

**Posthumanism: An Introduction**  
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**Lecture 26**

**Lec 26 : Literary Posthumanism 2: Feminist Speculative Fiction**

This week on literary posthumanism, we have a case study on Octavia E. Butler. What we'll be doing in this lesson is locating certain themes of posthumanism that appear in some of Butler's texts. So before we locate them, here's a brief intro to Butler herself. Octavia E. Butler was born in 1947 in Pasadena, California. She started writing at a young age, and in 1995, she became the first sci-fi writer to win the MacArthur Grant, also known as the Genius Grant.

She is a sci-fi writer, so her characters include many extraterrestrial beings as well as humans. The encounters between humans and non-human life forms form a major part of the plot in most of her stories. So here, I'll mainly be relying on two of her texts. I've also used certain excerpts from a couple of other texts as well. But the two main texts I've used are Dawn and Survivor.

Dawn was published in 1987, and Survivor was published in the 1970s. Dawn belongs to Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy, later known as Lilith's Brood. In Dawn, the protagonist, named Lilith Iyapo, is rescued from Earth along with many other human beings. This occurs after a human-induced nuclear war on Earth. So basically, in almost all of Butler's fiction, the world is in chaos.

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**Posthumanism in Octavia E. Butler: Themes**

- From the monster to the posthuman
- (Re)Educating the Human
- Biological Addiction
- Posthumanism as Partnership
- Redefining the human

**Literary Posthumanisms 2: Feminist Speculative Fiction**

The Earth has been destroyed by humans, and some of the human beings are rescued by extraterrestrial beings or monsters, however you may choose to call them. So they're being rescued, and Lilith wakes up on an Oankali ship. The extraterrestrial beings are called the Oinkali, and Lilith wakes up on one of their ships, realizing she is now under their control. So what happens next? She can either run away or not. She cannot run away exactly.

She can choose to die. Or she can say yes to initiating contact with the Oinkali and starting a new life with them. Of course, she chooses the latter and helps other humans acclimate to the Oinkali. That is a very brief intro to the first book of the trilogy. I've only used certain instances from the text where Lilith meets the Oankali for the first time, and they start learning about each other.

The second text I've used is Survivor. Survivor was published in the 1970s 1977, I think. And in Survivor, The protagonist, named Alanna, has fled from Earth along with her foster family. She reaches another planet, and there, the humans meet

Two warring tribes known as the Taekon and the Garkon. And Alanna then becomes a mediator, an emissary of the humans to the Taekon and the Garkon, and she initiates a relationship between them, which comes at a price, of course. So that is a very basic introduction to two of the main texts I've used. So without further ado, into the texts themselves and the excerpts I've used. The first theme I've located is from

the monster to the post-human. So what happens is that I've located a number of excerpts here where the monster or the other is described and how the other appears to the human at first glance. So if you look at slide 3, you can see that Lilith is meeting Leon and Kali for the first time, and she is, of course, thrown off by how unhuman-like they are. But then, the first thing she asks them is, 'I don't mean any offense, but are you male or female?'

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## From the monster to the posthuman

The lights brightened as she had supposed they would, and what had seemed to be a tall, slender man was still humanoid, but it had no nose-no bulge, no nostrils-just flat, gray skin. It was gray all over-pale gray skin, darker gray hair on its head that grew down around its eyes and ears and at its throat. There was so much hair across the eyes that she wondered how the creature could see. The long, profuse ear hair seemed to grow out of the ears as well as around them. Above, it joined the eye hair, and below and behind, it joined the head hair. The island of throat hair seemed to move slightly, and it occurred to her that that might be where the creature breathed-a kind of natural tracheostomy.

Lilith glanced at the humanoid body, wondering how humanlike it really was. "I don't mean any offense," she said, "but are you male or female?"

"It's wrong to assume that I must be a sex you're familiar with," it said, "but as it happens, I'm male."  
(Butler, *Dawn* 7)



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And then the person whom she is asking replies, 'It's wrong to assume that I must be a sex you're familiar with, but as it happens, I am male.' So once Lilith realizes that this creature she's talking to is male, it becomes easier for her to talk to him. And she says 'he' right after that. He looked remarkably human now. Was it only the tentacles that gave him that sea-slug appearance?

