



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 9. Issue.2. 2022 (April-June)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

**AN EXPLORATION OF TRANSHUMANISM, NON-BINARY GENDER IDENTITY, AND
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN JEANETTE WINTERSON'S
*FRANKISSSTEIN: A LOVE STORY***

PIYUSH KUMAR

Research Scholar

Department of English, Central University of South Bihar

Email ID- piyushkumar@cusb.ac.in



PIYUSH KUMAR

Article information

Received:21/05/2022
Accepted: 27/06/2022
Published online:30/06/2022
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.9.2.138](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.9.2.138)

ABSTRACT

Jeanette Winterson's latest novel *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019) rethinks the classic novel and makes an outstanding contribution to contemporary science fiction. She focuses on advancing science and technology to portray a present society of smart tech and artificial intelligence. The novel explores hard science and romanticism combining the possibilities of artificial intelligence and transhumanism. It acknowledges the AI-enabled future which transcends the human body and automated consciousness. The major theme of the novel is the engagement of humankind with hybridity and technological advancements. This study aims to grasp Winterson's posthuman perspective on the human body through transhumanism and artificial intelligence as its implications. The novel is constructed in a way that its speculative nature suggests a future that is not only resting in the hands of tech giants and scientists but also pointing towards a society that is born out of AI and transhumanism. The novel focuses on gender and sexuality and the use of technology as a tool to understand ourselves, redesign ourselves, make our existence fluid to offer life beyond the socially constructed idea of heteronormativity. Winterson asserts that the novel itself is a technology. This paper explores the transhuman and transexual identity in the novel as to how the characters experience their dilemma to break the barrier of gender identity through a technological transition. It also seeks to explore how Winterson fictionalized the essence of artificial intelligence in a narrative, the theme of which also addresses the question of existence and the boundaries we can break through the implications of such technologies. The methodology involved in the present research is to analyze the novel through Donna Haraway's cyborg theory put forward in her essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* (2006). Haraway's vision of creating a genderless cyborg can achieve social, cultural, and political equality. She fiercely proposed her opinion about the notion that the fusion of humans and technology will liberate us from the ancient concept of the body. The present paper attempts to engage in the analysis of this aspect of the transhumanist world in the novel which offers a deeper understanding of the advent of AI and cyborgs concerning gender and sexual identity. It also examines the principal questions of the consequences of the

inevitable future of humankind and its transhuman creations that literary phenomenon raises and also forms the core of Winterson's belief in such a future.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Transhumanism, Gender Identity Transsexuality, Cyborg, Science Fiction

In the 21st century, science and technology shaped our lives with tremendous speed and their impact can be traced in our day-to-day life. It is clear that technology is constantly overpowering the position of humanity in theory as well as in practice, turning society into a posthuman age through the transition of transhumanism. The advancement in technology has led us to turn into cyborgs. The technocentric reality of today forces us to ask the questions of ethics, gender roles, transhuman body, human communication with artificial intelligence, social and political stand in a world constantly changing from humanism to transhumanism and ultimately posthumanism. Transhumanism can be said as transitional humans moving beyond its limit to seek and transform humans through technological augmentation such as neurotechnology, biotechnology, and reproductive technology. In contemporary times, human lives are aided and enhanced by technology that gets updated every day moving towards a future that will certainly be transhuman. Transhumanism also subverts humanistic hierarchies of humans over machines and thus liberates humans from conventional gender identity. It is the main focus of the transhumanists that humans should remain open-ended as we are the product of an ongoing existential process of biological and cultural development. It brings forth the idea of radical alterations and possibilities of the human through the various implications of techno-enhancement and this technological progressivism can bring techno evolution and reformation through science and technology. Transhumanism offers a deep and inventive study on technology that explores the current potentiality of human endeavor to vision a posthuman world.

