or change, but escape to a new world and repeat the same pattern. The Easter Island section of the story set in 1774, acts as a sort of historical mirror to the technological destructiveness of Orbus. Easter Island is a famous historical example of a race which apparently killed itself off through the depletion of resources. The inhabitants of Easter Island, by cutting down trees, ultimately destroyed their environment. They built gigantic stone statues, called moai, that evidenced their cultural achievement and power. But the same forces that produced these monuments, namely the striving for status, the necessity of consuming 'more,' the inability to see limits, destroyed them.

The final section of the novel, set in Tech City after the Third World War, describes the aftermath of these patterns being run out to their logical conclusion, where the world has been ravaged by nuclear war and the environmental consequences of toxicity, so that survivors have been twisted into genetically mutant forms from radiation. But even there the human drive for love and connection exists in its uglier forms. Billie, in her form of a young woman, is an educator for Spike, an artificial, robot-like being, a Robo sapiens, so that they explore a ravaged world in inevitable search of meaning and connection in a time of 'approaching annihilation.' (6) In this last section what is remarkable is not the apocalyptic nature of the setting in which the characters find themselves, but the persistence of love.

Despite everything that has befallen them, confronted with the ruined world around them, Billie and Spike find each other and care for each other. Here the novel transcends the simple postmodern nihilism or cynicism of the belief that nothing matters. Rather the argument of the novel is that human connection and human love are valuable regardless of the collapse of all larger systems. The most notable achievement of *The Stone Gods* is the way Winterson has arranged the three worlds in which the novels take place, so that they mirror and echo each other. Each narrative instance shows the same patterns of economic exploitation, of environmental destruction, of social collapse, making the narrative structure itself tell us that this repetition is no accident, that history repeats itself because man refuses to learn from the

past. The broken, non-linear narrative of the novel, changing time and world continuously, mirrors this repetition.

Readers are conscious of the same disorientation as in confronting world catastrophe, and they see the same errors being made. What we see human beings doing is making objectively the same poor choices, though conscious of the fact that they ought to know better. That the postmodern breakage of the narrative occurs here is not just a literary technique, but an ethical one, pointing to the fractured nature of reality in a world in which there are multiple, concurrent catastrophes happening. By refusing to offer to his readers a linear or understandable narrative that is comforting and clear, Winterson offers us something that is closer to reality in the scope of its truthfulness, that apocalypse is not the outcome of a clear and predictable narrative structure, but emerges out of countless iterations of failures across time and space.

IV. THE CYBORG, THE POSTHUMAN, AND DECONSTRUCTED SUBJECTIVITY

Spike, a cyborg or artificial being known as a Robo sapiens, is one of the most interesting characters in the novel. She is not human in a traditional sense. She exists in metal and circuitry. She is a person produced by technology and engineering. She has, however, feelings, she develops ties and she exhibits the power of growth and change. The place of Spike in the novel represents a direct assault on humanist philosophies. The humanist tradition is founded on the traditional and natural primacy of man as the possessor of value and meaning. It assumes that to be human means to have certain essential qualities, e.g.: consciousness, feeling, reason, morality. But what is to happen when not human, an entity, manifests all these qualities? This question gave rise to the consideration of what humanity means to theorist Donna Haraway. In her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," she argues that the cyborg is the hybrid of human being and machine that should liberate us from the humanist assumptions that now limit us.(7) The cyborg does not pose as authentically human. On the contrary, it is proud of its artificiality and construction. This ideal of the cyborg is represented in Spike.

The gender of Spike and her sexual nature put into peril the established humanist categories further. Gender, unlike the earlier kind of narrative in which gender is fixed and essential, is fluid and alterable in Spike. She is feminine, but this appears to be just that: femininity as a kind of choice rather than an essential truth about her body being. She embarks on a lesbian love affair with Billie, loving her over the various timelines and incarnations. The narrative compares the relationship of Spike with that of Woolf's Orlando, who similarly challenges the categories of gender since the protagonist lives through the centuries changing gender. By making her cyborg character also a fluctuating lesbian, Winterson engages a feminist and a queer theory with posthumanism. This combination implies that the liberation from the constructs of traditional humanism is indistinguishable with the liberation from the heterosexual patriarchal norms. The cyborg is not only a figure which has power over the human-machineliness. It is also a figure who has power over the limits of gender and heterosexuality. In Spike, these many limitations are added together. She represents the radical alternative to the humanist subject taken to be male, straight, unitary and complete. The presence of the cyborg in *The Stone Gods* also engages what the philosopher Michel Foucault means by biopolitics. Biopolitics is what is the way in which power works in the modern world, by controlling bodies, managing populations and regulating life itself. (8)

