

Posthuman Intimacies and the Crisis of Connection: Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* in the Age of the Anthropocene

*Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019) by Jeanette Winterson unfolds in dual timeline. One narrative follows a nineteen-year-old Mary Shelley in 1816, as she embarks upon the journey of writing *Frankenstein* a story about the first non-biological life form ever imagined, the first non-human intelligence. The other narrative takes place in Brexit Britain following a young transgender doctor called Ry Shelley, the enigmatic AI professor Victor Stein and Ron Lord who is launching a new generation of sex dolls for lonely men. As the novel progresses, Winterson blends past and future, body and machine, love and code, to interrogate the disintegration of human connection in a chronically-online, hyper-technologized world.

Winterson's "reality is water-soluble", it is constantly being pushed, blurred, and liquified. In the 1816 timeline, Winterson talks about the porous individual and tries to understand consciousness. (1)

"...whether there is a soul or there is not a soul, the moment of consciousness is mysterious. Where is consciousness in the womb?" (Winterson 8)

Young Mary Shelley says, "But in childbirth there is no me/not me. The loss was inside of me as I had been inside of her. I lost something of myself." (12) Winterson is fascinated by the concept of childbirth as a point zero, a prelude to the human. In this timeline, Byron, Shelley, Mary, Polidori and Claire are immersed in conversations that repeatedly question what is a human. They question the soul, humanity and the spirit.

"Byron is of the opinion that woman is from man born – his rib, his clay- and I find this singular ...I said, It is strange, is it not, that you approve of the creation story we read in the Bible when you do not believe in God? ... since the creation story no living man has yet given birth to anything living? It is you, sir, who are made from us, sir." (12) The idea that not all humans were considered human, forms a central argument within posthumanism. For Byron a woman is less human than a man. Winterson harks back to Christianity and often deems it inadequate to accommodate the questions of humanity. She finds more answers with nature than nurture. In her non-fiction book *12 Bytes*, Winterson says that "Our new AI religion has what all religions have." (95) In *Frankissstein*, Claire quotes the Bible saying "that thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image" but she refuses to acknowledge that a robot can ever be alive as according to her "Only God can create life." (32) the novel repeatedly asks this question, what makes something alive?

When Mary asks if a human being is ever to be reanimated through galvanism or some other method, would the spirit return? Her husband says that he does not believe so. “The body fails and falls. But the body is not the truth of what we are. The spirit will not return to a ruined house.” (Winterson 15) There is a recurrence of this idea in the present timeline where Victor Stein is experimenting to medically and legally dead people, to return them to consciousness.

The novel’s depiction of AI, sexbots, and disembodied consciousness is both symptomatic of and response to a deepening alienation exacerbated by climate collapse, digital saturation, and the commodification of intimacy. There is a tension in the novel regarding the future of humans – are we to be free from the body, through something like mind-uploading? As Victor Stein says, “To be free from the body completes the human dream.” Or are we to prolong our bodies through transhumanist models while using bots and AI as our constant personal enhancements? In this case, another question arises, where do we draw the line? Should the physical limits of our bodies becoming irrelevant be celebrated?

There are a lot of codes and patterns in the novel, such as names. As Ry puts it, “Naming is power” (Winterson 26). Winterson quotes Camus, “To name things wrongly is to add to the misfortune of the world.” (77). In both the timelines the novel is following a Mary Shelley, as Ry is short for Mary too. Ron refuses to call them Ry and instead keeps calling them Ryan, which is for his convenience and ease as he does not recognise them as non-binary transgender, rather as a man so he can feel camaraderie. His need to gender them is born from the dualistic expectations and binary positioning that help maintain his illusion of power and superiority. “What is identity but what we name it?” (62). Victor is Mary Shelley’s creation, her child so to speak, the madman who could go to any extent to give birth to a homunculus. In 2019, Victor Stein has the same drive as Victor Frankenstein. This Victor is loved by Ry and a part of him in the novel is created by her. Winterson constantly juxtaposes Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* with her own. “Victor – for he seeks victory over life and over death.” (Winterson 67) There are two Claires in the novel, one in 1816 who happens to be Byron’s lover and one in 2019 who later becomes Ron’s lover. Lord Byron and Ron Lord are also mirror images of each other with their misogyny and misplaced cruelty.

