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"THE SEARCH FOR ORIGINS STOP HERE": REPRESENTING JEANETTE WINTERSON'S POSTHUMANIST WORLD IN *THE POWERBOOK*[1]

Abstract

The alliance between posthumanism and technology has opened a way for feminist critics to perceive embodiment not as a biological determinant essentialising the human body as natural and organic, but rather as the intertwinement of intelligent machines and humans. By highlighting Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome and Haraway's notion of the cyborg to bear upon Jeanette Winterson's novel *The PowerBook* (2000), this paper aims to demonstrate how the text deals with the notion of the human, alongside practices of embodiment central to the organisation of gendered and sexed identities. The writer's use of cyberspace depicts a posthumanist world, where the boundaries of physical and non-physical worlds become blurred. Likewise, the protagonist, Ali/Alix, is represented as a posthuman subject, whose body becomes a plane of immanence, by being in a state of constant flux. With the destabilization of any essentialist perception of the human body, it argues that the novel refuses any demarcation between human/non-human, nature/culture, male/female, gender/sex, real/virtual or organism/machine.

Keywords: cyborg feminism, rhizome, posthumanism, embodiment, Jeanette Winterson

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[1] Bu makale ASOS 6. Uluslararası Sosyal Beşeri ve İdari Bilimler Sempozyumu'nda tarafımdan sunulmuş olan '"You're Not Human Until You're Posthuman": Representing Winterson's Rhizomatic Cyborg in the Powerbook (2000)" başlıklı sözlü bildirinin genişletilmiş halidir.

"KÖKEN ARAYIŞININ SON BULDUĞU YER": JEANETTE WINTERSON'IN *THE POWERBOOK* ADLI ROMANINDA POSTHÜMANİST DÜNYANIN TASVİRİ

Özet

Posthumanizm ve teknoloji arasındaki bağ feminist eleştirmenlerin bedenlileşmeyi, insan bedenini doğal ve organik olarak varsayan biyolojik bir belirleyici olarak değil; akıllı makinelerin ve insanların birleşmesi olarak algılamasını sağladı. Bu makale, Deleuze ve Guattari'nin rizom ve Haraway'in sayborg kavramları üzerinden, Jeanette Winterson'un *The PowerBook* (2000) adlı romanında toplumsal ve biyolojik cinsiyetin temelinde yer alan bedenlileşme politikalarının ve 'insan' kavramının nasıl işlendiğini göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Yazarın sanal gerçeklik ortamı yaratması, maddesel ve soyut dünyaların sınırlarının belirsizleştiği, posthümanist bir dünyayı betimlemektedir. Aynı şekilde, romanın kahramanı Ali/Alix, bedeni sürekli akış halindeki bir içinlik düzlemi olan insan-sonrası bir özne olarak betimlenmektedir. Makale, romanın, insan bedeniyle ilgili özcü algılarının da yıkılmasıyla, insan/insan olmayan, doğa/kültür, erkek/kadın, toplumsal cinsiyet/biyolojik cinsiyet, gerçek/sanal veya organizma/makine gibi ikili kategorileri reddettiğini öne sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: sayborg feminizm, rizom, posthümanizm, bedenlileşme, Jeanette Winterson

"THE SEARCH FOR ORIGINS STOP HERE": REPRESENTING JEANETTE WINTERSON'S POSTHUMANIST WORLD IN *THE POWERBOOK*

"The human skin is an artificial boundary: the world wanders into it, and the self wanders out of it, traffic is two-way and constant"

— Bernard Wolfe, *Limbo*

Since the 18th century onwards, there has been an ongoing construction of a "'natural' human hierarchy" that has affected every aspect of life including ethnicity, sex, gender and language (Lykke 36). The critical debates on the notion of 'human' can be dated back to Foucault's work, *The Order of Things*, where he claimed that man is "an invention of recent date" as a result of "the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge", and is "nearing its end" (422). The publications of theorists such as Hassan, Braidotti, Wolfe, Hayles and Badmington have accelerated the debates in the late 20th and the early 21st centuries, and 'posthuman' has become a crucial concept that has opened up a number of new possibilities to redefine the traditional understanding of human. Posthumanism refers to the end of a certain perception of the human by offering new ways of reinterpreting it within its social and natural environment in relation to other beings. Braidotti perceives becoming posthuman as a process,

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in which the human gives a new meaning to be attached and connected to "a shared world" ("Critical" 25), and in that world, the human never "masters but merely inhabits, always in a community, a pack or an assemblage" (26).

