



THE BODILY GROTESQUE AND THE EVOLUTIONARY SUBLIME IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *THE EVENING AND THE MORNING AND THE NIGHT*

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Abstract

The paper titled “The Bodily Grotesque and the Evolutionary Sublime in Octavia Butler’s *The Evening and the Morning and the Night*” attempts to study the artistic excellence of Butler in the select short story. Butler’s oeuvre centers around the study of human nature in the face of difference and it gets reflected in the various perspectives used to analyse her writings. In order to explore the artistic excellence of Butler in this short story, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay’s theory of the seven beauties of science fiction is used. It is to be noted that no specific narrative theory is exclusively used to analyse a science fictional story. But Csicsery-Ronay lists out seven criteria through which a science fictional work can be analysed for its narrative excellence. This paper aims to attempt the same.

Keywords

The Evening and the Morning and the Night, Octavia Butler, Duryea-gode Disease, Seven Beauties of Science Fiction, Lynn Mortimer, etc.

Full Article

Octavia Estelle Butler, the pioneer in the field of Afrofuturism, inspired many present generation writers of science and speculative fiction. Her oeuvre centers around the concept of human nature; specifically, human nature in the face of difference. Almost all her writings deal with the question of the constitution of human nature. Butler in many interviews stated that she is a pessimist and believed that humans are inherently violent and there is no escape from hierarchy and intolerance. Though many proto-Afrofuturist and contemporary Afrofuturist writers are there, Butler stands apart because of her narrative kernels that are dense and complex in their settings and characterization. Her artistic style is one area that is to be analyzed extensively and exclusively. Her works bring a kind of awareness about human nature.

This widespread normalization of what is essentially a style of estrangement and dislocation has stimulated the development of science fictional habits of mind, so that we no longer treat sf as purely a genre engine producing formulaic effects, but rather as a kind of awareness we might call *science - fictionality*, a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of a work of science fiction (Csicsery-Ronay, 2).

Butler’s works offer this awareness that is being talked about by Csicsery-Ronay. Butler’s narrative excellence stands as a proof the science-fictionality.

The short story “The Evening and the Morning and the Night” is taken for the study in this paper. The aim of this paper is to analyse the narrative excellence of Octavia Butler with respect to the select short story. In order to realise the aim of this paper, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay’s theory of the seven beauties of science fiction is used. The story is about Lynn Mortimer, the protagonist,



who is affected by the disease called Duryea-Gode disease. Butler portrays the grotesque side of the disease, its course and treatment, and future hope from the point of view of the diseased. Lynn Mortimer's perception of the disease is abject when she attempts suicide after visiting the DGD ward for the very first time in her life. Soon after this incident, both her parents, affected by DGD, kill themselves. Lynn enters into a University with the help of a scholarship offered by Dilg Retreat, the trust established for taking care of the DGD affected patients and their families. She meets Alan Chi, another patient with whom she plans to begin a family. They both meet Naomi Chi, Alan Chi's mother in the Dilg Retreat, where their perceptions get altered. Beatrice Alcantara, the incharge there offers them hope - Lynn gets to decide whether she will remain a destitute patient or to become the incharge of the patients. Alan gets to choose his course of life if he chooses to stay with Lynn. At the end of the story, when both the characters leave the retreat after meeting Beatrice, they are given hope and this places a huge responsibility on their shoulders. This is the crux of the story.

Butler uses disease trope to explore about human nature in the face of difference. The difference between the able-bodied and the disabled is clearly shown by Butler. The descriptions of actions and reactions of the people involved mirror the lived experiences of the real world. Having suffered from Dyslexia and marginalized for the same and also for her appearance, Butler understood the pain well and portrayed the same through her stories. This makes her narrative kernels so complex and beautiful in a realistic and comprehensive way.

There is no specific narrative theory to determine the beauty of a science fiction or speculative fiction. Darko Suvin, the renowned science fiction critic emphasized the presence of two elements in any science fictional work. They are cognition and estrangement. Other science fictional critics like Adam Roberts, Frederic Jameson have suggested the same. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, a Professor and a critic of science fiction has given seven criteria through which a work of science fiction could be analyzed for its narrative excellence. In his book, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (2008), Csicsery-Ronay listed out the following seven elements: Fictive Neology, Fictive Novum, Future History, Imaginary Science, Science-fictional Sublime, Science-fictional Grotesque and Technologiade.

