



THE CONSTRUCTION OF MORALITY IN OCTAVIA E BUTLER'S XENOGENESIS TRILOGY

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Abstract

Octavia E. Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy is the story of a post-apocalyptic earth, where humanity survives only through the aid of an alien species. These aliens, who are known as Oankali throughout the text, are a race of spacefaring gene traders, who posit that human beings must lose their hierarchical tendencies if they are to evolve. The central argument of the trilogy is, indeed, that in so far as human species is intelligent, their intelligence is subservient to the ancient impulse of hierarchy encoded within their genetic structure. As long as this trait remains humans, no matter how intelligent their species may become, shall always find themselves embroiled in war. The solution to this contradiction, offered in the trilogy, is to fundamentally transform the genetic structure of human beings by incorporating Oankali traits. This paper argues that what is posited as subservience of intelligence to hierarchy, encoded within the genetic structure, is merely the moral imperative or the law of superego, depending on the discourse. In so far as human beings are moral creatures, they accrue their pleasure through the enforcement or violation of prohibitions. In the first case, it appeals to the sense of preservation of the epistemological order that sustains the human self. Disobeying the moral imperative, on the other hand, leads to the production of new knowledge, which adds to the pleasure of the desiring being.

Keywords: Octavia E Butler, Moral Imperative, Superego, Dawn, Adulthood Rites

Introduction

In the Xenogenesis trilogy, Butler creates a race of spacefaring gene traders, the Oankali, who having found the earth ravaged by human war save as many people as they can, intending to not let the species end. Butler never stoops to explain why the human nations were engaged in a war so destructive that not even the intervention of an alien race could possibly save them.

The first novel, Dawn, begins with the character Lilith waking up in an Oankali spaceship, alone and confused. It is made implicit that the

nations being at war was simply a reiteration of an historical precedent, which according to Oankali results from subservience of human intelligence to an older, more ancient trait of hierarchy. As Jdahya explains to Lilith, "“You are intelligent,” he said. “That’s the newer of the two characteristics, and the one you might have put to work to save yourselves. [...] You are hierarchical. That’s the older and more entrenched characteristic.”” (Butler 39).

One can consider this an Oankali idiosyncrasy, as being capable of perceiving the genetic structure might have revealed to them

something that is often ascribed to human nature. It is not the purpose of this paper to debate the possibility of such a thing as human nature, however, in the Xenogenesis series, it is assumed, a precedent does exist that makes the humans vulnerable to their own hierarchical impulses.

While it would be reductive to condense the whole argument into the so-called human nature debate, in order to connect the perception of grotesque with the moral order, it becomes imperative to have a concept of human nature. Butler had a working definition in her mind, according to which she depicts people who resisted the Oankali solution as those enslaved by their own genetic impulses. However, this paper will make the argument that whatever Butler calls genetic impulse can be attributed to the existing moral order, or the law of the Superego, depending on the discourse.

"She talked about something called an "emergent" property, a small thing which, repeated over many actions, has large consequences. For instance, an ant might have a genetically encoded instruction to "remove a grain of sand from here and place it there." Any individual ant doing this is meaningless. But a colony of ants doing this creates a complex and beautiful network of tunnels. Tiny individual tendencies multiplied across thousands or millions of interactions over lifetimes create the kind of dangerous, intractable sexism and racism that Octavia saw as the building blocks of Armageddon" (Barnes 12).

Moral Imperative and the Genetic Structure

That the novel does not seem to provide any background of the war that destroyed the human civilization only points to the fact that the war within the narrative requires no explanation to the reader. The contemporary society always hangs at the precipice of war and destruction, and the reader requires no preamble to it, even though, Cold War was Butler's immediate reality when the Xenogenesis trilogy came out.

Though it could also be argued that the other reason why Butler chose not to depict, even

tangentially, the brutalities of war, was so she could present the hegemonic noumenal to her readers that perpetuates the material reality of war. If the Oankali are to be considered the mouthpiece of the author, then the hegemonic noumenal is the subservience of the newer trait of intelligence to the ancient impulse of hierarchy.

This, however, does not clarify much, as the Oankali solution to the problem is to breed the hierarchical trait out of humanity. Imposing such a decision on the humankind, as Burnett puts it, "rests in interacting with humanity in highly hierarchical fashion" (Burnett 110).

Within their own family structure, the Oankali deferred to the Ooloi, which could be, as Burnett says, considered hierarchical. Even having procreated with them, the Oankali barely understood the Ooloi. The Oankali could only perceive the world in myriad of ways, it was only the Ooloi, who could bring about a palpable change. In such a situation, Oankali tended to leave certain decisions to the Ooloi, as they were the only ones who could execute them.

