

From Anthropocene To Post- Anthropocene In Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn*

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Abstract

Over millions of years, our planet earth witnesses millions of species right from dinosaurs to many aquatic and land species. Though there are many species from unicellular to multicellular, human beings are the one who exert their dominance over other creatures. Thus, human beings become the primacy of domination. Thus, we are all living in an Anthropocene epoch. Sooner or later the situation may change from Anthropocene to Post – Anthropocene. Octavia E. Butler's novel *Dawn* is a perfect example of this situation, where the human beings are coerced to involve in Gene Trade with an extraterrestrial species, Oankali. In this novel, when the earth becomes uninhabited because of atomic holocaust, it was saved by Oankali. They in return ask the whole humanity to involve in gene trade, which brood human – Oankali children. Oankali sterilized the human beings who denied this deal. Through this cautionary tale, Butler warns the human beings that their hierarchical nature is the flaw which leads to several crises. Anthropocene is the state where human exert their power upon the other species of the earth, whereas Post – Anthropocene is something where humans can be dominated by non – human entity.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Post – Anthropocene, Xenogenesis, extraterrestrial species, Symbiocene, Post – Apocalypse, Octavia Butler

Introduction:

Human beings tend to be the most dominating species on the entire planet. We cause tremendous hazard to our ecology which may create potential threat and danger to the future generation of people. In the recent years, the actions of human beings make considerable changes upon the environment that bother our ecology. Rachel Carson in her book *Silent Spring* writes the increasing danger of this as, "The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings. To a large extent the physical form and the habits of the earth's vegetation and its animal life have been modified by the environment" (Carson ch. 2). Further Carson clearly explains the after effects of the actions of human beings upon the environment through the followings lines: "The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination in air, earth, river and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials" (Carson ch. 2).

From exploiting nature to killing animals, man makes the earth anthropocentric. The term "Anthropocene" becomes popular when Paul Crutzen, the atmospheric chemist and Eugene Stoermer, the limnologist first introduced it in the newsletter of the International Geosphere – Biosphere Program (IGBP) in 2000. The earth becomes Anthropocene when the humanity seems to be the primacy of domination. The age of Anthropocene somehow begins at the starting of the second millennium. Post – Anthropocene occurs when non – human entities decentralize human beings from the focus of discourse. Gaia Vince in her book *Adventures in the Anthropocene* demonstrates the actions of humans as "The changes humans have made in recent decades have been on such a scale that they have altered our world beyond anything it has experienced in its 4.5 billion year identity" (Vince int.). Human beings are crossing the boundary into the Anthropocene epoch. There are certain signs that advocate that human beings are entering the new geological age that is Anthropocene. The industrial and domestic emissions of greenhouse gases are warming the atmosphere that changes the climate and disrupts weather patterns across the globe.

The people are undergoing immense social changes and that change the way we live as a species. Anthropocene is the direct consequence of these changes. It would be quite challenging for the humanity to rescue our ecology without exacerbating the prevailing environmental conditions. As the pioneers of the Anthropocene, the people of today's world have superior understanding of science, excellent communication and connectivity that breeds collaborative thinking. The atmosphere of Anthropocene plays a major role in the ways in which humans develop, because our atmosphere is infused with chemicals and particulates which are because of the actions, the humans have done so much on the global scale of the planet's biggest natural events.

Ecological concerns in *Dawn*

Octavia Estelle Butler is an American science fiction writer and the recipient of Hugo and Nebula awards. In her *Xenogenesis* trilogy, the first novel *Dawn* emphasizes the means in which humanity might face extinction because of the hierarchical nature of human beings. Oankali, the extraterrestrial beings consider the hierarchical nature of human beings as one of the fatal flaws of human beings. Oankali believed that, altering human beings genetically might lessen the harm created by them. In an article titled, *Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler (Utopie, dystopie et ideologie dans la science – fiction d'Octavia Butler)* Hoda M. Zaki, the critic of *Xenogenesis* trilogy claims

that Butler's novels make "unmediated connections between biology and behavior" (Zaki M. 242). She also states that Butler's works are primarily dystopian because "Butler believes that human nature is fundamentally violent," (Zaki M. 241) and "men are intrinsically more violent than women" (Zaki M. 241). This paper presents the ways in which the earth slowly transforms from Anthropocene to Post – Anthropocene under the supremacy of Oankali.