Csicsery-Ronay defines fictive neology as follows: "They are fictive *signa novi*, signs of the new. In the real world, any design or fashion motif whose purpose is to refer to a "New Thing," whose meaning depends on its newness, is a sign of newness..." (13). Newness is the main component in a science fiction and it is expressed through the coinage of new terms. Die-hard science fiction fans would remember the invention of the new terms like robots, cyberspace, atomic bombs and the likes from the various imaginary worlds of science fiction. Klingon language, Navi language are the inventions of science fictional authors. It is to be noted that not all the words introduced in science fictional writings have been incorporated into the real world usage. Few words have made their way in the real life applications. Butler has not introduced many new terms in this short story. For instance, she has coined the term "Duryea-Gode disease" (35), an imaginary disease, which is a combination of many real life diseases. She has used the word "drift" (35) in a different context. In the "Afterword" to the story, Butler gives details about the real life diseases on which she based her DGD. In this short story, the act of drifting refers to the phase when a person develops the symptoms of the disease. Other than these two things, there is no new terms coined by Butler in this short story.

The second beauty is fictive novum. "... 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" (Csicsery-Ronay, 47). A novum is a narrative kernel in science fiction. It is literally translated into the new setting around which the plot happens. This term was introduced by Darko Suvin in his monumental work *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*.



Suvin defines the term as “the defining trope of the genre” (33). Novum serves as the tool or point of distinction between the two worlds - of the story vs. of the reader. Csicsery-Ronay acknowledges that there can be more than one novum in a science fiction. In this story, the novum is the world inhabited by DGD affected people. In fact, they are more in number and there is one particular help center called “Dilg Retreat” available for their treatment. “Dilg is the retreat you try to send your out-of-control DGD relatives to” (Butler, 36). This retreat is run by a trust that helps kids with DGD get scholarships for their education. Lynn Mortimer and her roommates study in University of Southern California with the help of Dilg scholarships. This is the novum - the world that includes DGDs.

The third beauty is the future history. It is a well-known fact that future cannot be separated from the past. History shows what is probable or possible in the future, in that sense, when one writes about future with the lessons learned from history, he/she becomes a kind of a prophet. Authors of science fiction can be regarded as prophets in a sense as they imagine the future with the past. Csicsery-Ronay defines future history as follows: “*Representing the future*. SF writers sometimes place their stories in imaginary pasts and presents, but most science fictions are futuristic. They are set in a futuretime vis-à-vis the author’s present, or they include an event—an invention, a discovery, a seed—that will prove to be a history-transforming novum” (76). In her “Afterword” to the short story “The Evening and the Morning and the Night”, Butler explains the idea behind the story. “In particular, I began the story wondering how much of what we do is encouraged, discouraged, or otherwise guided by what we are genetically” (Butler, 69). History has shown time and time again that, humans are inherently violent and intolerant towards difference. The Two World Wars and the Nazi Germany are the testimonies that prove the above statement. Butler also believed our genetic structure hold answers to many of our dispositions. She explores the same in this short story.

Through Lynn’s character, Butler brings in the discussion about sterilization and the creative ability of the diseased. Lynn and Alan discuss about beginning a family when Alan informs her that he has sterilized himself already. “I don’t want kids, but I don’t want someone else telling me I can’t have any” (Butler, 42). To which, Lynn replies that she cannot decide on such a sensitive matter without giving it a lot of thought. “That would be like killing part of yourself when so much of you was already dead” (Butler, 42). This conversation shows the responsibility of each person involved in the decision making process. Butler penned these stories when there was a battle going on about legal abortions and sterilizations. Even now the condition remains the same. In this sense, Butler’s writings are really prophetic in nature. Also Butler uses Alan Chi to comment on human nature. Butler firmly believes that humans are beyond saving; he remarks: “The damned disease could be wiped out in one generation . . . but people are still animals when it comes to breeding. Still following mindless urges, like dogs and cats” (Butler, 42).

The fourth beauty is imaginary science. It can be called as pseudo science. Csicsery-Ronay defines the beauty as follows: “SF’s *free science*. Science is sf’s pretext. Every quantum-info-nano-bio-cyberastro-psycho-xeno-socio-physical info dump pumps up the illusion that sfstories are dramatizations of scientific knowledge. But even in the hardest of hard sf, sf’s science is always figurative. It is an *image* of science, a poetic illusion disguising its illusionary status” (111). Every work of science fiction begins as a thought-experiment, a what-if consideration. Darko Suvin has acknowledged the same about science fiction being thought-experiments. Butler used the concept of genetics as the imaginary science in this short story. Popular culture’s fascination with science fiction is rooted in the combination of strangeness and familiarity that make up the particularities of the genre. This tension between the “known” and the “unknown”



is at the heart of science fiction (Melzer, 3). Butler takes up the concept of genetics that is known to the readers and adds the unknown, that is, the imaginary in this story.

