

64-Temporality in the Anthropocene: Revisiting Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*

Najmeh NOURİ¹

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, since the term Anthropocene was coined by Paul Crutzen in 2000, the concept of the Anthropocene has attracted the attention of many contemporary authors. It is a phenomenon that is hard to totally grasp and only distinguishes itself through evidence such as climate change and other environmental disasters. The Anthropocene challenges the concept of temporality because as it is so enormous in range it resists representation within a specific time. In order to narrate the Anthropocene and its devastating impacts on human and nonhuman worlds through literary texts, the Anthropocene authors need to deploy new narrative techniques that make possible the image of such vast scale issues. In *The Stone Gods*, Winterson utilizes nonlinear structures of time to portray the story of a planetary catastrophe as a form of a continuum that influences different time periods from past to present and definitely the future. She skilfully reconstructs the concept of time to create alternative worlds that allow her to imagine ecological collapse in different times and locations. With its three interrelated sections, *The Stone Gods* narrates the story of the Anthropocene as a continuous thread of degradation which occur throughout history in parallel with the destructive activities of humanity on Earth.

Keywords: Climate change, the Anthropocene, temporality, Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*

Antroposen'de zamansallık: Jeanette Winterson'un Taş Tanrıları'nı yeniden değerlendirmek

Öz

Antroposen terimi 2000 yılında Paul Crutzen tarafından icat edilmesi ardından geçen yirmi yılda, Antroposen kavramı birçok çağdaş yazarın dikkatini çekmiştir. Tamamen kavranması zor ve yalnızca iklim değişikliği ve diğer çevresel felaketler gibi kanıtlarla kendini gösteren bir olgudur. Bu perspektif içinde, Antroposen, belirli bir zaman içinde temsile direnecek kadar geniş bir aralıkta olduğu için, zamansallık kavramına zorluklar sunar. Buna göre, Antroposen'i ve onun insan ve insan olmayan dünyalar üzerindeki yıkıcı etkilerini edebi metinler aracılığıyla anlatmak için, Antroposen yazarlarının böylesine büyük ölçekli bir konunun hayal gücünü mümkün kılacak yeni anlatı tekniklerini kullanmaları gerekir. Taş Tanrıları'da Winterson, bir gezegensel felaketin öyküsünü geçmişten bugüne ve kesinlikle geleceği farklı zaman dilimlerini etkileyen bir süreklilik biçimi olarak tasvir etmek için zamanın doğrusal olmayan yapısını kullanır. Farklı zamanlarda ve yerlerde ekolojik çöküşler hayal etmesine izin veren alternatif dünyalar yaratmak için zaman kavramını ustaca yeniden inşa ediyor. Taş Tanrıları'da, iç içe geçmiş üç bölümüyle Antroposen

¹ Öğr. Gör., İzmir Demokrasi Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı (İzmir, Türkiye), n.nouri67@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3573-0498 [Makale kayıt tarihi: 12.09.2020-kabul tarihi: 20.11.2020; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.825948]

hikayesini, insanoğlunun Dünya üzerindeki yıkıcı faaliyetlerinin aynı kaynağıyla tarih boyunca meydana gelen sürekli bir bozulma dizisi olarak anlatıyor.

Anahtar kelimeler: İklim değişikliği, Antroposen, zamansallık, Jeanette Winterson, Taş Tanrılar

Introduction

Nowadays, the impact of human activities on the Earth have largely transformed the pattern of life for both human and nonhuman entities to such an extent that the contemporary epoch is named as the Anthropocene age, highlighting the central role of the *anthropos*² “in geology and ecology” (Crutzen& Stoermer, 2000, p. 17). In order to perceive the threats of the Anthropocene, nature should be discussed not only in terms of space, but also in terms of temporal dimensions. In his seminal work *Timescapes of Modernity*, Adam argues that time functions as an “invisible ‘other’ that works outside and beyond the reach of our senses” (1998, p. 11). Thus, focusing on the temporal aspect of nature will help to translate the invisible into a tangible and recognizable concept. Similarly, for Rob Nixon, destruction of nature occurs gradually, and, for most people, the danger is yet to come or happens in remote areas. He deploys the term “slow violence” to refer to a type of damage that is beyond sensation but happens slowly through time (2011, p. 14). In his view, imaginary fictional works can help to apprehend the scales of the violence and maintains that “in a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear” (2011, p. 15). Literature has the power to transform abstract future into a realistic life story, connecting the present destructive activities of human beings with their impacts on the future. Although the Anthropocene is progressing gradually, literary works “can project our understanding and appreciation of invisible, slow, and slowly accelerating crisis into the future in a dramatic way that other forms of discourse lack. [the Anthropocene narratives] can also legitimately collapse or juxtapose time for maximal impact and understanding in a way that science, biology, and even history cannot” (White, 2009, p. 240). The Anthropocene has attracted the attention of many contemporary literary scholars and authors like Jeanette Winterson, offering new insights into the perception of this “seemingly unrepresentable” phenomenon (Johns-Putra, 2016, p. 274). However, the Anthropocene resist being narrated as it is vast in temporal dimensions. This study aims to explore how Winterson transforms such a complex phenomenon into a prolific story, *The Stone Gods* (2007). Consisting of four interrelated chapters, *The Stone Gods* is a postmodern fiction with environmental concerns. First section, “Planet Blue” recounts the story of modern humans on an imaginary Planet Orbus which has almost run out of natural life and is dominated by mega trends of technology. People on Orbus have discovered a new planet, Planet Blue. The protagonists of the story, Billie and Spike, are in the space expedition to land on the new planet and make it habitable for humans. The second part, “Easter Island” is based on a true story of the Easter Island in the eighteenth century. It recounts the Island’s destruction by its inhabitants. The third and fourth sections, “Post-3War” and “Wreck City”, the reader is introduced to post-World War III when people who survived the nuclear war suffer from physical and environmental damage.

