

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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An Analysis of Medical Metaphors in Octavia Estelle Butler's "Bloodchild"

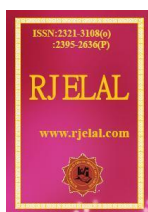
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Abstract

Science fiction and medical humanities intersect with each other when the author uses a speculative story to throw light on the comprehension of diseases and illness, thereby extending it to the various other aspects such as healthcare, stigmatization, fostering empathy, etc. Humanity has seen its share of illness and diseases in the past and battled its way out of it. With the recent COVID-19 in picture, the realm of humanities and medicine come together to critique, question and understand human nature in the face of disease and illness. In a fiction that deals about medicine, disease and illness, metaphors become inevitable for human understanding. Science fiction writers use metaphors to provide a deeper understanding of the medical context. This paper is an attempted study to analyse the medical metaphors in Octavia Estelle Butler's short story "Bloodchild". Butler uses biology and biological functions to comment on human nature in this short story.

Keywords: Bloodchild, Octavia Estelle Butler, Medical Metaphors, Human Nature, Medical Humanities, Sciende Fiction

INTRODUCTION

Medical Humanities is an interdisciplinary realm that combines humanities, arts with health care to research about humanity's experience with illness and health. It shows the reality of human nature when faced with illness and disease. Fiction dealing about medical humanities throws more light on the human side of the illness rather than the medical procedures and details. The term

disease and illness encompasses all forms of ailments - physical, psychological, mental, emotional, etc. Various forms of disability and its treatments are also included in the realm of medical humanities. Readers feel empathy towards the diseased and are able to relate to the characters and illness more from their own perspectives. The main role of medical humanities is to establish this connection among the readers - to feel for the diseased and to understand their own sufferings and decisions.

It helps to shed the age-old stigmatization on diseased and the affected people are viewed from a fresh perspective; it throws light not only on the patient but also on the loved ones who suffer in the process. After COVID, the field of medical humanities have gained traction to bring awareness about technology-driven technologies that help in human illness and diseases.

Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, Besser van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*, Rita Charon's *Narrative Medicine*, Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, Virginia Woolf's *On Being Ill*, Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, William Carlos Williams' *The Doctor Stories*, Abraham Varghese's *Cutting for Stone*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* are some of the acclaimed works, both fiction and non-fiction, written on the subject of medical humanities. They offer insights about diseases, the sufferings, the medical procedures, the care and empathy of the characters involved. They show why empathy is important, why biases and beliefs are to be questioned when it comes to treatments and procedures and why communication becomes mandatory between the diseased and doctors.

Exploring the unexplored has been one of the most important aspects of the science fiction since time immemorial. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, James White's *Sector General Series* are some of the renowned science fiction that have medical humanities at their core. Imagining a new novum (context or a new world) where humans are in a position to overcome their fears or get used to a new difference (technology, aliens, illness, etc.) form the crux of science fiction. Novums play a very important role in science fiction where human nature in the face of difference is the tenet. The term was introduced by Darko Suvin, one of the prominent critics of science fiction, in his work *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. According to him the novum is "the defining trope of the

genre" (33). Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, another Professor and Critic of science fiction, defines the term as follows: ". . . sf novums are the radically new inventions, discoveries, or social relations around which otherwise familiar fictional elements are reorganized in a cogent, historically plausible way" (47). He talks about this in his work *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, where he places novum as the second beauty in any science fictional work. Csicsery-Ronay also acknowledges that there can be more than one novum. According to Suvin, readers must have cognition (comprehension) to understand the dislocation of their world (alternate world). Many science fiction writers use these two very well to capture the attention of the readers and to drive their point home.

Objective

Science fiction writers have one basic tenet - to explore humanity; its potential and its nature. This lies underneath any science fiction, be it a hard science fiction or a soft science fiction. Octavia Estelle Butler, the African-American science fiction writer, has set the study of human nature as her primary goal. Her oeuvre talks about humanity in detail. Her oeuvre offers the readers many stunning and sublime novums that help to understand human nature in a better light. Octavia Estelle Butler was born in Pasadena, California. Her father was a shoe-shiner and after his death, she was raised by her mother and grandmother. Her mother supported the family by working as a maid in white households. Octavia Butler received first-hand experience of racism when she accompanied her mother to her workplace. Also added to this the fact that Butler was dyslexic and she was bullied a lot in her school because of this and also her appearance. She looked larger than her class kids. Even her teacher were not able to understand her dyslexia at first. All these made Butler take refuge in libraries and stories. Later in college, she took creative writing courses and attended many workshops that shaped her perspectives in viewing the world in a different way; and that is

reflected in her writings. She authored three novel series, two standalone novels and one short story collection. *Bloodchild and Other Stories* bagged several reputed awards like Locus, Nebula in the field of science and speculative fiction. This paper aims to analyse the medical metaphors in the titular story of the collection "Bloodchild".