In recent decades humanity has brought about a tremendous change through the emergence of technology which reduced the workload of humans in several daily tasks. Today, people trust technology more than humans because of the accuracy, pace, and excellence it provides to society. The entire area of technology has transformed dramatically since the advent of Artificial Intelligence. As AI technology is continuously growing the question of ethics also emerges with it. Countries are producing autonomous weapon systems capable of attacking the target without any human intervention. From self-driving car to the advent of biological AI 21st century is the turning point in the field of technology. Companies are creating robots for the companionship of human beings as well as building sex robots which are also discussed in Winterson's novel. A humanoid in Japan acts as a priest in a temple. With such a shift in the area, the notion of artificial life comes into existence. The spread of technoscience and technoculture is so real that Helen Hester in her book *Xenofeminism* (2018) writes, "Technology is as social as society is technical (11)". This suggests the expansion of technology will be everywhere. The gradual steps in the field of AI-enabled technology began to leave behind humankind, that is why in today's world it has become a matter of concern for it raises some crucial social, political, and cultural questions. Within the arena of speculative posthumanism, this development can lead to a possible future where technologies and Artificial Intelligence may conquer humankind and cause the AI takeover. It is time to look at the future and to investigate posthuman society.

Posthuman narratives can be observed in various science fiction. Issac Asimov defines science fiction as "the branch of literature that deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology" (65). The objective of the science fiction genre is to explore, discover, to experiment with something about the universe and human society. Science fiction of yesterday influences the society of today. Most science fiction carries this incredible ability to shape reality, identity, and extraordinary development in the field of science and technology. The impact of science fiction is so much that it creates tremendous scientific possibilities. Literature of the 21st century has produced some remarkable works through the fictional expression of the future. In the last few decades, technology and artificial intelligence has frequently served as the central and dominant subject for science fiction, a prominent literary genre in western literature which has much to say about the contemporary technology-driven society. Contemporary society is equally fascinated and sacred by the evolution of machines.

Jeanette Winterson's latest novel *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019) is one such book that rethinks the classic novel and makes an outstanding contribution to contemporary science fiction. She focuses on advancing science and technology to portray a present society of smart tech and artificial intelligence. The novel explores hard science and romanticism combining the possibilities of artificial intelligence and transhumanism. It acknowledges the AI-enabled future which transcends the human body and automated consciousness. The major theme of the novel is the engagement of humankind with hybridity and technological advancements. Winterson starts the story with two plotlines: the first narrative is situated during the period of Mary Shelley when she was writing her novel *Frankenstein* and her relationship with her husband, the poet P.B. Shelley, and the other poet friends like Lord Byron. The second narrative focusses on the contemporary high-tech world with a scientist like Victor who aspires to preserve the brains of humans in the form of artificial intelligence after their deaths, Ry is a trans doctor who symbolizes the significance of transhumanism in the present world and the other important character is a tech giant Ron who has created sexbots. Through a dual narrative mode, the author switches between the two plots and two different stages of time. The story is full of postmodern techniques of constructing narratives. There is proper coherence, stability, and balance between the two stories, despite the delivery of the story with an experimental style that masterfully intermingles the twenty-first-century cyborg and nineteenth-century monster. The purpose of reimagining and reanimating Frankenstein's monster seems to be clear because the madness of Victor the scientist is predictable which could cause terror. Through this novel, Winterson overthrew patriarchal values and subverts the conventional heteronormativity of body perception to make her case. This idea is effective as we go further into the story, in retelling the agonies, pain, suffering from Mary Shelley as a woman writer in the 19th century, Winterson disrupts the very idea of fear of cyborgs with her extraordinary imagination. In the second story, the reader gets to know that Ry a doctor who is having a trans body is in a love relationship with the mad scientist Victor the creator of the cyborg. This relationship is being cherished throughout the novel and becomes the basis for dissolving the heteronormative and phallocentric idea of gender and goes beyond the traditional gender identity through technological enhancement. The phallocentric myth is the obstacle for women which led to the marginalization of women through gender performance. To liberate them from gender is one of the prominent thoughts of Haraway which can also be easily grasped throughout the novel written by Winterson. The part of the story dealing with Shelley exposes the perspective on nineteenth-century domination of patriarchy to the structure of gender. While reading the novel, the reader realizes that the author is attempting to emancipate women from the established heteronormative notion of gender. Haraway in her essential essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* (2006) commented, "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are a cyborg. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (150). In this context, science fiction written by Jeanette Winterson breaks down the gender boundaries through the depiction of transhuman and artificial intelligence as she believes science does progress in the interest of patriarchy which needs to be acknowledged. The story recreates the theme of transhuman and artificial intelligence through the viewpoint of contemporary scientific possibilities and the vital debate on gender identity in such posthuman times. One of the major characters in the novel Ry Shelley a transgender doctor claims that "not one thing. Not one gender. I live with doubleness" (89). Therefore, the author duly addresses the issue of patriarchy and cherishes the transgender identity of Ry and its biotechnological construct of the human body. Another character who represents patriarchal ways in the novel is Ron who looks down on the identity of Ry. Ron's robots are created on this ancient model of male-dominated social structure. He makes sexbots that satisfy all sexual needs of men without questing and adhering to the master-slave relationship. Humanity operates through a network of binaries that is subverted through the discourse of posthumanism but the hierarchies remain in practice which functions as a weapon to divide and control technological advancement and manipulation. In this sense, the way sexbots are physically designed mirrors the conventional beauty of women such as they are long-legged and attractive breasts satisfying the human-centric patriarchal needs in the posthuman age. Thus, it can be concluded that patriarchy or male domination in the field of robotics and AI technologies act as an agency in resulting in such circumstances. In one instance, Ron refers to women as not having enough time to fulfill the needs of their husbands or partners. It is quite evident that the sexbots are deliberately designed to perform as coy, submissive, and obedient like the traditional women. Therefore, it can