His coloring hadn't changed. The fact that he had no eyes, no serious still disturbed her not as much. So soon she compares the new body that she has seen to bodies that she is familiar with. For example, she compares doing Kali body together with sea slug and at some point she says the flesh is smooth.

Flesh is not as smooth but it's almost as smooth as fingernails were and perhaps it's tough with the fingernails. She kept comparing it to human body parts as well. So what happens here is that in this preliminary encounter with the monster, The human relies a lot on physical appearances. So once this physical appearance is set, once the body, once the human being, Lilith here, can see

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## From the monster to the posthuman

He looked remarkably human now. Was it only the tentacles that gave him that sea-slug appearance? His coloring hadn't changed. The fact that he had no eyes, nose, or ears still disturbed her, but not as much.

...

His skin was cool and almost too smooth to be real flesh-smooth the way her fingernails were and perhaps as tough as a fingernail. (*Dawn* 17)



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some at least a couple of similarities very subtle similarities perhaps but at least a couple of similarities between the human body and the body of the other what happens is that it is easier to interact with them right so what is the sex or the gender what does what does the body look like does it resemble something on earth yes a sea slug or something some other animals then it is easier to uh sort of fitted within the human imagination. So the appearance is perceived to be human-like. The same happens in *Survivor* as well. One of the cone tribes in *Survivor* is described as a furry caricature, human caricature, furred human caricature, I think is the word used.

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## From the monster to the posthuman

Natahk's eyes were narrowed by a Kohn version of the epicanthic fold. His fur grew longer and thicker on his head and around his neck and shoulders, forming a kind of mane. Even his face was furred all over, though the fur was shorter. But the face was long and flat and his body and limbs were humanly proportioned. He was not apelike. The Missionaries saw him and his people as strangely colored, furred caricatures of human beings. (*Survivor 5*)



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Yeah, strangely colored furred caricatures of human beings. So what happens here is once the monster finds a way to fit within the human imagination, once that step happens, in the first encounter, the monster finds a way to fit within the human imagination. So once that is done, that is over with, It is easier to accommodate once the physical nature of the monster or the unknown can be compared to something at least slightly human-like or slightly known to human beings.

So that is the first step towards the birth of the post-human. First encounter happens and during the encounter, the human beings look for ways to fit the monster within the human imagination. And once the monster is sort of accommodated into the human brain and can be compared to something known, it is easier to facilitate communication. The second theme is re-educating humans.

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## Monster → Posthuman

- Preliminary encounter with the 'monster'
- Reliance on physical appearance
- Making sense of the Other: body? Sex? Gender? (Slide 3)
  
- Appearance perceived to be human-like (Slide 4, 5)
- Easier to accommodate once the physical nature of the monster/the unknown can be compared to something/someone that is *known*

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## (Re)Educating the Human

"You'll Awaken a small group of humans, all English-speaking, and help them learn to deal with us. You'll teach them the survival skills we teach you. Your people will all be from what you would call civilized societies. Now they'll have to learn to live in forests, build their own shelters, and raise their own food all without machines or outside help." (*Dawn* 22)

"Begin teaching her our language, our ways—as in the old stories. There was a time when Garkohn survived the cleansing and our ancestors made good Tehkohn of them."

"But she is so different..."

"She is. But I wonder how much the differences matter. We will let her show us. Through her we will learn more of what her kind can do—more of what the Garkohn might use them for." (*Survivor* 20)

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So once that is done, the primary encounter is over with. The second step is re-education. So what happens next is learning about each other. So these are two very different species that we are talking about.

The human species with their own set of cultural norms, societal norms, etc. And another species with a very different set of differences in every aspect you look for in their

economy, in their society, in their culture, in their language, everything will be different. So what has to happen next is a process of teaching each other in how to embrace difference towards an almost erasure of differences teaching each other and across species as an important step in living as companions.

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- How to embrace difference?
- Towards an (almost) erasure of difference/s
- Teaching each other/across species as an important step in living as companions
- “Becoming-posthuman consequently is a process of redefining one’s sense of attachment and connection to a shared world, a territorial space: urban, social, psychic, ecological, planetary as it may be” (Braidotti 193).

