Resisting Colonialist Politics Through Sex-Role Reversal: A Critical Reading of Octavia E. Butler's "Bloodchild"

Anupom Kumar Hazarika

Octavia E. Butler is known "for stories that trouble rather than reify difference, and unsettle those readers searching for easy answers." (Pasco et al. 249) To put it succinctly, science fiction, for Butler, becomes a literary vehicle for problematizing binary opposites: colonizer and colonized, human and alien, male and female. In her essay "Defining Butler: Postcolonial Perspectives," Thelma Shinn Richard says, "Octavia Butler brings postcolonial understanding to bear on the possibilities inherent but unrealized in contemporary America." (118) Richard draws our attention to Butler's cultural identity as an African American that is wedded to America's colonial history. Being a Black woman writer, Butler makes sure that her science fiction narratives allusively explore the facets of colonialism.

Octavia E. Butler's science fiction narratives corroborate what Michelle Reid argues in her paper "Postcolonial Science Fiction." Reid says, "Science fiction doesn't have to work within, [sic] existing colonial history. We can project a world completely different to our own into other times and spaces that doesn't have to be subject to the same assumptions or colonial legacies" (Reid). Butler's literary freedom allows her to weave stories that are allusively linked to empirical world of the reader. Exploiting the elements of science fiction, Butler, in "Bloodchild," imagines an estranged universe peopled by humans and aliens. The text dramatizes how the male-sexed body is used as a site for implantation of alien eggs, which Kristen Lillvis identifies as an instance of the exploitation of the colonial subject. The literary strategy of using the binary of human and alien as a metaphor for the colonizer-colonized dyad corroborates Raffaella Baccolini's argument that the associations between imagined events outside human history and historical occurrences attribute a paradoxical status to science fiction. (296-297) Butler's science fiction short story, then, is contingent on the colonial encounter.

Butler's short story, titled "Bloodchild," depicts an unusual relationship between a human protagonist and an alien. By "unusual relationship," I imply an interspecies bond built on affection, trust, and care. Octavia E. Butler herself explains the thematic concerns of her story about aliens in her afterword to the short story. She lays out three different ways of looking at her narrative. She calls it a romance between two distinct beings, a coming-of-age story concerning a boy, and a story about men becoming pregnant. (30) Butler makes the act of approaching the text critically easier for the reader, who can then effortlessly explore the three themes around which she builds the plot. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Butler does not provide any univocal interpretation of the colonizer-colonized dyad. She, in fact, complicates the line of inclusion/exclusion separating the category of the colonizer from that of the colonized. The line of inclusion/

exclusion is challenged by b her characters—Gan (a human) and T'Gatoi (an alien)—who rewrite the notions of gender, kinship, and love.

Before I discuss how T'Gatoi and Gan reconfigure gender norms, it is pertinent to situate their relationship in the colonial context. Results from earlier studies indicate that gender is "a significant historical consideration" (Levine 2) that paves the way for examining how gender shapes both European and non-European configurations of gender. (Ghosh 737; Hassan 1) A significant work that critically looks at the discursive formations of white and non-white masculinity is Mrinalini Sinha's *Colonial Masculinity: The Manly Englishman and the Effeminate Bengali in the Nineteenth Century* (1995), where she argues that "the contours of colonial masculinity were shaped in the context of an imperial social formation that included both Britain and India." (2) Incorporating "the intersection of the imperial with categories of nation, race, class, gender and sexuality" into her line of reasoning, Sinha says that "the politically self-conscious Indians occupied a unique position" within the colonial order of masculinity. (2. Correspondingly, Philippa Levine urges her readers to consider gender as an analytical tool that signifies "'the multiple and contradictory meanings attached to sexual difference'" and goes on to argue that "an understanding of gender does not stand alone or somehow 'above' other factors, such as class and race, also at work." (2) She says that "it was not uncommon for colonized peoples to be seen by imperialists as weak and unmasculine, because they were colonized, an opinion that already assumed that male weakness and lack of masculinity were central to the process of becoming a colon.y" (6) A case in point is middle-class Bengali Hindus who were designated as 'effeminate babus'. (Sinha 2) Radhika Mohanram's examples of British and Indian soldiers in *Imperial White: Race, Diaspora and the British Empire* (2007) bear out the relational link between white masculinity and Indian masculinity. Embodiment becomes the focal point for Mohanram, who says that the darkened body of the colonized Indian man subjugates him "in a hierarchical relation with the British." (12) The hierarchical relationship between the white and the non-white body constructs the Indian soldier as "superstitious, irrational, giving validity to rumour." (7) During colonialism in Africa, the universalized idea about masculinity as popularized by the Europeans stood in stark contrast with the multi-faceted nature of African masculinity. (Scott 4) Transgressive gender performances native to African society were targeted by the Europeans, and colonial subjects who did not conform to the gender binary were seen as having a negative influence on Christian society (Elnaiem).

