



An Analysis of Humanimalia in Octavia Butler's Clay's Ark

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Article History	Abstract
Received: 06 June 2023 Revised: 05 Sept 2023 Accepted: 17 Oct 2023	<p><i>Octavia Estelle Butler can be considered a visionary writer from many perspectives. The prominent science and speculative fiction writer is known for her afrofuturistic tropes. Her novels reflect relevance in today's scenario in myriad ways. Clay's Ark (1984) is a part of the Patternist Series. In this novel, Butler envisioned a humanity plagued by an alien microbe from another star named Proxima Centauri. The novel traces the spread of the pandemic caused by the Clay's Ark microbe resulting in hybrid children who mix human and animal characteristics. Butler chose the trope of the alien microbe in a very different yet believable way. The hybrid children are the next stage of evolution in Butler's Patternists world. The aim of this paper is to explore the hybrid identities caused by the pandemic in Octavia Butler's Clay's Ark through the lens of biopolitics of difference and to reflect on the metaphorical significance of the same.</i></p>
CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0	Keywords: Octavia Butler, Clay's Ark, Hybridity, Afrofuturism

1. Introduction

Octavia Butler the renowned science fiction writer bagged the most prestigious awards in the field of science and speculative fiction. She is considered to be one of the pioneers of Afrofuturism, the cultural aesthetic which projects Afrocentrism. Her oeuvre comprises of three series, two standalone novels and a short story collection. Butler dealt with themes such as racism, slavery, miscegenation, hybrid identities, family, gender dynamics, etc. All her works explore the concept of being human when faced by the Other. Science fiction becomes the perfect platform to talk about beings other than human. *Clay's Ark* belongs to *Patternist* series where there are three groups – patternists, mutes and clayarks. The patternists are enhanced humans, mutes are humans without any power and clayarks are animalistic beings originated because of alien microbes. *Clay's Ark* is the origin story of the clayarks, the animalistic beings, the mortal enemies of the patternists in Butler's world.

Butler published this novel in 1984 with its setting as 2021. In *Clay's Ark* novel, Butler envisions a future where humanity is plagued by a pandemic caused by an extraterrestrial microbe. A failed space exploration provides the opportunity for Asa Elias Doyle to become the Typhoid Mary of the Clay's Ark microbe; the name of the shuttle sent to explore Proxima Centauri is Clay's Ark and the microbe gets the name after it. The narrative alternates between the past and the present; the past tells the story of Eli's infection and the formation of the first family of the microbe. The present tells the story of Blake Maslin and his twin daughters – Rane and Keira, the potential converts (infected) for Eli's people.

Eli is described as "...a tall, thin black man with skin that had gone gray with more than desert dust" (Butler 9). This is the only physical description of Eli the readers get to know from Blake Maslin, whom Eli kidnaps along with Blake's twin daughters. Eli repeatedly tells Blake and his daughters that they cannot outrun them and that he and his people are different. The infected people become so thin and their skin turns grey. But their outer appearances are deceptive and indeed they have superhuman strength because of the microbe. The readers get to know much about the organism through the

conversations between Meda, Eli's partner, and Blake. When Blake gets Meda's blood sample, he is quite confused about the organism.

"Unidentifiable microbes," the small screen said. It was able to show him tiny, spiderlike organisms in her flesh, some of them caught in the act of reproducing along with her cells – as part of her cells. They were not viruses. According to the computer, they were more complete, independent organisms. Yet they had made themselves at home in human cells in a way that should not have been possible – like plasmids invading and making themselves at home in bacteria.... In the most basic possible way, they had tampered with Meda's genetic blueprint. They had left her no longer human. (Butler 51-52)

Blake suspects that it might be similar to Rabies but when Meda informs that the alien microbe tampers human brain cells, he is not sure.

The readers get to know Eli's story from the past chapters. Eli was one of the crew members sent to Proxima Centauri; his wife was also one of the members. Soon everyone is infected by the alien microbe and they took control measures to contain the disease but only in vain. Eli's survival instincts are stronger and it was because of this, the organism chose him as the carrier and made him sabotage the entire ship leading to the death of his wife and his crew members. The crew was trying to find a solution but they were never close except the realization that "reinfection" (Butler 48) could be the answer. That is how Eli becomes the Typhoid Mary of the Clay's Ark microbe.

