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EXAMINING THE ROLE OF EMPATHY IN OCTAVIA E. BUTLER'S PARABLE NOVELS: A  
POSTHUMANISTIC ANALYSIS

MANOJ KUMAR BEHERA

PhD Research Scholar, Utkal University, Odisha

Lecturer in English

Kosala Mahavidyalaya, Kosala, Angul

Email: [behera.manoj8@gmail.com](mailto:behera.manoj8@gmail.com)



MANOJ KUMAR BEHERA

ABSTRACT

Discussed from a posthumanistic perspective this paper argues for the existence and acceptance of empathy in a posthuman world. The discussion revolves around Olamina who possesses the hyper empathy syndrome to bring all humans together in a dystopian world. This paper also examines how empathy is rooted in vulnerability of different life forms. All human beings are interconnected and there is a kinship between all. Nayar's posthumanism and Judith Butler's idea about precarious life are used to support the existence and acceptance of empathy. Butler offers different hyper empathy characters to establish a posthuman world. Olamina believes in the concept that God is change and she creates a community named Acorn that welcomes everyone irrespective of race, gender and social status. Butler proposes a world that demands kinship and connectedness. Butler suggests a posthuman world where empathy holds all together. Empathy holds the key for humans to survive in a posthuman world. Rejection of the idea of autonomous self can help us to think about empathy that is grounded on connectedness and vulnerability.

Keywords: Empathy, Posthumanism, Enhancement, Vulnerability, Kinship

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INTRODUCTION

Octavia Butler in her novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* offers a dystopian world where empathy holds all together by giving a ray of hope for human survival. This empathy comes to humans in the form of disease or deformity. Posthumanism suggests kinship among all life forms. Octavia Butler uses empathy to establish this kinship among humans. Butler's novels are dystopian novels with a ray of hope. Octavia Butler's Parable series novels depict the story about a near future world affected by grave environmental issues caused due to Global warming. Lawlessness and disorder is the new face of The United States of America. In this world public service departments like police and fire demands money for their services. Rape and murder are common everywhere except few armed enclaves. Government is losing its

power and private companies are gaining hold to create private towns for people. Lauren Oya Olamina a black girl is the protagonist of these two novels who escapes a brutal attack and left her home only to survive in a cruel world. Butler depicts the dark side of our world in her novel *Parable of the Sower* as, "Every direction was dangerous, but there was more danger where there were more people." (154). Most of the characters want to escape the obnoxious world in Butler's Parable series, where only technologies are inadequate to escape the situation or solve problems. Survival of Humanity is only possible when technology, nature and human beings work together. A new start for humanity is possible only in a symbiotic relationship.

In this context I argue that in her Parable series Butler proposes a posthuman world and in order to survive in a Posthuman world empathy is necessary for the humans. Haraway in her "Cyborg Manifesto" uses the word cyborg to designate a hybrid of living organisms and machine. In this way she puts conventionally opposed things together by ascribing connection and link between all living organisms and between living and nonliving things. In parable series Olamina's concept of Earthseed and Acorn community are based on kinship and connectedness between human beings. Contemporary science fiction is crowded with cyborgs. Characters are portrayed as combination of human and animal or human and machine. The origin of cyborg is multiple. Cyborg stands for anything that demands kinship and rejects boundaries. Haraway recommends kinship among individuals that holds no boundaries on the basis of race, gender and sexual orientations. Becoming posthuman doesn't mean to evolve into a completely new species but to become hybrid, which is more powerful than the existing one. Haraway considers humans as hybrid, always dependent and coevolved with nature and machines. Butler's concept of Earthseed is not based on human individuality but on merging many to become one and always in a process of becoming. Human life is always changing, changing with other life forms. Butler in her works suggests different modes of kinship with human and nonhuman 'Other'. P.k Nayar says, "By demonstrating the end of the sovereign human subject, critical humanism prepares the ground for the new form of the human, the posthuman." (29)

Butler's concepts like Earthseed religion and Acorn community proposes pluralism and rejects autonomy. Earthseed religion believes in the concept that God is change and we don't need a figure to worship. Acorn community welcomes people from different racial and cultural backgrounds. Butler's characters reject individualism and accept connectedness and symbiotic relationship with other humans. This indicates the beginning of posthumans. Judith Butler says empathy is grounded on the vulnerability of different life forms. This vulnerability also binds us together. Change, empathy and Acorn community stand as integral concepts to create Earthseed.

