

Science Fiction Magnifying Mirrors: Octavia Butler's *Dawn* and the Ethics of Genetic Manipulation

Irene Sanz Alonso

Universidad de Alcalá

Abstract

In this paper I deal with Octavia Butler's novel *Dawn* and the issue of Science Fiction as a mirror of real situations. I analyze *Dawn* from an ecocritical approach focusing on how human beings are treated by the extraterrestrial community called Oankali. In this reality, human beings become objects in the hands of the Oankali, a society which mirrors human beings' behaviour in times of colonization. As genetic manipulation is one of the major issues of this novel, I study its ethical consequences using references from real experiments carried out in the first half of the twentieth century. With this paper I want to show how Science Fiction sometimes portrays situations that take place in our world without us being aware of them.

Science Fiction offers a whole different kind of literary analysis. Behind supernatural creatures, extraterrestrials, robots and other realities labelled as Science Fiction, we can discover how familiar SF situations are to us. Thus, we can find in SF literature something like a mirror of our own society, a mirror that is disguised through futuristic situations and discomfoting worlds. Patrick D. Murphy addresses this issue as one of extrapolation:

The application of the concept of extrapolation to science fiction insists that the writing and reading of SF are intimately linked to, and based on, getting people to think both about the present and about this world in which they live [...]. Extrapolation emphasizes that the present and the future are interconnected –what we do now will be reflected in the future, and, therefore, we have no alibi for

PROCEEDINGS 31ST AEDEAN CONFERENCE

avoiding addressing the results of our actions today.
(2001: 263)

Following this argument, SF is not so far from us as one would believe and the study of SF can illuminate processes or issues which are present in our world, although perhaps only in an incipient way. Often books which were considered SF when they were written, like those by Jules Verne, *From the Earth to the Moon* or *Around the World in Eighty Days*, have become part of reality. Any serious SF always contains present concerns which are played out in futuristic scenarios but are possible consequences of our actions today. Thus, they are frequently a warning of what may happen actually.

Furthermore, Felicia Florine Campbell argues in her article “Some Necessary Heresies Revisited: Science Fiction as Environmental Fiction”, that “science (and *any*) fiction is more than a mere vehicle to carry an idea” (1985: 70). According to her, though environmental and worldwide problems can be shown in graphs and statistics, “science fiction, however, because it deals with people, whether earthlings or aliens, can, perhaps, carry many more of us into the midst of a starving, overpopulated world and cause us to live there for a while” (70). Thus, SF, as other fictions, allows the reader to experience alternative realities bringing him/her closer to understanding other perspectives.

Because SF can be analysed as a mirror or warning of our present world, I am going to analyse certain aspects of Octavia Butler’s novel *Dawn*, from the trilogy *Lilith’s Brood*. *Dawn* tells the story of a woman, Lilith, who is awakened by an extraterrestrial group called Oankali after two hundred and fifty years of being in suspended animation. The Oankali tell her that some human beings were rescued from the Earth during the nuclear war that almost destroyed the planet. They also explain to her that human beings will be able to go back to the Earth together with a group of Oankali, with whom they will establish villages in the area of the Amazon river.

However, if human beings want to go back to their planet, they will have to participate in the trade the Oankali propose. The Oankali call themselves gene traders and they want to mix with human beings in order to create a new species, a hybrid species. As human beings were sterilized when taken into the spaceship, those who refuse the trade will remain sterile while those who accept the Oankali will have hybrid

children. Among the Oankali we can find not only male and female creatures but also ooloi. Those Oankali born ooloi are able to genetically manipulate themselves and others and they are the ones in charge of “producing” children. Thus the novel presents, according to Rachel Stein: “the dilemma of forced gene trading and sexual/reproductive controls” (Butler, 2000: 210). But we may wonder why the Oankali decide to apply such strong measures against human breeding on its own. Nikanj, Lilith’s ooloi, explains why human beings will not be allowed to have children without Oankali help. Nikanj tells Lilith that human beings are flawed by nature because they have a “mismatched pair of genetic characteristics” (Butler, 2000: 38). The ooloi says that human beings are very intelligent creatures but the problem is that they are also too hierarchical and often “human intelligence served it [hierarchy] instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it or did not notice it at all [...]” (Butler, 2000: 39). The consequences of this flaw were fatal, such as the nuclear war that almost destroyed the planet. The Oankali do not want to leave humanity on their own because they are sure human beings will destroy themselves again.

