

DAWN: LILITH IYAPO'S JOURNEY OF GROWTH AND RESILIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the growth of the female protagonist of the chosen science fiction novel *Dawn* by Octavia Estelle Butler; the first African American woman who is acknowledged as a major science fiction novelist. Butler shows her heroine Lilith Iyapo with exceptional psychic intelligence which is seldom accepted by the patriarchal society. She is shown as a super-female icon who, by her sheer will and resilience overcomes all odds in an alien world and ultimately achieves self-actualization. The paper traces her journey from victimization to survival.

Keywords: *science fiction, alien, victimization, self-actualization.*

With a woman life feels complete in all dimensions. Literature recognises the significance of women in spite of her marginalization on the basis of nationality, gender, race etc. Within the realms of science fiction, Octavia Butler is one such writer who acknowledges the multifaceted aspect of a woman and manipulates the psyche of a woman in her works.

Instead of talking about the subjugation of women, Butler talks about women's enlightenment and empowerment. Her female protagonists endure all trials and tribulations very courageously, thus offering a solution to various problems of the dystopian world of her novels. Her utopian vision depends on the symbiotic relationality between the humans and the non humans set in earthly as well as non earthly environments. Anne Louise Keating describes this aspect in an excerpt from the book *Contemporary African American Novelists: A Bio- Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (1999) as,

“ Butler's genre of choice- science fiction...entry into this genre represents a significant breakthrough. Her novels contain strong black female protagonists whose wisdom and actions make them agents of change. She deals with complex issues, such as the struggle for power and control...inflected by gender, ethnicity, and class...the politics of survival: and the creation of new communities where peoples of many colors and often different species interact. These hybrid communities...illustrate Butler's radical perspective on “race”,...she challenges preconceptions concerning miscegenation and racialized identities.”

The novel *Dawn* a part of *Xenogenesis Trilogy* revolves around the female protagonist Lilith Iyapo who has extraordinary strength and psychic abilities. Her fidelity to her path of life is presented by the writer as her journey from suffering towards survival and self actualization. As a result she transforms into a superwoman. This psychological journey allows her to navigate through alien abduction and confinement and in the process emerge stronger in the end. Collins English Dictionary (12th edition) defines abduction as “the act of taking someone away by force or cunning: kidnapping.” The verb form ‘abduct’ denotes the ability “to force someone to go somewhere with you often using threat or violence.” The novel *Dawn* is the story of nuclear war survivors who were abducted by the Oankali aliens for the purpose of gene trading.

The abducted human beings were kept unconscious in sleeping pods while the Oankali aliens studied their biology and from their minds extracted details of culture, human tradition and anthropology. Nikanj, an Ooloi alien explains the fascination for humans to Lilith and Joseph (another human captive) as,

“A partner must be biologically interesting, attractive to us, and you are fascinating. ...you’ve captured us, and we can’t escape. But you’re more than only the composition and the workings of your bodies. You are your personalities, your cultures. We’re interested in those too. That’s why we saved as many of you as we could.”

So Lilith’s cancer, which they cured without her knowledge was fascinating for the aliens. They find her as the perfect person to help them carry on their gene trading mission successfully. She was found to be adept at enduring the pressure of their training and also had the best teaching skills to train her fellow human beings accordingly.

The Oankalis treat the human captives as in a confinement. They observe them silently, all the while providing them the basic necessities to sustain their life. They examine the humans as scientists on earth examine rats in a cage. Lilith is also subjected to the same kind of treatment.

“Her captors spoke when they were ready and not before. They did not show themselves at all. She remained sealed in her cubicle and their voices came to her from above like the light. ... The entire ceiling seemed to be a speaker and a light-and perhaps a ventilator since the air remained fresh. She imagined herself to be in a large box, like a rat in a cage.” (Dawn 7)

After many awakenings and solitary confinement, Lilith passed the first level and was then subjected to the next level of training to Xenophobia. She was introduced to an adult male Oankali Jdahya and had to share her cubicle with him. Panic fills her at his appearance. Her reaction is described as:

“when his head tentacles swept in her direction she got up and ran into the bathroom. He let her hide there for a while, let her wash and be alone and wallow in self-pity and self-contempt. She could not remember ever having been so continually afraid, so out of control of her emotions. Jdahya had done nothing, yet she cowered.” (Dawn 21)

Very soon she overcomes this Xenophobia thinking that it is better to live with ugly faces than in confinement. She befriends Jdahya and passes on to the next level of her training where she is taken to Jdahya’s home and introduced to his family members. Her tells her many secrets about the next course of life; that she is to awaken other humans, train them and for this she would be given exceptional mental and physical powers. She also comes to know that the humans who fail to co-operate would never be sent back to earth.

This revelation leaves Lilith in a state of shock and confusion. Understanding her plight, Jdahya gives her an offer of death.

“Touch me here now”, he said gesturing towards his head tentacles, “and I will sting you. You’ll die very quickly and without pain” (Dawn 43)

Lilith denies the offer thereby showcasing her mental stamina which she was unaware of but the Oankalis had identified in the very beginning.

The other trait which attracted them was Lilith’s mentorship quality. This became evident when ‘Sharad, an East Indian child, was introduced to her cubicle. They got along well and taught each other. Also, she was a student of Anthropology when on Earth. Her interactions with Nikanj, an Ooloi Oankali also draw praise from the aliens. For this she was provided with reading and writing materials like pens and books. Lilith emerges out as a survivor from

her life with the Oankalis and is now ready for the next phase -her stay with the human community which leads to self-actualization.

For awakening the humans and her self defence, she is endowed with special physical powers by Nikanj; making her a human with ‘biformity’- having both Oankali and human traits. This biformity protects her from the attacks of humans who resist and rebel against her.

According to the Oankalis, Lilith proves to be a good teacher due to her natural earthly feminine traits. Even Tate, one of the awakened humans, fondly addresses her as ‘Mama’. On the other hand, there were humans who could not be subservient to her and tried to harm her. She ably defends herself and emerges unscathed. During all this she thinks herself to be a scapegoat of the Oankalis and the humans too. But, she endures everything and does not succumb to any pressure just in the hope of returning to earth with the other humans. At the end of the novel, when she is left behind in the ship, she accepts her fate and continues to serve others without any complaints or expectations

Thus, it can easily be said that Lilith Iyapo establishes herself as a transcended female entity; goes through a traumatic survival and understands the true meaning of her life. She stands out tall and distinct in the face of all unsurmountable obstacles; defeats all forces trying to defeat and destroy her. She is full of selfless love, endures suffering and keeps serving the Oankali, the humans and the ship, without any expectation. This service to self and the society is what gives her courage to keep going on. From being a victim, she becomes a survivor and transforms into a super-woman

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