

**Posthumanism: An Introduction**  
**Professor Dr. Sreelakshmy M**  
**Department of English**  
**The University of Hyderabad**  
**Lecture 43**

**Lec 43 : Moral Enhancement and Contemporary Literature: Octavia Butler's  
Hyperempathy**

Hello everybody. This class on post-humanism is about moral enhancement in contemporary literature. For this, I have chosen two novels and a short story. The first novel is Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower. The second novel is Richard Powers' Generosity and Enhancement.

And the third short story by Pamela Sargent called Gather Blue Roses. Basically what I'll be doing in the course of this class is to talk about moral enhancement. I'll be reading this text, of course, and locate how enhancement can be. What are the take-sets to enhancing the state? So enhancing can either be good or bad.

So what are the takes of these novelists about moral enhancement and how can moral enhancement be used to make the world a better place, for instance? So what is moral enhancement? Improvement of the condition of the human through biomedical advancement. So this can include using medicines genetically improving the human condition which can attribute to let's say

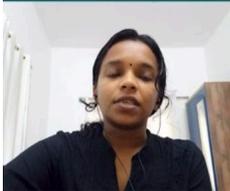
Using biomedical advancements to, for example, give longevity to the human body, to get rid of cancer, for instance, to eliminate diseases, and to make the human body more capable of surviving and living longer than it is naturally supposed to. So, in the first novel that I have chosen, J.J. Butler's Parable of the Sower, the narrator Lauren or Lamina she's also the protagonist, protagonist/narrator, Lauren, experiences a condition called hyperempathy or sharing, in which she feels the pain and pleasure of those around her. So, for instance, if somebody gets hurt, she experiences the same pain that the other person is going through.

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## HYPEREMPATHY IN OCTAVIA E. BUTLER'S *PARABLE OF THE SOWER*

- "I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel. Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an "organic delusional syndrome." Big shit. It hurts, that's all I know."  
(*Parable of the Sower* 12)



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And she finds it very difficult to live in a community that is ravaged by diseases, pain, and poverty. So, she does not, in fact, experience any relief at all. She gets to experience the pain of those around her. So, in this slide 2, I have provided an extract from Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. I'll just read it out.

I feel what I see others feeling, or what I believe they feel. Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an organic delusional syndrome. Big shit, it hurts. That's all I know. So, we're talking about...

A disease. She calls it a disease. She used to get fucking help with it from her mother who used to use a drug and it has affected her child. When she was pregnant, she used this drug and it affected Lauren. Firstly, let's pay for the time being.

So, a biometrically induced embodied advancement in human values, qualities and virtues, most notably to feel literally the pain of others, was a Pramod Rinne who reads *Hyper-Empathy in Bible of the Sower*, defines death. So, our first partner suggested the use of a disease such as one that is very intimate as hyper-empathy. Sharing is better than suggesting. the foundation for new humane intersubjectivity. That, for instance, if everybody else feels the pain of those around them, there won't be as much torture or violence.

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- Improvement of the human being/ the condition of being human through biomedical advancements
- “a bio-medically induced embodied advancement in human values, qualities and virtues– most notably to feel, literally, the pain of others” (Nayar 164)
- “the foundation for a new human(e) intersubjectivity”? (ibid.)
- A pattern of life that subsists on understanding and responding to the pain and pleasure of those around
- A way forward to counter violence, dystopias.



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So, it is very important to think about the present scenario as well. We are living in the age of wars and a lot of Intended violence. Pattern of life that subsists on understanding and responding to the pain and pleasure of those around. So, in a close-knit community, which is the one that Lauren is living in, if, for instance, everybody had hyper-empathy or hearing, there won't be any violence or torture and the world would have been a much better place.

also suggested by a lot of people as a way forward to counter violence and dystopias. So, in this next slide, I'll read out another extract from the same novel where Lauren calls it a biological conscience, called Servantation, a Biological Conscience. The faculty syndrome is a more common complaint. People couldn't do such things. They could kill if they had to and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it.

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## HYPEREMPATHY IN OCTAVIA E. BUTLER'S PARABLE OF THE SOWER

- "If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things. They could kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it. But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people. Failing that, I wish I could find other people who have it, and live among them. A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all." (*Parable of the Sower* 84)

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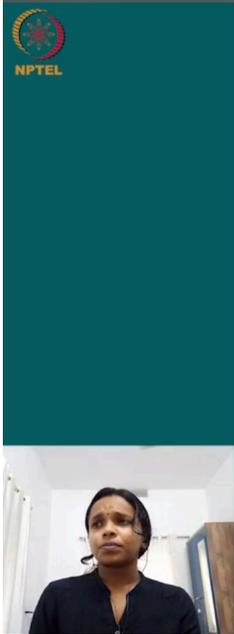
But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good for me. The way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people.

