

Octavia Butler's Bloodchild and the Posthuman Complexities: A Process of Becoming

Alisa Dahal*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the human-nonhuman relationship for co-reproduction and co-existence between two species in Octavia Butler's speculative fiction "Bloodchild". The humans called the Terrans and the aliens called the Tlics make a contract for reciprocity to save the futurity of both. This research analyzes Butler's speculation of some posthuman complexities related to identity, gender, reproduction and forceful bonding in the far future. The multifaceted female protagonist T'Gatoi, the male human surrogacy, non-normative pregnancy and experimental birth foreground the horror of dystopian future that Butler attempts to make humans aware of. Based primarily on the textual evidence, the paper uses Donna Haraway's concept of "speculative feminism", Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "becoming" and Rosi Braidotti's theory of critical posthumanities to argue for the author's warning to humanity against futuristic crises and call for a critical thought exercise to retrospect on human tyranny, egotism and sense of otherness. It proposes that overcoming the anthropocentric rule over nature and the "others" for the sake of natural equilibrium and socio-cultural harmony can help instill collective consciousness and promote community building to save this planet and the others for a sustainable future.

Keywords: becoming, critical retrospection, interconnectedness, posthuman complexities, speculation

INTRODUCTION

"Bloodchild" by Octavia E. Butler speculates about an alien planet where humans and the non-humans live together under some reciprocal conditions and agreements. The humans called Terrans have to resort to the Tlics, a strange species and comply with their law of hosting their populations as they cannot reproduce themselves. In return, they are allowed to live in the "Preserve" protected and cared for. They had to leave their homeland, the earth; to flee the tyranny and enslavement of their own kind. The Tlics females implant their eggs in the Terrans, preferably their males leaving the females to propagate the human population. Butler's concern is with contemporary America which harboured racial and gender discrimination to its extreme and was blindfolded to its harsh consequences.

* Teaching Assistant,

English Department, Mahendra Ratna Campus, TU, Kathmandu, Nepal, Email: rijalalisa@gmail.com

Foreseen to be a place not worthy to live for the humans, the Terrans' abandonment of the earth represents the similar condition of exploited and enslaved humans forced to seek a safer and better frontier – the alien planet of the Tlics in this novel. But the humans happen to subjugate to the aliens in some critics' eyes which at the deeper level is an affirmative response to the crisis and an action of integration with the "others". The Study Guide compares this historical context with the Terrans' condition: ". . . her [Butler's] story places humans in a weak position in comparison to the Tlic. The humans need to compromise, bargain, and sacrifice just to "pay the rent" (Study Guide, para 6). Butler speculates the possible results of transgression of humanity against its own kind. But examining this situation from a different angle, these two species are in an experimental process of "becoming" into each other. As an addressal to the posthuman dilemmas, Butler's idea of co-reproduction, co-evolution and co-existence is implicative of interdependence and relationality of the human and the non-human in the story. It proposes the posthuman as a polyphonic subjectivity, a process of symbiosis and monistic existence and enables some hopeful consolations of community building and integrated lives against the old hierarchical "categories".

Tailored to the interdependence and relationality between the human and the non-human there stand some questions regarding the status of the humans and their habitation, male-female dichotomy, and reproductive inheritance only as women's natural privilege. Butler's writing is a story of "male pregnancy" that unravels her intention of subverting "the traditional gender roles of mid-century America" (Study Guide, Para 2). The non-normative co-reproduction and experimental birth by a surrogate human male in an "extrasolar world" entails few other political and ethical posthuman complexities and contradictions related to the status of humanity, motherhood, power and identity. Whether the story as a story of a pregnant man echoes the breach of biological specificity and ethics of woman's sexuality or it envisions genderlessness is debatable. Does the "human subject" own its universal autonomy or intersect with the "other" species for the sustainable future? Is being human a question of universal subjectivity and its politics or a concern of interspeciesism and multiplicity? Is reproduction a specific biological privilege of women or a collective concern for the futurity of humanity?