In this novel, when the earth becomes uninhabited because of the nuclear war, the Oankali saved the survived human beings and put them in suspended animation. The book begins with the awakening of Lilith Iyapo from the suspended animation 250 years after the holocaust. Oankali coerces Lilith to involve in Gene Trade with them so that they let the other human beings to settle down permanently in the earth. Dorothy Allison emphasizes the character of Lilith and also privileges *Dawn* over the other two books, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago* in her *The Future of Female: Octavia Butler's Mother Lode*. This is because of the way Butler develops the character of Lilith who struggles to survive and not giving up her life at any circumstances. Allison describes this as, "Submits and bears children rather than die or murder the rapists/masters/aliens in order to preserve the family" (Allison 475).

As Lilith was in suspended animation, a male Oankali named Jdahya wakes her up to befriend her with his family. Jdahya did this to Lilith to make her understand Oankali and their language. Jdahya then ask her to mingle with his ooloi child Nikanj. Once, while going out with Nikanj, some Oankali children poke Lilith with their tentacles out of curiosity. Lilith felt herself like a pet animal to Oankali. Butler mentions this as, "Nikanj's friends poked and prodded her exposed flesh and tried to persuade her through Nikanj to take off her clothing" (Butler 36). It is one of the instances from the novel to prove that domination upon humanity may occur sooner or later by a non – human entity.

Breeding to Oankali is like breathing to human beings. In order to survive without extinction, Oankali revolve around the planets in their giant space ships to find living beings to breed with. That is how they find the earth and its destructed state. They saved the human beings who have survived the holocaust. They also collected the samples of the animals and the plants from the earth. The ooloi are the third gender of Oankali and are great in genetic engineering. They are perfect at genetically modifying anything, healing injuries and curing diseases. They are even capable of curing cancer, they learned about cancer from Lilith and they saw her cells to be precious which may help to regrow even the amputated legs. In the novel, Jdahya mentions this as, "You had a growth," he said. "A cancer. We got rid of it. Otherwise, it would have killed you".

Nikanj was a child when Lilith met it for the first time. An ooloi must undergo the process of metamorphoses twice to become an adult. It will cause severe pain and ooloi needs the support of someone to assist throughout the process. Nikanj chooses Lilith. Lilith accepts its approach to support him to undergo the process out of affection towards him. Thus Nikanj becomes an adult.

Oankali are more advanced than the human beings. They rehabilitate the earth with their power and tried so hard to restore it to its old form. They are extremely fascinated by the gene of human beings. So they selected Lilith and she was assigned to wake up the survived human beings from suspended animation to explain them about Oankali and their gene trade process. Lilith was a black woman like many other protagonists of Butler. She was rational and pragmatic. She was an absolute realist. So she was selected by Oankali. Initially Lilith hesitated, but in order to save humanity from extinction and for the sake of humanity and the curiosity of going back to settle down again in the earth, she accepts to wake them and make them understand the situation. But the human beings who woke up didn't believe Lilith to be a human. It is because Nikanj gave her extra powers like healing quickly, opening the doors of the aboard with bare hands and bringing in food for human beings. As the others were denied these powers, they considered Lilith to be the pet animal of Oankali. They didn't see her as one among them. Jdahya once clearly mentioned about the hierarchical nature of human beings in the book as, "Human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it" (Butler 26).

