In Octavia Butler's *Dawn* transhumanism: Scientific utopia or humanistic dystopia?

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Abstract

Transhumanism is a 21st century radical movement focusing on the evolution of the humanity through advanced technologies or scientific utopia that will lead to humanistic dystopia because the enhanced humanity would be partly ultra beings and partly aliens, robots, androids and other type of hybrid nonhuman multispecies. Thus, as the human beings through advanced technology form a scientific utopia, they will change humanity into subhuman beings and different species. Namely, as transhumanism intends to reform a better future for humanity that is re-designed with the advanced technology, it will lead the path to transitioning humans into trans-beings. Recently, in the literary world transhumanism and posthumanism are exponentially growing subjects all around the world which display enhanced human beings and human future either as a utopia or as a dystopia. Octavia Butler's *Dawn* is one of the literary texts that deals with the future of the human being and focuses on the multispecies Oankali aliens and the trans beings. In Butler's *Dawn* the protagonist Lilith Iyapo awakens 250 years after the catastrophic nuclear war, on a spaceship of the alien Oankali race that has the power to reconstruct a new humanity due to their advanced biotechnologies, genetic engineering, and post-human reproduction. Thus, the aim of this study is to analyze Octavia Butler's *Dawn* in the light of transhumanism that seeks to reform an enhanced life with the advanced scientific utopian perspective but the result will be leading to a dystopian future for humanity.

Keywords: Transhumanism, utopia, dytopia, Octavia Butler, *Dawn*.

Octavia Butler'ın *Dawn*'ında transhümanizm: Bilimsel ütopya mı yoksa hümanist distopya mı?

Öz

21. yüzyılın radikal bir akımı olan Transhümanizm, ileri teknolojiler veya bilimsel ütopya yoluyla insanlığın evrimi üzerine odaklanmaktadır fakat bu insancıl distopya ya yol açacak çünkü gelişmiş insanlık kısmen ultra varlıklar ve kısmen uzaylılar, robotlar, androidler ve diğer insanlık dışı çoklu melez türler olacaktır. Böylece, ileri teknoloji yoluyla, bilimsel bir ütopya oluştururken, diğer yandan insanlığı insanlık dışı varlıklara dönüştürecektir. Yani, Transhümanizm, ileri teknoloji ile yeniden tasarlanan insanlık için daha iyi bir gelecek oluşturma niyetiyle insanların trans-varlıklara dönüşmesine yol açacaktır. Son zamanlarda, edebiyat dünyasında ve tüm dünyada katlanarak büyüyen konular olan transhümanizm ve post-insancıllık, insanlığın geleceğini ütopya veya distopya olarak göstermektedirler. Octavia Butler'ın *Dawn*'ı, insanoğlunun geleceği ile ilgilenen ve Oankali uzaylılarına ve trans varlıklarına odaklanan edebi metinlerden biridir. Butler'ın *Dawn*'nda, ana

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karakter Lilith Iyapo, nükleer savaştan 250 yıl sonra, gelişmiş biyoteknolojileri, genetik mühendisliği ve insanlık sonrası üremeleri nedeniyle yeni bir insanlığı yeniden inşa etme gücüne sahip Oankali ırkının uzay gemisinde uyanır. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın amacı, Octavia Butler'ın *Dawn* romanını, gelişmiş bir bilimsel ütopik bakış açısıyla gelişmiş bir yaşamı yeniden düzenlemeyi amaçlayan transhümanizm ışığında incelemektir fakat sonuç insanlık için distopik bir geleceğe yol açacaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Transhümanizm, utopia, distopia, Octavia Butler, *Dawn.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Transhumanism: Scientific utopia or humanistic dystopia?

The term transhumanism has a long history that dates back to the nineteenth-century. The term, as commonly thought, is not coined and firstly used by Julian Huxley because the term with different connotations had been used before him. The debatable term was mentioned by the British geneticist JBS Haldane in his essay *Daedalus: Science and the Future* (1923), by Huxley in his essay *Religion Without Revelation* (1927), and by JD Bernal in his work *The World, The Flesh and the Devil* (1929). Yet, interestingly, the term "transhuman" was first used by the translator, Henry Francis Carey when he was translating Dante's *Divine Comedy* in 1814 to render a term in the first Canto of Dante's *Paradiso*. In describing his heavenwards journey with Beatrice, Dante speaks of being 'transhumanised' (Harrison & Wolyniak, 2015, p.467) in a biblical context. Secondly, the Canadian author, historian, jurist philosopher W. D. Lighthall in his work entitled 'The Law of Cosmic Evolutionary Adaptation: An Interpretation of Recent Thought'(1940) makes use of the term "transhuman" by adding the "ism" because he was seeking a new term for his scientific cosmic evolution of humanity. Thirdly, Biologist Julian Huxley, considered the father of the modern Transhumanist movement mentioned "transhumanism," in his book of essays *New Bottles for New Wine* (1957) but first used the term in a 1951 lecture published in the journal *Psychiatry*. Huxley searching for an alternative to characterize his own utopian scientific philosophy was influenced by Lighthall's article stated that "Such a broad philosophy might perhaps be called, not Humanism, because that has certain unsatisfactory connotations, but Transhumanism. It is the idea of humanity attempting to overcome its limitations and to arrive at fuller fruition" (1951, p.139). Huxley believed that "Transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature." (1957, p.17). Thus, Huxley may not have been first to use this term but he was the first to define it.

