

An Exploration on The Diverse Masculine Identities in Octavia Estelle Butler's *Dawn*

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Abstract

Octavia Estelle Butler is one of the foundational figures of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic that is used to narrate the story with Afrocentricity at its core. Butler's 'Xenogenesis Series' (1987-89) opened wide range of theoretical explorations. It tells the story of the alien race called the Oankali invading earth to create hybrid children with the survivors of a nuclear war. 'Dawn' is the first novel in the series and introduces Lilith Iyapo, the protagonist of the novel and one of the foundational characters of the series. Lilith is given the responsibility of training the surviving humans to enter into a gene trade with the alien Oankali. Dawn traces Lilith's journey in the gene trade process. Lilith faces opposition from her fellow humans. All the male characters treat her with contempt since she has assumed the role of their leader. The men cannot simply accept the fact that they are led by a woman. The aim of this paper is to analyze the male characters through the lens of R.W. Connell's Masculinity theory to study the patterns of patriarchy projected in the novel.

Keywords: Anti Masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, Octavia Butler, Lilith Iyapo.

The concept of Masculinity, though discussed, remains one of the least explored areas in the field of literary studies. It is not treated as equally as Feminism at many times. Given the penchant for following western ideologies, most of the male personae that the readers come across, fall into the pit of patriarchy in one way or the other. Though there are some exceptions to the rule, patriarchy remains

Submitted: 22.01.2024

Accepted: 15.03.2024

Published 30.03.2024

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the norm of the day. In today's society, pluralities are welcomed, but not wholly, while binaries are regarded widely. Even within households, boys are anticipated to exhibit masculine behavior. This ideology is better reflected in most of the literary works. The crisis of masculinity is better analysed and explicated by the platforms like science fiction. Marianne Kac-Vergne asserts that Science fiction is a genre that has the capacity to "criticize contemporary society and smooth away social tensions, revalidating and finally integrating working-class masculinity in this very same society through the rituals of genre" (12).

Octavia Estelle Butler was a prominent science fiction writer who explored the possibilities of erasing all the '-isms' that plague the society. She was an African American writer who used her history – individual and collective – to create stories that transcends the binaries in the society. Her writings are termed Afrofuturistic as they have black protagonists who save humanity despite several odds. Butler's world is full of posthumans, hybrids, hyper-empaths and mutants. Though they appear colourful, they are mostly dystopic in nature; but there is still a hope in the end. She has written three series of novels titled *Patternist Series*, *Xenogenesis Series*, *Parable Series*, two standalone novels *Kindred* and *Fledgling* and a short story collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. She bagged the most prestigious award given for speculative and science fictional stories. Her works are interpreted and analyzed by various theories such as posthumanism, racism, gender studies, queer studies, postcolonialism, etc.

Butler's *Xenogenesis Series* (later called as *Lilith's Brood*) consists of three novels – *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989). The series tells the story of the alien race called the Oankali trying to get into a trade with the humans and succeed. *Dawn* is the first novel of the series which has Lilith as the protagonist. In order to become the saviour of humans, Lilith has to become an enemy of her fellow humans. Men in this novel find it difficult to work and learn under the leadership of Lilith. This novel showcases the different facets of Masculinity, and this becomes the scope of this study.

The *Oxford Dictionary of English Language* defines Masculinity as "the qualities or attributes regarded as characteristic of men" (Masculinity). The concept of hegemonic masculinity remains the wildly discussed one in the field of literature. Hegemonic masculinity came into existence around the 1980s. It attained quite popularity with the works of psychologists like Freud and Jung. Freud emphasized bisexuality, which got the attention at its arrival but later it was discredited by many. Jung talked about masculine persona and feminine anima.

"Masculinity is defined as a configuration of practice organized in relation to the structure of gender relations" (Connell and James 843). Despite the evolving perspectives, the fundamental truth that has remained constant is that gender is a product of social construction. The rise of feminist theorists has led to the recognition and acceptance of gender as a socially constructed concept. Only a limited number of critics explored Masculine studies during the 1980s.

The following books are some of the core works on Masculine Studies. Mike Donaldson's 1993 work "What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?" explains the notion of Masculinity. "Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity" (1985) by T. Carrigan, Connell and Lee, Connell's and Messerschmidt's "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept" (2005), C. Beasley's "Rethinking Hegemonic Masculinity in a Globalizing World" (2008) deal with the concept of hegemonic masculinity in detail with several real-life examples.