Postcolonial approaches to masculinity seem to be complemented by the science fiction genre, which has played a vital role in refashioning the sexed body, gender, and sexuality. Feminist interventions in SF make it apparent that SF became a fertile ground to resist gender, sexuality and identity during the 1960s and 1970s. (Thibodeau 263) In *In the Chinks in the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (1988), Sarah Lefanu says, "The stock conventions of science fiction—time travel, alternate worlds, entropy, relativism, the search for a unified female theory—can be used metaphorically and metonymically as powerful ways of exploring the construction of 'woman.'" (4-5) Lefanu emphasizes how the generic conventions of science fiction can help

writers explore how bodies are socially constructed. With regard to the inquiry into liberal humanism, Constance Penley argues that "new pressures from feminism, the politics of race and sexual orientation, and in the dramatic change in the structure of family and the workplace seem to have intensified the symptomatic wish to pose and re-pose the question of difference in a fictional form." (vii) The non-human in science fiction is a significant literary tool through which science fiction engages with "the question of difference" (Penley vii). Regarding the alien, Amanda Thibodeau argues, "While alien bodies have often represented feared "otherness," they offer feminist science fiction a rich site for the re-imagining of gender, sexuality, and identity within narratives that challenge the heteronormative implications of "progress" built into space exploration narratives." (263) Butler's representation of T'Gatoi exemplifies the point made by Thibodeau. Even though she does not provide any information regarding how the zone of the aliens is organized along gender lines, she challenges the gender binary via her protagonist T'Gatoi, who actively participates in the political sphere, which is traditionally perceived as a masculine space in the reader's empirical world. Gan says, "T'Gatoi was going into her family's business—politics" (Butler 8). Her reputation as an efficient negotiator is enhanced as she puts "an end to the final remnants of the earlier system of breaking up Terran families to suit impatient Tlic" (5). Furthermore, her unceasing endeavour to look after Gan and his family illustrates that she is the primary breadwinner for Gan's family. Her role as a breadwinner, along with her interest in the public, masculine world, evinces the elasticity of the masculine gender category and allows her to stretch the category of masculinity. Her challenge to masculinity is intertwined with her political intent to reorganize colonial society; therein lies the text's strongest postcolonial undercurrent. It is apparent that Gan's and T'Gatoi's lives are organized according to the tension between the colonizer and the colonized. As Gan says, "Only she [T'Gatoi] and her political faction stood between us and the hordes that did not understand why there was a Preserve." (5) The Preserve is an area of land where Terrans (humans) are kept. However, love's transformative possibilities shape their preordained destinies. Textual evidence reveals that T'Gatoi has been a regular visitor to Gan's house and considers Gan's house as "her second home." (4) T'Gatoi's care for the humans is evident in her aforementioned effort to put "an end to the final remnants of the earlier system of breaking up Terran families to suit impatient Tlic." (5) T'Gatoi's apprehension of Gan's house challenges both the zone of the aliens and the zone of the humans which "are opposed" (Fanon 37) and "follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity." (38) It attests to the split in the colonial encounter.

