

An Analysis of Sexual Agency in Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn* and *Fledgling*

Aashray Joshua Rao^{1*}, Anil Adagale²

¹ Department of English, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune, Maharashtra, India

² Professor, Department of English, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune, Maharashtra, India

*Corresponding author E-mail id: rao.aashray4798@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper aims to analyse some of the relationships found in the novels *Dawn* and *Fledgling* by science fiction author Octavia E. Butler. It draws insights from not only sexuality studies but also from Marxist theory to understand these relationships in the context of the economic conditions of the worlds in which they occur. It also attempts to show how we can extend Marxist analysis of human-relations to the cases of alien-human pairings in *Dawn* and vampire-human pairings in *Fledgling*. In its analysis of *Dawn*, the focus is on the hierarchy within the Oankali family and later in the composite Oankali-Human pairings. A crucial goal is to depict the alienation from sexual choice that the main character, Lillith, experiences in the novel. Similarly, in the analysis of *Fledgling*, the paper focuses on the agency and the limits of consent as they appear in relationships between Shiro, the protagonist of the novel, and the partners she takes throughout the novel. Hopefully, the study will show the amenability of Marxist analysis to providing a richer understanding of agency and alienation in the fantastical relationships found in these novels while also showing how they are applicable to the broader context of human relations in the wider world.

Keywords

Marxism, Octavia E. Butler, Science fiction, Sexual agency, Sexuality studies.

INTRODUCTION

There are two key concepts guiding the study of the two novels, Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn* and *Fledgling*, under review in this paper: hierarchies of power within the family and sexual agency. For its understanding of the evolution of the institution of the family and its relation to private property, the study focuses on the work of Frederick Engels, and for the latter it looks into analyses of sexual capitalism such as that of Paul Reynolds.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses one of the most important methods used by Marxist critics is ideology critique which looks at texts in relation to the dominant ideology. Again, this is not to be reduced to simply the evident claims in favour of a certain political or philosophical belief system but also implicit claims of the role of individuals and societies. The pernicious nature of ideology is such that even writers are unwittingly co-opted by it. As Barbara Foley points out in *Marxist Literary Criticism Today*, it is not necessary that writers consciously and purposefully create texts that play a role in continuing the hegemonic domination of the ruling class, rather they may even take themselves to be actively opposing this domination. However, there is often a gap between what is intended and what actually plays out. It's important to be aware of the ideological web in which works are created and interpreted to be able to critically engage with it [1]. One example of this would be Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that, in superficially critiquing the British Empire, reinforces the supposed inferiority of Black Africans in relation to white Europeans.

DISCUSSION

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels discusses the transition from the consanguine family that lived during times of primitive communism to the monogamous family that was, and still is, the dominant model of the family in modern capitalist society. He refers frequently to his partner Marx who points out that the structure of modern families is not just reminiscent of the slave-master relation where the woman is subjected to a place of inferiority to her husband but also resembles the conditions of feudal society where she works without owning anything and simply receiving the 'privilege' of having a place to stay and food that she herself must produce to sustain herself and the other members of the family. The institution of the family contains the same contradictions that we see play out in the productive areas of society and in the state [2]. In essence, the family functions as a microcosm of the society at large and are indicative of the hierarchy and class divides that dominate the society it exists in.

Engels criticises the idea that the appearance of the monogamous family is the sign of a less barbaric and more egalitarian society but rather that, its foundation is the assumption of the supremacy of the man and the subordination of the woman. This is unequal than the primitive relationships-- that were somewhat matriarchal in nature. Hence primitive communism, though not perfect, is closer in alignment with the goals of socialist political action. One of the main purposes of the monogamous family is to establish a clear paternity of the children produced in the marriage, this necessary because the property owned by the man must be inherited by his biological children [2]. This is

oppressive hierarchy of man over woman is key to understanding the social and productive dynamics of the family and human society at large. Here, one sees how intertwined the patriarchal, monogamous family is to private property and class. This framework for looking at the family is what one is going to use to try and make sense of the familial system presented in the *Lillith's Brood* series.

