POWER, AGENCY AND CONSENT : A NEOCOLONIAL READING OF OCTAVIA E. BUTLER'S *DAWN*

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Abstract
Octavia E. Butler's Dawn (1987), the first novel in the Lilith's Brood trilogy, presents a speculative exploration of power, coercion, and agency in the context of an alien intervention. Set in a post-apocalyptic future where the alien Oankali "save" humanity from self-destruction, the novel raises urgent questions about autonomy, consent, and the structures of domination that persist under the guise of benevolence. This paper examines Dawn through the lens of neocolonial theory, interrogating the ways in which the Oankali's control over humanity mirrors historical and contemporary neocolonial relationships. Drawing on postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks, the study highlights how Butler critiques the ethical contradictions embedded in asymmetrical power structures, particularly in relation to consent. Through an analysis of key moments in the novel, this paper argues that Dawn serves as an incisive critique of neocolonial ideologies, demonstrating how control and dependency are maintained even in the absence of overt violence.
Keywords: *neocolonialism, consent, octavia e. butler, dawn*

Introduction

In *Dawn*, Octavia E. Butler crafts a dystopian vision of the future where humanity's survival is predicated on the intervention of an alien species, the Oankali. Following a nuclear apocalypse, the few remaining humans are "rescued" by the Oankali, who offer them a chance to rebuild civilization on the condition that they integrate genetically with their alien benefactors. The Oankali present themselves as saviors, framing their actions as necessary for the continuation of life. However, their insistence on biological merging and the systemic control they exert over human survivors reveal an unsettling power dynamic, one that echoes historical patterns of colonialism and, more specifically, neocolonialism.

Neocolonialism, a term coined by Kwame Nkrumah, describes the ways in which former colonial powers continue to dominate less powerful nations through economic, cultural, and political means rather than direct rule. In *Dawn*, the Oankali embody this paradigm by positioning themselves as benevolent overseers who, despite offering "help," ultimately strip humanity of its autonomy. Through their control over reproduction, environment, and access to technology, they render humans dependent on them, much like neocolonial powers sustain economic and technological dependencies in postcolonial nations.

At the heart of this dynamic is the question of consent. The Oankali claim that they do not force humans into genetic merging, but their control over all aspects of survival renders any refusal meaningless. The choices they offer are structured in such a way that true autonomy is impossible, raising the question of whether consent can ever be truly given in a deeply unequal power relationship. This paper examines *Dawn* through a postcolonial lens, exploring how Butler critiques neocolonial structures through the Oankali's control over humanity. The analysis also incorporates feminist and intersectional critiques of consent, highlighting the ways in which gender and race complicate notions of agency in the novel.

The concept of neocolonialism, as articulated by Nkrumah, serves as the foundation for this analysis. Neocolonialism functions by maintaining the structures of colonial control through indirect means, often by establishing economic and technological dependencies. The Oankali's intervention in human survival mirrors this model, as they offer their advanced knowledge and resources while simultaneously ensuring that humans can never exist independently of them. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth (2004),* provides further insight into

the psychological and cultural consequences of colonial and neocolonial rule. Fanon argues that colonial domination disrupts indigenous identity and fosters internalized subjugation, a dynamic that is evident in *Dawn* as the Oankali shape not only humanity's future but also their self-perception.

Feminist and intersectional theories provide additional layers of analysis, particularly regarding the question of consent. Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" critiques the ways in which power structures render marginalized voices inaudible, raising pertinent questions about the conditions under which consent can be meaningfully given. Similarly, bell hooks' discussions of power and coercion in *Ain't I a Woman? (2014)* Illuminate the ways in which gender and race shape agency, particularly in Lilith's experience as a Black woman navigating the Oankali's imposed structures.

This paper employs a close reading methodology, analyzing key passages in *Dawn* that exemplify the themes of neocolonial control and coerced consent. The work *Dawn* is examined alongside postcolonial and feminist theories to demonstrate how Butler constructs a critique of power and agency in asymmetrical relationships.

