

Octavia E. Butler's *Clay's Ark*: A Posthumanist Reading

Manoj Kumar Behera

PhD candidate at the Department of English, Utkal University, Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar
and Lecturer in English, Kosala Mahavidyalaya, Kosala, Angul, Odisha, India.

Email: behera.manoj8@gmail.com

Received September 14, 2016; Revised April 5, 2017; Accepted April 11, 2017; Published May 7, 2017.

Abstract

This paper explores the possibility of posthuman subjects only in kinship and connectedness. By analyzing few characters from Butler's novel *Clay's Ark* I shall explore the continuous human effort that marginalizes non-humans in our world. I will also attempt to find out how few characters deny crossing species boundaries to remain in a state of pure humans. I use discourses like Animal studies and Posthumanism to demonstrate that life exists in connection, kinship and symbiosis. We can find human qualities in animals and the animal qualities in humans. In the conclusion I suggest that we are always in a process of becoming and every subject needs to accept co-evolution, connectedness instead of autonomous identity in order to enter into a posthuman world.

Keywords: *Animal studies, posthumanism, symbiosis, kinship, co-evolution, hybrid, enhancement*

1. Introduction

Traditionally human beings are believed to be autonomous, rational and singular (only humans without any modification and merging with other). Humanism believes that man's ability to stay human without connecting with the 'other' differentiates humans from other life forms. Butler's novel *Clay's Ark* is about an alien organism that invades each life form and blurs the human nonhuman boundaries. In this paper I address the organism as Clay's Ark organism because it is found in the spaceship named Clay's Ark. In order to rethink life from a posthumanist perspective it is necessary to place the Clay's Ark organism and human-nonhuman relationship into context. However, humans acquiring nonhuman qualities and giving birth to a hybrid that combines features of the human-nonhuman, raise the issue of the 'other' in Butler's novel *Clay's Ark*. Octavia Butler in her novels *Clay's Ark*, *Lilith's Brood* and *Fledgling* suggests the possibility of crossing species boundaries with the help of her hybrid characters. Typically human beings feel superior in comparison to other species by declaring humans as autonomous and self-sufficient. P.K.Nayar in his book *Posthumanism* explains that "The universal category of the 'human' is not really universal at all because several forms of life have been throughout history subordinated to the human as sub-human, non-human and inhuman in the system of classification" (Nayar, 2014, p.11). Posthumanism as a discourse suggests human subjectivity as an assemblage, coevolving with

machines and animals. Survival of human beings or any other life-form in a posthuman world is grounded on a symbiotic relationship among different forms of life. Posthumanists like N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway believe that life on earth is possible only because of co-evolution and a symbiotic relationship among different life forms, which negates autonomy. Biologist Lynn Margulis sees life as a result of hybridization and constant interaction across species. It is my claim here that different life forms have been subverted and subordinated by categorization and binaries created by human beings. Humanism believes in autonomy and human superiority whereas posthumanism sees human beings as mutating hybrids represented in the plural, 'we' rather than 'I'. Human subjectivity as isolated and autonomous is called into question by Butler in her novel *Clay's Ark*. Haraway sees the human as a hybrid that combines machines and different forms of life. Thus she rejects the idea of autonomy of life forms by destabilizing traditional boundaries: human/nonhuman, pure/impure and man/machine. Butler in her novel *Clay's Ark* favors life supported in the spirit of a symbiotic kinship. Thus, she encourages transcending species boundaries and promotes species interdependence.

