

# Unveiling Otherness: Gendered Memories and Identity in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*

Arvinder Kaur Pantlya<sup>1</sup>, Veerendra Kumar Mishra<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Dept. of English and Modern European Languages, Banasthali Vidyapith, Banasthali, 304022

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Dept. of English and Modern European Languages, Banasthali Vidyapith, Banasthali, 304022

## Abstract

In recent years, American Studies have shifted their focus towards the political realm. However, despite the undermining of many moral-philosophical dogmas of the Western metaphysical tradition by poststructuralism and deconstruction, a significant portion of the political claims made in this revisionist turn still rely, albeit tacitly, on these moral and ethical assumptions. As these assumptions often clash with the theoretical foundations of revisionist works, some proponents resort to what could be termed as the "pathos of marginality" and rely on vague concepts of "otherness." Furthermore, these political-ideological interpretations often neglect aesthetic aspects, suspecting them of carrying implicit and hegemonic strategies of representation. This abstract delves into the exploration of gendered memories and identity within Octavia Butler's seminal work, *Dawn*. The narrative unfolds in a world fundamentally transformed by alien intervention, where the protagonist, Lilith, grapples with the complexities of her own identity amidst encounters with enigmatic extraterrestrial beings. Through an analysis of key characters and narrative themes, this study elucidates the nuanced portrayal of otherness and the role of gendered memories in shaping individual and collective identities. Butler's visionary narrative offers a thought-provoking examination of the intersections between memory, gender, and the construction of the self in a post-apocalyptic world. By delving into the philosophical underpinnings and ethical implications of otherness, this research aims to shed light on the intricate dynamics of identity formation and the quest for belonging in speculative fiction.

**Keywords:** inter-human and interspecies relationships, gendered memories, identity.

## Introduction

Octavia Butler's science fiction masterpiece, "*Dawn*," transcends mere narrative to delve deep into the intricate dynamics of identity, power, and the essence of being human. Central to the novel is the exploration of the concept of Otherness, a theme intricately intertwined with memories and gender. In "*Dawn*," Butler constructs a world where humanity faces extinction, and salvation comes in the form of an enigmatic alien species known as the Oankali. Through the lens of protagonist Lilith Iyapo, Butler invites readers to confront notions of the self, the Other, and the societal constructs that delineate them. Memory, as a pivotal element in shaping individual and collective identity, plays a crucial role in understanding Otherness in "*Dawn*." Lilith's memories, fragmented and manipulated by the Oankali, become a battleground where her sense of self clashes with the alien agenda of integration and

hybridization. Butler deftly navigates the complexities of memory, revealing how it not only shapes one's understanding of the past but also influences perceptions of the present and aspirations for the future. Through Lilith's journey, readers are compelled to question the fluidity of memory and its role in defining what it means to be human in a world undergoing profound transformation.

**Objective:**

To elucidate the nuanced portrayal of otherness and the role of gendered memories in shaping individual and collective identities.

**Research Methodology:**

The study encompasses a qualitative literary analysis approach. This method involves a deep engagement with the text of *Dawn*, focusing on close reading and interpretation of its themes, characters, and narrative structure. Textual analysis allows for the identification of key motifs, symbols, and literary devices employed by Butler to convey her thematic messages. The study draws upon established literary theories and critical frameworks to analyze Butler's work. This includes feminist literary criticism, postcolonial theory, and theories of memory and identity. By situating *Dawn* within broader critical discourses, the study aims to uncover deeper layers of meaning and significance. A central aspect of the methodology involves in-depth character analysis, focusing on protagonists such as Lilith and their interactions with alien beings. This analysis explores how gendered memories shape individual identities and influence relationships with others in the narrative.