What makes Spike's existence in the novel so important is that she experiences real emotion in spite of being artificial. In the last passages, after she has been detached from her body, she sends this thought: "One day, tens of millions of years from now, somebody will find me oxidizing in the mud of a world they have never seen, and when they crumble me to dust between their fingers, it will be you they find." (9) This thought, directed toward Billie through the centuries of time, is very touching. It expresses a species of eternality of love which supersedes time and destruction. The fact that this great emotional truth is offered to us from an artificial being is a point which is emphasized—emotion and meaning are not to be considered as resulting from biological humanity. They may come from anywhere, from any substrate. Love is a matter of importance regardless of whether it flows between two biological beings or between a human and a cyborg. This postmodern deconstruction of essential humanness becomes an ethical position. If we are unable to say definitely what constitutes authentic humanity, we must extend our ethical considerations to all beings which exhibit the quality of consciousness, emotion and relationship.

V. ENVIRONMENTAL ECOCRITICISM AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

At its very essence, *The Stone Gods* is a warning about environmental destruction wrought by human greed and irresponsibility. The novel does not portray environmental catastrophe as a thing inevitable or mysterious. It gives us cause and effect. When human profit is put before human sustenance, when governments and corporations aim at immediate gain rather than ultimate survivability, ecological collapse is the result. The frank view of ecological responsibility is one of the essential features of that school of literature which is known as ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is the study of literature as it represents the relation of humanity to the earth.

The destruction of Orbus is not a metaphor. It is described in concrete, physical terms: poisoned air, dead oceans, extinct species. That the planet perished is a fact because humanity took from the planet more than it was able to yield. Ecocriticism in contemporary usage also utilizes to a degree the concept of anthropocentric, a geological term used to describe a new epoch in the history of the planet, a period of humanity itself. Anthropocentric refers to the era in which humanity succeeded in creating a situation whereby its activities had at last become apparent in regard to the earth's geology and to the plant and animal ecology of the earth. Here we are putting layers of plastic in the ground. We are changing the chemical composition of the atmosphere. We are indirectly causing the mass extinction of other species. The Anthropocene is the first time that one species has had a global impact on the Earth's systems. (11) Winterson's novel engages the Anthropocene, but in a critical way. Rather than viewing human predominance as something to be celebrated, she gives a warning that predominance means destruction and ultimately suicide.

The novel also uses the "matter narratives" which are defined by such scholars as Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. What is meant by this is that the world itself has stories to tell us which we must learn to hear. Matter plastic, soil, water, air has its own story to tell. The world is not inert. It has its agency. The earth is not just a commodity for human use, but a living, moving, responsive system that is governed by its own laws and logic and that produces its own consequences. (12) In *The Stone Gods*, Winterson writes of planets, ecosystems and

the physical environment that gives them a voice, guarantees them dignity. Planet Orbus is dying but is dying as part of its resistance to human exploitation. Its ecosystems are collapsing because of their own overexploitation. The possibilities of the future but as the rational results of what is going on at present in the world. So too in her researches into climate fiction does the scholar Michaela Merola talk of the emotional ambience of environment catastrophe being “geotraumatic and melancholic”.(13)

By this is meant that accepting the existence of environmental destruction produces emotional fears in the minds of those that are sensibly aware of the fact of the reality. Winterson’s novel reveals the effect of the geotraumatic. Characters in all three worlds suffer from the effects of lack of environmental thinking. They mourn the tragedy of the environment that has been thrust upon them by the action of their environment. But in their grief, they are paralyzed and disturbed. It does not follow that having diagnosed the disease solves the problem. Conscious awareness of catastrophe in the world can produce despair at the situation and too much inaction. This is the reason why in the hands of Winterson the tools of modern skepticism and irony are not literary fluff, but answers to organize problems of real psychological and philosophical profundity. How does man manage to be hopeful when one sees the seriousness of the sempiternal processes behind environmental destruction? How can one continue to act or remain concerned when mortals realize that other civilizations have failed in their attempts even when they adopted every means in their power to cure the evil?