2. Extending Life

A posthumanist approach allows us to see life as growing, extending, changing and continuing process where technological intervention is a key factor. It emphasizes co-evolution. In this context it is necessary to think, what it is to be a human being? Humanity has a long entangled history with different forms of life and technology. Posthumanism never grants supremacy to a selective life form and it also discards fixed categorization of human/nonhuman and human/machine hierarchy on the basis of appearance. Similarly Octavia Butler through her novels suggests that, in future human beings might even to lose their supremacy when they merge with the 'other'. In her novel *Clay's Ark* Butler has offered life in three different forms. The first form of life is represented by Blake and his daughters as singular and autonomous. (Humans believe themselves to be unique and pure); the second form of life is represented by Eli who is poised for a long life, close to immortality. A microorganism has enhanced their life and they are no longer human (pure) for Blake and his family. The human-animal hybrid Jacob represents the third form of life by crossing species boundaries. Thus a posthuman world encourages enhancement of life and crossing species boundaries. In fact Butler suggests connection among all forms of life for survival in this world. Posthumanist John Harris supports the theory of enhancement so that better persons can be created. Science fiction and movies are the areas where we can question and envision life in different ways. As humans, our present body is the result of constant and continuous interaction with different non-human life forms, machines and our environment. Braidotti sees "human/animal as constitutive of the identity of each" (Braidotti, 2013, p.79).

Butler destabilizes human-animal boundary by proposing three different forms of life. Through philosophical debates and technological advances we can argue for the plurality of life forms but we can't think of a world without humans. Being and becoming human is an ongoing but unstable process of becoming with the 'other'. Butler also presents the Car gang, a group of humans known for their violence and animalistic tendencies. These humans are categorized under the first group, as pure humans doing beastly things. Peter Singer says the distinction between human and beast is very fragile that doubts the boundaries between man/animal, and man/machine. Life moves and acquires different shapes. To become a posthuman does not mean the end of humanity rather it opens windows for rethinking the relationship between humans and other forms of life.

2.1. De-centering Humanity

For Michel Foucault, 'Man' is an invention of recent times and very close to his end. It is believed and projected by sci-fi movies and science fiction writers that humanity will vanish from earth either by the invasion of extraterrestrial life forms, nuclear war, or by human's irresponsible attitude towards their environment and different forms of life. Humanism considers humans as the core of the world. Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto' allows us to see life forms as interconnected and fluid by rejecting bodies on the basis of fixed categories. In our everyday life we depend upon machines and spend time with animals too. Machines help us to lead a good life and we don't become machines by using electronic devices. In our environment connection promotes life. Cary Wolfe advocates for a human animal kinship only through the string of posthumanism. As a unique species we hate ourselves to be changed. But change is inevitable and our present body is a result of continuous change. Technological interventions are common in our world. Braidotti is hopeful that in near future "Humanities can and will show the ability and willingness to undergo a major process of transformation in the direction of the posthuman" (Braidotti, 2013, p.184).

Butler introduces an extraterrestrial micro organism that invades the autonomous status of humans. This organism does not allow either the human or the animal to form the epitome of their own kind. Butler in her novel *Clay's Ark* attempts to bring these drifted entities together through the *Clay's Ark* organism. *Clay's Ark* is the story of Asa Elias Doyle an astronaut who survived a spaceship crash and got infected by an unknown virus. He got enhanced senses, power and strength of an animal after the infection. It is irresistible for an infected person to infect the normal humans. Few of the infected people died and few survived. Eli secretly built a colony of infected (enhanced) people and in due course kidnapped Blake a doctor and his two daughters Rane and Keira. Blake found the infected people are no longer human and the infection has created a new species.

Butler proposes human-nonhuman affinity in *Clay's Ark* by taking the help of an alien organism. This suggests that life is multiple and relational. At present redefining human-nonhuman hierarchy in our social world is necessary. Blake and his daughters see the infected people as inhuman. Children born to the infected parents are human-animal hybrids. The indifferent attitude of pure humans towards the infected people in the novel raises the question of intolerance of humans toward other humans and different forms of life. Rane categorized all hybrid children as "animals and things" (Butler, 1996, p.83). By staying isolated from humanity Eli assumed that he could preserve humanity. But finally the infection spreads and thus, humanity gets itself involved in a continuous unstable process of becoming the 'other'. Likewise the first mammal clone named Dolly hybrid Jacob is also "the icon of the posthuman condition" (Braidotti, 2013, p.74). Life includes humans, animals, plants and bacteria to share the same environment. Thus, the humans no longer hold the central position in this world. Becoming 'other' along with other forms of life is deeply rooted in connectedness and symbiosis with other species.