be said that the sexbots produced by Ron is not truly a technological and scientific pursuit but it is the invention of the patriarchal system. As Haraway puts it, "only caricatures of that masculinist reproductive dream" (152).

Throughout the novel, Winterson oscillates between both the plots in a very interesting manner creating humor unexpectedly. In both the narratives, she uses the same name of the characters providing similarities among the psychology of the characters as well as uniting the consequences of scientific goals, and gender oppression. The first story takes place in 19th-century visions and questions the possibilities of artificial intelligence whereas the second story which takes place in the 21st century describes the already realized dominance of artificial intelligence in human lives. So, the first story acts as the antecedent of the second one. In the second narrative, Winterson propounds artificial intelligence to suggest that body has no significance. She did this to overcome gender politics and tells us that the distinction between male, female, transgender, or other gender is obsolete as a concept. It is irrelevant in contemporary times fulfilling the idea of cyborgs that she propounds. Through the patriarchal politics in the development of artificial intelligence and technology, the writer maintains the deeper connectivity between the two plots. Haraway's ideas can be traced throughout the novel as Victor put in the picture about artificial intelligence suggesting that the mind and body are free from each other. According to him, the future is different because "The human race is not the best possible outcome" (31). Winterson points out that the patriarchal politics of gender and body will vanish from sight with the initiation of disembodied forms. Victor's idea of artificial intelligence is different from robots designed by Ron. Victor's artificial intelligence is not based on gender as he informs that his vision of AI does not consist of biological males or females, hence there will be no prejudices on the grounds of gender identity. But the robot or sexbots made by Ron is entirely based on phallocentric notion rooted in patriarchy. With this novel, the author proposes a world where through the AI vision of Victor a future is possible where the notion of gender, gender inequality, and gender discrimination can be dissolved. However, she alarms us that the patriarchal politics will continue to hold the late capitalism resulting in robots created by Ron. The world of Victor is similar to the intellectual imagination of Haraway.