I built Duryea-Gode disease from elements of three genetic disorders. The first is Huntington's disease - hereditary, dominant, and thus an inevitability if one has the gene for it. And it is caused by only one abnormal gene. Also Huntington's does not usually show itself until its sufferers are middle-aged. In addition to Huntington's, I used phenylketonuria (PKU), a recessive genetic disorder that causes severe mental impairment unless the infant who has it is put on a special diet. Finally, I used Lesch-Nyhan disease, which causes both mental impairment and self-mutilation (Butler, 69).

DGD occurs as a side-effect of Hedeonco, the supposed cure for cancer. "They'd had a briefly profitable interest in Hedeonco: the magic bullet, the cure for a large percentage of the world's cancer and a number of serious viral diseases - and the cause of Duryea-Gode disease" (Butler 46). Here Butler brings into the attention of readers about the side-effects of using drugs in our daily life. This can be considered a warning about usage of drugs and its excessive usage. She also plays around the concept of genetics further. Females born with DGD inherited from their mothers can control themselves and others affected by DGD easily. Again, this is a pseudo science concept that Butler introduces in the story which leads to the reimagination of the power of the diseased bodies. Butler's constructions take place on a biological level that mediates human experiences through the body (Melzer, 70). Butler offers hope for the DGDs who can reshape their whole world if they are willing to try. Alan Chi, after learning about the possible power and control of Lynn, finds it difficult to accept the same. He himself declares that he cannot be her slave. Beatrice explains this clearly:

It's a pheromone. A scent. And it's sex-linked. . . Men who inherit from their mothers have as much of the scent as men get. They can be useful here because the DGDs can at least be made to notice them. The same for women who inherit from their mothers but not their fathers. It's only when two irresponsible DGDs get together and produce girl children like me or Lynn that you get someone who can really do some good in a place like this (Butler, 61).

Lynn has been doing this control all her life without realising it. When Beatrice explains this, she realises what she could do. Beatrice offers job for Lynn because of her pheromones and Lynn is unsure about it.

Butler subverts the trope of disease and ailment by giving creative abilities to those who are affected by DGD. In the story, there are many instances, where people affected by DGD are portrayed as multi-talented people. "This and much more. Our people work instead of tearing at themselves or staring into space. One of them invented the p.v. locks that protect this place. Though I almost wish he hadn't. It's gotten us more government attention than we like" (Butler, 48). The level of detailing in the description of the disease, the self-mutilation of the diseased people and the subversion in making them talented and self-sufficient makes Butler stand out. "As an author of speculative fiction, Butler was meticulous about ensuring that the information in her novels was scientifically and historically correct. She was a regular reader of the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, an enthusiastic patron of the public library, and a thorough



researcher, doing archival research at the Maryland Historical Society. . ." (Schalk, 164). This is evident in her using of the scientific concepts in her fictional worlds.

The next two beauties are science-fictional sublime and science-fictional grotesque. They are antithetic to each other at the same time they go hand-in-hand; quite contradictory but they constitute the beauty of science fiction at its core. Csicsery-Ronay defines the two as follows:

The sublime is a response to a shock of imaginative expansion, a complex recoil and recuperation of self-consciousness coping with phenomena suddenly perceived to be too great to be comprehended. The grotesque is a response to another sort of imaginative shock, the realization that objects that appears to be familiar and under control are actually undergoing surprising transformations, conflating disparate elements not observed elsewhere in the world (146).

The best example of this is Frankenstein's Monster, which is the element of both awe and horror. Similarly, Butler's short story has that element which is a source of both awe and abjection; here it is the DGD disease. DGD affected people are talented to the core and this marks the sublime quality of the disease. At the same time, it wrecks them psychologically. They are driven to the point of suicide, self-mutilation and harming others without being aware of it. This marks the grotesque element of the disease. Butler demarcates the awe and abjection of the disease by talking about the transformation that happens in the diseased people. The DGD affected people have become scientists and doctors and they even discovered cure for cancers. "And some of us went good – spectacularly – and made scientific and medical history. They made discoveries in genetics, found cures for a couple of rare diseases, made advances against other diseases that weren't so rare – including, ironically, some forms of cancer" (Butler, 38). These people despite their ability to destroy choose to create things that could help them and humanity in general. They even make some discoveries which are not done by normal, able-bodied people. Butler toys with the idea of the bio politics, the process of governing human bodies to render them docile. Michel Foucault talked about bio politics and bio power: "The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body - to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces" (136). Butler's characterization of the DGDs reflects the same. Dilg Retreat offers them a second chance in life and helps them cope up with the disease for as long as they could.