It is necessary, therefore, to posit, unlike what is proposed by Burnett, that the hierarchy, which the Oankali ascribe to the human beings is not the same kind of hierarchy that functions between the Oankali and the humans, and the Oankali and the Ooloi. When the hierarchical characteristics of the human beings is reduced to genetic traits, the reader must not read it as a biological reduction, for Butler's notion of genes is connected to the history, and indeed, the Nietzschean sense of genealogy. As Foucault posits,

"Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations-or conversely, the complete reversals-the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we

know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents" (Foucault 81).

In so far as the Ooloi are able to modify the genetic structure of the humans, they possess the ability to mutate the present regardless of the past, thus rendering various human idiosyncrasies obsolete. The humans who come in contact with the Ooloi are disturbed most with the indifference these gene traders show towards their faculty of speech and the system of language.

Desire and Morality

The perception of desire is not, as is usually insinuated, subjective i.e., totally dependant upon the individual. The individual only perceives the object of desire as it appears in the world of phenomenon. In so far as the individual perceives the world as a unified whole, everything seems to be within the limits of perception, and the world seems to be rational.

The object of desire is only known in the synthetic apperception of things, and to the individual it appears to be linked with a conscious choice. Had it simply been that the individual was under the hegemony of the law of superego, it would have been easy to ascribe to the superego, the unknowability of desire. The problem of desire cannot be reduced to the vulgar subjectivity of having the freedom to choose, as whatever relationship one perceives between the pursuit of the object of desire and the attainment of desire is simply the fallacy of constant conjunction.

The nature of desire is in direct contradiction with the object of desire, as on the one hand the object of desire as it exists is unknowable to subject and desire, on the other hand, cannot escape the dictates of the superego. The subject's own fascination with the ego-ideal is an example of this dichotomy. The individual wishes to grasp his or her own purpose of existence, that is to say, what she is in herself, but can only learn about what she represents, and what she must exemplify.

The pursuit of the ego-ideal, renders the subject either an obsessive or a hysteric, and the subject never grasps the truth of ego-ideal, which can be variously posited as the Kantian thing-in-itself

or the Lacanian object small a. It can be construed that the ego-ideal is the impression of the superego upon the subject, who to be fashioned into a moral being, must become calculable in its desire.

It is, therefore, ideal to have desiring subjects that cannot truly capture their object of desire in its essence. As such, the subject must revel in the irrationality of the noumenal and waste his energy in the pursuit rather than the understanding. It is only thus the subject can gain that calculable demographic identity as the consumer of experiences. An unknowability that cannot be transformed into a machine that generates value is, obviously, not to be valued.

"The Superego, in censoring the unconscious and in implanting conscience, also censors the censor because the developed conscience registers the forbidden evil act not only in the individual, but also in his society. Conversely, loss of conscience due to the satisfactory liberty granted by an unfree society, makes for a happy consciousness, which facilitates acceptance of the misdeeds of this society" (Marcuse 79).

The irrational noumenal, if it cannot be made calculable, must be rendered obsolete, hence if, there is within the subject, a lack of knowledge regarding the object of desire, then it becomes easier to manufacture objects of desire for immediate consumption. This impulse for immediate consumption does not offer the satisfaction that attainment of the desire brings as it only occupies the place of the object of desire. The subject is left forever wanting because that yearning to know the thing-in-itself is never fulfilled.

Aesthetics and Morality

Morality within the society is built upon the foundations laid by the superego, where the edifice of control is laid upon the subject, by making them accountable for their actions. However, it is not merely accountability that shapes the aesthetic sense of the subject. The semantic value of beauty and good in the Ancient Greek is woven into the same signifier. In this vein, the Xenogenesis trilogy challenges the established notion of the good and

the beautiful by introducing to a defeated human species, the Oankali, who for all intents and purposes would seem grotesque to them.

It must be argued that while the Oankali may appear grotesque to the surviving humans, their hatred runs more than skin deep. As discussed earlier, the humans had already made peace with the unfathomable nature of their desire, knowing that their language is fundamentally incapable of expressing such irrationality. The Oankali, specifically the Ooloi, upended that irrationality by acting as mediators between the humans and the object of their desire.

That the humans revelled in their irrationality, is nowhere clearer in the instance when Neci wished to sever the functional organs of the human and Oankali hybrid constructs so that they might seem more human. The body horror epitomised by the Oankali is too much to rationalise for the resistor subject, who has so far only known her own sense of propriety.