VI. OSCILLATION AND AMBIVALENCE: METAMODERNISM

Scholars have found that the literature and culture of today cannot be comfortably described as "postmodern" any longer because something has changed. Postmodern literature was characterized primarily by irony, skepticism and a refusal to accept grand narratives, but in contemporary writing this skepticism is sometimes combined with a genuine earnestness, a sincere attempt at meaning-making. This new feeling is called "metamodernism" by theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. (14) Metamodernism oscillates, swings back and forth, you see, between modernist sincerity and postmodern irony. It is not either wholly ironic nor wholly sincere but both at once. The Stone Gods is a perfect example of this metamodern structure of feeling. The novel is wholly postmodern in its forms. The effect of the fragmented narrative on your mind, the playful intertextuality, and the refusal to give any clear meaning are all postmodern. But it believes entirely, starts all over again and is sincere and earnest in its environmental alerts. Winterson believes genuinely that the destruction of the environment means catastrophe and that it must be dealt with.

There is no irony in this. But she does not offer a simple solution, or comfortable hope for that matter. She holds in her writings however a kind of ambivalence in the recognition both of the gravity of catastrophe and the weaknesses of the human response. The emotional tone of The Stone Gods may be called "constructive pessimism." It presents a fundamentally pessimistic view of human capacity for change. The evidence in the text seems to prove that the human race will have learned nothing by Civilization will continue to repeat its destructive patterns. Yet in spite of this pessimism, Winterson puts the values of hope, love, and the continued struggle before us. Billie and Spike fall in love again and again in different worlds and ages. In spite of the ruins of civilization that surround them, in spite of their awareness that the same

love stories have failed in previous time lines, they choose love anyhow. This is not naive optimism. It is not the belief that love will save the world or avoid catastrophe. It is the assertion that love and connection are valuable just because they are weak, temporal, and mortal. In a world whose destruction is imminent, the choice of love, the choice of caring, the choice of trying again is a form of ethical resistance.(15)

The formal devices found in the novel also reinforce this metamodern oscillation between sincerity and skepticism. The disjointed narrative structure could be read as expressing despair regarding coherent meaning and understanding. But Winterson's prose, even despite the disjunctions of the narrative, is, like that careless statement above, often exceptionally beautiful and lyrical. She writes with intense passion and feeling regarding the natural world, regarding human connection, regarding loss and desire. This combination, the postmodern disjunction together with the lack of ironic comment, enacts a sort of formal argument. Form and content are not separable. The novel says with its form that coherent, linear meaning is impossible in a disjointed world. But it says, too, through the beauty and the lyric of the prose, that we must continue the effort of creating meaning, of expressing feelings, of witnessing to that which is being destroyed. The postmodern skepticism regarding meaning does not lead to silence, nor emptiness. It leads to a more mature and careful effort at telling the truth of that which is real.

The concept of posthumanism set forth by philosopher Rosi Braidotti provides an ethical framework for understanding how Winterson goes beyond the simple postmodernism of being ironic to this metamodern ethics. Braidotti argues that we must go beyond the limitations of a humanistic thinking, with its assumption of a rational, autonomous subject at the heart of the universe, while still being committed ethically to caring for others.(16) Metamodernism is a similar move. It goes beyond pure postmodern irony, which can be ethically empty, while holding in abeyance the postmodern skepticism about large, totalizing narratives and the simple meanings. In *The Stone Gods* it means taking the environmental crisis seriously, without believing that technological development will solve it, accepting the cyclical phenomenon of history without falling into a fatalism, and keeping love and connection (which of the author's characters is the most completely realized) in spite of their ultimate vulnerability. Metamodernism is the appropriate sensibility to the Anthropocene, the time in humanity's history when we must grapple with gargantuan systemic problems while being committed to those acts of love, beauty, meaning, and the witnessing of what we hold dear.