There are two key interconnected facets of Oankali family structures that we aim to analyse in this paper: hierarchy and the means of production. Firstly, we want to see what the hierarchical structures that exist within the Oankali family are. Secondly, how these structures relate to the means of production in the setting of the *Lillith's Brood* series.

The premise of this series is that humanity has destroyed most of itself and the planet through an all-out nuclear war. The Oankali are an alien race that survives through trading genetic information with species that it encounters as it travels through the universe. The word 'Oankali' even means 'gene trader' and this trade of genetic information is necessary to their survival as a species. In *Dawn*, the Oankali have saved the remaining humans on Earth and have begun trading with them, they are particularly interested in cancer and its abilities, if controlled, to allow the regeneration of limbs and accelerated healing. The story centres around Lillith, a Black American woman, who is chosen to reintroduce humans to the Earth that has now sufficiently healed from the radioactive disaster. The early parts of the book deal with her coming to terms with the Oankali and their ways of living.

The Oankali claim that the downfall of humanity lay in a genetic contradiction in the fabric of the DNA that makes up humans. According to them the combination of intelligence and a natural proclivity for hierarchy which needed to be genetically altered if humanity were going to make suitable gene trading partners with the Oankali. In fact, Jdahya, the male Oankali, that Lillith initially encounters on the Oankali ship that orbits the Earth claims that the Oankali have no predisposition towards hierarchy. However, Lillith, in my opinion, accurately discerns that there is hierarchy in Oankali relations and we will get to the textual evidence for that.

Quoting from the text, Lillith describes the first Oankali family she comes into contact with: 'They were Jdahya and his wife Tediin—Kaaljdahyatediin lel Kahguyaht aj Dinso. And there was Jdahya's ooloi mate Kahguyaht—Ahtrekahguyahtkaal lel Jdahyatediin aj Dinso. Finally, there was the family's ooloi child Nikanj—Kaalnikanj oo Jdahyatediinkahguyaht aj Dinso [3].' To put it simply, an Oankali family (before the inclusion of humans) is made up of three senior members: a male Oankali, in this case Jdahya, a female Oankali, here Jdahya's wife Tediin, an ooloi, a gender neutral Oankali who in this case is generally referred to as Kahguyaht. Apart from this, it includes any children the three mates may produce. In the case of this family, that child is an ooloi, Nikanj. If one pays attention to the system of naming among the Oankali, it already suggests a hierarchy even if the Oankali are unwilling to accept it. The name of the male

Oankali always precedes that of the female, while the ooloi is also given a separate privileged position in the naming structure, separated from the male and female Oankali names.

Lillith also makes an astute observation that 'in spite of Jdahya's claim that the Oankali were not hierarchical, the ooloi seemed to be the head of the house. Everyone deferred to it [3].' If one member is deferred to for all decisions, to claim they're not in a hierarchically superior position is just slavishness to a dogmatic proposition among the Oankali family. Another way in which we see the ooloi having some sense of authority is in the relationship between Kahguyaht and Nikanj where Kahguyaht has control over the training and guidance of the ooloi child. It is important to note that the authority of a parent over a child is a form of dominance hierarchy, especially when only one of the parents seem to have it, that anarchists and socialists have argued also needs to be undone for a just society. There are some other facets of Oankali pairing that suggests hierarchical and unequal status. The young ooloi, Nikanj, reveals to Lillith that his future mates want to start living with him before he completes his metamorphosis into a full ooloi. Male and female Oankali mature faster than the ooloi do and hence, want to feel like they 'helped their ooloi out of childhood.' [3] This is another form of hierarchy where more mature members feel an almost parental role and authority over younger ones, before it flips at maturation to ooloi supremacy.