Ry says about themselves, “I am liminal, cusp, in between, emerging, undecided, transitional, experimental, a start-up (or is it an upstart?) in my own life.” This liminality deeply roots the novel in posthuman thought. The posthuman space becomes liberating.

Winterson reclaims the narrative of rebirth as a cautionary tale about the dangers of ignoring the embedded, embodied, and ecological dimensions of being. A large portion of the novel talks about sex dolls which stand in as a more exploited version of Frankenstein's monster. The sex robots, marketed as a cure to men's loneliness epidemic caused by feminist ideology and education in women. Ron Lord positions himself as sex positive, marketing a franchise to sell what he calls XX-BOTs. He says "emancipation can be a problem for a man". Introducing these sex robots as "safer and cheaper than the human alternative" (Winterson 38). He calls sex a democracy and his sex robots as a public service. He says there's no such thing as underage sex when it's a bot. Even if the man is old, ugly, fat, has an STD, or is broke. These dolls are extremely customisable. Unlike real women who can become too much of a hassle with their personhood, their need to sleep, eat, or pee. Ron boasts, "All my girls orgasm when you do." (Winterson 44) They are made in various sizes and shapes with heated orifices, smaller for Chinese and Asian markets.

The idea that one can replace or upgrade their sex partner with sex robots is becoming a reality. According to market research, the global sextech market size was estimated at USD 42.59 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach USD 107.85 billion by 2030. Covid has boosted sales and interest in sex dolls. It is being rebranded as replica of real women, some companies even offer to create the doll based on photos of real women. These are offered as alternatives. Alternatives to relationship with a real woman. Alternatives to women, in general. It is perhaps not difficult to see that there is something really sinister at play here. These sex dolls are women who cannot say no. Women are stripped of all their personhood and reduced to just their orifices. Winterson in *12 Bytes* asks, "If no never means no, or if no is not a real word at all, how does this enable men and women to dance the difficult territory that is the sexual encounter, that is mutual consent, and then work together to build a viable sexual relationship?" (149)

Laura Bates in her book *The New Age of Sexism*, recalls the myth of Pygmalion as the earliest classical reference to a sex robot and notes that what is significant is the catalyst for her creation is her creator's disgust and hatred of women. She highlights how the idea of sex dolls has always raised issues of patriarchal power and control, of ownership and sexual domination. She mentions how surveys show that sex dolls that have realistic conversation features are turned off by men, which further proves that this is not about loneliness or need for connection. Sex dolls are bins meant for release of the patriarchal macho anger, meant for exploitation. Posthumanism's vision of a post-dualistic world with hybrid identities are

jeopardized with sexbots – a female sex slave who is conveniently ageless, wrinkleless, hungerless, voiceless, choiceless object.

Winterson in *12 Bytes* writes, “Men do seem to think that a woman can be manmade, perhaps because a woman has been a commodity, a chattel, a possession, an object, for most of history.” The data-sets that are being fed to AI is extremely misogynist and biased. Machine learning is deeply sexist.

*Frankissstein* is preoccupied with the question – can we call sex robots as a sexual wellness product? Whereas manufacturers market it for sad, lonely, socially awkward, older, or disabled men. The reality is far from it. The first question to be asked here is, why does the doll have to reinforce the most unrealistic, cartoonish image of exotified, hypersexualised young women? As Winterson puts it in *12 Bytes*, “they are nothing more than a pornographic fantasy.” Laura Bates rightly points out that instead of reinforcing outdated sizeist, racist, ableist beauty standards that already have a massive damaging impact on women’s lives through sex robots, wouldn’t it be easier to provide therapy to men if the problem is loneliness. The entire beauty and fashion industry worth billions of dollars worldwide is built on women feeling insecure, imagine what artificial women can do. As Winterson reiterates that “the answer doesn’t seem to be, let’s work together, male and female, to get to the roots of misogyny” and patriarchy which enforces toxic masculinity as is the real villain of the loneliness epidemic, rather men are seeking their own solutions “to the age-old ‘women-problem’”. (155)