VII. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: KEY SCENES AND MOMENTS

The stage is set for the novel's concern with environmental destruction at the outset of *The Stone Gods* in an action that is simultaneously apocalyptic and commonplace. The people of Orbus have decided: an asteroid is to be sent to Planet Blue to destroy all existing life on that world, making it a colony for humans. This is suggested as normal governmental action, a bureaucratic measure of persons occupied with the acquisition of resources and the expectation of economic opportunity. The plan for the committing of genocide against a complete biosphere is recorded in the language of fact that makes it the more dreadful. The blow of the asteroid is not represented as a dramatic apocalyptic moment. The most famous passage in the book has occurred in the last section, where Spike, who has been separated from her physical existence, speaks to Billie across the gulf of time and space: "Someday, tens of millions of years in the

future, someone will find me rusted into the mud of a world, which he never knew, and when he crumbles me between his fingers, it is you that he finds." (17).

This quotation merits careful attention. Spike in this speech of hers anticipates her existence as rust in a far distant future, with a future decay in mind, of which she will have no experience herself. But she represents this future decay as a kind of connecting link with Billie. When some one finds her rust form in that remote period, Billie's presence will be in the discovery. This extraordinary vision is a kind of transcendent love, love which exists beyond individual impermanence, beyond the ultimate end of worlds. The passage indicates how Winterson uses post-modern technique to explain something which is deeply humanistic, the abiding value of love. The severance of self in time, the separation of body and consciousness, the transcending of love through the ages, these postmodern techniques become methods of expressing the transcendent nature of human connection. The Easter Island section contains a fatal historical parallel to the technic catastrophe of Orbus. Winterson does not describe the moai statues as abstractions but rather as physical evidence of a civilization that really existed.

This act of teaching has no real effect. It does not solve material things. But it is a form of witness and a form of hope. She is saying by her actions: even in our immediate locale, even here, it is necessary that we give value and meaning to knowledge transmission. Even in a ruined world we remain as human beings by going on learning and thinking and knowing what we know. The final condition of ambiguity of the novel lies in Spike's final fate. Spike's consciousness has become disassociated from the ever-existing body. It now exists as information, as data. We can only be uncertain as to whether or not this represents loss or freedom. Has she transcended limitation and broken into the realm of the infinite? Or has she been lost, destroyed, forever, reduced to an order of electrical vibrations?

This ending is left unqualified. This lack of narrative closure is post-modern in form. Instead of the previous method of giving belletristic meaning to the reader in a clear and defined point in time, Winterson recommends that her readers live within the condition of ambiguity and uncertainty. This coincides with the concrete world of present menace of environmental or ecological global catastrophe. We do not know how it will end, whether human life can adjust or not, whether civilization as it exists will end or survive. We do not know whether or not love and meaning can continue. We can only continue onward into the future and the uncertainty, have faith and hope.

VIII. CRITICAL CONTEXTS AND SCHOLARLY DEBATE

Literary critics have disagreed about whether *The Stone Gods* adopts a determinist view of human civilization, viz., that man's destruction is inevitable and cannot be changed, or whether it allows space for human agency and decision. This disagreement is important because it influences our interpretation of the ethical position of the novel. If the novel suggests that apocalypse is fated, or that man cannot elude it, then it might fairly be charged with being defeatist and fatalistic. But the cyclical form of the novel-showing similar destructive patterns recurring in diverse worlds-could also be read as exactly what should be resisted, and overcome. The novel shows patterns, but not to suggest they are inevitable, but to convey to readers the things they should consciously attempt to avert. Baudrillard's notion of simulation, which is the basis of Winterson's treatment of Orbus, relates specifically to a theory of late

capitalism as a manner of pure spectacle, of empty image, and contains no essential reality. (18)

But even in this total simulation analysis, Winterson points out that certain realities remain: love remains, the body remains, destruction of ecosystems is real, not merely simulated. In this manner, Winterson modifies Baudrillard's theory. She accepts his analysis of simulation, but states that certain material realities, particularly environmental realities, break through the simulation and command our attention. Another important scholarly context for the understanding of *The Stone Gods* relates to gender, sexuality, and what theorists refer to as queer temporality. In *The Stone Gods*, Billie's gender fluidity in different incarnations and Spike's lesbian identity are not side issues in the book. They are central to the novel's political and philosophic stakes. Feminist scholar Donna Haraway and queer theorists have pointed out that to escape traditional gender and sexual norms is inextricably bound up with escaping other forms of domination, particularly patriarchal domination and the domination of nature.