Both science fiction and postcolonialism are concerned with bodies. Ashcroft et al. argue that the body "is important for postcolonial studies that reminds us that the discursive practices of imperial power operated on and through people, and it offers a ready corrective to the tendency to abstract ideas from their living context" (202). Scholars working in the realm of science fiction recognize how bodies represented in SF speak volumes about the discursive control of the body. In his paper "Teaching Postcolonial Science Fiction," Uppinder Mehan provides a frame of reference for examining the tropes of science fiction.

> Both postcolonial and sf writers have a rich literary tradition of complicating the notion of the body as an unmediated and sovereign entity: postcolonial writing examines the effects on identity when a profound distance is created between self and body by the histories of slavery and conquest which erase the lively and vibrant cultural context necessary for fuller understanding of the native's body, and by the 'scientific' construction of the black or brown as either inferior or superior to but definitely different from the 'normal' white body; while sf tales of robots, shape-shifting and humanoid aliens, androids, clones and cyberspace have all contributed to calling into question 'the natural body' far earlier than most commentators and critics. (165-166) In Butler's imagined world, no human can exercise control over his/her own bodies. The fate of the body is determined by the aliens on some planet. The ritual of implanting alien eggs inside the male body has been an outcome of a meaningful negotiation between the humans and the aliens. To save their species from extinction, male-sexed bodies are used as wombs where the eggs of female aliens are implanted. However, it is self-evident that the colonized man is unable to govern his own body ontologically. Exploitation of the male body testifies to the colonial ideology of disentangling masculinity, as the Europeans understand it, from the body of the colonized man. As stated earlier, T'Gatoi's representation as an alien is a means to imagine gender differently. Likewise, Gan's portrayal—which is in correspondence with the colonial subject—becomes a vehicle for complicating the colonized man's masculinity. Unlike his brother, who steps back from the ritual and who does not show any keen desire to carry eggs, Gan willfully chooses to risk his life. Even though Gan's role as a surrogate 'mother' may be construed as an instance of emasculation by some readers, Gan's intention reorients implantation as understood by the aliens. Gan's decision, no doubt, is predicated on the customary practice endemic to the planet and is affected by his social status as a colonial subject, yet he fervently acknowledges his desire to carry T'Gatoi's eggs. Gan changes the fate of his sexed body by altering the biological functions assigned to the male body and provides a challenge to colonizing power through his body.

Gan's conviction that he delights in carrying T'Gatoi's eggs undermines heterosexuality as understood by the reader. Gan belongs to a society which, I think, is patrilineal as heterosexual men have more sexual freedom than women. For men, copulation has wider implications. They can copulate with women and female aliens. In the text's imagined colonial context, patrilineal unions give the aliens the incentive to prolong implantation. Sexual copulation between men and women is predicated upon the demand of the aliens. When Gan says that "they [the aliens] usually take men to leave the women free to bear their own young," Gan's brother retorts, "To provide the next generation of host animals." (Butler 21) The fates of both species, which are entwined, rest upon colonized women whose reproductive labour is a form of exploitation, for they have to emotionally detach themselves from their offspring and cannot experience maternal love properly. For instance, Gan's mother, carries a troubled expression on her face. Collectively, she and T'Gatoi have been overseeing the stages of Gan's development: "T'Gatoi liked the idea of choosing an infant and watching and taking part in all phases of development. I'm told I [Gan] was first caged