Like the other resisters of her village, Neci's reproductive abilities have been taken away by the Oankali, lest they proliferate the genetic pool with the carcinogenic hierarchical trait. Lost in the nihilism of her immediate existence, Neci had no other choice than to wish for the return of her old frame of existence. That her reproductive capacities were taken also means that she did once have the experience of sexual fulfilment with an Ooloi.

Having lost the ability to reproduce, Neci's sole source of enjoyment lay in the enforcement of the prohibitions she deemed appropriate for one to maintain the veneer of being human. Her obsession with purity is irreconcilable to the Oankali, who "acquire new genetic material to assure their continuing survival and biological evolution. [...] species purity for the Oankali is synonymous with species extinction" (Vado 152).

Here lies the root of her discontent, the totality of her perception of the grotesque that she ascribes to the Ooloi. It is not merely her biological drive to reproduce that the Ooloi restrict, but the moral order that gave birth to her Eros. Before the Ooloi, the notion of Eros within the humans was

controlled perversion, in which it was the habit and not the body that became the object of desire.

"Clothes promise debauchery (ça promet la ménade), when one takes them off. But this is only a myth, a myth that converges with the bed I mentioned earlier. To enjoy a body (jouir d'un corps) when there are no more clothes leaves intact the question of what makes the One, that is, the question of identification. The parakeet identified with Picasso clothed (habillé). The same goes for everything involving love. The habit loves the monk, as they are but one thereby. In other words, what lies under the habit, what we call the body, is perhaps but the remainder (reste) I call object a" (Lacan 6).

With the mediation of the Ooloi, the body's function as the active object of desire, for knowledge and pleasure is restored. The body is no longer the remainder, as is the case in the human method of sexual gratification or knowledge production, as Lacan clearly showed. Rather, with the Ooloi intervention, the body revealed itself to be the producer of knowledge, and consequently desire and pleasure. That the Ooloi subverted the Big Other, in order to restore the autonomy back to the body was unpalatable to the resisting humans.

Throughout their history, everything that seemed unknowable, and even irrational to the humans is suddenly made known, with the intervention of these tentacled beings of undefinable gender, in a fashion that, it could be argued, is almost non-consensual. The Ooloi break the fundamental taboo of not listening to their speech, by paying heed to the consensus achieved by human body. In as much as it infantilises the human individual, it also puts forward a darker truth that language could no longer be the seat of being, as Heidegger had presumed and that after the intervention of the Ooloi, there had been an epistemological shift, in which the old, human frame of reference is no longer valid.

The Ooloi introduced to the human body, a new way of experiencing knowledge, which the mind was unable to verbalize or decipher. It is one of the functions of human language to interpret the

sensations felt upon the body and store it for further use as knowledge that would enhance the effectiveness of the social reality thus constructed. This is clearly stated by Bachelard who argues that “fire is more a social reality than a natural reality. [...] respect for fire is a respect that has been taught; it is not a natural respect” (Bachelard 10).

In this vein, it can even be argued that language carries within itself prohibitions that human curiosity in its pursuit of knowledge disobeys. The only problem that they encounter, in their disobedience for the sake of knowledge, is the resistance of those that cling to the prohibitions embedded within the language, calling them morality.

Conclusion

The Ooloi release the body from the prohibitions that language embeds and perpetuates within the social reality, offering to the human mind knowledge of the thing-in-itself, which so far had been deemed residual. In so far as the remainder is unknowable, the endeavour to know it, clearly comes under the disobedience that the moral order condemns. Indulging in that disobedience is pleasurable but it is a grotesque kind of pleasure that seeks to change the subject that enjoys it.

In the Xenogenesis trilogy of Butler, the moral order is exposed only when the humans come in contact with the Ooloi, who connect them to the true nature of pleasure known to their body. This pleasure is exacted by the conjoining of the senses with the wider world outside in such a fashion that nothing residual remains. This is entirely opposite of the pleasure one enjoys due to the prohibitive nature of the moral order, a pleasure that is not conceivable without the possibility of a remainder.

Such a possibility, which the Ooloi wish to negate, initiate the inception of a hierarchical structure, as the prohibition lies in categorising objects of desire. Any disobedience against such prohibition is empty without the upending of such hierarchies, and in this sense the Ooloi are right to posit that in so far as the intelligence of the humankind remains enslaved to the ancient order of hierarchy, humanity is only delaying the inevitable.

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