The same DGD brings out the element of grotesque too. As Beatrice acknowledges, "I majored in biology. Non-DGDs say something about our disease makes us good at the sciences – genetics, molecular biology, biochemistry. . . That something was terror. Terror and a kind of driving hopelessness" (Butler, 37). The DGDs learn to live with the terror, the violence. Csicsery-Ronay calls this as scientific grotesque:

. . . comes with the recognition of an embodied, physical anomaly, a being or an event whose existence or behavior cannot be explained by the currently accepted universal system of rationalization. An exception to a fundamental principle of form or evolution cannot be ignored; a universal rational system that is contradicted by even one phenomenon is not universal. Anomalies draw the attention inward toward the apparent violations of common sense, rational elegance, or logic (191).

Scientific racism, Nazism has shown that history has been playing a major role in the present and in the future also. Eugenics dominates discourses surrounding racism, abled vs.



disabled body, etc. The grotesqueness of the disease is portrayed in the violence done on one's self or self-mutilation. Lynn's father kills her Mom and then he kills himself. The very description of the same makes one get horrified. Lynn recounts about the incident: "Dad had killed Mom, then skinned her completely. . . Then he began tearing at himself, through skin and bone, digging. He had managed to reach his own heart before he died" (Butler, 36). The concept of self-harm is so violent that the normal human beings find it difficult even to initiate a conversation with a DGD affected person. "Scars didn't bother me much. Disability didn't bother me. It was the act of self-mutilation that scared me. It was someone attacking her own arm as though it were a wild animal. It was someone who had torn at himself and been restrained or drugged off and on for so long that he barely had a recognizable human feature left, but he was still trying with what he did have to dig into his own flesh" (Butler, 50). Violence is inherent in DGDs to a greater level and Butler here summarizes the tendency of humans through her DGD characters.

Another element of grotesqueness is observed in the dietary practices of the DGD affected people. They are asked to follow a separate diet plan where their food is dubbed by the so called normal people as "dog biscuits" (Butler 38). The most saddening part of the story is the wilfulness of the DGDs to end their lives to escape their misery. They do not believe that there is a cure for their condition and hence once they begin the phase of drifting, they mentally prepare themselves to end their lives at any moment. There could be nothing more abject than this. Alan: "When I do it, there'll be no half measures. No being rescued, no waking up in a hospital later. . . The day I realize I've started to drift. Thank God we get some warning" (Butler, 41)

The loss of lives of DGD persons can be called as 'precarious lives'. Judith Butler has introduced the concept of 'precarious lives': "Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?" (xiv-xv). This is disheartening and even many people who battle with diseases are considered precarious in real life too. Sami Schalk refers to the Octavia's personal papers in which she talks about her dyslexia in a detailed manner.

Again, on May 26, 1983, she confesses: I feel so afraid, so utterly stopped by my own inadequacy – my slowness, my weakness, my timidity, my fear. I dislike myself so much, have disliked myself for so long . . . Self-contempt has become a terrible, ugly, stupid, and lovingly embraced habit. The only thing I've ever wanted to be a writer is death [. . .] Sometimes all that makes life bearable is knowing it will end (160).

Butler's writings reflect the pain she suffered in her life. A mere reading disability has given a new perception about people who battle with tough diseases in daily life. She has acknowledged the same in many of her interviews. Perhaps, this renders a verisimilitude in her writings.

The technologiade is the final beauty listed by Csicsery-Ronay. He defines it as follows: "sf's many plot loans and parables are structured by two distinctive forms of a category we might call the *technologiade*, the epic of the struggle surrounding the transformation of the cosmos into a technological regime. . . Space opera employs many of the traditional devices that the adventure tale has retained since its earliest incarnations" (217). Butler's short story does not take place in the space or has space elements in it; rather it is based on the current scenario that exists between the so called normal people, the able-bodied versus the abnormal, diseased-bodied people.



Butler uses science fiction to create new categories based on biological pre-givens and thus destabilizes essentialist notions of “humanness” (Melzer, 71). Thus, Butler’s artistic excellence is seen in the ways she has designed her novums, which are not entirely imaginative and at the same time plausible in the real life too. For, she concentrates on the human nature and the behaviour of humans in the face of difference. Though this story can be seen as a story between the able-bodied and the diseased, the very metaphor of disease could be analyzed deeply. It acts as a tool to comment on the social realities of the present time and even the future. As Du Bois once remarked, all forms of “-isms” will continue to exist for a very long time in the future, unless a global catastrophe happens that destroys all the differences that exist amongst humans. Butler’s story proves the same point. Thus, the aim of the paper is realised.

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