



BODHI

International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Science

An online, Peer reviewed, Refereed and Quarterly Journal

Vol : 2

No : 2

January 2018

ISSN : 2456-5571



**CENTRE FOR RESOURCE, RESEARCH &
PUBLICATION SERVICES (CRRPS)**

www.crrps.in | www.bodhijournals.com

DISEASE AS A FORM OF OPPRESSION IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S "THE EVENING AND THE MORNING AND THE NIGHT"

S. Lavanya

Assistant Professor of English,

Sri Sarada College for Women, Salem, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Octavia Estelle Butler was the prominent Afrofuturist (Black Science Fiction) writer who explores the experiences of Afrocentricity through the lens of science fiction. Science Fiction provides a wide platform for various experiments in the literary field. For example, the theme of racial discrimination among the Blacks and Whites can be compared to that of the aliens' domination of the humans. Various narrative devices such as extra terrestrial organisms, symbiotic relationship between the aliens and the humans, plague and visits from God are all used by Butler in her oeuvre to talk about the theme of racial discrimination, survival of the fittest, and familial values.

Society marginalizes the minority people such as the women, the Blacks, the old people, the poor, and the people who suffer from diseases. The last category becomes more vulnerable as they have to face the oppression caused by the society as well as their bodily ailments. The healthy people ostracize those who are affected with diseases whether it is an epidemic or genetic or self-imposed. This paper explores Butler's short story "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" where a fictional disease ravages the life of the people. The aim of this paper is to show how diseased people are oppressed by the society and how despite being affected, the diseased find a way of living to help themselves and the others by giving them the need of the hour – hope.

Keywords: Octavia Butler, *The Evening and the Morning and the Night*

Introduction

Octavia Estelle Butler was an African American Science Fiction writer who had won both the acclaimed Hugo and Nebula Awards for her writings. She is considered to be one of the pioneers of Afrofuturism (Black Science Fiction). Almost in all her works, she places black heroines as the protagonists and portrays their struggles for their survival along with the values of community and family. The other themes that are dealt in her writings are the power dynamics, symbiotic relationship between humans and the alien forms for the preservation of humanity and earth, black identity, etc. The most important aspect is she deals about all the above themes in the framework of science fiction and so there is an abundance of posthumans, transhumans, and other alien forms set in the dystopian or postapocalyptic world. She is known for her series such as *Patternist* series (comprising of *Patternmaster*, *Mind of My Mind*, *Survivor*, *Wild Seed*, *Clay's Ark*, *Seed to Harvest*), *Xenogenesis* series (comprising of *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, *Imago*), *Parable* series (comprising *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents*), the standalone novels *Kindred* and *Fledgling*. She wrote many acclaimed short story collections and the most acclaimed one is *Bloodchild and Other Stories* which consists of seven stories with varied themes. "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" is the second story of the collection and it deals about the creation of a new social caste which is the result of a new genetic disease that has destroyed the world. Butler uses this story to convey that not only the coloured people, the poor, women, old people,

transgenders are marginalised in our society but also the people with diseases and disabilities fall into this category.

Analysis

Butler in this story deals about a new fictional disease Duryea-Gode disease (DGD). In her *Afterword* to the story she discusses about the inspiration for this disease. Duryea-Gode disease – a combination of three genetic diseases namely Huntington's disease, Phenylketonuria (PKU), and Lesch-Nyhan disease. Huntington's disease is caused by one abnormal gene which is hereditary and dominant. PKU is another genetic disease which leads to mental impairment and could be kept in check only with a special diet. Lesch-Nyhan disease causes mental impairment and self-mutilation. Butler borrows elements from these three genetic diseases to build up the Duryea-Gode disease. The people who have taken cure for cancer are affected by this disease as a by product. People who are affected with DGD have a tendency of self-destruction unless they are controlled by a special diet and a harmonious environment. If disturbed from their efforts of self-mutilation by others, they harm others without their knowing. The signs and symptoms of this disease are easily noticeable. People begin to drift showing signs of agitations and self-mutilations. Those affected with DGD are to be taken care of separately through a special diet biscuits. If untreated they would not only harm themselves but also others. In this story, the DGDs are isolated from the other 'normal people' in a retreat called Dilg.

The protagonist Lynn Mortimer's father and mother are both DGDs. They passed this to their daughter Lynn also. Right from the beginning Lynn knows that she is marking her time. No matter what her parents said or the advanced medical treatments, Lynn knows well about her ending. It is only a question of when. "Hell, I knew what I was in for eventually. I was just marking time. Whatever I did was just marking time" (Butler 37). When Lynn became so careless about her diet, her parents took her to a DGD ward where she could see how it will end if she is not careful. Lynn attempts suicide when they return home. This is her first ever experience with the DGD ward. Her parents are hopeless about her situation. Soon they also die. Her father kills her mother and then kills himself.