within T'Gatoi's many limbs within three minutes after my birth." (8) Lien, Gan's mother, refuses to consume sterile eggs that can prolong her death, which can be construed as her endeavour to resist the practice of implantation. As Alexander Meireles da Silva argues, "There is a particular reason why human women on the Preserve, like Lien, have an extra sense of power that the males do not have . . . Without human women, the Tlics would be left without hosts for their eggs." (375) Gan says, "Why else had my mother kept looking at me as though I were going away from her, going where she could not follow?" (Butler 27) Gan's mother believes that implantation cannot cement the two species emotionally. In fact, narratives about the imposed practice reveal that men and women are destined to become partake in the Tlic system of reproduction: "Back when the Tlic saw us as not much more than convenient, warm-blooded animals, they would pen several of us together, male and female, and feed us only eggs. The way they could be sure of getting another generation of us no matter how we tried to hold out." (Butler 11) With regard to the representation of the Tlic system of reproduction, Kristen Lillvis, in her paper "Mama's Baby, Papa's Slavery? The Problem and Promise of Mothering in Octavia E. Butler's "Bloodchild"," notes that "The history of Tlic rule and forced Terran reproduction evokes the horrors of slavery, reservation systems, and internment camps, where the nonwhite other is segregated and coerced (through threats, beatings, or alcohol) into a passive or servile position." (11) What are the implications, then, of Gan's decision to become a human host? Gan's disavowal of any heterosexual inclinations towards (human) females can be interpreted as his wish to disentangle himself from his society's preference for patrilineal unions. Instead of choosing a customary heterosexual relationship that will be beneficial to the aliens since he will be fathering children, Gan decides to carry T'Gatoi's eggs in order that he can prove his love for the female alien. When T'Gatoi decides to choose his sister Xuan Hoa as a host human, Gan stops her and expresses his will to bear her young.

Lillvis says that "Butler's mothers invest themselves in caring for their communities" and "work to improve the circumstances of their people by destroying hierarchical power structures and developing more egalitarian societies." (7) Adding to her argument, I would point out that both T'Gatoi and Gan seek to challenge the social order by refashioning kinship. Through Gan, Butler demonstrates "the physical possibility of pregnancy beyond women" (Lillvis 7) and emphasizes the importance of partnership. Gan views copulation as a means to dismantle the view that humans and aliens are mutually exclusive. He emphasizes that changes in the colonial power structure can be brought forth through concrete examples of partnership. Rather than protecting the Terrans (humans) from seeing the stages of labour and birth, they must be shown when they are "young kids, and shown more than once." (Butler 29) Even though "T'Gatoi possesses the power of the phallus and occupies the father function because of her governmental and social authority as well as her physical superiority, including her phallic stinger . . . and ovipositor" (Lillvis 11-12), her role as a biological mother is contingent on her trust in Gan to not hate her young. In his study of the influence of African patterns in African-American families, Herbert J. Foster argues that Black families "are not necessarily centered around conjugal unions, the sine qua of the nuclear family." (231) Herbert J. Foster says "the extensive kinship network" is viewed by them as "a survival mechanism against the destructive and destabilizing impacts of American

society on black family life." (229, 227) The representation of kinship as a thematic concern of "Bloodchild" is further identified by Thelma Shinn Richard, who argues that the text illustrates how kinship beyond biological connections is determined by love. (122) She states that the transformative power of love surpasses the love of power in Butler's short story. Richard's claims are of relevance here. A notable aspect of the short story is the love between Gan and T'Gatoi, who do not share any ontological similarities with each other. Gan's family considers the female alien T'Gatoi to be one of their own family members. In fact, Gan's mother has decided to give one of her children to T'Gatoi. T'Gatoi, who herself feels kinship with Gan's family, redefines the ties of kinship by establishing a harmonious relationship between her and Gan's family. Even though Gan has been T'Gatoi's primary locus of attention since she began participating in all the phases of human development, her endeavour to bring sterile eggs for the other family members speaks volumes about the role as someone who is concerned about the physical well-being of Gan's family as a whole. Her gesture of cold-hearted kindness stands in stark contrast to "the earlier system of breaking up Terran families to suit impatient Tlic." (Butler 5) It can also be interpreted as an effort to rewrite the notion of blood relation as understood by the aliens. She has been playing the role of a breadwinner for Gan's family, giving them sterile alien eggs that prolong human life.