Researchers have a wide range of interpretations of the story "Bloodchild". It is a story of biopower ". . . the identification of biopower with the traumatic appropriation of the human body and the articulation of posthuman forms of resistance to it" as labeled by Maria Ferrandez San Miguel. But it is more than resistance, but "appropriation" being a way to "becoming", a changing process of adaptation to the posthuman polyversal world (27). Heather Duerre Human analyses it as a different genre writing of science fiction featuring a female protagonist different from traditional science fiction. More focused on "race, social justice and "otherness", he does not notice the rationale of its speculative interconnectedness of species to the sustainability of this planet (518).

Alyce Rae Helford traces Butler's common theme of the feminine as in her other novels like *Wild Seed*: "From the Medusa-like appearance of the alien Oankali in her Xenogenesis Trilogy and the archetypal power of the matriarchal shapeshifter Anyanwu in her 1980 novel *Wild Seed* to Gan's "female" reproductive function for the Tlic in "Bloodchild," Butler is deeply interested in science-fictional metaphors for the "feminine" which challenge traditional representations (260). But Butler's concern is not only about questioning the "feminine" with her "shapeshifting" Anyanwu and multifaceted T'Gatoi, rather it is speculation of a critical human future that can sustain in interdependence of different realities and forms of lives.

Hence, this paper explores how "Bloodchild" serves as a positive thought exercise for the possible posthuman predicament in the far future under the hegemony of bioscience, technology and human atrocities born out of the desire for perfection and excellence at the cost of the "others". To support my arguments, a few post-humanist theories like Donna Haraway's Speculative Feminism, Gilles Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "becoming" and Rosi Braidotti's concept of "nomadic subjectivity" will be used in the discussion.

THEORIES/APPROACHES

Haraway's Speculative Feminism, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming and Braidotti's "nomadic subjectivity" conform to the posthuman complexities resulting from the interdependence, interspeciesism and non-unitary subject. Speculative Feminism (SF), as discussed in Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* offers provocative new ways to reconfigure our relations to the earth and all its inhabitants. In the INTRODUCTION, she proposes "a ubiquitous figure" of the book, SF with its multiple implications like "speculative feminism" and "string figuring" as "practice and process; . . . becoming with each other in surprising relays; . . . for ongoingness"(3). Haraway's imaginings of plurality of subjectivity in identity formation and the relations of interspecies is what Speculative Feminism and String Figuring epitomize. Her concept of String Figuring is a way to "staying with the trouble" that requires "making oddkin . . . unexpected collaborations and combinations" (*Staying with the Trouble* 4). In the earth wounded by power-ridden wars, extractions and tyranny, "any tolerable way of surviving is really over", claims Haraway. Butler portrays the human species which had to abandon the earth and take shelter in the new frontier in an extrasolar world ruled by the aliens (4). This fluidity of being and the interconnectedness beyond identity politics, reproductive rights and female issues is what Haraway has conceived as an idea of Speculative Feminism built upon the posthuman crisis of propagating humanity as a collective issue. Haraway's cyborg sums up her concept of the intersection of organism and the cybernetics that stands for a posthuman being. This openness and fluidity of identity formation accepts the plurality of lives sustained by each other. Rosi Braidotti responds to the posthuman dilemma on a positive note. Discussing posthuman ethics and "becoming with", she observes: ". . . to be posthuman does not mean to be indifferent to the humans, or to be de-humanized. On the contrary, it implies a new

way of combining ethical values with the well-being of an enlarged sense of community, which includes one's territorial or environmental inter-connections" (190). The classical notion of Man and the perfection of a Vitruvian man with its universal subjectivity needs redefining in relation to non-human entities. It exists only in its relationality with them and with it the posthuman turns to a nomad "subject" belonging to the polyversal regime. Whether humanity is driven to this "nomadic subjectivity" because of "desire as plenitude or lack", it reinforces updates in historical contingency. She argues: ". . . [It] promotes a continuing emphasis on the radical ethics of transformation . . . an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the nonhuman or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centered individualism on the one hand and the barriers of negativity on the other" (189). Her point is not to deny the contingencies but to update them as per the "subject formation. . . their own changing structures and compositions" (189).