3. Life in symbiosis and connectedness

For N. Katherine Hayles posthumanism does not suggest the end of humanity rather it suggests the end of the idea that humans are autonomous and self sufficient. In this context Hayles promotes connectedness across species. In the novel *Clay's Ark* a radical organism gradually becomes a symbiont of human species. Butler also visualizes a posthuman Jacob with the help of the theory of co-evolution and symbiosis. The organism is responsible for bringing animal and

human together. Jacob the human-animal hybrid is possible only because of a life form. Eli becomes the first host to carry the organism and gradually multiple organisms become fundamental parts of his body. Like a strategist the organism guided Eli's body to produce the posthuman Jacob. Eli also finds about the organism that "...they made him feel as pleasure when he did what was necessary, desirable, essential; or as pain when he tried to do what was terrifying, self-destructive, impossible" (Butler, 1996, p.32). The organism understands the human body very deeply. As it holds control over the human body, it also decides what is good for the body to survive. Eli named these organisms as "millions of tiny symbionts" (Butler, 1996, p.32). The organism allows Eli to preserve his humanity by keeping his moral values. Eli got three female companions to share his infection but he tried to get other men for Lorene and Gwyn. Infected by the Clay's Ark organism, humans care for each other seriously.

Biologist Lynn Margulis says that human beings are products of hybridization; he even favors mutual exchange of certain traits between the material and the immaterial. Humanity has evolved with non-humans on this earth. Butler, in her book, envisions an alien organism to evolve with humans rapidly. Instead of choosing an earthly organism Butler opted for an extraterrestrial organism only to diminish species boundaries and xenophobia. She grants power to the 'other' to invade humanity and as a true partner it settles with humans symbiotically. The organism becomes a symbiont of humanity rather than of any individual. Thus the organism's hosts can't prevent themselves from infecting other humans. Eli and his people tried hard to confine the organism only to their group but they failed. Braidotti believes that life is synonymous with "flows of energies" (Braidotti, 2013, p.190) and it must be shared with "multiple others, here and now" (Braidotti, 2013, p.190). Eli blew up the building captured by the car families and carefully buried the infected only to prevent the organism from reaching the humans. But the organism fulfills its mission through Blake. Blake said "I could not help it, could not control it. He smelled so...I couldn't help it. God, I tore at him like an animal" (Butler, 1996, p. 205). Eli knew that it would happen sooner or later. From the epilogue of the novel we gather that the whole world is in chaos. Humanity might have divided into two groups: the infected and the uninfected. Stephen said to Keira "There have been outbreaks in Germany, England, France, Turkey, India, Korea, Nigeria, the Soviet Union...It will be chaos. Then a new order. Hell, a new species. Jacob will win, you know. We'll help him" (Butler, 1996, p.212).

Finally the organism reaches humanity. Keira believes that they need to help Jacob in order to help themselves. This acceptance is possible only due to the symbiotic relationship. Prof. Erica Fudge says that we treat our pets as individuals rather than animals. Such an attitude of humans towards the non-humans helps diminish species boundaries to a certain extent. Infected by the Clay's Ark organism people embrace all racial differences. Recently 'Animal Studies' has contributed a lot to minimize species boundaries and racial boundaries. It is not only vulnerability but also interdependence that binds all life forms together.

Theodor W. Adorno has mentioned in his book *Aesthetic Theories* (1970) about the feelings of ape; through their eyes they express their incapability to become human. We don't like to cross species boundaries to become animal and animals don't like to remain as animals. Humans and animals are shaped by different bio values. Human and animal mingling makes difficult to resolve the idea, what it means to be human or non human. It is also difficult to move forward and predict how these different creatures will stand together in future. Butler has shared her posthuman vision with her readers by creating the hybrid Jacob with the help of an alien organism. In her book Butler does not allow the alien/other to dominate completely the host and

also she never advocates eliminating the virus. In order to accept this human-virus union we need a changed human psychology and form.

