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Sexual Ontology in Octavia E Butler's Xenogenesis Series

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Abstract

The Xenogenesis Series by Octavia E Butler is a trilogy of novels that depicts a post-apocalyptic future where humanity has wiped itself out in a nuclear war of its own making and its only salvation lies with the race of gene traders from outer space called the Oankali. However, the Oankali existence is radically different to that of the surviving humans. Chief amongst these differences is the existence of Ooloi, the so-called third sex of the Oankali race. Using Lacan's psychoanalytic framework, this paper argues that the concept of Ooloi in Butler's narrative framework does not merely function as the identitarian third gender but as an ontological category in themselves, offering a radically different framework of existence than found in human subjectivity.

Keywords: Octavia E Butler, Xenogenesis, Lacan, Symbolic, Imaginary.

Introduction

As someone who wrote science fiction, Octavia E Butler, detested the tag that departmentalised her as a science-fiction author. Her abhorrence for such genre-based classifications is clear in the telephonic interview with Gregory Hampton, where she states that "a good story is a good story no matter what genre label gets stuck on it. If you want differences, I can give them to you, but they don't mean anything except in the sense that people like to make divisions by placing things in categories" (Hampton 134). Examining her Xenogenesis Series, also called Lilith's Brood, in that regard outside the confines of science fiction genre opens up her work to new critical avenues. Primarily, through analysing the characters in an ethico-political framework bolstered by Lacanian principles of psychoanalysis reveals a reality that is still shaped by real-world pathologies that science fiction as a genre seems to elide. At some point, delivering what is known as his first seminar, Lacan states,

Commenting on a text is like doing an analysis. [...] that one of the things we must guard most against is to understand too much, to understand more than what is in the discourse of the subject. To interpret and to imagine one understands are not at all the same things. [...] I would go as far as to say that it is on the basis of a kind of refusal of understanding that we push open the door to analytic understanding (Lacan 73).

In other words, any analysis employing Lacanian tools for understanding the narratives that shape the subject must always guard itself against too much cognizance, after all analysis begins by acknowledging the seat of misunderstanding. Literary criticism is replete with instances where the critic conjures up understanding, where there is none, while all this kind of understanding does is create an edifice that allows a stubborn refusal to actual understanding. The interpretation offered in this paper will be geared towards acknowledging the limits of the subject, human or otherwise, revealed in Lacanian principles of psychoanalysis. The subject in question will be a selection of characters from the three novels of Lilith's Brood: Dawn, Adulthood Rites, and Imago, specifically the characters of Lilith, and her children Akin from Adulthood Rites, and Jodahs from Imago.

Though redundant, but still necessary is to mention the fact that no character analysis is possible without considering the material conditions of existence revealed in the text itself. However, from a literary point of view, the review of material conditions of existence as explicated in the text must necessarily take the form of character analysis itself. In other words, analysis must not allow the abstraction of the material conditions of existence as a reified notion, rather it must reveal the social, the political, the cultural, and in Butler's case even the biological modes of existence that shape the mundane life of the characters. Only through such an analysis does one arrive at the base that shapes the building block of a character's daily existence.

Xenogenesis series

The Xenogenesis Series begins with a world destroyed by nuclear warfare that is still a palpable and a looming threat to the present reality. Butler, however, in her speculative text, lets the threat being enacted behind the scenes, in order to allow her characters to navigate the world after a forced apocalypse. Interestingly, the nuclear holocaust as a character does not play as much a major role as it would have in any other speculative text, be it cinematic or otherwise. Instead, Butler plays with the idea of a degenerative reality that allowed for such an event to take pass. Through the characters, Lilith, Tate, and Gabriel, Butler shows that though the world as the characters knew it was physically truncated in the textual present, the apparatus that subjectivised the characters was still part of their ethico-political framework. This is clear in the rejection of their saviours, the Oankali, a race of gene-traders, who saved a handful of humanity in order to transform and transcend their biological fate.