The plot of the story is as follows: Humans have left earth and sought asylum in another planet where aliens live in a symbiotic relationship with other life forms. The aliens are called Tlics. The Tlics have accepted humans and granted a place for them to live called 'Preserve' on one condition - they have to engage in reproductive symbiosis with the aliens. The humans are called Terrans and they are granted asylum on this condition. T'Gatoi is one of the most important government official when it comes to the Preserve. She is very close to a human family from which she needs one person to be her partner. She wants Gan to enter into a relationship with her. The entire story shows how Gan comes to accept his position with T'Gatoi even after witnessing the horrible male pregnancy first-hand. Gan's mother Lien is a childhood friend of T'Gatoi and this makes the Tlic become more attached to Gan's family. After witnessing a male pregnancy, Gan becomes perturbed; but at the end of the story realizes his affection for T'Gatoi and agrees to bear her young.

Analysis

Metaphors are part and parcel of literary writing. Authors use it to convey complex ideas, incite imagination among the readers, and to establish an emotional connection by bringing two different ideas together. The realization brings out the beauty of the author's craftsmanship.

"Medical terminology, originally confined to clinical contexts, has expanded semantically and is now used metaphorically in everyday speech, literature, media, and political discourse" (Nurullayevna 65). This tendency

has seen a raise among people after COVID pandemic. History shows that time and time again that humanity has faced its share of deadly diseases and found its way to continue. COVID has shown us the same; people tried to learn to live with the virus in them.

Many fiction have been written on the diseases that shook the world - Black Death, Influenza, Small Pox, AIDS, etc. Literary writings on diseases and illness have explored them as metaphors to comment on human nature. Science fiction and Speculative fiction are the perfect platform to use diseases as metaphors. "Science fiction foretells technological wonders, and science brings these prophecies to fruition. Numbered among such promised future marvels are medical miracles of cure, treatment and prevention: new drugs, transplant technologies, genetic engineering, prosthetics and diagnostic devices" (Miller and Anne 213). *The Plague* by Albert Camus, *World War Z* by Max Brooks, *Years of Wonders* by Geraldine Brooks and Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* have explored the myriad forms of humanity in the face of illness as the Other. It is now very common to associate illness to a battle or war, and healing to a solution or freedom. Writers employ diseases or illness as a tool not only to comment on the concept of human health and autonomy but also on the society's treatment of the diseased.

By analysing science fiction, solutions for real life diseases can be made possible. For the novums that are presented by authors like H.G. Wells, Isaac Asimov, William Gibson and many more have come true. The predictions or inventions introduced by many science fiction authors have become true. For instance, robots and robotics by Isaac Asimov. Even now, robots are being manufactured and analysed through the three laws given by Asimov in his fiction. Such is the power of science fiction and its possibilities. Miller and Anne "argue that such actions can be described as building a 'visionary medicine', taking inspiration from Walidah Imarisha's description of Octavia Butler's work

as 'visionary fiction'" (217). The stigmatization of the diseased people in fiction is analogous to the real life treatment of the diseased people. It can subsequently be used to compare with all the "-isms" such as racism, sexism, etc. that plague humanity. For instance, the relationship between the Tlics and humans is analogous to the racist relationship of the real world. In this particular short story, Butler brings in the novum of extraterrestrial space and male pregnancy. She introduces some of the metaphors that possess the ability of verisimilitude. This paper analyses these metaphors in detail.