In the novel *Clay's Ark* "Symbiosis" is used as a device by Butler to see life as always connected. Both animals and humans get benefit in the fusion of a new hybrid Jacob. Thus symbiosis is capable of offering a new biological model devoid of autonomous identity. Laurel Bollinger discusses in her work "Placement Economy: Octavia Butler, Luce Irigaray, and Speculative Subjectivity" about the chosen and forced symbiosis. In *Clay's Ark* the relationship between the virus and the host is a combination of chosen and forced symbiosis. The relationship is never like a parasite and host. Towards the end of the novel Eli and other's acceptance of Jacob indicates a positive symbiosis. In a posthuman world acceptance of kinship, change, interconnectedness and codependence are necessary. Without these traits a symbiotic relationship is impossible. People affected by the virus are capable of telepathy and also read others body language effectively. Due to the organism people are now more connected physically and psychologically. Only for this connection Eli communicated with Keira and saved her life from the car gang. The symbiotic relationship between Eli and the virus becomes a chosen one when Eli accepts the changes made by the virus to his body and mind. Eli gets his body and mind enhanced and the virus gets multiplied. In a posthuman world symbiosis also demands to lose some of the qualities from both life forms. In Jacob both humans and animals lose some of their qualities that make them human and animal respectively. Jacob is a hybrid with an animal body and human mind. Jacob stands for human-animal fusion and connectedness. Jacob's subjectivity is multiple. Through Jacob, Butler says that connectedness and codependency and not seclusion and separation, are the basis of the subjectivity of a life form. Jacob's subjectivity is multiple and multidirectional. Braidotti says "For posthuman theory, the subject is a transversal entity, fully in and immanent to a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 193). Jacob, thus, can be taken as a posthuman model

4. Becoming the 'other'

The 'otherness' of the infected humans and Jacob is marked by their non-human behavior and non-human appearance. In this context the non-human is the animal and the problem of the infected people and hybrid Jacob is that they acquire a liminal position between humans and animals. We live in a world of connectedness. Due to viral infection in the novel *Clay's Ark* people get deformity, but this deformity allows them to have telepathic power and a long life span. The non-human hybrid Jacob increases human's anxieties by blurring the human/animal boundary. The pure humans, the infected humans, the humans (without moral values) and the human-animal hybrid Jacob all represent life in different forms. Categorization of all and creating boundaries between them calls into question the concept of a distinctive and autonomous life form.

Posthumanism challenges the boundaries created by humans in an interconnected world; assisted by science, technology, microorganisms and animals. It also reevaluates the relation between human and the 'other'. The exercise of virus, infection, symbiotic existence and relation between human and the 'other' are important aspects in Butler's novel *Clay's Ark*. Viral infection in its various forms raise questions about humans, super-humans, transhumans and the possibility of a mixed species. Butler talks about companionship and symbiotic relationship with the 'other' to locate a posthuman subjectivity. We are knowingly or unknowingly entangled with technological or biological agents.