The contrasting biological realities that the surviving humans encountered in their rendezvous with the Oankali had massive repercussions. Focusing on the implicit repercussions, the shock to the existing subjectivising framework becomes apparent in Lilith's advice to her children,

Human beings fear difference [...] Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization. If you don't understand this, you will. You'll probably find both tendencies surfacing in your own behavior [...] When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference" (Butler 329).

As argued elsewhere, it is not merely about fearing difference but rather about giving up on the previous framework of subjectivity. While commentators of Butler's work have rightly focused on her ideas that do not compartmentalise human into any essential category, it must also be noted that the author is nuanced in her portrayal of the actuality of the human condition. Jenkins notes,

The human solely by what it is and, therefore, excludes what it can become. [...] If we look at humanity as always in a state of becoming, then Lilith's enhancements do not make her less human or more than human, just enhanced. On the other hand, if one defines humanity by what it is, he or she would view Lilith's enhancements as evidence that she is not human

precisely because it is presumed that humans cannot be changed without becoming something else (Jenkins 124-5).

Arguing for the primary key that drives the *Xenogenesis* project forward, it must be asserted that the author Octavia E Butler seems perfectly aware of the psychoanalytic construction of the superego and the ideal ego in shaping human subjectivity. Nowhere is this concern clearer than in second book of the trilogy. The Oankali, a race of gene traders, were as different from the humankind and their subjectivity as could be possible even beyond the narrative. To begin with, within the Oankali family structure the existence of the third is not a Lacanian metaphor, rather the Ooloi were in integral part of the reproductive and rearing process of the young Oankali.

In the Lacanian reading of the Oedipus Complex, the implication of the third is connected to the discovery of the unconscious and its comparability to the language structure. Rejecting the idea that human beings are instinctual like animals, Lacan argues that while animals remain in the imaginary and the real, human beings are subjected to a structure both insidious and sinister, called the symbolic. It is clear that the symbolic is the register of the language, however, it is necessary to understand that almost all codes, morals, values and ethical systems are structured in a manner that can only be called censorious. The intervention of language is an important turning point in the construction of a neurotic's split subjectivity. Lacan does not shy away from stating that the morality of the neurotic is absurd, vicious, and almost always anti-ethical in a specific sense.

It can be argued that it is not always that the subject who speaks does so independent of any intervention. It can also be argued that it is not necessary that subject always has a clear recipient for the message being uttered. The only surety that Lacan offers is the presence of a third in any intersubjective relationship. The third that is invisible in psychoanalytic discourse has been made apparent and material in Butler's text. However, Butler explores a trait often underlined in psychoanalytic practice, i.e., the horror of the third. As the Ooloi are supposedly the third biological sex, it is easy to analyse the entire narrative through a gendered lens. However, it is necessary also to pose a more ontological question that pierces at the heart of sexual difference.

In human relationships, the psychoanalytic argument posits love as a phenomenon of the imaginary register in the sense that the subject loves the unity of its own image presented in the other. However, Lacan also argues that there's no immediacy to such phenomenon as there is no identification of the subject without the presence of the symbolic register. This is what Althusser calls interpellation that allows the subject to recognize itself through ideology.

Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: rarely do we recognize ourselves in the hailing of a policeman or a tax inspector if we are not guilty. But the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e., in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e., in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself'. There are no subjects except by and for their subjection. That is why they 'work all by themselves' (Althusser 135).

The ontological argument to be found in Butler's *Xenogenesis* relies upon the replacement of the molar big Other with a molecular small other that acts in the stead of it. It is a tiny shift that can be mistakenly sidelined as an identitarian issue; however, this undermines the rich line of reasoning that lies at the heart of *Xenogenesis* series. Butler's project allows for the demystification of the big Other, of the framework of subjectivity, and of the pathologically fetishist nature of social reality, where human relationship with objects is falsely valorised.