The novel under consideration is not only about science fiction, technological posthumanism, and a future that might capture consciousness artificially but it is also about the love and romantic relationship between Victor and Ry which welcomes the transhuman future through their love. As Ry describes themselves as neither male nor female but a hybrid. This fluid representation of Ry dismantles the traditional hierarchical gender binary that makes Victor love them even more. Victor looks at Ry as the early model for the future he is striving for and characterizes Ry as "a harbinger of the future" (103). Thus, there is a kind of possibility in the arrival of AI of Victor. Winterson has shown both the perspective and character are divided into two categories one group of people are highly patriarchal in nature supporting and designing technology based on this notion whereas other people believe in the world beyond the notion of gender and aspire to create a world surpassing the limitation of gender, class, race, and culture. This is one of the reasons that even though Ry is loved by Victor they are constantly judged by others around them for being a hybrid. The way Ry is treated by different characters in the novel, Winter draws the attention of readers toward the aggressive face of the patriarchy, which does not accept queer bodies. Ry is not a character who rebels against the social stigma and violence even though they radically altered their body but on the other hand internalizes the negativity and atrocities done to them, which is sometimes physically and mentally torturing. But the point here is to accept the step towards the posthuman age which begins in the novel as Ry with a future body form as they are not male nor female. Through a remarkable portrayal of the conflict between the old world and the new world, Winterson focuses on highlighting the fact that humans fear new developments as well as the fear of losing their hegemonic hold on the world. In this context, Ron's idea of the future is very clear as he wishes to advance a patriarchal capitalist system to his production policies and sees the relationship between humans and his robots as a master-slave, continuing the old hierarchy to maintain the old-world order. For him, the only use of sexbots is to satisfy the needs of men. On the other hand, the idea of artificial intelligence of Victor in his own words means "non-biological life form, without hearts, seek to win ours...All life forms are capable of attachment.... No reproduction. Not economic necessity...Not patriarchy. Not Gender. No fear. It would be wonderful" (159).

Therefore, Victor's visions of tomorrow can be perceived as the foundation of an egalitarian cyborg society that Haraway pictures as the project of the future.

Haraway views the issue of gender as the patriarchal politics embedded in our historical, social, political, economic, and cultural alliances which act as the set of systems to support gender hierarchy even though all human beings are born biologically equal. To subvert this conventional thought process, ideas proposed by Haraway as a theorist and Victor's opinion about the utility of artificial intelligence in the novel combined to offer a valid argument on grounds on which the advancement in the field of AI aided technologies should be based and modeled. Winterson's *Frankenstein* raises some critical questions through the novel, she enquires into the exploration and possible outcome of artificial intelligence and transhumanism in today's world contextualizing it to the nineteenth-century idea of science and technology as well as discussing the subject matter of the existence of non-biological life forms which might lead the way for a posthuman future. Through this narrative, the author brings her ethical concern about the responsibilities in creating non-biological life forms such as the AI of Victor and robots of Ron. The writer in general communicates with humanity about the preparation of the world that is coming very fast and that might replace humans or overtake them. The very thought that is depicted in the novel through Victor as he is willing to create machines with the ability to think for themselves makes us contemplate the consequences.

Winterson begins her novel in an interesting postmodern style by combining Shelley's life, her Frankenstein dream, nineteenth-century patriarchal society, and scientific pursuits with the contemporary idea of technological advancement and artificial life, letting the reader find out the links between both the narratives. There is a gap of two centuries between the time frame of both the stories but the aims and objectives are the same with similar instances of gender issues and possibilities of artificial intelligence. The way Winterson tells the story not only spreads her idea of a cyborg but also defines her own identity as a cyborg. She convincingly destabilizes the patriarchal values and phallocentric facet of society which causes gender oppression. Winterson like Haraway is more concerned about the significance of bodies in performing the sanctioned gender roles and that is why many characters in the novel contribute to the world of cyborgs. Robots created by Ron are an example of how science is going to serve the patriarchy. The body of Ry who is a trans indicates the changes in the body can be done and lead to a transhuman society. Victor visualizes a cyborg world in his idea of artificial intelligence. Enhancement or augmentation in the body is done because of gender politics. We do not see much difference between both the stories as traces of gender politics and patriarchal dominance can be observed equally. The main argument of the author through this novel is to destabilize the older gender notion and imagine a world that operates primarily on genderless cyborgs where gender inequality and gender roles are demolished in all its forms. Along with all this, the story ends ambiguously not predicting a singular path for the future which shows Winterson herself is not comprehensible with these complex networks of technological evolution. While analyzing the novel in this context, we could see the diverse discourse about the independence of technology and its consequences. More and more advancement in the field of science and technology, experiments in the area of neurotechnology and biotechnology, presence of artificial intelligence, brings the question of what the world with an enhanced human would look like. The notion of cyborg is becoming the new reality, using genes as a tool to modify and experiment with body parts, creating artificial consciousness, and overcoming death through cryogenics alarms us as humans that how the collaboration between humans and technology would look like. There are many questions like will the technological posthuman future would look like utopia or dystopia remain unanswered. Today, artificial intelligence is a commonplace thing but we know not how our future is going to be if its utility has no social concern. The novel also indicates through the character Victor that there is this possibility of AI becoming supreme on the planet. If we look at it going beyond the Haraway notion of cyborgs the technology of AI may become destructive.