The Oankali family structure changes over the course of *Dawn* and its sequel *Adulthood Rites*. The first way the Oankali integrate humans into their family structure changes it to be made up of five members: an Oankali male, an Oankali female, a human male, a human female, and an ooloi (and of course, any children they might have together). Hence, in *Adulthood Rites*, the first male child that is born to Lillith, Akin, refers to his family members as, 'Nikanj Ooan (the ooloi parent), Lillith Mother (human female parent), Ahajas Ty (Oankali female parent), Dichaan Ishliin (Oankali male parent) and Joseph Father (human male parent).' (Butler *Adulthood* 7) [4]. The family structure evolves in *Adulthood Rites*: rather than being made up of separate Oankali and Human parents, the non-ooloi parents will be constructs—a mix of human and Oankali genes. The family system will then be made up of 'a female, an ooloi, and children. Males will come and go as they wish and as they find welcome [4].' This, we could argue puts the males in a subordinate position where their main purpose is engaging in sex for procreation and then an inability to have much say in the raising of the children.

Looking at this from a Marxist perspective, we can arguably draw a similarity to the hierarchy in the monogamous family where in the Oankali the means is not the means of production as the Oankali already live in post-scarcity society in regards to the physical items needed for survival. Rather, the hierarchy within the Oankali and later the construct family has to do with I will refer to as the 'means of reproduction.' The ooloi have full control over

how reproduction takes place and are the ones that facilitate the gene trade. Hence, they have control of the means of reproduction putting them in a superior position to the other members. The ooloi are also generally the ones who make decisions regarding the functioning of Oankali society, though Jdahya naively claims the Oankali all have a say. Reproduction is an essential part of what makes up the species-being of both humans and Oankali, therefore to have control of it fully in the hands of the ooloi estranges the others and causes a sort of alienation as described by Marx and other socialist thinkers. We see this as Lillith over time grows more and more hostile towards the Oankali due to this lack of control.

In the view of this study, it successfully shows that capitalist conditions and the Marxist explanation of them can be extended to situation where survival is not a question of resources and labour but reproduction takes its place. This sets up the Oankali family, and by extension Oankali society due to the family being a microcosm of the contradictions lying in a society, as not truly an equitable arrangement even if the Oankali themselves are wilfully blind to it.

In his article, 'Sexual Capitalism: Marxist Reflections on Sexual Politics, Culture and Economy in the 21st Century,' Marxist theorist Paul Reynolds points out that much of the recent work on sexuality studies comes from theorists who endorse an openly hostile attitude to traditional Marxism. These theorists tend to be regarded as post-Marxist, anti-Marxist or completely non-Marxist. This is a strange categorisation and contradiction as many of the important ideas and problems that these theorists tackle are very much in line with Marxist analyses and can even be seen as extensions of them. Regardless, not much respect or attention is paid to these Marxist investigations into the realm of the sexual [5].

Reynolds argues that when a lack of attention is paid to the political economy in which sexual identities and relations are construction they tend to fall into the trap of homonormativity. Homonormativity does not truly challenge the heterosexist attitudes that prevail in society and rather simply build upon it. It also tends to depoliticise the members of the group which is why we see gay men in affluent countries often siding with right wing politics and conservative ideologies as they see themselves now accepted into the upper fold [5].

Another issue that needs to be dealt with sexual agency and we can look at it in a similar way to alienation as Marx conceives of it. If humans, especially women, transmen, and AFAB non-binary people, do not have control over their reproductive abilities, it limits their ability to act according to their free will and to consciously make changes to the world that align with their goals of survival and thriving in accordance with their preferences. This brings us back to the idea of the 'means of reproduction' that was brought up earlier and how it presents another opportunity to create an underclass in society whose choices are limited unfairly.

Throughout Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn*, as Ruth Salvaggio points out in her 1984 paper [6] and Miller does in his 1998 paper, we see Lillith's agency undermined [7]. She is made a subject of Oankali in their project to make humans amenable to the gene trade and to mutual cohabitation with the Dinso tribe of the Oankali and the human-Oankali constructs that the ooloi breed through their control over the means of reproduction.