Neocolonial Power and the Illusion of Choice in Dawn

In *Dawn*, the Oankali's relationship with humanity is structured around dependency. The aliens control access to food, shelter, and technological advancements, making human survival contingent on their continued presence. This mirrors the economic dependencies that define neocolonial relationships, wherein former colonial powers maintain dominance by ensuring that postcolonial nations rely on them for resources and development. Lilith, the protagonist, becomes acutely aware of this imbalance, noting that "They own us. They changed us, and they'll keep on changing us. We can't stop them" (Butler 248). Her realization reflects the core of neocolonialism: even when direct coercion is absent, the structures of power remain inescapable.

The Oankali's justification for the control echoes colonial narratives that framed domination as a civilizing mission. They insist that humans are inherently self-destructive, citing hierarchy as an intrinsic flaw that makes independent survival impossible. "Your people would destroy themselves again if we gave them back their world," an Oankali tells Lilith, reinforcing the paternalistic belief that human autonomy must be curtailed for their own good (Butler 42). This mirrors real-world colonial rhetoric, wherein indigenous and colonized peoples were often portrayed as incapable of self-governance, necessitating the continued presence of colonial powers.

Central to the novel's critique is the illusion of consent. The Oankali repeatedly claim that they do not force humanity into genetic integration, yet the conditions they impose leave humans with no real alternatives. When Lilith expresses resistance, the Oankali dismiss her concerns, telling her, "You'll come to want what we offer" (Butler 89). This phrase encapsulates the coercion inherent in neocolonial relationships, where domination is reframed as benevolence, and resistance is treated as a temporary obstacle rather than a legitimate rejection of control. The Oankali's methods resemble what Fanon describes as the psychological manipulation of the colonized, wherein subjugation is internalized as necessity.

Coercion and Consent

Lilith's position as a Black woman in this neocolonial structure complicates the dynamics of power and agency in *Dawn*. Feminist and intersectional scholars have long examined how colonialism disproportionately affected women, particularly in terms of bodily autonomy and reproductive control. The Oankali's reproductive agenda, which demands that humans interbreed with them, recalls historical instances where colonial powers exerted control over the reproductive rights of colonized women, from forced sterilizations to the regulation of indigenous birthrates.

The reproductive aspect of Oankali dominance is particularly troubling because it removes the possibility of human continuity outside of alien influence. Lilith grapples with this reality, recognizing that any future for her species is one in which their genetic identity is irrevocably altered. "We won't be human anymore. Not really," she acknowledges, highlighting the existential stakes of this coerced transformation (Butler 302). The Oankali frame this merging as evolutionary progress, much like colonial

powers justified cultural assimilation as a means of civilizing "lesser" peoples.

Moreover, Lilith's role as a mediator between the Oankali and other humans places her in a position similar to that of the "native elite" described by Fanon—individuals within colonized societies who are given a limited degree of power to enforce colonial rule. Though she resists the Oankali's control, she is also forced into a position of complicity, tasked with preparing other humans for their inevitable integration. This reflects the complexities of agency in neocolonial contexts, where resistance is often constrained by structures that leave no viable alternatives.

Conclusion

Dawn offers a profound critique of neocolonialism, exposing the coercive dynamics that underpin seemingly benevolent interventions. The Oankali's control over humanity—particularly through dependency, paternalism, and reproductive coercion—mirrors the structures of neocolonial domination, where power is maintained through economic and technological reliance rather than direct conquest. By interrogating the illusion of consent within asymmetrical power structures, Butler forces readers to confront the ethical contradictions of interventionist narratives. Lilith's struggle embodies the complexities of resistance within coercive systems, highlighting the ways in which agency is negotiated in oppressive conditions. Ultimately, *Dawn* serves as a powerful examination of neocolonial control, urging readers to question the structures that shape autonomy and power in both speculative and real-world contexts.

Works Cited

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