So far as the text's subgeneric context is concerned, Butler's text has the generic symptoms of the alien invasion subgenre. Humans colonizing other planets or aliens visiting Earth to establish their colonies on Earth is a relatively generic aspect of stories about aliens (Jones 109). Alien invasion stories depict the subjugation of the powerless. Besides spatial colonization, the invasion of corporality is a thematic essence of science fiction stories about aliens. Movies like *Aliens*, *Independence Day* and the more recent *Prometheus* have popularized the motif of the evil alien and provide compelling evidence for border crossing while dramatizing violent confrontations between humans and aliens. Credible evidence of border crossing is Ridley Scott's film *Aliens* (1979), which shows how alien organisms kill their human hosts. The other movies also attest to how the human body is host to alien organisms feeding upon it. "Bloodchild" demonstrates similar scenes where female aliens implant their eggs inside the male sexed body:

> T'Gatoi found a grub still eating its egg case. The remains of the case were still wired into a blood vessel by their own little tube or hook or whatever. That was the way the grubs were anchored and the way they fed. They took only blood until they were ready to emerge. Then they ate their stretched, elastic egg cases. Then they ate their hosts. (Butler 17)

A scene like this is violent as there is inexorable demand for men who are at the mercy of female aliens and are killed by grubs. It exposes the reader to the fragility of the human body. Even though Butler's representation of border crossing may seem commonplace, Butler uses border crossing as a means to subtly critique oppressive socio-cultural practices. Let us consider the case of Gan (a human) who decides to become a surrogate mother for T'Gatoi's unborn alien babies. SF, according to Brian McHale, is "intrinsically ontological" (85) because it concerns bodily transgression which is a central concern of posthumanism. Gan's corporeality challenges the limits of the male body and fulfills the claims made by critical posthuman theorists who hash

over the liberation promised by bodily transgression. "So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities, which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work," argues Donna J. Haraway drawing upon the figure of the cyborg. (14) Haraway uses the cyborg, which is, of course, itself a familiar SF trope, as a theoretical underpinning and situates it in the context of the digital era. Another theorist of posthumanism, Rosi Braidotti, holds the view that post-anthropocentric practices perpetuated by global capitalism "blur the qualitative lines of demarcation not only among categories (male/female, black/white, human/animal, dead/alive, centre/margin, etc.), but also within each one of them, the human becomes subsumed into global networks of control and commodification which have taken 'Life' as the main target " (64). In a similar fashion, Butler critiques the classical human/alien and the male/female divides in her short story, yet she differs from posthuman theorists in terms of her strategy. Butler's tool is the science fiction genre, which, she argues, has "no closed doors". ("Remembering" 00:03:07-08. The pregnant man, in the text, not only emerges as a science fiction trope but also signals possibilities that may persuade the reader to reframe the non-conflictual category of masculinity. Gan's transgression is twofold—first, by using his body as a womb, he rewrites the contours of the male body; second, he remakes the human body by extending its limits. By hosting the eggs of T'Gatoi, Gan's body bridges the gap between the human and the alien. The convenience of using the body of the colonized man for implantation may be read as an implicit critique of racial segregation that divides colonial society along racial lines. The science fictional representation of Gan's body is an instance of border crossing/bodily invasion providing a critique of binary opposites: colonizer and colonized, human and alien, male and female without reservation.

In the introduction to *The Postnational Fantasy: Essays on Postcolonialism, Cosmopolitics and Science Fiction* (2011), Masood Ashraf Raja and Swaralipi Nandi argue the science fiction is "a staging ground and a launching pad for a radical reconfiguration" (9). Butler's text radically reconfigures our conventional approaches towards embodiment, gender, sexuality, and border crossing. Exploiting the human-alien dyad as a metaphor for the binary of colonizer and colonized, Butler dramatizes the plight of Terrans (humans). Butler's text challenges patriarchal oppression endemic to human society and provides a resolution (pregnant man), which remains essentially speculative. Gan's pregnancy may be interpreted as an act of radical autopoiesis. Factors like race and gender playing a part in constructing the non-white male body is critiqued by Butler through her demasculinized male protagonist, who challenges patrilineality and thus abates the subjugation of colonized women while rearranging the relationship between the ruler and the governed.

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Anupom Kumar Hazarika (he/him) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Cotton University. He is also a part-time PhD candidate at IIT Guwahati.