#### **Need of Empathy in our world**

Lack of empathy in this world is a real issue. Human beings believe themselves as the most dominating species in this world. We use earth's resources as our bounty including the animal world. Advanced technology has added a sense of superiority to human civilization. Longing for power and to control things around is an accepted universal truth for us. By taking control and doing innovative things we put our earth and other species at risk. Manmade disasters are widespread these days. Crime, arson, terrorism, war and industrial hazards are only few to list that cause social or environmental disasters in our world.

Empathy exists in our world. E.M.Foster says that we should not live in separation. It is empathy that binds us together. It is true that everyone is not capable of carrying empathy. Empathy has been comparing with altruism as we do something for others for their benefits. Carl Rogers and Heinz Kohut are important minds to analyze the concept of empathy in detail. Empathy means one individual is completely aware about the consciousness of other. Experiencing empathy means accepting similar experience, emotion and concern of others. An action of an empathizer is important in empathy and the involvement of two persons is necessary. Empathy can be compared with sympathy, emotions, compassion, care and concern but only the word "empathy" is helpful in getting our perception work and understanding the consciousness of others. Empathy or its preceding synonymous word sympathy played an important role in literature and ethics. Dona Haraway's ethics of "sharing suffering" is instrumental in understanding human empathy towards animals or

towards our fellow species. At present the concept of empathy has received a considerable amount of attention in diverse areas, like psychology, literature, medication and literary criticism. Empathy generally encourages goodness of human beings. Human and animals are connected due to empathy. Nayar states that empathy is a direct way to achieve critical posthumanism. In order to destabilize the species boundaries, empathy is a key element. Animal Studies suggests that diverse life forms are different but not inferior to each other. All life forms are interconnected.

#### **Empathy in a Posthuman world**

Butler in her Parable novels created a world where few of the characters can observe empathy. Survival of humans is only possible in connectedness and kinship among all. By creating such a world Butler suggests a posthuman world. In such a world people will think before hurting somebody around. We need tolerance in our society to bring everyone together. Butler speaks in an interview given to "Essay on Racism" that, *"tolerance, like any aspect of peace, is forever a work in progress, never complete, and if we're as intelligent as we think never abandoned."* (192) Few of the Earthseed community people are sharers. Earthseed community believes that being a sharer is a good thing. Olamina says, *"The one good thing about sharing pain is that it makes us very slow to cause pain to other people. We hate pain more than most people do"* (Parable of the Talents-34) Olamina's hyper empathy syndrome has a great influence on Acorn and Earthseed religion. Hyper empathy or Organic delusional syndrome of Olamina is a result of her mother's taking of paracetco drug before her birth. John Harris suggests the possibility of human moral enhancement through technological intervention in a posthuman world. Different life forms may not be humans in biological sense but are humans or posthumans in moral sense. Only due to empathy Olamina understands the significance of diversity, affinity and interdependence among humans. Butler proposes an enhanced human bio value through her character Olamina to solve the problems of our world. As Olamina can literally feel other's pain she is an advanced human with higher compassionate. Butler suggests that enhanced humans can be solutions to all problems in our world.

Olamina is more human in comparison to others in her society due to her enhanced moral values. Her new bio value demonstrates belongingness and responsibility towards others. Only due to empathy she was capable of emotional attachment, caring and connected with other individuals. This shows empathy refuses to accept origins based on race and gene because interconnectedness is necessary for development and survival. Nayar says, *"...Olamina with her hyperempathy, but also her 'earthseed' philosophy of interconnectedness, represents a new origin: if her qualities might be harnessed for future generations."* (posthumanism-143). Olamina embraces her difference from others but maintains kinship with them. When her brother Keith got killed brutally she realizes about human relationship that lacks empathy. She wished she could give it to many people and live with them. Her collective identity is based on respect for difference, acceptance of all situations and codependency; erase her individual identities as a wife and mother. Olamina like the Oankali in *Lilith's Brood* seeks difference and collects it.

In Parable series of novels Octavia Butler picks up the idea, that empathy is a kind of human moral response towards other species and our environment. Peter Singer advocates for identical treatment of all species and this idea leads us into a posthuman world by crossing species boundaries. Olamina the protagonist of the Parable novels is able to respond towards the agony of other humans. Thus Butler wants to convey that we can't think about our lives as completely individuals or autonomous. We are not self-sufficient individually. Throughout human civilization the idea of 'Other' remains as a persistence negative characteristic. The aspect of otherness generally separates us from our fellow species and our environment by shoving us into isolation. This isolation of human beings stands as a barrier to embrace empathy. Nayar in his book *Posthumanism* says, *"Critical posthumanism is an ethical project that asks us to ponder, and act, upon the acknowledgement that life forms have messy, intertwined histories."* (31) Our empathy towards others is a result of our continuous interaction with our environment and society. In a posthuman world enhancement of empathy is possible through biological or technological interventions.

*Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* are fictional autobiography of Lauren Olamina. As acknowledged by Butler in an interview that the lack of empathy or worse, the trivialization of empathy is a real problem in our world. In the two novels people got killed mercilessly by other human beings. Most of the family members of Olamina were killed recklessly. A large number of Earthseed members were killed at Acorn by the so called teachers of mission Christian. Butler placed her characters in a world full of chaos and problems. Violence, murder and rape were natural phenomenon for the crazy people who got mad due to the drugs. They set fire on house and human beings too. Olamina's father and her brother Keith brutally killed by a group of gangs. Olamina the protagonist of the Parable series set her journey in an apocalyptic situation. She finds people suffering and struggling to save their lives. She encounters a lot of problems due to her hyper empathy syndrome and gradually she finds people alike her in her journey. Butler offers this hyper empathy syndrome to few of her characters to feel other's pain and to aware others about the importance of empathy. People with hyper empathy syndrome, fear or hate pain the most. A society crowded with these people will never harm each other or any other species.

### **Empathy and its problems**

Judith Butler's work *precarious life* contains different essays and in his last essay entitled "precarious life" Butler discusses about non violent ethics and the precarious lives of different life forms. Non violence is a result of constant conflict between hurting others and being hurt by others. In Parable series novels people live in fear and anxiety. This fear and anxiety of human beings are rooted in the idea that "we can be killed and we can kill others too." This indicates that our life is dependent on 'Others'/strangers. Only through togetherness and codependency we can minimize our fear and anxiety. Olamina does the same thing, by creating Earthseed religion she spreads codependency and togetherness. Octavia Butler visualizes a world with hyper empathy syndrome to minimize violence and promote interdependency. In his preface to *precarious life* Judith Butler says, "...without the capacity to mourn we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence."

Philosopher Levinas advocates that love and care for others in this world is deeply rooted in the idea that the self cannot survive by itself alone. The vulnerability of others tempts us to kill it and at the same time it asks for peace too. Olamina sees so many deaths and suffering of others throughout her life. Due to her hyper empathy syndrome she feels the pain of others, and the others appear in their precariousness and helplessness in front of her. If the others do not appear in their precariousness and suffering, we will not be moved. This shows that empathy is deeply rooted in life forms vulnerability, violence and suffering. Only empathy will help us to accept the other and then we can value all life forms.

The world created by Butler can't be ignored and it is very difficult to live in such a world. Distinctiveness of empathy is a debatable topic. Butler confessed in an interview "Essay on Racism" that the hyper empathy syndrome in a society might cause problem. It might stop people from entering into professions like, health care and boxing. But the existence of empathy in our society can remove a lot of our competitiveness. We will become different people only due to the existence of empathy in our society. Neill Blomkamp's directed film *Chappie* (2016) portrays a highly intelligent robot that promises its maker to never do crime and not to kill anybody. Chappie the Robert got betrayed humiliated and suffered in the hands of humans but he didn't kill any innocent human, he helped all. Empathy proposed by Butler is possible as we are living in an era of science and technology.

### **Conclusion**

If we make a comparison between our present conditions with our ancestors then we will appear as becoming more humans/posthumans. Change is inevitable to Posthuman conditions. For Olamina 'change' is an idea that cannot be avoided. Change and Empathy can teach us to become adoptable, gentle, ingenious and victorious. We are moving into a posthuman era and a posthuman ethnicity is essential to survive in this world. Our symbiotic relationship is necessary with our biosphere otherwise a new posthuman identity is impossible. The Posthuman is once a human and by overcoming his/her limitations and acquiring empathy has turned into a posthuman but still it can be recognized as part human. This process or journey from human to posthuman is a process rather than a drastic change. The British engineer and Vice-Chancellor of Coventry

University Kevin Warwick said that Posthuman does not offer us a world where human beings are absent in future rather both humans and posthumans can coexist happily.

In Nayar's posthumanist vision intolerance of Other's difference on the basis of ethnicities, bodies, skin color, languages and gender is unacceptable as well as unethical because we have evolved and survived on this earth by depending upon each other. We can't leave behind empathy, as it is essential in a posthuman world. The destiny of Earthseed can be fulfilled with the help of human beings. For this we need to demolish species boundaries, accept tolerance, cooperation and pragmatism. Empathy in our world can destabilize binaries, discrimination on the basis of race, gender and nationality. Octavia Butler brings this empathy into context as the result of excessive use of drug by Olamina's mother. Our compassion towards others makes us human. In a posthuman world labels and boundaries are erased where different life forms live in connectedness that promotes empathy. This indicates that we are moving towards a posthuman world where Empathy and codependency play important roles to hold the world together.

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