Our social interactions, and not our knowledge, are the place to look if we want to know how things really appear to us. Thus, for example, the something in money more than

just a printed piece of paper is something quite real at work in our social relations; and it is this something that we need to analyze most seriously, instead of dismissing it as non-existent, as mere illusion. This is why 'realist' seeing and 'realist' representation is an (often very welcome) form of misrepresentation. It shows us all there is to see. But in doing this, it performs another operation as well: it makes us believe that all there is to see is also all there is to things. Or, that all there is to things appears directly in them, as their inherent part. This way it not only conceals the presuppositions, the negative conditions of visibility/existence, it cuts them off altogether (Zupancic 420).

Case Study: Jodahs as The Third

In the final book of the series, Lilith's youngest child chose not to become the either sex, whose ontological realities he had seen been explored but rather chose to follow the path of its third parent Nikanj, the Ooloi. The Oankali had already sent Lilith back to Earth with her human supporters, and while those that rejected the Oankali for the old human times, a little incident with Lilith's son Akin brought the Oankali-resisting humans and the gene traders together.

Jodahs, however, was a peculiar creature both before and after it became an Ooloi. As argued earlier, the best way to consider the category of Ooloi is the intersection of the sexual and the ontological. The Ooloi, with their appendages, perceived reality differently than the Oankali themselves, not to mention in this regard they were completely alien to the humans who came in contact with them. In a person's relationship with the world, the big other acts both as reality and the mediator of the Real, which allows the subject to form at times fantastical, at times neurotic relation with the world.

Since the Ooloi themselves were the third, and those that mediated the real for the Oankali and the humans, their experience of the world is essentially mutative. They had the ability to easily mutate the natural world and the human genetic structure. It cannot be emphasised more that such volatility is essentially anti-thetical to the unified Cartesian cogito, which is unified precisely because it facilitates a kind of repression. The Ooloi, unlike the other two ontological positions, were capable of affecting the material world in such a way that suited their perceptions.

It was delicately controlling his nervous system, stimulating the release of certain endorphins in his brain - in effect causing him to drug himself into pleasurable relaxation and acceptance. His body was refusing to allow him to panic. As he was enfolded in a union that felt more like drowning than joining, he kept jerking toward panic only to have the emotion smothered in something that was almost pleasure. He felt as though something were crawling down his throat and he could not manage a reflexive cough to bring it up. (Butler 454)

In other words, Jodahs had become desire itself, the kind which would be considered surplus jouissance under the conditions of human subjectivity. While it could be posited that Jodahs was the receptacle of such surplus, the conduit of fantasy due to its metamorphic abilities, it should be noted that by the virtue of being an Ooloi, Jodahs could shape itself and the world around it on the basis of its own perception. It is because of such an ability that Jodahs could not be anything other than the embodiment of objet petit a, or surplus jouissance, that human subjects in their experience of the world tend to negate or misrecognize.

Conclusion

As posited in the case study above, the experience of Jodahs cannot be bracketed into an identitarian structure of the third gender. It, therefore, becomes necessary to claim that sexuality for Butler, at least in the Xenogenesis Series, is an ontological category. Through the sexual difference represented throughout the trilogy it becomes clear that using such post-apocalyptic imagination, Butler intended to problematise the sexual politics of the present. She takes the idea of the impossibility

of any sexual relation forward through the explication of the third ontological category, which in her narrative universe is named Ooloi. Butler reveals the shortcomings of human sexuality, which is aimed at narcissistic unity where the subject identifies with its own image in the other and thus fashions its desire on the basis of other's desire. Narcissistic unity which allows the ego to take on its imaginary function so that the subject can constitute itself has no place in Butler's world which forces the third to materialise to shape its own reality. The ontological fabric of Butler's narrative resists monolithic unification and reveals the hidden split that Lacan argues is the basis of human subjectivity. Butler's narrative framework offers a new way of understanding human sexual relations, despite the impossibility of an actual ooloi-like existence. Not only does Butler free the subject from the constrictive interplay of the symbolic and the imaginary in her narrative, but she also offers a novel way of reading sexual difference as that which shapes the nature of human reality.

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