1. Human Bodies - site of reproduction

Human bodies are used as the tool of reproduction by the aliens. The very main purpose of the aliens - the Tlics in the story, to give sanctuary to humans who has fled their planet, is to use their bodies. Gan recollects: "Back when the Tlic saw us as not much more than convenient, big, warm-blooded animals, they would pen several of us together, male and female, and feed us only eggs. That way they could be sure of getting another generation of us no matter how we tried to hold out. We were lucky that didn't go on long" (Butler 9). Though, the humans now are treated better, their bodies are exploited irrespectively. In the end of the story, Gan accepts to bear the young of T'Gatoi: "I felt the familiar sting, narcotic, mildly pleasant. Then the blind probing of her ovipositor. The puncture was painless easy. So easy going in. She undulated slowly against me, her muscles forcing the egg from her body into mine" (Butler 27). Finally, he is ready to accept her and creates his own family with her. Butler shows how human bodies are used as tools even in the real world through the Tlics' treatment of the human bodies.

2. Eggs - narcotics

In order to make humans healthy and relaxed, the Tlics offer them eggs to have. These eggs keeps human healthy with a longer life span and make them relax by forgetting

themselves. It is similar to the drugs that is existent in the real world today. People especially teens and adults become addicted to the false illusion of pleasure and forgetfulness the drugs provide. Gan observes: "The eggs prolonged life, prolonged vigor. My father, who had never refused one in his life, had lived more than twice as long as he should have. And toward the end of his life, when he should have been slowing down, he had married my mother and fathered four children" (Butler 3). T'Gatoi scolds Lien, Gan's mother for not taking enough eggs and getting old soon. On the one hand, it makes them become a sort of posthumans, the humans who consume eggs live a very long life compared to those without having consumed eggs; they become more than humans. On the other hand, they lose a sense of their selves. Many lose themselves, their hold on reality when they consume these eggs. Gan looks at his older brother Qui who seems oblivious to everything and everyone around him. "I looked at him, stretched out on the floor across the room, his eyes open, but glazed as she dreamed his egg dream" (Butler 9). Before implanting, the Tlics make sure that the humans are relaxed and ready so as to succumb to the coercion. Though many say that the symbiosis is mutualistic, it can be seen very clearly that there is enough coercion. In this case, the eggs act as narcotics, drugs that make one forget themselves. It can be seen as a painkiller in the process of implantation also. When Gan sees T'Gatoi performing a Cesarean section on a male body, he realises the usage of eggs at that moment.

3 The Sting - medications /drugs injected into bodies through needles, syringes

Another source of pleasure offered by the Tlics is the sting. The sting of the aliens relieves pain the human bodies. This can be regarded as a form of painkiller. When Gan's mother is suffering from a wound, T'Gatoi admonishes her for not informing her before. She immediately set to work: "Her sting drew only a single drop of blood from my mother's bare leg. My mother cried out - probably in surprise.

Being stung doesn't hurt. Then she sighed and I could see her body relax" (Butler 6). Lien protests to this saying that this is not humane at all, to which T'Gatoi replies her: "I could not watch you sitting and suffering any longer" (Butler 6). This can be compared to medications such as painkillers that people use everyday. It is also analogous to the drugs and narcotics that people inject into their bodies using syringes. They only feel the sharp sting of the needle and the next moment, they forget the world around them and they even forget themselves. Butler's metaphors throw light on the societal issues too and this is evident from the stinging ability of the aliens that could make humans get addicted to the aliens.

4. Thinness - body shaming

The Tlics prefer humans to be fat or moderately fat to bear their young ones. It is because once implanted, their eggs will be several in number. If the human body has enough weight, the young ones can grow more comfortably until they are ready to come out. If the human body is thin, the Tlics do not prefer them. T'Gatoi prefers Gan despite his thinness and his age. She tells him, "Thinness is dangerous" (Butler 4). Here, she expresses her anxiety about the state of her young ones if Gan becomes pregnant with them. This metaphor of thinness shows how even in real life, people associate thinness to danger and weakness. Appearance is the first thing people notice in each other. Even the warmup conversations happen with appearance such as weight gain, weight loss, complexion, skin conditions, hair and facial features. Butler uses Gan's thinness to throw light on the issue of appearance among humans. T'Gatoi is advised to choose a woman or a girl, preferably Xuan Hoa, Gan's sister, as they have the necessary anatomical features to bear children; but she is attached to Gan. "Actually, they prefer women. You should be around them when they talk among themselves. They say women have more body fat to protect the grubs. But they usually take men to leave the women free to bear their own young. . . To

provide the next generation of host animals" (Butler 21). This again is a commentary on the reproductive process of women, how one is expected to be in the stage of pregnancy, both physically and mentally. The aliens are like worms. Gan associates T'Gatoi's movements to that of a flowing water. "T'Gatoi whipped her three meters of body off her couch, toward the door, and out at full speed. She had bones – ribs, a long spine, a skull, four sets of limb bones per segment" (Butler 9). Butler brings the sharp contrast in appearance to show grotesqueness of the symbiosis here.