The novel's patriarchal Orbus as a civilization pushing environmental destruction allows for this reading. Orbus' obsession with youth, beauty, bodily perfection is intimately linked with the commodification of women's bodies that is a part of patriarchal capitalism. The alternative put forth in the novel—Billie and Spike's queer, fluid love that transcends gender boundaries is a way of relating different than that proposed by dominant social realities, a way which might allow for more ethico/political ways of relating to the environment and to the future. *The Stone Gods* should also be read in relation to other significant contemporary dystopian and climate fiction. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) similarly stage a technologically developed civilization destroying itself through its own excesses. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) gives us a post-apocalyptic landscape of total desolation in which survival itself becomes morally dubious.

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) also plays with non-linear narratives and gives us views of how civilizations rise and fall historically through time. What sets apart Winterson's work is its insistence on love and aesthetic beauty even within apocalyptic settings and a more overtly post-modern and playful narrative. While McCarthy's *Road* is constantly bleak and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* darkly satirical, Winterson maintains a complex register which passes between cynicism and hopefulness, between irony and sincerity. It is perhaps this metamodern sensibility which makes *The Stone Gods* most particularly suited to express the Anthropocene at all, a moment for which we require both the candid acknowledgment of catastrophe at hand and the continued engagement with meaning and connectedness.

IX. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of *The Stone Gods* by Jeanette Winterson accentuates the fact that the novel engages with happy material in the exploration of apocalyptic and environmental themes in a broken, non-linear and fragmented narrative reminiscent of the chaos presently manifesting in the world under multiform planetary crises. The broken narrative is not just a matter of aesthetics, but a matter of morality, implying the chaos and destruction that mankind brings upon herself, owing to the interminable repetition of self-destructive modes of behaviour. The novel presents three worlds in parallel: Orbus, Easter Island and Tech City, each one of which tends to a warning concerning human effects destruction from exhaustion of resources,

poisoning the environment, etc. Winterson suggests to her public that the remedy does not simply lie in the way of advancing the level of technology, or a piecemeal improvement of the law, but in a sufficient change of human consciousness and consciousness concerning relations to earth.

The being Spike is also an artificial being who is in a state of emotional and other consciousness. This is a serious challenge to the established view of human subjectivity as it implies that consciousness and emotion is not the special privilege of humanity. As presented in *The Stone Gods*, post-humanism teaches us that ethical consideration must not only be extended to non-human entities and to all forms of life, but that instead, relationships, consciousness and inter-connectedness constitute higher values than the mere fact of being human. When this standpoint is established, it fits into the ecological themes of the work, for the problem lies in mankind not realizing that she is in no sense isolated or superior to nature, but is a necessary part of the living community. The movement from out of post-modernism into what some workers on the subject will term metamodernism is alluded to, where literature will have gone through an evolutionary phase and will have left behind irony and nihilism and will fully appreciate the reality of the space of ecological collapse that has been reached, and will see forthwith what the facts behove and require.

The work of Winterson adopted up to a point a form of "constructive pessimism" where the possibility of self-destruction, on the part of mankind, is admitted, but the cultivation of human love, care, the transmission of knowledge, and the guarding and preservation of culture is heralded, even in the light of a meaninglessness that one cannot escape from. It is an expression of an adult and matured understanding of the difficulties presenting them in the epoch which followed, the Anthropocene, a phrase coined by Dr. Paul J. Crutzen. This is the new geological period during which mankind has its effect on planetary systems. The use in the novel of the techniques of post-modernism, of break-up, ambiguity, and self-reflection, has as its aim the readjusting of readers to meet the demands and complexities revealed to us in the light of serious studies and understandings of contemporary ecological experiences.

The story educates the reader to hold the many angles possible where angles exist, to accept uncertainty, and the truths that might be discomfiting. *The Stone Gods* finally speaks to generations to come. Which lends point to the material of literature as witness, communication and defiance. The value of literature is no longer, as it was once, in worth, but in the creation of meaning, love, knowledge, with and for each other, and for mankind. To plagiarize sadly: the uncertainty of the earth's future may be insecure, the act of sharing knowledge, love, and the creation of meaning, as necessary and beneficial. The necessity in a world racing to destruction.

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