(Slide 7)

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So in the next step, the third step will be, we're looking at how companionships and partnerships are formed between the human and the other. So a major facet of that creation of the partnership is teaching each other their own culture-specific mores and traditions and values. So Lilith, for example, is asked to teach the rest of the human beings the Oankali ways of living and sort of help them ease their process of accommodating themselves within the Oankali society. Similarly, Alanna is taught ways of the alien tribe that she on a faraway planet and both Alana and Lilith teach themselves, teach the alien species as well as the rest of the human beings ways of fitting in, ways of finding similarities between the two species and fitting in with as little friction as possible.

So then what does becoming post-human mean? I'm using Rosie Bledotti here who says, becoming post-human is a process of redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared world. So this shared world part is very important here because what we're looking at is how the human and the other can form sustainable multi-species living multi-species communities so the shared world part is very important so once the human-other encounter starts they teach each other ways of fitting in their differences their similarities and they look towards forming feasible companionship right But, you know, in the Fetla section, there is a caveat to this because there is something called biological addiction, which aids the human beings into such relationships.

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## Biological Addiction

But what she felt now went beyond liking, beyond loving, into the deep biological attachment of adulthood. Literal, physical addiction to another person, Lilith called it. I couldn't think about it that coldly. For me it meant that soon Jesusa would not want to leave me, would not be able to leave me for more than a few days at a time.

It worked both ways, of course. Soon I would not be able to stand long separation from her. And she could hurt me by deliberately avoiding me. From what I knew of her, she would be willing to do this if she thought she had cause—even though she would inflict as much pain on herself as on me. (*Imago* 286)



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For example, there is a text called *Fledgling of Fetla*, which is a vampire fantasy novel. But, as I said, a vampire fantasy novel. So, what happens in *Fledgling* is that the vampires in *Fledgling* addict the human beings to venom in their blood. So, like the vampires of myths and fairy tales, the vampires here also drink the blood of human beings, and once they drink the blood of human beings a couple of times, the human beings become addicted to their vampires, and the vampires vice versa. What is established is a relationship that is very symbiotic, and the human beings are called symbionts. In exchange for the blood of the human beings, the vampires

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## Biological Addiction

“We addict them to a substance in our saliva—in our venom—that floods our mouths when we feed. I’ve heard it called a powerful hypnotic drug. It makes them highly suggestible and deeply attached to the source of the substance. They come to need it.” (*Fledgling* 99)

- Forced affiliations: the final step towards birth of the posthuman
- What does being partners mean within such relationships?
- Is this how the posthumans take control?

(Slides 9, 10)



### Literary Posthumanisms 2: Feminist Speculative Fiction

give them long life, longevity; they look much younger than their age, etc. The same goes for the Oinkali as well, who addict the human beings by tampering with the brain chemistry of the human beings and addicting them to their partner Oinkali. So, these are forced, right? These are not biological, or these are biological, but these are not voluntary. These are forced affiliations.

So, these forced affiliations can also be seen as a step toward the birth of the post-human. So, then, what does being partners mean within such relationships? Is this how the post-human takes control? So, biological addiction is a very tricky part in Butler's fiction, in the sense that human agency is almost inconceivable in such instances where the humans are They are said to be partners; they are said to be companions with their non-human counterparts, but at the end of the day, the others exercise power over their human partners.

So, what does partners mean within such relationships is something to also think about. right uh yes now posthumanism as partnership is the next thing this is what uh one of the venkali tells lilith trade means change bodies change ways of living must change did you think your children would only look different share to risk bargaining try to gain something and her only currency is cooperation So trade is something important here because the Ohinkalis say that they trade genetic material. They trade parts of their body with parts of their partners in order to create hybrids. So they live by trading genes and genetic material.

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## Posthumanism as Partnership

“Trade means change. Bodies change. Ways of living must change. Did you think your children would only *look* different?” (*Dawn* 260)

“. . . she had to risk bargaining, try to gain *something*, and her only currency was cooperation” (Butler, *Dawn* 8).