After waking up the survived human beings, few of them stand by the side of Lilith but few oppose her and consider her to be a traitor of the whole humanity for standing by the side of Oankali instead of them. After a lot of chaos, the Oankali set up a training floor which looks similar to the earth. As the earth was completely collapsed because of the nuclear holocaust, the Oankali partially restored to its form. In order to train the human beings to live in the earth, which barely looks like the earth during the time of Stone Age, they set up the training floor. But few human beings thought the aboard thought the space ship to be the earth and tried to escape from it. But they don't know that it is impossible to escape without the help of Oankali. Though Lilith is struggling to pave way for the human beings to settle down back in the earth, her efforts went vain when few human beings involve in fight to lead the human group. The most violent human beings were taken away to keep in suspended animation again. The greed to be in power and the lack of unity among the human beings are making them weak, in spite of their intelligence. Jim Miller in his *Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision* mentions this as, "Lilith serves as a frequently unwilling intermediary between the Oankali and their human captives" (Miller 340).

Lilith fell in love with the first man she awoke. His name was Joseph Li Chin Shing. Initially Lilith developed a kind of unnamed feelings towards Joseph, later it turned out to be love. He was the one who tries to understand her situation and the reason for her authority over other people and he trusted her. Few men were furious upon Joseph for his relationship with Lilith. A man named Peter, attacked Joseph with a shovel. Joseph died out of the brutal attacks of Peter. Lilith was not able to bear the death of Joseph. She started hating the fellow human beings and badly wanted to kill Peter for his behavior. When Lilith was too worried upon the death of Joseph, Nikanj informs her that, she was impregnated with the child of Joseph. Lilith was highly shocked to hear that she was not only impregnated with the child of Joseph, but also of

Nikanj which will give rise to the new form of first human – Oankali child. Here Lilith stands as the mother of the new form of genesis. To her utmost shock, Nikanj also tells her that, she must stay in the aboard to wake up the next set of human beings. The novel ends with the shattered heart of Lilith upon the entire humanity. Hence Lilith Iyapo, the protagonist of the story, turned out to be the mother of a new species and Judas to the humanity.

Conclusion:

There are several factors that lead to the extinction of humanity. There are many ways in which humanity may face the epoch of Post – Anthropocene via Artificial Intelligence, Technology, extraterrestrial species etc. Here Butler selected extraterrestrial species to alarm the whole humanity about the future events which may occur sooner or later. Butler through this novel strongly points out that, human beings are solely responsible for the climate change. The world would be a much better place if it becomes Symbiocene. Oankali also tried to be in symbiosis with human beings for the benefit of both humans and their own Oankali species. But few humans were disgusted by such idea to have alien children. Glen A. Albrecht in his article *Exiting the Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene*, points out that it would be harmonious if human beings develop a human – nature relationship to live a mutual life which would be beneficial for all the living species in the earth.

In her award winning novel *Parable of the Talents* and its prequel *Parable of the Sower*, Butler strongly portrays the apocalyptic world, where people of the United States of America suffer due to the harsh climatic changes, water scarcity, food scarcity epidemics, drugs and natural catastrophes. The actions of human beings lead themselves to their extinction. The nuclear war in the novel *Dawn* destroyed almost the entire population including children and animals. The main ideas of Oankali are to live in symbiosis with all the other living beings. They don't eat the flesh of animals, they found plastics to be toxic and due to their empathizing nature, they understand the physical pain as well as the emotions of the other living beings. Like Oankali, if we live in symbiosis with nature, we would probably enter the new epoch called "Symbiocene". But if we keep on exploiting nature, the earth will definitely face the Post – Anthropocene epoch. *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago* are the sequels of *Dawn*, where Butler presents the symbiosis of Oankali with few humans. The humans who are not willing to involve in the process of gene trade are allowed by the Oankali to go to the planet "Mars". Hence Butler wanted to create symbiosis among all the species to develop a harmonious life within one another. In this anthropocentric epoch, the actions of humans made its impact in the deepest ocean as well as the ice glaciers. The human beings must create a sustainable relationship with the all other living species in the earth to maintain a harmonious life and also to create a better future for the forthcoming generation of people. Butler reflected the ecological crises the earth faces through her novels. Hence the novel *Dawn*, presents the ways through which the earth may go from Anthropocene to Post – Anthropocene by the extraterrestrial species. Octavia E Butler uses literature especially the genre, Science Fiction as a tool to warn the people of today, regarding tomorrow.

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