R.W. Connell is the most discussed critic who gained acclaim because of her thorough exploration of masculinity and its myriad forms. An Australian psychologist and a Professor in the University of Sydney (retired), Connell is known for her theory of masculinity and her critically acclaimed book *Southern Theory* (2007). She published a collection in the year 1983, titled *Which Way Is Up? Essays on Sex, Class, and Culture*, where she discusses masculinity in detail. She utilizes sports as a mark of hegemonic masculinity. R.W. Connell's book *Masculinities* (2005) is one of the important books in theorizing masculinity. In this work, Connell examines the origin of masculinity as observed in day-to-day life. She explicates the four types of masculinity found in men. They are: 1. hegemonic masculinity 2. subordinate masculinity 3. marginal masculinity 4. complicit masculinity.

R.W. Connell describes these four kinds of masculinity that are to be found in men. Hegemonic masculinity is the first type and a very basic form of masculinity found everywhere. Connell defines Hegemonic masculinity:

as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (Connell 77)

This phenomenon is quite prevalent and commonly observed in settings such as households and workplaces. Patriarchy is the main component of hegemonic masculinity.

Subordinate masculinity, falls into the second category. When men possess feminine characteristics, they are considered to be less of a man and more of a woman. They are called effeminate and are subordinated by other men. For instance, homosexuals are marginalized by men in most of the countries. She proclaims:

Gay masculinity is the most conspicuous, but it is not the only subordinated masculinity. Some heterosexual men and boys too are expelled from the circle of legitimacy. The process is marked by a rich vocabulary of abuse: wimp, milksop, nerd, turkey, sissy, lily liver, jellyfish, yellowbelly, candy ass, ladyfinger, pushover, cookie pusher, cream puff, motherfucker, pantyvvaist, mother's boy, four-eyes, ear-' ole, dweeb, geek, Milquetoast, Cedric, and so on. Here too the symbolic blurring with femininity is obvious. (Connell 79)

Though there are laws and legitimacy, homosexuals are not considered as nominal men. This does not prevent them from exercising their right of oppression on women and the other marginalized people. This type of masculinity is called subordinate masculinity.

The third type of masculinity is marginal masculinity. When a minority or a marginalized group of men exert patriarchy over women, it is termed as marginal masculinity. When black men subjugate black women, it is marginal masculinity in display. She says:

Marginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group. Thus, in the United States, particular black athletes may be exemplars for hegemonic masculinity. But the fame and wealth of individual stars has no trickledown effect; it does not yield social authority to black men generally. (Connell 80-81)

The fourth type of masculinity as given by Connell is complicit masculinity. This type refers to individuals who take advantages from the prevailing social domination of men, though they do not actively pursue the oppression of women. Connell says that this type of Masculinity is constructed "in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the front-line troops of patriarchy, are complicit in this sense" (79).

Several critics have acknowledged the presence of the four types of masculinity in men. Occasionally, there may be a fusion of one or more types of masculinity depending on the circumstances. But Mike Donaldson in his work "What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?" is of the view that the notion of hegemony is at the root of the masculinity. He declares that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is the dominant one of all the four masculinities. Hegemonic Masculinity is the central and most prevalent one, as the other forms are the types of subordinates. He says:

Through hegemonic masculinity most men benefit from the control of women. For a very few men, it delivers control of other men. To put it another way, the crucial difference between hegemonic masculinity and other masculinities is not the control of women, but the control of men and the representation of this as "universal social advancement," to paraphrase Gramsci. (Donaldson 655)

The aim of this study is to analyse the male characters of Octavia Estelle Butler's *Dawn* and comprehend their type, by keeping R.W. Connell's theory of masculinity and its types as its research device to categorise them accordingly. As projected by Mike Donaldson, Hegemonic Masculinity might be the dominant trait of all the male characters of *Dawn*.

In Octavia Estelle Butler's *Dawn*, the central plot revolves around Lilith Iyapo, who is chosen by the Oankali to shoulder the responsibility of the continuance of the human race after the havoc caused by nuclear war. Only a handful of people survive the war and these survivors are rescued by the Oankali. Lilith is trained by the Oankali to teach her fellow humans. She has to awaken nearly forty people and train

them to survive on Earth. Lilith realizes what is at stake and decides to take the task only to realize that she is considered a Judas by her fellow humans. The Oankali has a tripartite gender division- the male, the female and the neuter gendered Ooloi. The Ooloi is the genetical engineer responsible for reproduction among the Oankali. With humans, they need to tamper with their neurochemical controls for reproduction and this precisely is the reason for the hatred of humans towards the Ooloi.