**The Genesis of Transformation: A Journey Through Octavia Butler's 'Dawn'**

The opening instalment of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, "Dawn," unfolds against the backdrop of an Earth rendered uninhabitable following a global nuclear conflict. The story follows protagonist Lilith Iyapo, who awakens in a cell-like chamber after a 250-year slumber. As she grapples with her newfound reality, Lilith discovers that humanity was on the brink of extinction and owes its survival to the intervention of an extraterrestrial race known as the Oankali. Initially apprehensive of these tentacled beings, Lilith gradually comes to terms with their presence. She learns that the Oankali harbor no intentions of enslaving or harming humanity, provided that humans are willing to participate in what the Oankali term "trading." This trading entails the exchange of genetic material, a process crucial for the Oankali species' survival and evolution. With their ability to manipulate genetic biochemistry, the Oankali can selectively combine desirable traits from different species to create enhanced beings—a goal they aspire to achieve with humanity. Despite humanity's intelligence, the Oankali perceive a propensity towards violence within the species. Feminist theorist Barad defines entanglement as "intraactions" within phenomena that reveal the inherent inseparability between human and non-human forms (125).

Thus, by eliminating the gene responsible for these violent inclinations, the Oankali aim to create hybrid Oankali-human beings as a means to ensure the survival of both humanity and their own species. Despite her initial repulsion, Lilith develops a connection with one of these Oankali, an ooloi named Nikanj. The ooloi represent one of the more peculiar aspects of the Oankali, possessing a third gender capable of rewriting genetic material and manipulating it at will. Eventually chosen to serve as a leader for the initial group of humans slated for reintroduction to Earth, Lilith receives from Nikanj rapid healing abilities and enhanced strength, which both shield her and distance her from her fellow humans. In his article focusing on the role of literature in promoting environmental awareness in students, scholar Beach finds that

environmental literature is exceptionally powerful in that it can provoke “emotions of anxiety, fear, and despair associated with imagining the adverse effects of climate change, along with alternative emotions of love of nature and optimism associated with potential efforts of mitigation and adaption for life in the future” (9) As time passes, the humans become impatient with the delay in returning to Earth and stage a revolt, resulting in the murder of Joseph, a man Lilith cares deeply for. This event leads to their banishment to Earth to fend for themselves. Amidst the chaos, Nikanj sustains severe injuries, prompting Lilith to forsake her companions and rest beside Nikanj, allowing it sufficient time to fully regenerate. Sensing that Lilith is prepared to bridge the gap between human and Oankali, Nikanj impregnates her, marking the conclusion of the first book and the beginning of the second.

### **Navigating the Depths of Xenophobia: Octavia Butler's 'Dawn' Unveils Humanity's Fear of the Other**

Octavia Butler uses her alien species in the novel *Dawn* to introduce her main theme of what she describes as "true xenophobia" (24). Xenophobia, characterized as the "fear and aversion towards strangers, foreigners, or anything perceived as strange or foreign" (Xenophobia Definition & Meaning), emerges as a central motif in Butler's novel. "Dawn" acquaints readers with the theme of xenophobia through the interactions between humans and the Oankali, an extraterrestrial race, as well as within the human community itself. The Oankali's markedly alien appearance in "Dawn" accentuates humanity's predisposition towards xenophobia. This inclination becomes apparent as human characters in the story respond with revulsion and apprehension towards their ostensibly benevolent "captors" due to their unfamiliar features. Likewise, newly Awakened humans display fear and suspicion towards Lilith, the primary human protagonist, as a result of the alien-like abilities she acquires from the Oankali. "Dawn" serves as a narrative vehicle to illuminate and emphasize humanity's rationales for xenophobia. These justifications span from likening the targets of their xenophobia to animals or monsters to rejecting certain aspects of their biology or culture owing to humans' intrinsic dread of the unknown. Set in a post-apocalyptic Earth rendered uninhabitable by global nuclear conflict, the novel depicts a scenario where humanity's survival is contingent upon intervention by the Oankali. The protagonist, Lilith Iyapo, awakens after a 250-year stasis period in a cell-like room, gradually discovering the circumstances surrounding her preservation and the implications of the alien presence on Earth.

Butler's novel is crafted against the backdrop of the Cold War, with numerous references to the tensions between Russians and Americans. Both factions were driven by xenophobic intolerance towards each other, to the extent that "a handful of people attempted humanicide." (Butler 6). Jdahya elaborates to Lilith that previous wars and conflicts stemmed from humanity's inherent traits of being both hierarchical and intelligent. He remarks, "You possess intelligence ... You are potentially one of the most intelligent species we've encountered, albeit with different priorities from ours ... You exhibit hierarchical tendencies ... It's a characteristic common to your species. When human intelligence enabled rather than directed hierarchy, when it failed to recognize it as a concern, but instead took pride in it or remained oblivious to it ... That was akin to neglecting cancer." (Butler 41).