Narrative resistance in the Anthropocene

One of the great challenges of narrating the Anthropocene is its uncertain temporality. The common perceptions of the phenomenon are mainly scientific, interpreting this unprecedented issue through diagrams, figures and graphs. In terms of literary representation, an author should write about a crisis that is invisible and elusive and “does not yet exist” (Colebrook, 2014, p. 24). A writer needs to

² A Greek word, meaning human.

incorporate nonhuman temporalities to depict the position of humans before and after the age of the Anthropocene. Paradoxically, while deep time denotes geological time, a time period apart from human history, in which human place is insignificant, the Anthropocene refers to the notable impacts of human forces on the Earth. In this sense, the Anthropocene narrative has a difficulty of “enunciation” since on the one hand, it needs to comprehend both human and nonhuman forces and on the other hand, the contemporary human needs to achieve a sense of emotional connectivity with humankind all through the history involving past and future times (Klein, 2013, p. 84).

Apart from the problem of articulation, the Anthropocene is a “large-scale intervention in nature” (Mehnert, 2016, p. 33). It is, as Morton argues, a “hyperobject”, a crisis with expanded impacts on “time and space” (2013, p.1). This type of crisis cannot be felt in a certain time and space, but rather individuals experience its partial outcomes locally and temporally. In other words, although the Anthropocene is a planetary issue, its consequences are yet to be grasped globally. Out of season rainfalls, flash floods, draught, and extreme weather conditions around the world are examples of local and temporal indications. Furthermore, the enormous expansion of the Anthropocene across time and spaces may cause the uncertainties that foster a sense of denial. An idea that the Anthropocene is not a contemporary challenge and will occur in the far-away future.

Imagining the Anthropocene takes on a different significance when the author needs to convey the message through an engaging narrative that translates the disaster into an appealing life story. In Trexler's view, the Anthropocene remains “anonymous” when it comes to mark the responsible people or factors behind it. Unlike the conventional stories which revolve around a hero and an anti-hero, the Anthropocene narrative is liable to be rejected for not being sufficiently “interesting” in the absence of a clear cause and effect connection (Clark, 2015, p. 175). On the other hand, the narrative needs to involve nonhuman entities since its core concern is to scrutinize the relationship between humans and their environment. In this sense, the Anthropocene writers place the issue in broader contexts of culture, politics, and economy to explore the consequences of the crisis on humans and simultaneously, the result of human activities on planet Earth. Trexler warns the Anthropocene writers against the risk of entrapment in a “dramatic” story with “a single setting and a cast of characters” only for the sake of satisfying the reader (2014, pp. 205-206). In his point of view, some of the contemporary Anthropocene authors fail to address the issue by focusing on both the human and nonhuman worlds. They attempt to enhance the readability of their stories through focusing on human characters and have no particular interest in the social and cultural significance of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene fiction also faces the difficulty of choosing the narrator when the author includes both human and non-human entities. In Winterson's *The Stone Gods*, the narrator is a human, different versions of Billie, who narrates the story in the first person point of view. In so doing, she engages the readers in a way that they could straightforwardly connect to the protagonists, since the readers receive an intimate description of their personal and emotional thoughts. All the narrators share a common interest of environmental concerns. The first section's Billie condemns humanity for destroying and polluting natural resources and suggests for “global responsibility” to save the Earth (Winterson, 2007, p. 37). Although she works for the Enhancement Services in Tech City, a city running by advanced artificial intelligence and in which no sign of natural life is left, Billie still strives to keep her life close to nature by residing in a biodome³ farm, a place that gives her an opportunity to stay away from polluted Tech City in which everywhere is covered by red dust and wearing a mask is