The first human male Lilith meets after her awakening is Paul Titus. Paul has chosen to stay with the Oankali. He was fourteen years old when the Oankali has awakened him. Paul is described as follows: “A human being-tall, stocky, as dark as she was, clean shaved. He looked wrong to her at first – alien and strange, yet familiar, compelling. He was beautiful. Even if he had been bent and old, he would have been beautiful” (Butler 84). Lilith feels completely alienated in the presence of Paul. Paul, on the other hand, is at ease with Lilith and even jokes around that he is older than Lilith since he has been awakened long before.

Lilith feels uncomfortable from her first moment with Paul. This might be because of the absence of humans in her life for a very long time. Paul is given a separate cabin which he can open and close at any time. The Oankali have made chemical changes in him so as to grant his freedom for being a member of the Oankali family. When Lilith notices that Nikanj has left without disturbing them, Paul makes a sexual innuendo casually. “Maybe he thought we might be kind of inhibited, if he stayed around” (Butler 87). And he continues to talk with Lilith in the same vein.

Lilith finds him very ignorant as he simply refuses to acknowledge the Ooloi as the neuter gendered beings. “When they woke me up, I thought the ooloi acted like men and women while the males and females acted like eunuchs. I never really lost the habit of thinking of ooloi as male or female” (Butler 87). When Lilith expresses her wish to be on earth like a cavewoman, he finds fault with her decision. But Lilith knows that civilization does not await them on earth. Without asking Lilith’s permission, he moves on to her. “He had put his hands on her shoulders. When she drew back reflexively, he held on to her in a grip that was almost painful” (Butler 91).

When Lilith expresses her disagreement in a gentle way, Paul tells her that they are not watched by humans and they should make use of the moment. Paul initiated his hegemonic trait:

He took her by the shoulders again and this time tried awkwardly to kiss her. It was like what she could recall of being kissed by an eager boy. That didn’t bother her. And she caught herself responding to him in spite of her fear. But there was more to this than grabbing a few minutes of pleasure. (Butler 92)

When Lilith pushes him away and tries to escape, he hits her. He talks of sex as something that is highly taken for granted. “They said I could do it with you. They said you could stay here if you wanted to. And you had to go and mess it up” (Butler 94). When Lilith questions Paul regarding his children, he gets even angrier for he has been in the shadows about the usage of his sperm for producing hybrid children.

He hits her hard and Lilith ends up unconscious.

Paul is a classic example of hegemonic masculinity. He feels that it is his right to take women despite meeting her for the first time. For a person who has spent much time with the Oankali, Paul does not seem to see Lilith as a human at all. For him, she is a toy to be toyed with. He simply liked the idea that he could have her. Without thinking about Lilith and her consent, he tries to rape her. This is pure hegemonic masculinity in display. Even Nikanj seems to be in confusion; it could not understand the sudden violent behaviour of Paul. Nikanj treats her injuries and expresses its emotion:

He was . . . enraged. Out of control. He attacked members of his family. They say he would have killed them if he could have. When they restrained him, he wept and spoke incoherently. He refused to speak Oankali at all. In English, he cursed his family, you, everyone. He had to be put to sleep – perhaps for a year or more. The long sleeps are healing to nonphysical wounds. (Butler 99)

Lilith finds it difficult to trust another human after this hegemonic act of Paul. However, she has no option other than to accept her training. She has undergone training and has been given the responsibility of awakening humans to repopulate earth. While Lilith is doing the generous act, the awakened humans see her as a captor and alien. Thus, they continuously doubt Lilith and treat her with contempt.

Next, Lilith awakens Victor Dominic. From his dossier, Lilith learns of his life before war. He is 32 years old and weighs 140 pounds. He missed three fingers in his left hand in an accident happened in his childhood. He was a lawyer before the war happened. He was married three times but had no children.

The hegemonic trait of Victor is revealed very early after the awakening. The novelist declares: “Not fathering children had bothered him intensely, and he had blamed his wives, all the while refusing to see a doctor himself” (Butler 119). During his captivity, he was questioned several times and he seemed violent enough to scare the Oankali off. His very nature seems to be oozing of violence and he makes no attempt to hide it. “He had, however, promised to kill his captors if he ever got the chance. He had said this only once, calmly, more as though he were making a casual remark than as though he were seriously threatening murder” (Butler 119).