Soon after this incident, Lynn gets admission to college through a Dilg scholarship. Lynn goes to University of California where she works hard, gets top grades, tries to pass the remaining of her life without any incident. But the students there give her a hard time.

I didn't eat in public anymore, didn't like the way people stared at my biscuits – cleverly dubbed "dog biscuits" in every school I'd ever attended. You'd think university students would be more creative. I didn't like the way people edged away from me when they caught sight of my emblem. (Butler 38)

The Government has made it mandatory for the DGDs to wear their emblem. Normal people edge away from DGDs once they get sight of the emblem. Obviously Lynn has no friends in her life except her roommates. Four other DGD patients decide to share a house and they fit right in. Lynn acts like a caretaker there reminding them about the chores to do. Another DGD Alan Chi becomes her roommate. He is also a product of double DGD parents. He seems to have developed a kind of resignation, though in a severe form, a characteristic of DGD patients.

Alan seems to have zero interest in everything and Lynn finds this very attractive despite being odd. His mother started to drift when he was three and his father died sometime later after that. Lynn tells him about her suicide attempt and he tells her that he would also attempt suicide when he begins to drift. Alan also shares his plans with her and talks about the touch subject of sterilization. When Lynn questions him, "Do you want someone else telling you what to do with your body?" (Butler 42), he just says that he has taken care of that. Lynn is astonished by this answer and when Alan asks her about her decision, she replies that she has not thought about it but at the same time reveals that she is not interested in sterilization.

"That would be like killing part of yourself – even though it wasn't a part you intended to use. Killing part of yourself when so much of you was already dead" (Butler 42). Despite these differences of opinion, they both start living together and they each find solace in other's company.

Soon they find themselves interested in Dilg, the retreat for treating people with DGD. It is entirely different from a DGD ward. It is run by those who themselves are affected by DGD. Alan has already researched about Dilg and informs Lynn that it is unlike a normal DGD ward where patients are treated worse than animals. Dilg is a special facility where even diseased persons are treated like normal beings. "They don't just shut people away to die the way the others do" (Butler 44). Alan's mother is at Dilg and so they both decide to meet her. Beatrice Alcantara welcomes them and makes them prepared for their first Dilg experience. Their Dilg experience is completely different from what they had expected. The patients there are not treated like patients, their creative abilities are enhanced and they are taken care in a special way there. DGDs there invent many things and they are the most creative when they are left undisturbed.

Both Alan and Lynn are astonished at the routine and the care given to the patients. They find it hard to believe that there is still hope for certain DGDs. Alan seems to be at ease with Beatrice and this irks Lynn as Lynn is not comfortable with her presence. Whenever she tries to touch Lynn she shies away from her and there is a palpable tension in the room when both are present.

Beatrice asks Lynn about her first DGD ward experience. Lynn recites about a woman who tried to bite and gorge her own arm in front of her. "Scars didn't bother me much. Disability didn't bother me. It was the act of self-mutilation that scared me. It was someone attacking her own arm as though it were a wild animal. It was someone who had torn at himself and been restrained or drugged off and on for so long. . . ." (Butler 50). But when Lynn asked her to stop biting her arm, the woman immediately responded. Beatrice continuously asks questions to Lynn about her first DGD ward experience. The reason is revealed by Beatrice later in the story. Lynn believes that those who are self-mutilating themselves consider their bodies as prisons and they try very cruelly to get out of their prisons. "They try so hard, fight so hard to get out. . . . their restraints, their disease, the ward, their bodies. . . ." (Butler 53).

Alan's mother Naomi Chi is a small woman. She is blind and has been in the care of Dilg for a long time. She has turned into an artist. When Alan and Lynn visit her,

she is busy clay sculpting a model of an old woman. Then she is introduced to his son Alan and Lynn. She responds only to Beatrice and when Lynn seems to instruct her, she obeys her too. She gets their impressions and start sculpting their models. She is happy to learn when Alan informs her that both he and Lynn are going to be married. "Good. No one will close him away from himself. No one will tie him or cage him" (Butler 60). Naomi utters this because of her DGD ward treatments before she was found out by Beatrice. The other DGD hospitals and wards used to chain the patients in order to prevent them from harming themselves. They adopt some acute measures to keep the patients in check. But little did they know that they are creating more damage than control. DGDs that are controlled to a greater extent become more violent. Whereas in Dilg, they are treated like normal people, given new life and opportunities to engage themselves in whatever they desire or excel because Butler offers these patients a special characteristic - DGDs are often brainy and they have higher extent of attentiveness and concentration.