“Surprising how quickly the Oankali had become people to her. But then who else was there?” (Butler, *Dawn* 58).

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The bodies change. Trade means change. Ways of living must change. So we're talking about partnership here. So there are partners involved in this exchange, in this contract, in this bargain.

So the future is conceived with two partners, the human and the non-human in the form of a contract where they live and evolve alongside each other. But it is also to be remembered that this partnership involves both loss and gain the certain parts of the body you get to keep but certain other parts will be will be controlled by the non-human partner so once the post humans are born the hybrids are born they will be born with the best features of their parents, of their partner species. It is to be remembered that competition is always rejected in favor of cooperation, as Ramukh K. Nair points out in his reading of Fledgling.

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## Posthumanism as Partnership

Partnership is giving, taking, learning, teaching, offering the greatest possible benefit while doing the least possible harm.  
Partnership is mutualistic symbiosis. Partnership is life.

*Any entity, any process that cannot or should not be resisted or avoided must somehow be partnered.* Partner one another.  
Partner diverse communities. Partner life. Partner any world that is your home. Partner God. Only in partnership can we thrive, grow, Change. *Only in partnership can we live.*  
(Butler, *Parable of the Talents* 129; emphasis mine)

- Shift from physical appearance to ways of living
- Future as partners- a contract?
- Living and evolving alongside one another
- Simultaneous loss and gain
- “competition rejected in favour of cooperation” (Nayar, “A New Biological Citizenship” 796)  
(Slides 11, 12)

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Competition is rejected in favor of cooperation. So what we're looking at is a very symbiotic, symbiogenetic way of living that Butler very much favors in all of her texts. So in slide 12, I've used an extract from Butler's Parable of the Talents, where she says, 'Any entity, any process that cannot or should not be resisted or avoided must somehow be partnered.' So we're talking about partnerships and how partnerships are very important to the creation of post-humanism. Right.

Now that this is all done, we have the human redefined, redefining the human. So what becomes of the human? To think beyond the confines of the human body and to shape oneself accordingly. The posthuman opens up new ways of thinking about what being human means. Being human then means living alongside other forms of life, giving birth to new forms of life, and shaping one's beliefs and oneself accordingly.

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## Redefining the human

Self is.

Self is body and bodily perception. Self is thought, memory, belief. Self creates. Self destroys. Self learns, discovers, becomes. Self shapes. Self adapts. Self invents its own reasons for being. (Butler, *Parable of the Talents* 227)

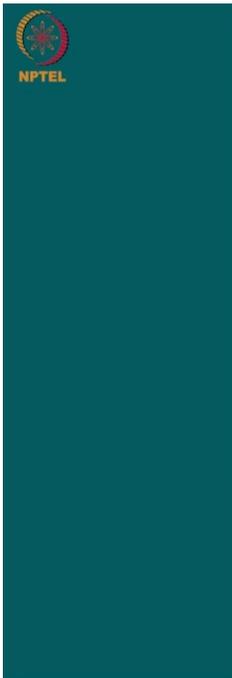
- What becomes of the human?
- To think beyond the confines of the human body, to “shape” one’s self accordingly
- The posthuman opens up “new ways of thinking about what being human means” (Hayles 285)

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This is an excerpt from *Parable of the Talents* again. Self is body and bodily perception. Self is thought, memory, belief. Self creates; self destroys. Self learns, discovers, becomes.

Self shapes, self adapts. Self invents its own reasons for being. So what happens to the self? The body, of course, changes. Ways of living change.

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And now the self also has to change. The self has to learn new ways of living. As well as to adapt oneself to something beyond human imagination, of course, and also beyond anything hitherto known to human beings. And to think of mutually evolving and existing with other forms of life, which is what posthumanism is all about. So just to...

Briefly recap, we talked about how the monster and the human meet for the first time, monster-human encounters, how they teach each other their cultural values, more about their society, economy, etc., and how to embrace differences. How biological addiction is part and parcel of these interactions. How posthumanism then becomes a sort of partnership where multi-species communities are formed through these interactions. And finally, how the human has redefined new ways of looking at humanity through these adaptations and ways of living. Yes, so that's about it.

Thank you.