More importantly, the binding of technology and humans has enabled to move beyond the boundaries of the body, and it has created new possibilities for "postanthropocentric premises in feminist theory" (Braidotti, "Feminist" 680). For "the most obvious manifestations of posthuman are in movements against the exploitation of women, animals and the natural environment" (Oppermann 28), feminist critics have attempted to demonstrate how the hierarchical understanding of knowledge legitimizes and fixes the binary categories about gender, sex and body. As opposed to the humanist view of the human body as natural and organic, posthumanism has inscribed the body with technology. When posthumanism embraces information technologies and favours the informational processes over "material instantiation" (Hayles 2), embodiment no longer becomes a biological determinant essentialising the human body as in humanism. As a consequence of the symbiotic relationship between technology and the human body, embodiment is either trivialized or removed in the process of "cybernetic construction of the posthuman" (4). The crucial notion of embodiment has been redefined with the claim that the body can no longer be construed as "a unified and unifying organism" (Grosz 168); instead, it is a dynamic process composed of multifarious components, where the "boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles 3). "No stuff, no matter, no fleshy bodies, no experiences associated with physicality and nothing beyond the one-dimensional functionality of information processing" (Kember 3).

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As a 21st century fiction, *The PowerBook,* which was published in 2000, starts in a virtual reality when the e-storyteller Ali or Alix receives an e-mail from an unknown person, and then, the novel follows with the promise of "Freedom, just for one night" (10). On the one hand, there are a number of critics agreeing on the fact that Winterson repeats herself; however, she states that her novels, which are *Oranges, The Passion, Sexing the Cherry, Written on the Body, Art and Lies, Gut Symmetries*, create a cycle, and *The PowerBook* is considered to be the end of that cycle. On the other hand, the reviews of the novel criticise the computer analogies as being mere metaphors that have no deeper meaning as well as the tulip chapter, where the usage of tulip as a sexual tool is being ridiculed (Makinen 153). By considering the remarks of the critics, it can be suggested that Winterson's *The PowerBook* has been undermined and received little attention so far, which will be the endeavour of this paper to find out how the text offers a posthumanist stance. Before exploring how *The PowerBook* complicates the gendered and sexed bodies and embodiment, the overall structure of the book will be briefly analysed. Succeeding that, the use of space and time will also be explored so that the blurring of sexed and gendered categories of embodiment can be better construed within those contexts.

A detailed examination of the novel reveals that Winterson follows a rhizomatic strategy throughout the whole story, which enables her to uncover the ways of experimenting with different opportunities, finding possible "movements of deterritorialization" or lines of flight to "produce flow conjunctions here and there" (Deleuze and Guattari 161). In botanical terms,

rhizome refers to subterranean stems that can grow horizontally and spread out from any random point without having a certain starting point. Deleuze and Guattari use rhizome as a philosophical concept, and define it as "an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory" (21). Whereas the arborescent structures impose "the verb 'to be'", the very nature of rhizome is "the conjunction, "and… and… and…"" (25), which can give rise to new beginnings through expanding, multiplying and forming new connections from any point through what Deleuze calls "lines of flight" (4). By building upon the posthumanist strategies that reject the fixation of worlds or things and their hierarchical relationship, Winterson promotes "relationality between specific material (re)configurings of the world" (Barad 139), which can problematize not only space and time but also the categories of embodiment, gender, sexuality.

Winterson wrote *The PowerBook* in such a way that the novel gives the sense of being in a cyberspace through both the content and the overall design of the book including the title. What attracts the attention first is that the chapter titles, represented with little icons, are similar to computer jargon such as "OPEN HARD DRIVE", "NEW DOCUMENT", "SEARCH", "VIEW", "EMPTY TRASH", "QUIT" and "RESTART". Instead of including a table of contents, Winterson creates a new method of presenting these chapters that can be found in the virtual world of computers, which is the cyberspace. The rest of the chapter titles; nevertheless, is presented in lower case such as "terrible things to do to a flower", "great and ruinous lovers", "blame my parents", and "meatspace", which refer to the material world in the novel. In a way, the posthumanist instances of the novel start with the blurring of the boundaries between the virtual and the actual realities through the interplay of figuratively designed chapter titles. Furthermore, it can be claimed that the chapter titles serve as hypertext that is a software system enabling to navigate quickly through the linked networks or information with a click. In a similar fashion, Winterson invites the reader to follow the instructions, provided by the chapters, as if using a software programme so that the reader can understand the thematic content of each chapter.