Octavia Butler's novel *Clay's Ark* creates a posthuman world by advocating the idea of human-animal hybrid. This idea allows Butler to diminish species boundaries in our world. Butler's posthuman world rejects the notion of fixed boundaries between human and animals. Braidotti says "Becoming-posthuman consequently is a process of redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared world" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 193). It is true that human being's best quality is to adapt itself in different situations. Butler imagines the possibility of becoming 'other' through different stages. At first she introduces the infected person Eli with a tremendous drive to survive. This shows that both the 'other' and the human have a natural tendency to live. This infection steals human's unique individual identity. In this context Nayar's observation is pertinent: "If bodies come into being without the usual procedure, would they be human? Or, if a body has several of its parts replaced by machines or organic parts from assorted species, would the body be human?" (Nayar, 2014, p.60). It is not certain whether infection has made the human more human or less human. Then at the second stage Eli creates a secret colony far away from the reach of humanity. He wants to preserve humanity by staying away from humans. This shows Eli's intention to maintain a boundary between the infected and uninfected people. Fixed identities categorize life forms as humans and animals. Blake and her family categorized as humans whereas Eli and his people are poised for becoming the 'other'. Infected people get animal's strength and appetite. The organism merges with humans and offers them a life of becoming the 'other'. This shows that life and subjectivity are no longer an autonomous entity. Nayar rejects the idea of purity by saying "life does not have a sovereign origin" (Nayar, 2014, p.60). At the last stage Butler offers us the human animal hybrid Jacob, a new species. Butler wants to challenge the existing hierarchies in our society; so she offers a specimen of a human-animal as an intertwined species.

Here I mention two books that deal touch upon these issues: Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975), and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983). After the publication of these two books we see an increasing interest in animals among writers, academics and common folks. *Clay's Ark* organism transforms the animal 'other' as a symbiont of humans. Animal studies claims that human beings have created human/animal categories only to maintain human superiority. Eli found Zeriam suitable for Lorene as a match but Zeriam could not accept the invasion of the virus to become something more than human. Butler was fully aware of the fact that it would be difficult for human beings to accept the 'other' as a partner. Here Zeriam stands as a representative of humanism and stands in opposition to a posthuman world. Humanism has placed humans as superior to all life forms whereas post-humanism sees human-nonhuman bond as one "based on sharing this planet, territory or environment on terms that are no longer so clearly hierarchical" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 71).

At present we can look at posthumanism as a discourse that holds the key to bring all forms of lives together. Feminism, queer theory and animal studies helped a lot to deconstruct humanism and thus helped to establish posthumanism as a discourse. The concern for animals is less moral but more political as it advocates for the 'other' to grant identical status with other life forms. Butler was aware of the fact that our attitude towards animals is a patronizing one. For this reason she gave Jacob both forms of human and animal to encourage kinship between them. She is radical indeed in her stance to propose a posthuman beginning. Crossing species boundaries suggests our acceptance of merging with many life forms. Butler finds the existence of boundaries in our world and she also suggests that such boundaries are porous. It is essential to think about a radical posthuman subjectivity "resting on the ethics of becoming" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 49).

4.1. Humans, animals and posthumans

Traditional views regarding humans as autonomous and individual is challenged in a posthuman world. Posthumanism accepts every life form and machines, those once considered as tools of man in human history. *Clay's Ark* offers us a context to study how it feels to be an animal and how it feels to become an animal with a human conscience. Most of the characters in this novel are scared initially to cross the human/animal boundary. Butler suggests that there is only one solution to resolve the existence of hierarchy and binary structure from our society and that is by crossing the species boundaries and experiencing what it feels to become 'other'.

Our overall attitude towards animals is unsympathetic. This attitude of humans raises the question whether animal's have less important life than humans. Within the framework of 'Animal Studies', parallels between human/animal only an assumption: we have not yet addressed questions like animal's ability to experience pain and suffering, animal consciousness, altruism in animals, and communication among animals. Our reluctance to demolish species boundaries shows human being's hierarchical nature. Butler always puts her characters in difficult situations where humans find themselves entangled with the 'other'. Haraway also promotes hybrids to rethink human- animal interaction.

Life forms and hybrid characters proposed by Butler, questions the uniqueness of human subjectivity. By accepting animal-human kinship we can show greater moral values. Our enhanced qualities and intelligence are a result of our constant interaction with our environment and different forms of life. Animals, humans and posthumans are the result of a process of continuous interaction with each other. In this context excluding any life form from an inevitable bond is irrelevant and unjustified. In a continuous process of becoming different, life forms resemblance with each other and reject boundaries. To become more human or posthuman we need to embrace all life forms together. Butler's novel *Clay's Ark* offers a dynamic vision of connectedness that blurs human nonhuman boundaries and prepares the ground for the emergence of a posthuman.