The alien microbe is a symbiont as described by Eli. "...the disease organism caused changes that could be beneficial – if the host survived its initial onslaught. . . . increased sexual needs and heightened sensory awareness – inevitable effects of the disease" (Butler 47). And the reinfection need not be sexual at all, just a mere touch or scratch would pass on the microbe from one person to other as Meda explains Blake, "Or rather, it feels sexual. Touching you is almost as good as screwing" (Butler 53). Eli infects the household members who gave shelter to him and watches them die. Only the women survive because the microbe realizes their potential for contagion and mainly reproduction.

The alien microbe proves to be more intelligent. Eli tells Keira that there might be a chance that she might get rid of her leukemia too. "We had a woman who had had herself sterilized before we got her – had her tubes cauterized. Her organisms communicated with Meda's and her tubes opened up. She's pregnant now. We had a guy regrow three fingers he'd lost years ago" (Butler 206). The microbes interact with the host's body cells and reprogram them according to their need. It makes an infected person almost impossible to die. But if the host body is not up to the expectation or if the person is in initial stage of infection, there is a chance that the person might die. One such death described in the novel is of Andrew Zeriam's. He kills himself by slitting his throat. And then there is Eli who cannot end his life even if he wants to. "I was in a couple of dominance fights aboard ship . . . The first time, I was stabbed through the heart twice. I healed. The second time, I was beaten literally to a pulp with a chunk of metal. I healed. Barely a scar. It takes a lot to kill us" (Butler 147). So, the process of symbiosis also differ from person to person.

The organism changes them into animals in a real sense. The infected people are called "converts" (Butler 41) and all they care is about procreation. Eli has several children with the three women of the ranch. "We began that way out of biological necessity, I was alone with three women. The organism doesn't permit celibacy for any reason other than isolation" (Butler 130). Almost all the persons in the ranch, brought by Eli, share themselves with others. They could not escape this as the organism does not allow them to think much. But Eli insists on behaving like humans and not as animals as Meda tells Blake, "We're changed, but we have ethics. We aren't animals" (Butler 39). Animals are also affected by the Clayark disease but some of them withstand the infection.

Cows don't seem to get the disease . . . Dogs get it and it kills them. It kills all the types of cold-blooded things that have bitten us – snakes, scorpions, insects . . . There may not be anything on Earth that can penetrate our flesh and come away unchanged. Except our own kind, of course. I can't prove it, but I'll bet those cows are carriers. (Butler 94)

Eli creates a ranch that is isolated in the desert. They cultivate their own crops, grow their own cattle, have a well and they become self-sufficient. Eli and his people reinfect others only when the need comes. They do not want to spread the disease to others.

The infections are transmitted through touch primarily. The symptoms will begin in about three weeks after the transmission. The infected become “Inhumanly fast, inhumanly strong. . .” (Butler 36). They are able to see in the dark, they become stronger, resistant to diseases. Their sense of smell is increased and uncontaminated people smell like food to them. They are almost telepathic in the sense that they are good at reading people as Meda informs Blake: “We read body language. We see things you wouldn’t even notice – things we didn’t notice before. We don’t work at it; it isn’t a conscious thing. Among ourselves, it’s communication. With strangers, it’s protection” (Butler 38).

The most dreadful consequence of the disease is the mutated children. They are a mix of human and animal and they are more different than the both. Eli’s son Jacob is the first hybrid child to be born after the pandemic. “He [Jacob] stopped in front of her – beautiful child head, sleek catlike body. A miniature sphinx. What would it be when it grew up? Not a man, certainly” (Butler 83). The main problem is that all the hybrid children are quadruplets; they do not walk with two legs like humans rather they crawl with their hands and legs like animals. They are strong, resistant to diseases and possess qualities that are beyond human.

When Jacob was born, Eli seems surprised, “The baby never cried, but it was clearly breathing well. Its eyes were calm and surprisingly lively. Its arms were long and slender- without the baby pudgyness Eli had expected. . .” (Butler 164). Eli realizes that Jacob is not normal and Jacob is merely the next stage of human evolution. But they are highly protective of their kids, it is what the organism makes them do. All the infected love their children to the core; they put them first over and above everything. “Our children are not animals! . . . We are not interested in hearing them called animals” (Butler 93). They are between human beings and animals.

In the end of the novel, the disease has spread throughout the world. Many cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Phoenix, San Diego are being burnt in the hope of curtailing the infection. This pandemic do not stop people from killing each other. “In Louisiana there’s a group that has decided the disease was brought in by foreigners – so they’re shooting anyone who seems a little odd to them. Mostly Asians, blacks, and browns” (Butler 212).