Saying that, I wish I could find other people who have it and live amongst them. A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all. So, in fact, she does find a group of people, some of them who have hyperempathy, and she starts building a community around it. So, biological conscience is what we're looking at here. Then, what does it mean to live in a world where everybody has a biological conscience, everybody has hyperempathy?

In such a world, there will not be, as we just mentioned, any violence or terror. But we have to keep in mind that hyper-empathy can also be used to torture people. Like, if you're... I don't know if I can say 'captor'. But yeah, if somebody wants to do harm to you, knows that you have hyper-empathy, you will get trapped in a world where it works against you.

So, it has a different side to the same coin. So, a community of sharers is what Patra is intending here, where human qualities and virtues can be improved. Basically, So here we're talking about a condition or a disease that is intended, which creates a vulnerable group of people but also can be used in the larger context to create a morally advanced group of people who are aware of what they do to each other. This is what Persson and Sevelius's group calls becoming moral and becoming more human in the moral sense.

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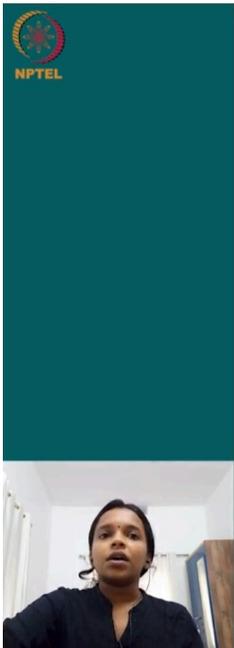


- A community of 'sharers'
- Medicine and drugs to improve human qualities and virtues
- "biomedical means of moral enhancement" in order to change human nature (Persson and Savulescu 667)
- "... if human civilization is to avoid destruction or deterioration, human beings need to become more human in the moral sense. Such morally enhanced humans may be called transhumans or posthumans" (Persson and Savulescu 667).
- Moral enhancement to conquer oppression, inequality, violence (Hughes, "Politics of Transhumanism" 760)

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A human civilization needs to avoid destruction or deterioration, meaning it needs to become more human in the moral sense. Such morally enhanced humans we call transhumans or post-humans. The moral enhancement, once again, this James Hughes who discusses moral enhancement, says that moral enhancement can be used to conquer oppression, inequality, and violence. So, let's go to the next text, which is Pamela Saju's 'Gather Blue Crosses'. Here, there is something called communicated pain.

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### COMMUNICATED PAIN IN PAMELA SARGENT'S "GATHER BLUE ROSES"

- "I knew that she understood, and felt her fear and her sorrow as she realized that she and I were the same, that I would always feel the knife thrusts of other people's pain, draw their agonies into myself and, perhaps, be shattered by them" (254)
- "I need the peace, the retreat from easily communicated pain. How strange, I think objectively, that our lives are such that discomfort, pain, sadness, and hatred are so easily conveyed and so frequently felt. Love and contentment are only soft veils which do not protect me from bludgeons; and with the strongest loves, one can still sense the more violent undercurrents of fear, hate, and jealousy" (252)

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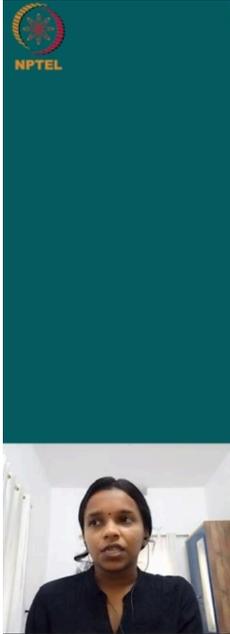
The context of this story is simple. It is about a daughter and a mother in their relationship when the mother has lived in a nasty camp and what she went through, having this condition where she communicated the pain to those around her. I knew that she understood and felt her fear and her sorrow as she realized that she and I were the same, that I would only feel the knife thrust of other people's pain, draw the agonies into myself, and perhaps be shattered by them. So here, unlike hyper-empathy in the first novel, there is only Ah, pain, this side of experience.

No experience of pleasure, none at all, just pain. I need peace, retreat from easily communicated things. How strange, I think of just the way that their lives are such that discomfort, pain, sadness, and hatred are so easily conveyed and so frequently felt. Love and contentment, a release of fear, which is not expecting indulgence. I am the strongest love and can still sense the more violent undercurrents of fear, hate, and jealousy.

So here what we are talking about is the very controlled environment of pain and agony and how this person feels it nevertheless, feels it more frequently than those around her, and responds to it in very violent ways. Similar to the border enhancement that we talked about in *Stadia e Butler*, with some of the stars being together, Blue Rose is there, the protagonist-slash-narrator. She feels the pain of those around her. She, in fact, used to resent her mother, and she realizes what her mother went through, having lived in a camp alongside in a very desolate world of pain, agony, and anguish, and what she endured. She understands this.