5. Conclusion

It has discussed here how gradually we are moving ahead by crossing traditional boundaries. Animals, humans and machines are traditionally considered as fixed categories but Butler's novel *Clay's Ark* establishes a kinship between human and animal by proposing a long continuum of life forms. With technological advances we feel superior to others and forget noble qualities like tolerance and peaceful co-existence with different forms of life. We need to recognize the boundaries and categorization exists in our world, only then can we find solutions to such problems. Kinship and connectedness among all forms of life can promote a posthuman subjectivity. We are bounded in different forms but we are dependent upon each other for our survival. The idea that human subjectivity is unique, autonomous and irreplaceable is increasingly losing its hold, thus prepares the ground to think about human non-human relationship from a posthumanist perspective. In *Clay's Ark* we find an organism enters into human's body and modifies humans to accept animals as our kin. Few characters see this organism as evil because it blurs human non-human differences. A life form brings all forms of lives together. Our traditional notion says that human species is superior and all non-humans are categorized as 'other'. But biologist Lynn Margulis advocates for connection and continuity among all forms of life. We need to modify our patronizing attitude towards the non-humans. Human being is also a life form on earth whose survival is based upon kinship and a symbiotic relationship with other life forms.

The novel discussed above shows the contemporary attitude of humans towards animals and hybrids. Butler acknowledges the existence of differences in our society and she also believes that gradually all the differences will be vanished. Human beings are so much merged with their surrounding, technology and animals that they frequently fail to recognize the kinship with all life forms. A posthumanist analysis can help us to identify human-nonhuman kinship in our world. It also suggests that every life form has a role to play in this world of connectedness. Posthumanism is a live possibility that allows all life forms to connect and communicate with each other in order to involve ourselves in the process of “becoming.”

References

- Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman*. Bridge Street Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Butler, O.E. (1996). *Clay's Ark*. U.S.A: Warner Books.
- _____. (2005). *Fledgling*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- _____. (2007). *Lilith's Brood*. Boston: Grand Central Publishing.
- Govan, S.Y. (1984). Connections Links, and Extended Networks: Patterns in Octavia Butler's Science Fiction. *Black American Literature Forum*, 18(2), 82-87.
- Haraway, D. (1991). A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in Late Twentieth Century. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 149-182.
- _____. (2006). Encounters with Companion Species: Entangling Dogs, Baboons, Philosophers, and Biologists. *Configurations*, 14, 97-114.
- Harris, J. (2010). *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hayles, N.K. (1999). *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Nayar, P.K. (2014). *Posthumanism*. Bridge Street Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Obourn, M. (2013). Octavia Butler's Disabled Futures. *Contemporary Literature*, 54(1), 109-38.
- Outterson, S. (2008). Diversity, Change, Violence: Octavia Butler's Pedagogical Philosophy. *Utopian Studies*, 19(3), 433-56.
- Seaman, M.J. (2007). Becoming More (Than) Human: Affective Posthumanisms, Past and Future *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 37(2), 246-75.
- Singer, P. (2009). *Animal Liberation*. U.S.A: Harper Collins.
- Vint, S. (2005). Becoming Other: Animals, Kinship, and Butler's *Clay's Ark*. *Science Fiction Studies*, 32(2), 281-300.
- Wolfe, C. (2010). *What is Posthumanism?*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Manoj Kumar Behera, is a PhD candidate at the Department of English, Utkal University Bhubaneswar. His thesis title is POSTHUMANIST DYNAMICS IN OCTAVIA. E. BUTLER'S NOVELS: AN ANALYSIS. He also works as a Lecturer in English, in Kosala Mahavidyalaya, Kosala, Angul. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Manoj Kumar Behera, Contact: behera.manoj8@gmail.com.