Defining sexuality as a process of "becoming", Gilles Deleuze reasons in the same line:

Sexuality proceeds by way of the becoming-woman of the man and the becoming-animal of the human There is no need for bestialism in this It is not a question of "playing the dog" . . . not so much a question of making love with animals. Becomings- animals are basically of another power since their reality resides not in an animal one imitates . . . but in themselves [which] suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become— a proximity, an indiscernibility that extracts a shared element from the animal far more effectively than any domestication". (Deleuze and Guattari, 278-79)

It is not domesticating or imitating animals and appropriating them to our comfort but becoming into through proximity in a somehow natural manner. It is having visionary insights, being affirmative by transcending negativity and "having faith in creative powers of imagination" and "actualizing the untapped in daily basis of interconnections with the others" (Braidotti 191). Hence, discussed under these theoretical frameworks, textual analysis will form the major part of the argument and support the interpretation of the issues in the story.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Regarding the concept of male pregnancy in the story, Butler surpasses the identity politics of women over their bodies and the natural "privilege" of reproduction. Butler's concern is more with the realization of co-reproduction and co-development of species as posthuman ethics to continue the organicity of symbiotic existence. The concept she conjectured about a decade ago in her character Lomas's surrogacy in the story gets materialized almost in a parallel manner in Dolly's cloning later. Besides, the agreement between Terrans and the Tlics has multiple dynamics to save their common future. Lomas's severity of birth pain intensified by Tlic T'Khotgif's absence at the birth place reminds us

of the modern legal provisions for the husband's compulsive presence. It is not merely a legal ritual but a realization of collectivity and mutualism at a psychological and ethical level too. Butler's projection of this integrated missionary task of reproduction and birth is manifested potently in Gan's internalization of his great responsibility for the common good by accepting T'Gatoi's eggs as a human host. The writer's dialogic portrayal of mediation of power between helpless Gan and the coercive and manipulative T'Gatoi draws upon the axiological and ethical role of humanity for the non-humans at an implicit level. Gan bargains to compel her to rethink the negotiation:

"I don't want to be a host animal . . . Not even yours".

"We use almost no host animals these days. . . . You know that."

"You use us"

"We do. We wait long years for you and teach you and join our families. . . . You know you are not animals to us" ("Bloodchild" 27-28).

T'Gatoi implies that humans are better and have a bigger responsibility to save lives and the planet.

Before Gan's ancestors' arrival, the Tlics had animal hosts who did not perform safe births. T'Gatoi also reminds how his ancestors too "tried to kill them as worms" before they were "trained" (28). But she can rely on Gan's family as hosts because they are "trained" to live together with the insects, which suggests what "becoming-with" refers to. This contributes to changing his temporarily deranged mood not to host the Tlics' population rather to kill himself. Gan's threat is the ego-complexity of the human "subject" and power politics to make T'Gatoi realize human agency and its interactive force that enables both of their population to flourish longer. T'Gatoi also grows more human, loving, caring, protective and intellectual to keep her relation with the Terrans unlike her indifferent, bestial and "alien" behavior before.

Moreover, Butler creates an ethos as a black woman and writer because she has witnessed atrocities of racism like poverty, discrimination and rejection. Gregory J. Hampton appreciates her first novel *Kindred* attributing the same persuasive power: "Here was a black writer, a black woman writing compelling science fiction (SF), a writer creating a black heroine while simultaneously telling a fully accessible dramatic tale and re-presenting Black History to three distinct audiences (established SF fans, black readers, and feminists)" (Hampton, "Foreword" 15). Projecting the multifaceted T'Gatoi as the hero in "Bloodchild", she addresses multiple audiences to serve her multi-dynamic purpose of integration as a science fiction to evoke a critical inquiry to change for the future. She is not merely ventriloquizing the issues of fragmentation and "fractured identity" (Haraway, *Reader* 13) and its debilitating impacts on living but is appealing for a transformational