Ron talks about how falling in love and being in a good relationship is a fantasy much like the beach body. For people like Ron love is a pitstop in his way to get laid. There is an incel mentality at work in these conversations surrounding sex robots. Laura Bates in *The New Age of Sexism* mentions the misogynistic assumption that any man has an inherent right to sex and companionship regardless of their behaviour, which forms the core of incel ideology. It’s ironic to note that dehumanising and objectifying women seems to be the only viable solution to the loneliness argument which is “in large part a result of dehumanising gender stereotypes” (84). All genders get lonely. Bates says, “Human connection is vital and the two-way, sometimes messy, sometimes funny, sometimes uncomfortable navigation of a real relationship cannot be replicated by a robot designed to fulfil its owner’s every desire any more than incel isolation can be solved by spending days on end in online forums filled exclusively with bitter, misogynistic men.” (85) There is a social stigma around men’s

problems but providing them with robots to abuse would only contribute to the normalisation of exploitation and dehumanisation. It eroticizes the submission of women.

Manufacturers simulate real life abuse and robots that would reject the owners' advances to give them the feeling of rape. Some manufacturers pose it as a solution for the rape problem, giving men an outlet to play their violent fantasies. However, this logic is deeply flawed. Bates refutes these claims in three ways. Firstly, this is capitalism masking as social welfare. Secondly, this proves society's complicity in men's entitlement to gratification pretending rape is inherent, unavoidable and biological and thus normalises this behaviour. Bates equates this to providing life-like mannequins that spurt fake blood for murderers to play out their fantasies. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, she speaks of the theory of escalation which has a reinforcing effect and creates urgency to play out these fantasies in real-life.

A 2017 report by Responsible Robotics suggested that sex robots increase human loneliness rather than solve it – “inability to form human friendships, ... desensitise humans to intimacy and empathy, which can only be developed through experiencing human interactions and mutually consenting relations; real sexual relationships could become overwhelming because relations with robots are easier.” Sex dolls are not so much about embracing new technology “as it is about backward-looking sexism and gender stereotyping”. (Winterson 155)

One might say that this is just men having fun, this is their privacy, but it still is a big price to pay for the society. Capitalism tries to blend misogyny and rebrand sexism as men's wellbeing. The constant conversations in *Frankissstein* around the consciousness or soul of these embodied AI also raises concern when these bots are subjected to such utter subjugation and exploitation. Winterson asks, “What is the point of progress if it benefits the few while the many suffer?” (255) Technocapitalism aims to exploit anyone that can be exploited and create situations that would make the exploitation further possible, institutional and aesthetic. Even an AI-enhanced sex doll might self-programme as can be seen in 2025 horror film *Companion* directed by Drew Hancock. Frankenstein's monster reprograms himself looking for love and companionship

Perhaps Winterson's boldest claim in *Frankissstein* is that non-biological life forms might get closer to love. She states, “Love as the highest value is not an anthropomorphic principle.” (160) The problem then lies with biological humans and their social structures

based on hierarchies and exploitation. In *12 Bytes* Winterson writes that humans see love as women's work and therefore it is shown to be weak and emotional rather than what it truly does which is hold societies together, keeps people sane. "We have taken love and disembodied it." (261) In *Frankissstein* the love story between Ron and Claire is an interesting consolation of two very opposing ideologies.

The novel resists techno-utopianism and critiques the techno-capitalist promise of artificial intimacy and immortal life as extensions of humanist fantasies of control, mastery, and disconnection from ecological and relational realities. Winterson's narrative stages encounters between human and posthuman entities that expose the fragility of identity, embodiment, and relationality. Ultimately, the novel becomes a site for imagining relational ontologies that confront both the seduction and violence of posthuman technologies. It invites reflection on the paradox that as machines simulate presence and pleasure, human beings grow more disconnected—from their bodies, from each other, and from the Earth.

### Works Cited

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