In *Dawn*, the Oankali justify genetic manipulation, birth control through sterilization, the strengthening of the body to resist diseases and faster healing —with the idea of the “higher good”. However, this “higher good” does not satisfy Lilith, because “this was one more thing they had done to her body without her consent and supposedly for her own good” (Butler, 2000: 33). In fact, she becomes aware of her position when she compares herself with animals, realizing that animals had been treated that way before the war: “We did things to them – inoculations, surgery, isolation– all for their own good. We wanted them healthy and protected –sometimes so we could eat them later” (Butler, 2000: 33). She feels scared because she does not understand what they are doing with her body and she is not altogether sure whether it is for the better, but she has no choice. As Stein argues, Lilith’s comparison between her treatment and the treatment of animals is closely related to how women and racial and minority groups were treated in the United States:

While Lilith compares the Oankali treatment of humans to our behaviour toward other animals, the

PROCEEDINGS 31ST AEDEAN CONFERENCE

notion of paternalistic control and genetic manipulation of captive populations for a “higher good” also echoes the historical and contemporary situations of women of color in the United States and around the globe who have been subjected to sexual and reproductive controls during centuries of colonization and neo-colonial exploitation, and they too have often been justified in terms of environmental requirements or protections. (1997: 212)

Often we are incapable of seeing our behaviour towards groups of allegedly *inferior* status and when this behaviour is illustrated in another world, its implications are made patent. The Oankali manipulate human beings the same ways conquerors manipulate colonized people, considering them unable to act on their own, with a paternalistic behaviour. This paternalism is amply discussed by Val Plumwood in the analysis of the “master mentality” in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

This paternalistic behaviour exists both in SF but more importantly, in our world. According to Donald T. Critchlow’s article entitled “Keeping the Life Stream Pure”, involuntary sterilization was a common procedure with other human beings that were considered “inferior”. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Persons (renamed as the American Association on Mental Retardation in 1987) took serious measures in order to reduce the numbers of mentally handicapped persons through forced birth control:

Accepting the belief that the mentally retarded produced mentally handicapped progeny, many reformers sought to isolate mentally retarded women into segregated institutions to prevent pregnancy. In 1879, Amy Shaw Lowell, a well-known New York socialite, successfully lobbied to establish a women’s asylum in Newark, New York. The legislature appropriated funds for this asylum in part because

many of the “weak minded females” had borne illegitimate children and had been “life-long burdens” upon the tax payers. (1992: 344)

As a result, according to Critchlow, between 1907, when the first sterilization law was enacted, and 1941, more than 38,000 people were sterilized in the United States, more or less 16,000 males and 22,000 females (1992: 346).

If historically human beings have exercised reproductive control over other humans simply due to physical or mental handicaps or due to racial purity –as in the case of Nazi Germany–, one could easily justify the Oankali attitude towards a species which has wilfully destroyed its habitat. Of course, from an ethical point of view we cannot justify these procedures because human beings should have the right to choose. The Oankali justify their attitude in the hierarchical nature of humans who consider themselves superior to other inferior beings.

Similarly the Oankali adopt a paternalistic behaviour treating human beings as inferior, as children that may hurt themselves without the supervision of an adult. This echoes Val Plumwood’s concept of “master mentality”. Besides, due to their natural flaw, human beings are not only treated as inferior but as objects too:

“You could clone us,” Joseph said. “Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“You could take reproductive cells from us and grow human embryos in artificial wombs?”

“Yes.”

“You can even re-create us from some kind of gene map or print.”

“We can do that too. We have already done these things. We must do them to understand a new species better. We must compare them to normal conception and birth. We must compare the children we have made to those we took from Earth.”(Butler, 2000: 152)

PROCEEDINGS 31ST AEDEAN CONFERENCE

As we can see in this example, human beings become objects in the Oankali's hands; they are used as instruments without any value attached to human life itself. This aspect of instrumentalization of people is also analysed by Val Plumwood. Through instrumentalization the Oankali become the colonizers for whom human beings are just objects to experiment with, isolating and studying them, something which brings about more criticism from Lilith because she says human beings should not be isolated, that they need to be with other human beings.