Literature is a medium to discuss the technological evolution of the contemporary age. In short, it can be concluded that the present-day human beings are the transitional species as suggested in the novel giving emergence to a new species which is not the traditional human but entwines with artificial intelligence and technology to become a future posthuman. Throughout the novel, we witness multiple occurrences of dialogues

and conversations among the characters that point towards a posthuman world. At this point, realizing the necessity or threat of such a technologized world is of absolute concern.

This paper attempts to analyze the depiction of Frankenstein narratives by Jeanette Winterson in her novel. Since literature can see through and foretell the future by depicting speculative scenarios, the paper discusses the human-machine relationships in terms of gender roles, transhumanism, and AI development. The novel also deals with the issues of consciousness, cryogenics, and challenging ramification of technological advancement. While reading this book readers also realizes that on one hand Winterson is delivering us an extraordinary posthuman perspective as well as paying tribute to Mary Shelley. Frankenstein narratives are becoming popular in contemporary British fiction tackling posthuman issues through philosophical inquiries in contemporary human-machine interaction. Another reason for including Shelley's plot in the story is because Winterson is making the point that human desire for creating nonbiological life forms or artificial life forms is two centuries old. In this novel, Winterson allocates more room for the debates on artificial intelligence and its consequences to humanity. The advantages and disadvantages of the posthuman world are discussed and some serious social, political and ethical questions are raised.

Work Cited

- Asimov, Isaac. "How Easy to See the Future!" *Natural History*, 1975
- Bagırlar, B. "Winterson's Cyborg Dream in Frankissstein" *Soylem Filoloji Dergisi*. 2021, pp. 701-711.
https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/soylemdergi/issue/67644/1011523#article_cite
- Ferrando, Francesca, and Rosi Braidotti. *Philosophical Posthumanism (Theory in the New Humanities)*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.
- Gürova, Ercan. (2021). "Winterson's Frankissstein: Postmodernism Blended with the 19th-Century Style Philosophical Look" *Eurasian Journal of English Language and Literature*. Vol.3, 2021, pp. 235-244.
<https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/jell>
- Hayles, Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman*. Amsterdam University Press, 2008.
- Hester, Helen. *Xenofeminism*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
- Krevel, Mojca. "The Monstrous Cosmos of Jeanette Winterson's Frankissstein." *ELOPE English Language Overseas Perspectives and Enquiries*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2021, pp. 85–100. Crossref,
<https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.18.2.85-100>.
- Pohl, Rebecca. *An Analysis of Donna Haraway's A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century (The Macat Library)*. 1st ed., Macat Library, 2018.
- Trifonas, Peter, and Donna Haraway. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century." *International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments (Springer International Handbooks of Education, 14)*, edited by Joel Weiss et al., 2006th ed., Springer, 2006, pp. 117–58.
- Winterson, Jeanette. *Frankissstein: A Love Story*. Vintage, 2020.

Brief bio of corresponding Author:

Piyush Kumar is a Research Scholar in the Centre for Foreign Languages (English) at the Central University of South Bihar. He has completed his Graduation (2017) and post-Graduation (2019) in English Literature from the University of Delhi. His area of interest is Contemporary Science Fiction and Posthuman Studies.