This starts with Lillith being placed into an Oankali household without really giving her a say in the matter. She does not choose Jdahya or Tediin or Kahguyaht as her substitute parents and guides into Oankali society. Most importantly, she is not given a choice when it comes to her future Oankali mates Nilkanj, Ahajas, and Dichaan (Though it must be noted it doesn't seem that Nilkanj is given much of a say either). When she is offered a human mate, Paul Titus, it is again dependent on the wishes of the Oankali families involved rather than allowing her to naturally choose a man to mate with. This leads to the horrendous scene where Paul Titus, who has also been denied any agency or free will in his time with the Oankali, attempts to rape her and does physically harm her, breaking her wrist in the process of trying to subdue her. Even though this is a morally evil act, some of Paul's rhetoric behind it is worth analysing.

Paul points out that, during the time on the Oankali ship where the humans who survived the nuclear holocaust are taken which spans over centuries, they extracted semen and eggs from unconscious men and women who had no acquaintance with each other and produced children through impregnating other women so that they would have a larger fleet of humans to connect their gene trade with. It's also very much a possibility that these children who grew up on the ship never knew their true biological parents, especially if they were placed in an Oankali family as Paul Titus and Lillith were. The Oankali even have genetic blueprints that allow them to create what basically amounts to clones of people they have taken onto the ship. This opens the possibility of them creating further Pauls and Lilliths if they are unsatisfied with the outcomes they have with the originals. In fact, it is not truly out of the question that the Oankali have already done so and that the Lillith in the novel is not truly from Earth but a clone imbued with her memories. Paul comments on how his genetic material has been used to sire over seventy children even though he has never met another human on the ship. (Butler *Dawn* 104-5) [3]

Finally, the most problematic denial of sexual agency is seen when Nilkanj impregnates Lillith with a construct child without first attaining her permission. This is arguably tantamount to rape. What makes it even more sickening is that the reason had to do with the personal convenience of Nilkanj than any truly pressing time constraints that would have stopped him from first informing Lillith.

This demonstrates how the withholding of the control over ones means of reproduction can be as alienating and mentally disturbing (as we saw in the case of Paul Titus) as the withholding of the means of production in traditional

capitalist setups. Sexual agency is not just the remit of sexuality studies, gender studies, and queer theory but also extends into the theoretical and analytical playground of Marxism and especially Marxist literary criticism.

Fledgling follows the story of a vampire Shiro. She is ostensibly a nine-year-old black child but in actuality as a vampire she ages slowly and has actually been alive for over fifty years. When she bites a human and feeds on their blood, they feel pleasure and a sense of sexual arousal. This leads to her making multiple human partners to live with, with whom she even engages in sexual activities even though as humans they seem many years older than her [8].

In essence, what she's doing amounts to drugging the humans to make them suitable mates and livestock for her to ensure she has a sufficient supply of blood. It is quite obvious that these partners don't really have full sexual agency and their consent is problematic due to the pleasurable effects of the vampire fluids that are transferred during feeding as well as sexual activity. On numerous occasions, Shiro's mates are perplexed by the dynamic and feel that they do not have much say in what happens to them which is obviously problematic. Consent as we now understand it is meant to be fully informed and enthusiastically, voluntarily given. If the mates of Shiro are under the influence of this vampire drug, and Shiro is not, it is hard to call this consent truly informed and voluntary, especially as many of them do not really understand Shiro's nature as a vampire. Another problematic angle is the presentation of someone who looks like a child as a suitable mate for full-grown adults even if she is in actuality much older.

CONCLUSION

This resembles in many ways the justification given for Lolicon hentai that is abundant on the internet. It presents animated figures from Japanese anime that look like children, but are supposedly much older, for viewers to pleasure themselves. This is arguable an example of what is now termed 'child sexual abuse material' (CSAM). One feels that it would be better to avoid this kind of material that promotes paedophilia and the abuse of young children.

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