When Deleuze and Guattari introduce their book, it is claimed that they write the book as a rhizome, which consists of plateaus; and every plateau can be "read starting anywhere and can be related to any other plateau" (2). To be able to achieve the multiplicity, it is claimed that one should have a method to create it, and the method is rhizomatics. *The PowerBook*, as well, is a rhizome composed of plateaus as both virtual and material, a plane of immanence including a number of possibilities waiting to be actualised through the cyberspace. Winterson's use of cyberspace as a rhizomatic strategy or a method allows both the narrator and the reader to travel across space and time. Due to the fabric of the rhizome, asking questions about where one goes or comes from are useless, it has no beginning or ending, because the rhizome is always "between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (25). When the use of space is carefully observed in the novel, it appears that the storyteller, too, displays a rhizomatic understanding of space by interpreting it as "the orderly anarchic space that no one can dictate" (*TP* 130), but is free to enter and leave as he or she wishes.

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The PowerBook brings about a new categorisation of not only space but also time within the framework of rhizome. The storyteller says that "one life is not enough" (154); therefore, she decides to use time vertically so that it can be experienced in its full potentials. The vertical use of time allows Ali/Alix to jump sometimes from 16th century Ottoman setting to 20th century England or from a time period in Paris to Italy. In other words, Ali/Alix is always staying on the run 'to avoid discovery' so that it becomes not a tracing but a map that is "ever-changing and ever-renewed movement out of fixed forms into new possibilities" (Mansfield 145). Ali/Alix stays on the run only to make discoveries of things for herself so that she can be a part of the maps, which are the stories of the journeys "that have been made and might have been made" (*TP* 49). So, Ali/Alix is always in a state of becoming in Deleuzian sense, a 'trickster' cyborg that can trouble the boundaries of physical/non-physical world in relation with time and break away from the constraints of essentialising accounts of embodiment.

Considering that the storyteller gives the promise of 'freedom for just one night' in a virtual world, where time, space and even the names do not matter, it is no surprising to see that the construction of gendered and sexed bodies are challenged. Throughout the whole novel, Winterson explores the relationship between embodiment, technology and construction of gendered and sexed bodies through the cyberspace in a deconstructive manner. What stands out as a first example is the ambiguous use of gender pronouns throughout the novel. Winterson begins the novel with the chapter titled "language costumier" followed with the icons of 'X' and 'Y', which represent the biological sex for both the customers and the reader to make a choice between the two so that they can move on with the rest of the story. Although the story seems to start with perpetuating the binarical gender/sex categories, it turns out that these categories actually travel across the linguistic barriers. First of all, the gender of the storyteller is not specified, and Ali/Alix is always referred to as he or she interchangeably. Later on, the boundary between the storyteller and the lover collapses into each other:

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'Ali. I'm coming to London.'

(I'd better reply. What else can you do?)

'Business or pleasure?'

'I want to see you.'

'I thought we weren't seeing each other.'

'We're not.'

'Are you going to keep your eyes closed then?'

'I'd always know you in the dark.'

'Cut it out.'

'Where do you live?'

'You've got my Website.'

'Meatspace not cyberspace' (*TP* 121)

As it is seen, the shifting of pronouns and unidentified genders obscure who is speaking to whom, and what the sex of the characters is. In chapter "terrible thing to do a flower", as well, the dialogue between the two characters in the cyberspace creates obscurity:

> You said, 'Who are you?'
>
> 'Call me Ali.'
>
> 'Is that your real name?'
>
> 'Real enough.'
>
> 'Male or female?'
>
> 'Does it matter?'
>
> 'It's a co-ordinate.'
>
> 'This is a virtual world' (*TP* 26)

Once the characters realize how trivial it is to specify the gender and the reader gets into the flow of reading, what becomes important is not the binarical organisation of the sexes for emphasising the sexual orientation in the novel, but the effects of the heterogeneous elements when they come together.