enactment to achieve a reconfigured holistic existence. The lively descriptions of the perinatal scenes of Lomas's horrifying experimental birth show the strong sense of pathos through Gan's experience: "Paler worms oozed to visibility in Lomas's flesh. I closed my eyes. It was worse than finding something dead, rotting, and filled with tiny animal grubs. And it was far worse than any drawing or diagram" (Butler, "Bloodchild" 21). Her appeal compels us to review our relations to the non-humans and nature before we have to "pay the rent" ("Bloodchild", "Afterword" 34) and make unwanted negotiations for survival.

Besides, some issues that follow the contradictions are the coerced longevity of human life prolonged by the sterile eggs and the choice of human host, preferably a male for the Tlic's vested interest of saving female humans for parallel population growth of both species to their own sustainability. It violates the ethical parameters of human life at one level but calls for mutualism and monistic existence on a serious note. The unprecedented and forceful new human relations with the "others"- as with the Tlics in the new frontier are meant to aware people of probable future horror as consequences of human arrogance, tyranny and desire-induced destruction of the peaceful nature and its inhabitants. These questions even lead to the dilemma Butler's "Bloodchild" as a science fiction generates about its utopian or dystopian projection of the future. But she positions herself as a mediator to provoke critical inquiry of our past and make the future a livable place of unity and harmony.

"Bloodchild" frames a similar relationship of harmony, love, care, and mutual understanding for each other. Born from a human surrogate "father" out of the unnatural sexless coupling is a bloodchild that feeds on blood and flesh but not of his mother's whose eggs it is hatched from. This raises questions about maternity, breastfeeding, and the possible cannibalism in human societies. Seemingly a choice of compulsion, the main character Gan is bound to host the alien, T'Gatoi's eggs parallel to Haraway's idea of "the odd coupling of actually working and playing for multispecies flourishing" (*Staying with 3*). Braidotti makes a thoughtful remark relevant to the relationality and interconnectedness as a process of becoming posthuman: "This is in fact a moveable assemblage within a common life-space that the subject never masters nor possesses but merely inhabits, crosses, always in a community, a pack and a cluster" (193). Braidotti implies that it is a transversal entity, embodied and impersonal; immersed into the non-human relations. Only if judged on human race-based priorities, the posthuman complexities look obscure but the considering of the commonly shared ground of interdependence gives us a glimpse of a hopeful future- a way to wholeness. Relating it to Gan's character, Nisi Shawl analyses the obscurity of his coercive choice of hosting T'Gatoi's eggs as a resolve between committing suicide and risking human annihilation: "The terrifying choice- poor path lying before Gan is one many marginalized readers know well, while this society's giant centipedes may find it so mundane as to be beneath their ordinary notice" (Shawl). Approaching his impregnation in a holistic view, Gan represents the Saviour of the futurity of both the humans and the

aliens because their propagation is conditioned by the agreement of co-reproduction of the two species. The question whether Gan or T'Gatoi stands as the protagonist of the story has to undergo a radically changed worldview and perspectives that lead to many other posthuman ontological and epistemological dilemmas regarding identity and its formation.

Parallel to Haraway's idea of "... the horrors of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene ... that life on earth that includes human people in any tolerable way is really over" (*Staying with* 3-4), there are the atrocities of slavery that drove the Terrans to a livable planet, yet of the aliens, the "others". Haraway's concept of becoming-with that demands "unexpected collaborations and combinations" among species for "staying with the trouble" is manifest in the forceful and coercive negotiations of survival in the story. The agreement for co-reproduction to host Tlics population may reproduce the reversed imperialist arrogance of women's movement for sexual and reproductive freedom if observed in T'Gatoi's representation. But Butler complies with Haraway's position against the identity politics for she reclaims "... that motherhood is not the telos of women and that a woman's reproductive freedom trumps the demands of patriarchy" (*Staying with* 6). Discussing the companion species, Haraway appeals for opening up their stories and having "a hardy soiled kind of wisdom" to "stay with the trouble". She argues:

... we need to resend our souls and our home worlds in order to flourish again, ... on a vulnerable planet that is not yet murdered. We need not just reseed, but also re-inoculating with all the fermenting, fomenting, and nutrient-fixing associates that seeds need to thrive. Recuperation is still possible, but only in multispecies alliance, across the killing divisions of nature, culture, and technology and of organism, language, and machine. (*Staying with* 17)

Her argument resounds with hope and consolation for the shared future if the intersection of nature, culture and technology is internalized.

Referring to Octavia E. Butler's speculative fiction *Parable of the Sower*, Haraway points out that "Butler knows all about the untold stories, the ones that need a restitched seedbag and a travelling sower to hollow out a place to flourish after the catastrophes of that Sharp Story" (*Staying with* 119). It is a story of a young woman, displaced from her home and a believer of a religion called "Earthseed". She can feel the pains of others and inhabit other planets sowing the seeds for their flourishing. In the *Wild Seed*, the protagonist Anyanwu changes herself into a dolphin. that grows in her empathy to them- symbolic to "becoming". Taking into a dolphin, she realises: "Strangely, their chatter sounded more human now—more like speech, like a foreign speech. She swam toward them slowly, uncertainly. How did they greet strangers? How would they greet one small, ignorant female? If they were speaking among themselves somehow, they would think her mute—or mad" (*Wild Seed* 58). "Bloodchild" overtones a similar story of sowing a new community of two different species on a reciprocal trading of what helps them co-reproduce, coexist,

co-evolve and flourish. Haraway traces "Butler's entire work as an SF writer [who] is riveted on the problem of destruction and wounded flourishing not simply survival in exile, diaspora, abduction, and transportation -- the earthly gift-burden of the descendants of slaves, refugees, immigrants, travelers, and of the indigenous too" (*Staying with* 120). Despite Butler's unwillingness to accept "Bloodchild" as a story of slavery, this bears some traces of enslavement appropriated to the comfort of both groups as in her other books like *Kindred* and in which the protagonist time-travels conforming to time. However, the Terrans in "Bloodchild" are never the mere medium to implant eggs, seemingly enslaved by the aliens but with a great undertaking of the futurity of species. Enclosed in the "Preserve" from where there is no "away", Gan's act of love choosing pregnancy amidst "surrounding difficulties" represents the interdependence of the humans and the non-humans, and the blurred dialectics of "categories", which constitute the posthuman complexities.

Gan's visit home on the last day of his childhood, his attachment with the human family and his growing love and forceful bonding to a non-human companion embodies an appropriated creature living through the posthuman contradictions. The nostalgia of motherly love and the growing attachment with the "harmless pleasure" of the sterile eggs, and T'Gatoi's love that prolongs his youth fits into Deleuze's idea of becoming-animal and Haraway's cyborg. The horror of Lomas's birth of the grubs, T'Gatoi's instinctual licking of the blood, the grubs feeding on the flesh; growing together with T'Gatoi's intelligence, quick understanding of Gan's emotions and her agency over Gan and Lomas concretize her polysubjectivity and multiplicity of identification. The becoming-with is materialized even in the designing of the Tlics-friendly cars that force the "crawling" in and out of the doors by humans too. Furthermore, T'Gatoi's adaptation and comfort with the warm human bodies that she often resorts to as with Gan and his mother, her special couch in Gan's house and the egg implantation event into Gan inside the "bedroom" add to her becoming-civilized and humanized. Gan's resistance to the Terrans' conditioned recognition under Tlics' laws, their indifference on the human suffering as with Lomas's pain of unnatural birth and Gan's threat to shoot himself to death to escape the cruel experiment reminds us of Tony Morrison's mother character in *The Beloved* choosing to kill her child better than scapegoating to slavery. Explicitly an objection, this demands a symbiotic establishment of power relations that is embodied in the negotiations Gan and T'Gatoi make on who to choose for egg-implantation and how to be tamed to love and live on mutual consent.