Naomi not only listens to Beatrice but also to Lynn. Twice or thrice Naomi tends to lose control while touching Alan. When Lynn asks Naomi to stop, she immediately obeys. This surprises both of them. When Alan asks the reason to Beatrice, she explains the fact behind that. "It's a pheromone. A scent. And it's sex-linked. Men who inherit the disease from their fathers have no trace of the scent. . . It's only when two irresponsible DGDs get together and produce girl children like me or Lynn that you get someone who can really do some good in a place like this" (Butler 61). Females who are the product of the two DGDs have this pheromone and they become like the guardians to the other patients. They make others obey to whatever they say. Such is the power of pheromone. This is the very reason why all her roommates obey Lynn without uttering a word. It is not a kind of authoritative power but a friendlier one. Beatrice reveals all these to Lynn which puts her at a most crucial point in her life. "You put them at ease. . . You're there. You. . . well, you leave your scent around the house. You speak to them individually. Without knowing why, they no doubt find that very comforting" (Butler 63).

When Alan comes to know about Lynn's scent he seems to be upset that he is being controlled by her. But in reality this is no fault of Lynn's. Though he struggles to accept this at first, later he admits that there is no other option and he is convinced when he is assured by Lynn that she would never compel him to do anything he

dislikes. Beatrice offers them both the chance of working there in Dilg. Alan is not sure while Lynn seems to have made up her mind. "I was convinced that somehow if I turned, I would see myself standing there, gray and old, growing small in the distance, vanishing" (Butler 68).

"Butler believes that human nature is fundamentally violent and therefore flawed. The origin of violence, she suggests, lies in the human genetic structure, which is responsible for the contradictory impulses towards intelligence and hierarchy" (Zaki 241). As we have already seen Butler explains the idea of this story – particularly the disease – in the *Afterword*. Butler just wants us to think what would happen if our basic genetic structure turns as a violent person and through this story she shows if affected how we would harm us and others and how we would suffer endlessly. The concept of the 'Other' as enchanting and mysterious equals the conception of the very same as different and diseased. Butler emphasizes this idea of the viewing of the Other as the diseased body. Butler's utopian writing contributes to the deconstruction of difference as the "other" to a stable identity. Here difference is not the opposite component of the identity, but becomes a part of the self. (Melzer 31).

In her oeuvre Butler presents strong women characters who are vested with the power of changing the future by making the toughest of the choices for their survival and the very existence of the human race. "Each of her protagonists is an ordinary woman facing impossible conditions, someone who must make unattractive choices in order to find a place and a way to live." (Curtis 414). Lynn is vested with the power to even drive Alan away from her because of her scent. "That's up to you. You can keep him or drive him away. I assure you, you can drive him away" (Butler 68). Similarly it is ultimately her decision whether to use her power in a useful way or to stay away from the other patients. Lynn decides to join Dilg to use her power in order to bring change and hope to the patients. Through her heroines Butler offers these affected and oppressed poor souls a hope, a care that belies the discriminations they face and offer them a chance of building their community anew.

Conclusion

Though many number of writings are produced highlighting the discriminations and marginalizations, there seems to be no improvement in the condition of those who are oppressed. Many Black writers have used Literature as a platform to voice out their opinions and conditions in order to bring change but of no avail. Butler echoes this

thought through Lynn when she describes one of her roommates. "There was an English major. He wanted to be a writer and tell ort story from the inside – which had only been done thirty or forty times before" (Butler 39). This mirrors the condition of our contemporary society where prejudices rule and people treat their fellow beings as the 'Others' because of their 'abnormalities' such as age, skin colour, gender, and ailments.

"It's clear to me that I spent too much time in the past believing it was necessary to mobilize entire armies against the devastating effects of racism, and not enough time considering how one person can help another person to heal from those effects. A chain, after all, is only as strong as its individual links, and it seems to me now that the way to help strengthen my community as a whole is to improve the quality of my relationships – romantic and otherwise – with individual Black folks I meet every day. To do this requires tearing down all the walls I've built around myself and taking a long, hard look inside; what I've already discovered, much to my surprise, is that the view isn't really all that bad" – Quinn Eli. (Collins 296)

This is the ultimate message of Butler to all those who suffer from ailments – both bodily and societal. People should help each other and make themselves stronger individually as well as a society. Racial discriminations

may be combined with any other new force in the future to ostracize people, but one thing is for sure it cannot be completely removed at all. It is only in the hands of the humans to save themselves as well as each other from all kinds of discriminative ailments.

Works Cited

1. Butler, Octavia E. *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. 2nd ed. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005. Print.
2. Collins, Patricia H. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
3. Curtis, Claire P. "Theorizing Fear: Octavia Butler and the Realist Utopia." *Utopian Studies* 19. 3 (2008): 411-31. *JSTOR*. Web. 02 January 2017.
4. Melzer, Patricia. "All that you touch you change": Utopian Desire and the Concept of Change in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. *Femspec* 3. 2 (2002): 31. *JSTOR*. Web. 02 January 2017.
5. Zaki, Hoda M. "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler." *Science Fiction Studies* 17. 2 (1990): 239-51. *JSTOR*. Web. 02 January 2017.