As for the infected people, they are in the next stage of human evolution. The important thing is they are not becoming better but the opposite. They are turning into posthumans with the combination of both the species – humans and the Clayark microbe making them as humanimals. Pramod Nayar’s discussion of posthumanism throws more light on the term: humans as a category defined themselves against the other living forms (flora and fauna), even separated themselves from the machines and the deformed by setting up some boundary. In posthumanism this boundary gets dissolved, the binary gets mixed up (79). It is a kind of Butler’s prediction about the future of humanity. When faced with the odds, it is very rare to see the humane part of the humans but instead the bestiality of the humans comes out. Butler projects this through the hybrid humanimals of the Clayarks. More than the effect of the pandemic, it is a critique on human nature indeed.

The representation of the nonhuman becomes so important in the realm of literature. With the advent of Postmodernism and Posthumanism, Plant Humanities, Animal Studies, Microbial Studies are discussed when the realm of non-human is discussed in literature. Literature has always been a multidisciplinary area and this inclusion of various branches only proves the same.

When talking about the nonhuman, the concept of their agency is one of the primary things to be brought into the fore.

Critics like Cary Wolfe, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Sherryl Vint and Donna J. Haraway have extensively talked about the boundary between human and animal. Cary Wolfe’s works on Animal Studies deconstruct the notions of humanism with respect to animals. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of ‘becoming’ has thrown light on the formation of new identities. Sherryl Vint’s works have contributed a lot to the discussion of animals in the field of science fiction. Donna Haraway has dealt extensively about animals as companion species to humans. All these critics and many have given a voice to the nonhuman to erase the boundary that separates them; to advocate symbiosis with other forms of beings.

With respect to Octavia Butler's works, many critics have analysed the importance Butler attaches to the nonhuman representation. Sophia Booth Magnone raises an important question along the same lines in her discussion about Butler's novel. "What would the world be like, for instance, if the agency of nonhuman species was unmistakable and irrepressible? How would, and should, humans contend with their changing status? (111). This is exactly the crux of Butler's *Clay's Ark*. This again is reflective of Rene Descartes's oft-quoted saying, "I Think, Therefore I Am". Animal studies centers around this declaration – whether they have the agency to think or as in common language - do animals have souls or feelings. On the other hand, studies about the behaviour of apes, dolphins, bees and ants reveal astonishing facts about them.

Butler brings this to the science fiction – what if animals are not competing for agency opposite to humans; but trying to coexist in myriad forms; for instance, as a hybrid identity made of humans and animalistic alien microbe. Eli becomes the first person to achieve symbiosis with the alien microbe. It is a very well-known fact that human bodies act as host for myriad bacteria that regulates our body health. Butler's claysark microbe offers much to the people it bonds with – but not without certain losses. The converts become agile, they possess great strength; have a lengthy lifespan, free from diseases. But they lose their agency particularly reproductive agency which makes them behave without any morals or codes. Overtime, they are consumed by this animalistic tendency completely. The American evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis talks about the importance of symbiosis. Symbiosis is the process of living together with different species. It is inevitable and a necessity in many aspects. Butler's claysark microbe strives to achieve symbiosis with humans in the novel and succeeds in the process.

4. Conclusion

A metaphorical analysis of the alien microbe infection leads to myriad discussions about human nature. Butler's other series *Lilith's Brood* also deals with embracing difference rather than fearing it. Differences in the society might stem from any aspect – race, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, speciesism, etc. Butler's concept of difference can be related to that of slavery and miscegenation. Even in the novel, this difference can be found. Eli, a black man, is selected for the highly promising space mission. On the other hand, Keira who is black by birth faces humiliation when she walks along with her family; because her parents are a mixed couple. Butler portrays this nuance in a realistic way. Keira is friendly towards the hybrid children, but on the other hand Rane abhors them. "A fearful response to difference, particularly racial difference, is common in Butler's futures. The novel emphasizes that Keira's darkness has produced her greater openness to difference and change. Eli praises Keira's kindness to the children in contrast to the way new people often react to them" (Vint 293). Keira and Rane's responses to difference are not very different to the real-world humans' reactions to those who are not their own. Butler critiques human's fear and hatred towards difference through her science fiction stories. In the end of the novel, the disease has spread all over the globe and people slaughter each other not because of the pandemic but because of their inherent violence: "In Louisiana there's a group that has decided the disease was brought in by foreigners – so they're shooting anyone who seems a little odd to them. Mostly Asians, blacks, and browns" (Butler 212). Perhaps this is the message Butler wants to convey – unless people overcome their fear and hatred towards difference, the world will be in chaos.

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