The most striking postanthropocentric feminist stances of *The PowerBook* can be found in the chapters "EMPTY TRASH" and "OPEN HARD DRIVE". In "A Cyborg Manifesto", Haraway propounded the figure of 'cyborg' that is defined as a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid machine and organism" (Manifestly 5). The cyborg goes beyond the humanist interpretation of the human as autonomous, distinct and disconnected from technology, and appears as "a connection-making entity, a figure of interrelationality" (Braidotti, "Feminist" 80), which cuts across the boundaries between human/animal, organism/machine and physical/non-physical. In this regard, the posthuman can be considered as a conjoined twin of cyborg thanks to "its enmeshment, at all levels of materiality, metaphor with information, communication and biotechnologies and with other nonhuman actors" (Kember vii). The myth of the cyborg, Haraway claims, is about "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions", where all dichotomies collapse into each other (*Manifestly* 14).

It can be said that there is a strong analogy between Alix and the cyborg figure. As the story of Alix unfolds in "EMPTY TRASH", it becomes clear that Alix is an adopted child, of whose past is unknown. Hence, both the cyborg and Alix are considered to be an 'illegitimate offspring' that has no past to be faithful to; and thus, does not constrain itself to a genealogy. Additionally, the interpretation of Alix as a cyborg also shows parallels with the notion of rhizome. Both Deleuze and Guattari and Haraway have used biological models and taken from technological and scientific fields to deconstruct the human/non-human distinction that privileges the human position. Each human or non-human being is considered to be composed of lines that are either

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imposed, come into existence by chance or invented, and those lines are in constant flow by "crossing, intersecting for a moment, following one another … even cross over into one another" (Deleuze and Guattari 203). The blurring of these hierarchical distinctions, inscribed in the humanist view, through the figure of cyborg can be considered as an empowerment of Deleuzian notion of the rhizome. By drawing a metaphorical analogy between the cyborg and the rhizome, both the cyborg as a figure and the rhizome as a notion raise the possibility for multiplicities to resolve the problems spring from the limitations imposed upon the body. Similar to Haraway and Deleuze, Winterson seems to reject a story of origin, for Alix is considered to be "a changeling child… outside of time who could cheat time" (105) and cannot be traced through the arborescent structures.

With the chapter "OPEN HARD DRIVE", Winterson keeps her postanthropocentric feminist stance through the art of horticultural crafting. It is the first story of the novel that takes place in 16th century, in which the reader discovers that Ali is a skilful master of disguise. Because the father of Ali wants to drown her rather than to take care of one more daughter, Ali's mother finds a solution by dressing Ali up as a boy so that she could support the family financially. What her mother finds as a solution is to prepare a belt made of tulip bulbs to change Ali's sex as a man. Ali first disguises for economic reasons, but then she disguises to travel safely while working as a spy for the Ottomans. Although Winterson might be considered as perpetuating the sexual binarism, the moment Ali is kidnapped by the pirates and brought to the Princess to teach her the arts of love, Winterson troubles all the biological and cultural embeddedness of sexed and gendered practices. When Ali and the Princess meet, "a strange thing" (23) begins to happen during the sexual intercourse. The more the Princess and Ali come closer to experience the arts of love, the more Ali's sensations grow "but as yet no stronger than [her] astonishment" (23) as Ali realizes that her disguise comes to life.

Ali's process of transformation with the tulip can be seen as the moment when Haraway's cyborg figure comes to life with Deleuzian becoming. Similar to Deleuze's example of "becoming-wasp of the orchid and becoming-orchid of the wasp" (*ATP* 10), the reader witnesses the becoming-tulip of human and the becoming-human the tulip, which can be considered as a primitive version of the cyborg coming to existence in the virtual reality. This becoming is "deeper than disguise" (*TP* 11), for it is no faking and the boundaries between the two beings cannot be distinguished anymore. The body is represented "as a kind of *virtuality*, but one that is, precisely for that reason, all the *more* real" (Wolfe xxiii). Whereas the humanist view of the difference between human/non-human beings is represented as problematic, the posthumanism interprets these differences as enriching. That is why Winterson speaks through the storyteller to interpret the transformation of the tulip as a 'strange' thing to happen so that she can illustrate how strongly the heterosexual practices are gendered and inscribed within the humans. Nevertheless, "no organ is constant as regards either function or position, … sex organs sprout anywhere,… the entire organism changes colour and consistency in split-second adjustments" (Deleuze and Guattari 153). When the cyborg's liberatory aspect is combined with a body without organs, the body of Ali/Alix becomes a field of immanence, a living body regenerating itself,

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which can challenge the essentialist practices of embodiment centralised around gender and sexuality.