Traits of complicit masculinity is also seen in Victor Dominic. Victor joins other people whenever there is an opposition against Lilith. Though he does not confront her directly, he is always among one who is against her for any reason. R.W. Connell says, “Men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a complicit masculinity” (832). Thus, the characters of complicit masculinity are seen in Victor.

Another male who is a walking symbol of hegemonic masculinity is Peter. Peter is the first one to cause a protest against Lilith:

Two days later, Peter Van Weerden and six followers seized Lilith and held her while a seventh follower, Derrick Wolski, swept a dozen or so leftover biscuits out of one of the food cabinets and climbed into it before it could close. (Butler 171)

The Oankali, for their own reasons, do not interfere in the affairs of humans. Derrick is retained back by the Oankali. This even makes Lilith appear more villainous. Peter incites another guy named Gregory Seabastes to have Allison Zeigler as his partner to which the woman Allison disagrees. Again, in order to prove that he is more powerful than Lilith, Peter assists Gregory and behaves violently towards Allison: "She [Allison Zeigler] screamed Lilith's name when Peter and the new man, Gregory Seabastes, stopped arguing with her and decided to drag her off to Gregory's room" (Butler 176). Lilith saves Allison and leaves the men wounded. Peter's arm is damaged and when he lies on the floor, the Oankali heal his arm through the floor. Even his group members doubt him. "He said nothing to her, only watched her with hatred and contempt" (Butler 182). The worst is he blames Lilith again for his healing.

Another toxic masculine character in the novel is Curt Loehr. When Lilith reads his dossier before awakening him, she judges him perfectly. He was a cop in New York before the war. He survived because his wife made him come to Colombia but she died in a riot that happened there. He lost all his four children in the war and when the Oankali picked him up from the ruins, he had been protecting seven children. Lilith rightly observes:

Curt Loehr. . . needed people to look after. People stabilized him, gave him purpose. Without them, he might have been a criminal – or dead. He had, alone in his isolation room, done his best to tear out his own throat with his fingernails. (Butler 123)

Curt always needs someone to depend on him. Lilith matches him with Celene and they get together perfectly. And like most of the awakened people, he does not believe Lilith.

Curt's true nature, his hegemonic masculine trait, comes out when he tries to help another guy in a rape attempt. When a guy named Gregory tries to get a woman named Allison against her wishes, Curt intervenes. "One man, one woman. Nobody has the right to hold out. It just causes trouble" (Butler 177). Lilith tries to solve the matter by intervening. But the men try to attack her. Lilith attacks Peter and defends Allison and herself from her attackers. Curt experiences humiliation as a result of this incident, prompting him to actively seek retribution against Lilith. Seeing that she is stronger than him, he goes for Joseph and kills him brutally. The hegemonic masculine nature is vivid in the character Curt.

Gabriel Rinaldi is another example of a combination of hegemonic and complicit masculinity. Gabriel is an actor aged 27. He is stronger physically and not mentally. ". . . stubborn and not as bright as he liked to think." (Butler 122). He does not surely believe that his captors are the extra-terrestrials; but he sides with Lilith

for reasons unknown. Whenever there is a protest, Gabriel sides with Lilith. But later he tries to make her understand the opposite party's reason and cause. He himself is not sure about the Oankali. He has sided with Lilith for Tate as Tate has chosen Lilith already. When the Oankali come for the awakened humans, he accepts the ooloi. He then takes out his anger on Lilith. "Look at things from Curt's point of view, . . . He's not in control even of what his own body does and feels. He's taken like a woman and . . ." (Butler 203).

When they leave the Oankali camp for another place, he invites Lilith to join him not out of friendliness but because she would prove to be useful to them. When Lilith instructs them to build tents and decides the place for rest, he gets upset. "I didn't invite you along to tell us what to do . . . We're not in the prison room now. We don't take orders from you" (Butler 217).

Gabriel displays toxic masculinity when he gets a chance to get back at Lilith by hurting Nikanj, who has done nothing against him. "Lilith saw Gabriel swing at Nikanj, narrowly missing it, saw him raise his ax again for what was clearly intended to be a death blow" (Butler 229). Gabriel knows that he is powerless and he always needs someone to blame. In the ship when he is awakened, he needs Lilith's help, so he does not blame her then. But on earth like simulation, left by themselves, he gets braver. Similarly when Lilith tries to help the wounded Nikanj, he blames her again: "I don't give a shit what you feel! . . . You're talking about your feelings, not mine. Strip and screw your Nikanj right here for everyone to see, why don't you. We know you're their whore! Everybody here knows!" (Butler 240). The irony is he and Tate have spent time with their Ooloi Kahguyaht. Almost all the human pairs are spending their time with their respective Oolois. But it is Lilith who gets blamed by everyone. And Rinaldi, who is considered to be Lilith's friend is the one against her.