³ “A dome-shaped artificial structure enclosing one or more self-contained ecosystems or living environments”. Retrieved from <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/biodome>

compulsory. Billie is also critical of human activities on the Earth and believes that they do not deserve a “second chance” (Winterson, 2007, p. 39), because they would make the same mistakes again. The second section’s Billy, a male version of Billie, a sailor who disembarks from his ship and is accidentally left on Easter Island, compares the previously green Island with its current condition that is “as dismal as the Valley of the Shadow of Death [...] 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, pp. 97-8). The third section’s Billie, a similar character to the first Billie in terms of career but living at the time of the post World War Three. The third Billie narrates a post nuclear war story of polluted lands and mutant people.

Various perceptions of time in *The Stone Gods*

In *The Stone Gods*, Winterson envisages a multiplicity of cartographies which involve mapping of territories other than planet Earth in an extended time beyond human history. The novel takes place in three different settings which encompass a time period of almost sixty five million years. It covers the distant past, from the age of dinosaurs, up until near future when life becomes digitalized with the presence of artificial intelligence. Winterson utilizes multiple protagonists to allow her for a smooth transition between epochs. As I mentioned above, the Anthropocene narrative resists uniprotagonist and needs multiplicity of human and nonhuman protagonists to facilitate the representation of both geological and human history. *The Stone Gods* has a pair of protagonists named Billie, a human being, and Spike, a robot, that live in near future. Their male incarnations Billy and Spikker inhabit in the eighteenth century in “Easter Island” and in the third and fourth parts, a different version of Spike, a robot with a bodyless head, and Billie, living in a setting of post World War Three. By using doubling technique, Winterson underlines the “instability of natural forms” and practises subversion of structures through “constant metamorphosis” (Onega, 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, the technique helps her to display the interconnectivity of humankind, highlighting the fact that each human beings’s destructive activity on the Earth may affect humanity simultaneously in current and other times. *The Stone Gods* opens on a planet, Orbus, that becomes “hostile to human life” (Winterson, 2007, p. 7). As an alternative choice, Orbusians have discovered a new planet, Planet Blue, that serves as a “new beginning” and “is perfect for new life” (Winterson, 2007, p. 77). The newly discovered planet offers Orbusians “the chance of many lifetimes” (Winterson, 2007, p. 4). and will allow them to rebuild the legacy of humanity again in an intact environment. The protagonists, Billie and Spike, are in a space expedition and are given a mission to make Planet Blue habitable for humans by redirecting an asteroid to the planet, thereby obliterating dinosaurs. On their way to Planet Blue, Billie and Spike listen to many stories told by the captain and the ship crew about the history of other planets including the past, and the future versions of Earth. Winterson portrays multiplicity of planets in different times to underline the fact that the consequences of human activities may have its impacts on another times and places.

Following the same track of thought, the Anthropocene writers need to incorporate innovative techniques in order to depict the results and traces of human actions on the Earth. In *The Stone Gods*, Winterson uses the trope of signals to depict the progress of the Anthropocene. In her article, “Materializing a Geotraumatic and Melancholy Anthropocene: Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*”, Merola categorizes four different types of signals:

Lithostratigraphic signals are traces in the composition of new rock formation caused by dramatic changes to patterns of sedimentation and by the creation of novel strata [...] Chemostratigraphic signals are layers of pollution and altered geochemical composition. [...] Biostratigraphic signals

index significant changes in flora and fauna and are generated by agricultural monocultures, trawling, increased rates of species migration and extinction, and chemical changes to ecosystems. The last signal geologists look for is a sequence stratigraphic signal, produced by significant sea-level rise. (2014, p. 126)

Winterson utilizes signals in the first section, *Planet Blue* and the third and fourth sections, *Post-3 War* and *Wreck City*. Chemostratigraphic traces can be seen on *Planet Orbus*, a world characterized by “red dust,” (Winterson, 2007, p. 39) where “carbon dioxide is five hundred and fifty parts per million” (Winterson, 2007, p. 37) and ecosystem is collapsed due to technological development. Furthermore, Chemo- and biostratigraphic signals are available in *Post-3 War* and *Wreck City* parts. *Wreck city* is an outskirts of *Tech city* where the second *Billie* works for *MORE- Futures* and is responsible to teach *Spike* about humanity. On one of their educational walks, *Billie* takes *Spike* away from *MORE's* building and together they go to *Wreck city*, a place that is called a “No Zone” (Winterson, 2007, p. 179) where people live an alternative lifestyle without the intervention of the government. As far as the anthropogenic signals are considered, the city is replete with environmental damage that originates from nuclear war. In a suburb of *Wreck city*, there is an environmental hell called the *Dead Forest*, a radioactive forest inhabited by “toxic radioactive mutants” (Winterson, 2007, p. 202). Through depicting war as one of the destructive forces of humanity, Winterson maintains that the anthropogenic world emerges not only because of human activities on the nonhuman Earth but also due to their recurring mistakes and hostility towards humankind.