Jdahya employs the term "terrestrial" to characterize the innate hierarchy within human society. His choice of words serves to distinguish his species from this trait, as they are not bound by terrestrial limitations. While he does not refute the notion of his species being intelligent, it can be inferred that the Oankali perceive themselves as intelligent but not hierarchical. While each characteristic individually may not be problematic, the Oankali suggest that the combination of both intelligence and hierarchy led to humanity's

downfall. This unfounded disapproval also constitutes a form of xenophobia, suggesting that individuals of different races are unworthy of each other's company. Nikanj discloses that other Oankali also find this pairing unconventional among humans, assuming that Lilith "would choose one of the big dark ones because they're like [her]." (184). Both Tate's and the Ooloi's assessments underscore and further illuminate humanity's propensity to prioritize their close circles over others.

Due to the slight genetic modifications made by the Oankali, the humans regarded Joseph as something inferior to a human, as described by Curt, who referred to him as an "animal." (262). This xenophobic perception of someone whom they had previously accepted triggers an irrational, fear-driven violence, validating the Oankali's assessment that humans possess an inherent xenophobic tendency. Similarly, Lilith faced similar treatment when some individuals avoided her out of fear, apprehensive that she might not be fully human. (205). Although Lilith once held a leadership role among the humans, they ceased to perceive her as human due to her affiliation with the Oankali. Butler underscores xenophobia as an intrinsic human trait by illustrating how the newly Awakened humans harbor hatred and fear towards Lilith and Joseph, former friends, solely because of their genetic connection to the Oankali. In Octavia Butler's "Dawn," the alien otherness of the Oankali race serves as a vehicle to reveal humanity's inherent propensity for xenophobia and how it manifests in both inter-human and interspecies relationships. The relational dynamics depicted in the novel offer insights into human injustices like colonialism and systemic racism. Historically, individuals have justified cruelty and oppression by dehumanizing people from other countries and races, often labeling them as subhuman or more animal than human. The theory of Darwinism perpetuated this notion by likening people of color, particularly Black individuals, to primitive beings, thereby rationalizing mistreatment and discrimination.

## Conclusion

In her literary works, Octavia Butler offers a penetrating critique of patriarchal structures by skillfully examining the complexities of gender dynamics. Through her portrayals of diverse characters and societies, Butler unveils the insidious ways in which patriarchal systems perpetuate inequality and oppression. One key aspect of Butler's critique lies in her depiction of power dynamics within patriarchal societies. She exposes how traditional gender roles restrict individuals, particularly women, from fully realizing their potential and agency. Butler's narratives often feature female protagonists who challenge these norms, navigating patriarchal constraints to assert their autonomy and challenge oppressive systems.

## References

1. Barthes, Roland, and Stephen Heath. (2007). "The Grain of the Voice." *Image, Music, Text: Essays*, Hill and Wang, 1997, pp. 179-189.
2. Barad, Karen. "Nature's Queer Performativity." *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 19 no. 2, 2011, p. 121-158.
3. Beach, Richard. "Imagining a Future for the Planet through Literature, Writing, Images, and Drama." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2015, pp. 7– 13.,
4. Butler, Octavia E. "Dawn". Warner Books, 1997
5. Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. "Ecofeminism".1993. Zed Books, 2014.
6. Murphy, Patrick D. "Ground, Pivot, Motion: Ecofeminist Theory, Dialogics, and Literary Practice." *Hypatia*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1991, pp. 146–161.

7. Schlichter, Annette. “Do Voices Matter? Vocality, Materiality, Gender Performativity.” *Body & Society*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2011, pp. 31–52.
8. Spretnak, Charlene. “Radical Nonduality in Ecofeminist Philosophy.” *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture & Nature*, edited by Karen J. Warren, Indiana University Press, 1997, pp. 425–436.