The marginal masculinity, the third type, is seen in Joseph Li-Ching Shing. Joseph is from Canada though he was born in Hong Kong. He is a forty years old widower with a small and ordinary physique. He was discriminated because he is an Asian. His name and skin would always be a reminder for him to be in the sides rather than the centre. When he found out that he survived the war, his initial decision was to commit suicide. When he finds out that he has been captured and caged, he believes he has a reason to meet his captors atleast once. He was almost close to be selected to be a parent of a group but the Oankali put off this decision because of his threat.

The second type, the subordinate masculinity, is also seen in Joseph Li-Ching Shing. Joseph always sides with Lilith, which showcases his feminine pull. Joseph fears that his life is in danger because he sides with Lilith. Despite knowing this, he tries to prove that he is braver than her. When his friends try to leave the Oankali and go in search of another place, Joseph immediately agrees to go with them. He convinces Lilith to go with him too. "Joseph moved closer to her, his manner protective. It was easier for him to give comfort than to ask for it. Now he managed to do both at once" (Butler 158). Whenever there is a problem for Lilith, Joseph

stands by her.

Lilith reciprocated Joseph as she found out that Joseph's life is in danger due to his attachment towards her. When Nikanj has made some improvements in Lilith to enable her to protect herself from enemies, Lilith uses this as an opportunity and asked Nikanj to help Joseph. She asks Nikanj to strengthen Joseph too. Joseph gets offended because of this. "Lilith, I'm not large, but I'm stronger than you think. I can take care of myself" (Butler 155). Joseph Li-Ching is an unadulterated example of subordinate and marginal masculinity.

Thus, all the men in Octavia Estelle Butler's *Dawn* exhibit traits of various masculinities as described by R.W. Connell. Hegemonic masculinity remains to be the most exhibited form of masculinity. The main problem in the novel is about human-Oankali union that is necessary in order to continue the human race. But the male characters in the novel do not worry about that. All they worry is about Lilith, to be under her leadership and be controlled by her. They are not ready to accept a woman as their leader and try to create many problems for her. Till the very end of the novel, the male characters of the novel worry about them being taken as women by the Ooloi, which is not the case.

When the ego of male is hurt, they take it out on others. Since the Oankali are powerful, the male characters chose Lilith to take the blame. Throughout the series, people blame Lilith for their condition as if Lilith is the one responsible for the nuclear war that made the Oankali invade the Earth. Butler's *Dawn* proves that unless men change their ideology about women, there is no scope for progress. Patriarchy will remain the order of the day till then.

Hegemonic masculinity is exhibited by the Male characters such as Victor Dominic, Curt Loehr, Van Weerden. They want to be in control of others, though not themselves. Their actions cause tragic repercussions in the novel. The only solution to survive is to enter into the gene trade with the Oankali, yet none is ready to talk about the elephant in the room. They just happily dominate Lilith in all given circumstances but fail to act manly while the real situation demands.

The trait of complicit masculinity is exhibited by Gabriel Rinaldi, who not only directly hegemonize his authority but shifts the blame entirely on Lilith. Gabriel himself is willingly complying with the Oankali but scapegoats Lilith for his condition.

Joseph Li Ching exhibits the traits of subordinate and marginal masculinities in the novel. His Asiatic roots make him an outsider and people never forget to remind him and discriminate him by that. Joseph's subordinate masculinity is revealed when he openly supports Lilith. When Joseph agrees that symbiosis with the Oankali is the destiny of the humanity, it was considered by the other male characters as an act of a female. They attributed feminine adjectives to describe Joseph and his acts throughout the novel because he chooses the way of the Oankali and he was murdered at the end of the novel.

The novel *Dawn* by Octavia Estelle Butler provides a comprehensive exploration of masculinity through its portrayal of various male characters. Despite the changing times, the situation for women does not seem to be improving. Patriarchy continues to perpetuate the victimization of women. The journey towards achieving progressive change is arduous and far-reaching.

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