Apart from setting and characterization, the writer needs to have a different perception of time that can narrate a seemingly invisible phenomenon. From a traditional point of view, time is a quantifiable concept that can be measured with numbers and objects (Adam, 1998, p. 40). However, the contemporary vision of time argues that it is a multidimensional concept that is plural and nonlinear. In other words, unlike scientific representation of time in which there is a gap between present and future, the Anthropocene fiction troubles the linear division of time and as an alternative present an intertwined concept of temporality, thus highlighting the fact that present is pregnant with the dangers of tomorrow. Winterson seeks to display a continuum of time and space that decentres the apocalyptic perception of the end of the world and defies the idea that Earth's history has a beginning and an end. Winterson's fluid perception of time underlies the fact that energy and matter never disappear, instead they are under constant transformations through creating intensive multiplicities. *The Stone Gods* three intertwined narratives repeat the never-ending story of the many Anthropocene worlds in a way that one planet's present becomes another one's future and past. Through depicting the Anthropocene in multiplicity of time and space: “It is not a universe – there is more than one reading” (Winterson, 2007, p. 83), Winterson emphasizes that the Anthropocene is not “a one-dimensional challenge” and resists singular depiction (Chakrabarty, 2016, p. 3). Similarly, Winterson rejects the concept of time as a linear structure divided into past, present and future. Instead, she deploys the textual space of novel as a temporal site on which she attempts to reflect the continuum of obvious shifts from real historical time periods on “Easter Island” to purely fantastic times far way on “Planet Blue”, and to the post-apocalyptic nightmare of “Wreck City”. Moreover, Winterson utilizes quantum theory to trouble the linear perception of time, suggesting that “no object may be viewed in its entirety, but instead it presents different qualities to the observer in different circumstances” (Morrison, 2003, p. 109). The novel argues that human and non-human entities live in “a quantum universe, [...] neither random nor determined. It is potential at every second” (Winterson, 2007, p. 76). In this perspective, Winterson undermines the unified concept of time through presenting characters, *Billie* and *Spike*, who do not belong to “a single century [and] a single body” (Morrison, 2003, p. 105). Furthermore, the cycle of non-linear narratives offer a form of connection between characters in different times,

particularly, in the third and fourth sections, Post-3 War and Wreck City, Winterson focuses on the interrelation of one world with many other worlds when in the last part of the novel, the second Spike receives a signal that was sent by the first Spike sixty five million years ago and the second Billie finds the diary of the first Billie on a subway wagon.

Winterson also defies the concept of human history as being the subjective account of the past. Through deploying “metachronous times”⁴, the novel deterritorialize the concept of progressive human history as being “knowable and finite” structures which aim to silence and defy alternative views (Makinen,2005, p. 16). Furthermore, Winterson questions the fixed structure of human history by deploying threaded stories of annihilation, thereby emphasizing human being’s similar destructive actions throughout history. In doing so, she encourages the readers to think of an alternative history perception in which there is no fixed universal truth: “Every second the Universe divides into possibilities and most of those possibilities never happen. It is not a uni-verse – there is more than one reading. The story won’t stop, can’t stop, it goes on telling itself, waiting for an intervention that changes what will happen next” (Winterson, 2007, p. 68).

Conclusion

A proper perception of the Anthropocene epoch demands a detailed understanding of the geological time and this makes the temporal representation of it quite challenging. Yet, Jeanet Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* is a seminal work of Anthropocene fiction that overcomes the difficulty of narration through incorporating nonhuman entities, like a posthuman robot, expanding the narration times and places to three different epochs and planets, using non linear perception of time in human history, and ultimately through using anthropogenic signals that mark the temporal development of the Anthropocene. Throughout the novel, Winterson attempts to convey a crucial message that human activities on the Earth, regardless of time and place, can affect the other species including human and nonhuman in the past and future worlds. Thus, she invites readers to take responsibility towards their home, Earth, since given the lack of an alternative habitat human beings cannot keep on repeating the same mistakes over and over again.

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⁴ “times in which multiple simultaneous pasts and futures are operative within the present” (Edward in Brake 2017, 60).

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