By taking into account the importance of pleasure in the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, it can be claimed that pleasure plays a significant role in the empowerment of the rhizomatic cyborg Ali/Alix in *The PowerBook*. In traditional Western thought, lack has always been associated with desire, which has direct connection with pleasure, and is inscribed as "the negative law of lack, the external rule of pleasure" (Deleuze and Guattari 155). What is innovative in Deleuzian approach to desire and pleasure is to construe them as the productive ways of becomings, assemblages, deterritorializations and lines of flight. As it can be claimed that the body is the best field for the production of desire and pleasure, it becomes possible only through the body to destabilize the sexual identity and gender as binarical categories. In the chapter "NEW DOCUMENT", the lovers come across in Paris once again, and when Ali/Alix asks to the lover what brings her to Paris, she says "I like the structures without cladding" (32). Then, she continues by commenting that she lets "the lines show through" (32) on her work, her life and her body. The structures without cladding can be seen as the ways of dealing with the constraints of the physical world. Therefore, the lover's interest in the structures without cladding can be interpreted as having a desire for a body without organs, on which the flow of intensities can wander freely as the BwO is the field of immanence of desire.

In Deleuzian approach, the BwO is a desiring machine, which is against the idea of unity; instead, it favours discontinuity, which enables to reject "belong[ing] to either an original totality that has been lost or one which finalizes" it. The BwO always works across both material and virtual dimensions (Grosz 168). Since pleasure is a way for one to find himself or herself in the process of desire that transgresses him, "pleasures, even the most artificial, are reterritorializations" (Deleuze and Guattari 156). Thus, desire is not supposed to produce "permanent multiplicities"; rather, it makes experiments, builds connections and creates assemblages (Grosz 168). If love is considered as pure desire producing pleasure, it becomes obvious that Winterson uses love as a war machine against the effects and the restrictions of institutionalized discourses of gender and sexuality. Because love is not a result of the discourses of sexuality or gender but of pure desire, love transcends and crosses the boundaries of sexuality to open the doors of freedom as in the case of sexual intercourse of Ali and the Princess. As the storyteller says love "smashes into your life like an ice floe, and even if your heart is built like Titanic you go down" (*TP* 47). Even though Ali/Alix is the creation of both social reality and fiction (Haraway, *Manifestly* 5) as a rhizomatic cyborg, it does not change the fact that the work troubles the discourses of embodiment. No matter how the cyberspace in the novel seems to give the chance of choosing whoever or whatever one would like to be, the rhizomatic nature of the text will always find a line of flight. *The PowerBook* refuses "all the narratives that have been written so far" by allowing "some air to those elements choked with the centuries of use, and give some substance to the floating world" (TP 49).

Having analysed Winterson's *The Powerbook*, it can be claimed that the problem stems not from the biological sex differences but from the way they are arranged, which Deleuze calls 'the

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judgement of God' while Haraway calls it 'the God-trick'. For that reason, the human beings cannot realize the capacities of their sexed bodies. Even though one is not born into his or her gender, it is not possible to live without any gender, either. Therefore, gender and sex should be considered together, which work as 'biunivocal' in Deleuzian sense so that it can become possible to "desire on gender" by being aware of that it is only a "part of your body without organs" in a constant becoming (Buchanan 5). As any becoming can never be a "'history' with fixed starting and ending points", it is just a "representation of nothing" that transforms and problematizes the very terms of identification" (Rajchman 90). Like Ali/Alix, a rhizomatic cyborg will always be in a state of constant flux, represent multiplicities and the possibilities of transgressed boundaries. As Halberstam states "the search for origins stops here because we are the origins… You're not human until you're Posthuman. You were never human" (8).

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