


Frankissstein: A Love Story, by Jeanette Winterson, Random House, 9781473563254, May 2019, pp. 352 (paperback)

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Yayın Değerlendirme / Book Review



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Despite more than 200 years having passed since its first publication in 1818, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* still attracts the attention of many critics, scholars and writers from various fields. It is an enduring and timeless masterpiece due to its exploration of controversial issues ranging from ethical and moral dilemmas persisting in human nature to the double-sided results of scientific and technological advancements. Depicting the thin ice between humanity and monstrosity, Shelley's *Frankenstein* serves as a constant reminder for readers, especially in regard to the direction of the ethical boundaries of science and technology. In fact, it gains even more relevance in the 21st century because of the growing number of studies in the fields of artificial intelligence (AI, henceforth), robotics, cryogenics, genetic engineering and creating cyborg bodies.

The latest writer to give a contemporary look on Shelley's classic work is Jeanette Winterson, a modern British writer who is widely known for her literary works that explore the themes of gender, sexuality, identity and love. However, in the last two decades, she has taken an interest in the limits and potential consequences of the growing use of technology. Thus, in her *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (*Frankissstein*, henceforth), longlisted in 2019's Booker Prize, Winterson scrutinizes the political and ethical issues concerning the d/evolution of technology, especially in terms of the use of artificial intelligence in the creation and modification of new bodies. Like Shelley, Winterson also believes in the creation of new kind of life forms or new bodies, but in today's world, they will not be formed "out of the assembled parts of decayed corpses by using electricity, but out of the zeros and ones of codes", as she puts in TED (TedTalks, 2022). Thus, while paying homage to Shelley's intuition and fervor in *Frankissstein*, Winterson goes one step further and demonstrates that human existence is being redefined in new ways that no one can determine or control. According to her, human intelligence is the key issue in this redefining process. It can enable the possibilities for establishing an all-encompassing system and a post-gender world where gender-biased categories are subverted. On the other hand, it can transgress the limits and plays the role of God in the pursuit of progress, as portrayed in Shelley's and Winterson's Victor Franken/Stein. In other words, Winterson emphasizes that it is human intelligence that will determine how this world is going to end: "Utopia or dystopia? It is up to us" (TedTalks, 2022). With that issue in her mind and by forming an obvious parallelism between AI and the Frankensteinian notion of creating a new kind of life form, she gets under the skin of her readers and encourages them to question their own assumptions and biases, thereby leading to a deeper engagement.

The novel has the mirrored plot-line that seamlessly weaves together throughout the book. The first takes place in Lake Geneva in the early 19th century, when Mary Shelley starts composing her timeless literary classic *Frankenstein*. In this storyline, providing rich and immersive reading experience to her readers, Winterson encourages them to explore Mary Shelley's life and understand how she has struggled for her own creative genius against the prejudices and constraints persisting in her time. Then, in the modern-day storyline set in Memphis at the opening ceremony of the global Tec-X-Po on Robotic, readers meet Ma/Ry Shelley, a transgender doctor who also grapples with the challenges of being a transgender individual in her own time. Establishing a connection between the lives and experiences of Dr. Ma/Ry Shelley and the writer Mary Shelley, both of whom grapple for their own self of sense, Winterson unravels the complexities and discourse on gender/identity and the ongoing transformation of human race. Alongside Ma/Ry, to delve more into the issues of the malleability of gender constructions and evolving sexuality, Winterson introduces Victor Stein, a brilliant AI specialist who is obsessed with immortality and transhuman implications that would provide an eternal life by going beyond the limits of a physical body. Realizing the doubleness in Ma/Ry's post-surgery body, Victor's attraction to Ma/Ry deepens, because this hybridity represents "future-early" (*Frankissstein*, p.62) for him. Ma/Ry is the evidence of what he wants to prove to the whole world with his cryogenics experiments. By means of Ma/Ry and Victor's relationship, Winterson examines concerns involving identity, sexuality, and the ethical ramifications of intervening with nature.

In order to add another layer of depth to the d/evolution of technology, Winterson introduces Ron Lord, who manufactures life-size sexbots for lonely men. Desiring to develop the next generation of sexdolls that satisfy all the desires and demands of male customers and hoping to make a lot of money with it, Ron finances Victor in his studies. Meanwhile, he markets these sexbots as ‘his girls’ having a “very tight figure – little waist, double- G-cup” are the “*pulsing vaginas that never say no*” (*Frankissstein*, pp.36-56) (emphasis in original). That is, by adding a character like Ron, symbolizing toxic masculinity and male chauvinism, Winterson criticizes the growing sextech industry framed in line with phallogocentric desires and forewarns her readers about the dark sides and the misogynistic structure of heteronormative technology. Integrating the theme of sexbots in *Frankissstein* may be disorienting and confusing for some readers who prefer a more traditional narrative structure; however, Winterson’s clever maneuver encourage them to read between the lines and uncover the unspoken truth. The brave new world to be created by artificial intelligence will not be gender-equal or gender neutral, but rather a more suffocating one, especially for women. In other words, through sexbots, Winterson wants to underline the fact that the long-lasting gender binaries of phallogocentric discourse will re-establish the new master-slave dialectic as long as the prevailing ethics of technology and advancements in artificial intelligence are utilized to meet men’s unlimited sexual desires and ab/uses. If human race desire to go forward and create a more diverse world without labels and dichotomies, they should not let Silicon Valley guys “with poor emotional intelligence and frat-dorm social skills” (*Frankissstein*, p. 57) guide and shape the world. The future reformulated by technology and AI should be inclusive, and this is what Winterson longs to achieve in *Frankissstein*.

Briefly, Winterson’s *Frankissstein* is a brilliantly constructed work that provides a thought-provoking experience for readers. Toying with intertextuality through the veins of *Frankenstein* and interweaving the issues about gender, sexuality, and limits of individual freedom with today’s future tech obsession, Winterson invites her readers to reconsider their perceptions with regard to what defines one as a human. “The world is at the start of something” (*Frankissstein*, p. 10), she writes at the beginning of the novel, and then towards the end, she clarifies that “what will happen to the world has begun” (*Frankissstein*, p. 148). That is, technology is already here and re-shaping humanity’s future. Nevertheless, the essential question is whether this process is realized through technological utopianism or hubris.

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