Thus, Gan's split self between the human desire for Edenic innocence in the human home and the enhanced life with the intoxicating eggs makes Gan's character a posthuman representative of Butler's speculation. T'Gatoi, who is honored and respected as a family member by Gan's family "considered [it] as her second home" ("Bloodchild", 12). This sense of "otherness" and the forceful bonding between the two families is likely to project the compelling inextricability of the human and the non-human, and nature and culture embodied by the aliens—the prospective companion or enemy of the transhuman.

Similar duality can be observed in the concept of territorialization of the isolated colony of the Terrans that the Tlics have named as “Preserve.” Is it the humans who colonized the alien planet in the quest of new frontiers or the Tlics who have enslaved the humans? The Terrans do not have a well-reasoned and authentic source of their ancestors' history. The reliability of Gan’s knowledge as a narrator about his own race’s history depends on T’Gatoi’s manipulated communication because she is the oldest living creature to know the family as she was born out of Gan’s father as the host. Butler, envisioning all these contradictions and complexities of the future regarding the human and the non-human relations with these multiple dynamics is warning humanity against the destruction of the symbiotic and integrated relations of the two.

CONCLUSION

As a speculative fiction, the story foregrounds the posthuman future with its multiple dynamics of the challenges, risks, rewards and appropriations regarding various life forms and technological enhancement in the earth and beyond. The human- nonhuman interconnectedness represented by the bonding of Gyan and T’Gatoi entails some posthuman complexities speculated by Butler in the story. She implicitly proposes two choices: a warning to humanity against these or a preparation to live with them. It is a call for the moderation of human desires and aspirations, critical reviews of our past and a recognition of plurality to create a sustaining future. She is prophetic about the posthuman crises and complexities like destruction of the symbiotic existence, fragmented lives and forceful relations. that cost us high as the irreparable loss of our habitations and an existential limbo. She provokes affirmative actions by changing our worldviews and overcoming the tunnel vision of human arrogance for a peripheral and polyversal world community represented by the interrelationlity of T’Gatoi and Gan in the story.

Works Cited

Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013

Butler, Octavia E. . "Bloodchild". *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. 2nd Ed. Seven Stories Press, pp 10-32

---. *Wild Seed*. Doubleday and Company, INC, 1980

Course Hero. “Bloodchild Study Guide.” *Course Hero*, 26 Oct. 2020. Web. 28 Feb. 2024. <<https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Bloodchild/>>.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A THOUSAND PLATEAUS Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, 1987

Hampton, Gregory J. and Kendra R. Parker. *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Octavia E. Butler*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020, 13)

Haraway, Donna J.. *Staying with the Trouble*. University Press Books, 2016

---. *The Haraway Reader*. Routelage/Taylor and Francis Books, 2004

Helford, Elyce Rae. "Would You Really Rather Die than Bear My Young?": The Construction of Gender, Race, and Species in Octavia E. Butler's "Bloodchild". *African American Review*, Black Women's Culture Issue. Vol. 28, No. 2. Indiana State University, Summer, 1994, pp. 259-271 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3041998>

Humann, Heather Duerre. "A Good and Necessary Thing": Genre and Justice in Octavia Butler's Bloodchild and Other Stories". *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*. Vol. 19, No. 4, Penn State University Press, 2017, pp. 517-528.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/intelitestud.19.4.0517>

San Miguel, Maria Ferrandez. "Appropriated Bodies". *ATLANTIS Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*. Vol. 40, No.2., December 2018, 27-44

issn 0210-6124 | e-issn 1989-6840, doi: <http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2018-40.2.02>

Shawl, Nisi. "Why Men Get Pregnant: "Bloodchild" By Octavia E. Butler, 2018 <https://www.tor.com/tag/history-of-black-science-fiction/>. Accessed 18 August 2022.