This understanding forms a sort of connectivity, right? We are connected through this shared understanding, shared torment, and maybe what Sarjan is also suggesting here is that if everybody had communicated pain, then there wouldn't be torture or violence, and maybe it might have been easier to survive anguish, right? So the next novel. They have Richard Powers' *'Generosity,'* subtitled *'An Enhancement.'*

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### MORAL ENHANCEMENT IN RICHARD POWERS' *GENEROSITY*: AN ENHANCEMENT

- "That's the problem. She's constitutionally incapable of being anything but all right." (Powers 149)
- "Have you ever come across someone with an oversized appetite for life? Someone who seems to feel nothing but major joys, resiliently joyous, impervious to distress? ... constant mania without the depression, ecstasy without the cyclic despair. These people (and they are very rare) may possess a trait called hyperthymia" (87)

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'Generosity' is about a girl called Cassidy, who is an Algerian-born fugitive in the United States. And her foundation heard that she is especially happy. She has a condition called Hyperthymia, where she is always happy. So then, that's the problem. She is constitutionally incapable of doing anything but being all right, and I'll get there.

And actually, it revolves around her discovery by a genetic engineer who wanted to use her, like we're talking about in 'Resurrects,' and heal herself. So, similar to such a story as here and the story here that happened in dreams, this genetic engineering uses dreams to create a world where there won't be regret, pain, loss, or anguish. where people are always happy. But what happens is, in the course of the novel, Cassidy decides to sell her genes, and then she receives a lot of backlash from society around her, and finally, she commits suicide. So I'll read another extract from the same story.

Have you ever come across someone with an appetite for life, who seems to feel nothing but major things? Seemingly joyous, impervious to stress, constant mania without depression, ecstasy without the fact of despair. These people are very rare, and this is a trait called hypomania. So what we have here is a very singular trait, as I just mentioned, which we can have alongside hyperempathy, hypomania.

But unlike Butler, who seems to endorse a world of interconnected subjectivity and biological function, Powers seems to examine the disadvantages of moral enhancement. He seems to be saying essentially, rather looking at the philosophical aspects of moral enhancement per se. Essentially saying that moral enhancement, no matter the level or degree, is bound to be constrained by society, bound to be affected in such a way that enhancement will no longer matter. So that is the conclusion of generosity, which is just the paradox of being too happy.

So that is what passed as far as the doctor's critical stance toward using biotechnology to alter genes and thereby obtain happiness. It doesn't seem to endorse a world of biological

function or a world where morally enhanced virtues can be good or can be used to ameliorate the human condition. in this context. Well, not exactly in this context, but definitely in the context of moral enhancement. We can also talk about the KVL buttless, another phenomenon called a device, which I'm in fact fighting people right now on.

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The slide content is as follows:

- Biotechnology to achieve happiness/gratification.
- HeLa cells
- Powers adopts a critical stance towards using biotech to alter genes and thereby attain happiness.
- The conclusion of *Generosity*- perils of being *too* happy (Hughes, "Moral Enhancement" 92)
- Hyperempathy in the Parables and Hyperthymia in *Generosity*
- Moral Enhancement as a cure for xenophobia in Octavia E. Butler's *Survivor*

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on both elements right now, is how moral enhancement works in Butler's *Survivor*. So, in this novel, there are defeat-solarizing groups of people, groups of species, in fact, and they sort of work against each other. But the protagonist, who's named Lana, decides to interfere in this tussle, and she talks about a cure for xenophobia. She tries to engage within these different issues of people and she, in fact, one of these groups, all of these groups have very hypnotized ideas about each other.

She tries to bring in a cure for xenophobia through the interaction, relationships with each of the members of this group. So that is something that Butler also does. So Butler is suggesting a very positive attitude towards moral enhancement. Powers does the opposite.

He stops critical stance and we also have Pamela Sargent in between who I was going to be talking about moral enhancement and communicative pain and how then communicative pain can be used to initiate communication between two different parties of people, right, two different parties. So that's about it. Yeah, talking about, we talked about biological function. the creation of a morally conscious human who is aware of the consequences of one's actions, then can the human be then rendered or made into a being with more enhanced values?

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- Altruism
- "Biological Conscience"
- A morally conscious human who is aware of the consequences of one's actions.
- Can the human be rendered into a being with enhanced moral values?
- Is the said enhancement ethical?

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These are the questions that follow moral enhancement. Is the said enhancement ethical? So, what are the ethical paradigms of thinking about enhancing a human by medically inducing them with happiness genes, for example? Just to summarize, we talked about the two normal similar structures and how biological functions in Butler and communicated pain in Sargent and hypothermia in Powers are seen as the creation, particularly the creation of a morally conscious human who is aware of their actions.

So yes, that's it. Thank you.