The Oankali not only isolate, sterilize and propose gene trading to human beings, but they also try to erase everything that happened before the war. In a way, another aspect of Val Plumwood's analysis of colonisation, backgrounding, is effected: the Oankali deny any positive thing human beings did while they were on the Earth, including their different cultures.

“You'll begin again. We'll put you in areas that are clean of radioactivity and history. You will become something other than you were.”

“And you think destroying what was left of our cultures will make us better?”

“No. Only different.” (Butler, 2000: 34)

The Oankali want human beings to become a new species, forgetting their past and origins. By making a genetic mixture between human beings and Oankali, both species will obtain benefits; their hybrid children will be able to manipulate the shape and health of their bodies. Besides, their genetic flaw will be corrected and they will live in peace. Even though everything seems to be perfect, Lilith realizes the problem: “But they won't be human. That's what matters. You can't understand, but that *is* what matters” (Butler, 2000: 248).

The novel dramatizes one of the main issues in ethics: the lack of consent. The sterilizations are involuntary and even though they believe they are doing right, Lilith tries to explain to them that is not the way to treat human beings. The Oankali mirror human colonisers in our history. Rachel Stein underlines the parallelism in the contradictory standards of the Oankali:

[...] although the Oankali in *Dawn* present themselves to Lilith as an egalitarian society within which important decisions are reached through group consensus, they impose such decisions upon their human “partners” without their free consent and sometimes even without their knowledge, much as earthly colonial powers did to those whom they conquered and slaved. (Butler, 2000: 212)

Dawn is an example of how we can learn from Science Fiction. The novel was written in 1987, when the possibility of a nuclear war was still present (one can recall the touch of SF in Reagan’s “Star Wars”) and when the possibility of genetic manipulation was made patent with the first cloning of animals. Butler shows the reader what could happen if we destroy our planet. Even though she uses an extraterrestrial civilization, we can see in them a mirror of what human beings have done to other human beings throughout centuries: colonization, manipulation, birth control and sterilization.

We cannot know what will happen in the future, we cannot foresee the advances in genetic engineering but we should try to be prepared for what is to come, particularly to avoid the instrumentalization of human beings. In 1997, both UNESCO in the *Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights* and the *European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Being with regard to the Application of Biology and Medicine* state the need of the authorization of the person concerned; some people still remain sceptical at how things will develop if genetic science continues to advance at such a pace. We needn’t wait till scientists are capable of cloning a person. Ethics require that we evaluate our perception of a “higher good” and the issue of free will. We are already witnesses to the genetic selection of embryos in order to produce a child capable of curing an older sibling.

Therefore, it seems clear that Octavia Butler uses science fiction to problematize contemporary concerns and dilemmas. We may or not believe in intelligent life out of this planet, but we have been witnesses to the domination and instrumentalization of human beings by other human beings as well as the progressive destruction of our habitat. *Dawn* seems a kind of warning about genetic manipulation and

PROCEEDINGS 31ST AEDEAN CONFERENCE

for the human condition in general. Maybe it has not to do with our genes, but it is clear that we have some kind of flaw as a species because we are destroying our habitat and all the creatures that depend on it, including other human beings. Seen this way, Butler's Science Fiction is more a magnifying mirror of reality than a futuristic fiction.

References

- Butler, O. 2000. *Dawn. Lilith's Brood*. New York: Warner Books.
- Campbell, F. F. 1985. "Some Necessary Heresies Revisited: Science Fiction as Environmental Fiction". *Teaching Environmental Literature. Materials, Methods, Resources*. F. O. Waage. Ed. 69–72. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Being with regard to the Application of Biology and Medicine: Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine*. Council of Europe. 9 April 2007. <<http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/en/treaties/html/164.htm>>
- Critchlow D. T. 1992. "Keeping the Life Stream Pure". *Reviews in American History* 20. 343–349.
- Murphy, Patrick D. 2001. "The Non-Alibi of Alien Scapes: SF and Ecocriticism". *Beyond Nature Writing Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. K. Armbruster and K. R. Wallace. Eds. 263–278. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Plumwood, V. 1993. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Stein, R. 1997. "Bodily Invasions, Gene Trading and Organ Theft in Octavia Butler and Nalo Hopkinson's Speculative Fiction". *Shifting the Ground American Women Writers' Revisions of Nature, Gender, and Race*. R. Stein. Ed. 209–224. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.