5. Male Pregnancy - body horror

Finally, Butler brings in the metaphor for body horror through male pregnancy. Gan watches T'Gatoi perform a ceseraen section on a male body for the very first time and is terrified of bearing her young.

And she opened him. His body convulsed with the first cut. He almost tore himself away from me. The sound he made . . . I had never heard such sounds come from anything human. T'Gatoi seemed to pay no attention as she lengthened and deepened the cut now and then pausing to lick away blood. His blood vessels contracted, reacting to the chemistry of her saliva, and the bleeding slowed. (Butler 15)

If the same is happening with the female body, instead of the male body, the scene would have been considered very normal. Gan remarks, "The whole procedure was wrong, alien" (Butler 17). Gan acts as a mouthpiece of all humans here. It is not the body in question, but the mere process that involves blood and gore in human body makes the entire process a grotesque. "She found the first grub. It was fat and deep red with his blood – both inside and out. It had already eaten its own egg case but apparently had not yet begun to eat its host. At this stage, it would eat any flesh except its mother's" (Butler 15). The body horror created in this scene makes one wonder about human

births where a mother takes a rebirth after giving birth to her baby or babies. Gan wonders about his father who opted to have pregnancies in exchange for his ill health: "He had done it three times in his long life. Three clutches of eggs, three times being opened up and sewed up. How had he done it? How did anyone do it?" (Butler 22). This again can be regarded as a metaphor for female reproduction. One could easily say that the birth should be easy just because of the C-section but in reality birthing process is hard and grotesque and it should be comprehended by everyone, irrespective of the gender. Despite this horror, Gan understands the situation and agrees to bear the young of T'Gatoi.

6. N'Tlic - the 'Other'

In this story, the N'Tlic, humans who choose to bear the youngones of the aliens becomet he Other to the normal humans. Logically, the alien Tlics are the Others to the humans. But even among humans, there exist a difference. People who choose to bear the young of the aliens, they are treated differently by the normal humans. The Tlics give them privilege and it cannot be denied at all, "Because your people arrived, we are relearning what it means to be a healthy, thriving people" (Butler 25). Hence there is exchange of benefits from both the sides - Tlics and the N'Tlics. Gan's family members treat him differently. The reaction that he receives from his sister and older brother borders from jealousy to fear. This situation can be compared to that of the treatment of the diseased people in their families. Not every family member is very caring towards their diseased family member. Butler subtly hints at this differential treatment of humans.

CONCLUSION

There is a theory named Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Linguist George Lakoff and Philosopher Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) introduced this concept. This theory "foregrounds metaphor as a cognitive mechanism composed of a source

and a target domain that structures abstract reasoning" (Lippolis et al. 2). According to this theory, human thoughts are driven by metaphors. Humans understand abstract concepts using concrete experiences that are real and physical. This is evident while reading fiction. Various genres help one understand the context and intricacies of various linguistics such as financial linguistics, forensic linguistics, medical linguistics, etc. When one reads science fiction, there is a willing suspension of disbelief that is coupled with cognition also. The reader is able to relate to the alternate world that is presented in the fiction to their own worlds. For instance, a story about aliens abducting humans can be considered as a metaphor for the racial segregation existing between the whites and the blacks. Similarly, a story with robots can be considered a metaphor to the inhumane humans populating the real word. In simple words, any science fiction is a metaphor of the real world of humans.

Octavia Estelle Butler captures this essence in her oeuvre. On the outset, the short story "Bloodchild" is a story about a mutualistic symbiosis between two different species - humans and aliens. But this can be read at different metaphorical levels - race, sex, gender, posthuman, transhuman, etc. The very human body is the host for the young ones of the aliens. The biological process becomes medical metaphors in this story. Butler has beautifully portrayed the metaphors using biological functions. Thus the aim of the paper is realized.

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