Broadly, the debatable term Transhumanism is defined as "an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology" (Bostrom, 2003, p.493). Transhumanism promotes the application of emerging technologies in order "to overcome limits imposed by our biological and genetic heritage" (More, 2013, p.4), therefore, transhumanists pay attention to various strategies of human enhancement such as genetic engineering, information technologies, the development of molecular nanotechnology and artificial intelligence (Bostrom, 2003, p. 493). Transhumanism is an extension and partial derivation of humanism because the transhumanism's utopian vision of enhanced human beings could produce a dystopian future.

Actually, the studies of utopia and dystopia are defined in a variety of ways in different fields. Starting with Thomas More's *Utopia*, the vision of utopia was based on forming a perfect society for the humanity but dystopia is usually supposed to be an inverted, mirrored or negative version of utopia. Generally,

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utopian narratives are presenting future stories of the changing cycle of humanity's evolution from darkness to perfectness, and dystopian narratives are portraying a catastrophic world in which search for reconstruction can lead to destruction. Actually, every utopia can turn into a dystopia because the intention to find perfectness for humanity can also lead to darkness and chaos. The term Utopia was coined by Thomas More in 1516, five hundred years ago. Utopia was used by More to define an idealized visions of a perfect society and a perfect place that does not exist, an island where people were happy in society where there was no poverty or diseases. In order to form a perfect and ideal society, More's *Utopia* revealed several features: an isolated society, well-trained and well-ordered citizens, a democratic government, universal education, and loose religious limits. The roots of the word Utopia comes from the Greek "ou" (not) and "topos" (place) that means "no place" or "nowhere". If utopia means "nowhere", how did it come to be used as a definition of a perfect ideal society and place? The answer lies in the homonymous Greek prefix "eu" meaning "good" which makes the meaning of utopia divert to "good a place," and because of the state of "belief" the meaning of utopia can be applied to religious or political structures to make people believe that there might be an ideal world in the future. The duality in the meaning of utopia is expressed by Peter Firchow in his work, *Modern Utopian Fictions*; "[u]topia may be a no place –that is, it is a fictional place –but it is always a no place with good government" (2007, p.11), and an aspiration to overcome all difficulties by the imagination of possible alternatives" (Vieira,2010,p.7).Thus, utopia is an imaginative place where there are possible alternatives to form a perfect place and society for humanity.

Dystopia, as the opposite of a utopia, designates an anti-utopia. One common dystopian feature is that such societies employ dehumanization or disasters to cause the fall of human society because as Sargent states, "[m]ost utopias appearing in the twentieth century have been dystopias, and most of them have focused on excessive centralization of power as the primary cause of the troubles of society" (1982, p.565). Especially after the development of technology the classical utopia left its place to scientific utopia which flourished the idea of dystopia because depending on the way and which the scientific and technological developments would be, the humanity can be negatively influenced destroying the utopian world and forming a dystopian one. Namely, modern developments in science and technology will change humans' environment, way of lives, and conception of the universe both in a scientific utopian and humanistic dystopian ways.

Utopian and Dystopian visions present two imaginary worlds in which utopia refers to a dream like world while dystopia refers to a nightmare. For David Sisk dystopia emerged in the mid-to late eighteenth century, "when technological progress gave way to increasingly impersonalized mechanization and exploitation" (1997,p.6). In the twentieth century, these two contrary terms formed the main characteristic of science fiction, a term invented in 1929 by Hugo Gernsback, meaning "a sub-genre in which science and technology predominate thematically –utopically, when expressed positively, or dystopically, when used negatively" (cited. in Claeys, 2005, p.163). Although science fiction was developed in the twentieth century, its roots go back to seventeenth century because of its relations with utopian narratives in which "there are technological inventions with utopian voyages and ideals" (Claeys, 2005, p.164). Actually, "science may bring health and wealth but it also has the potential to unleash dark, destructive powers, just as utopia may bring security and plenty, but at the cost of liberty and spontaneity" (Claeys, 2005, p.169). Hence, future of humanity degenerated by advanced science will transform utopian visions into a dystopian ones.

Transhumanism seeking for the enhancement of humanity with advanced science and technology may seem as a utopia but utopian ideals can reveal dystopian results for the future of humanism because of

becoming transitional humans who "by virtue of their technology usage, cultural values, and lifestyle constitute an evolutionary link to the coming era of posthumanity"(Bostrom,2005,p.12). The transhumanist Nick Bostrom defines humanism as a philosophy that values the human species and human individual. They claim that humanism involves a moral obligation to improve humanity with "rational thinking, freedom, tolerance, democracy, and concern for . . . fellow human beings" (Bostrom, 2005, p.4). However, Bostrom and the other transhumanists do not restrict their advocacy to humanistic methods, such as education and cultural development but to the use of enhancement technology to upgrade humans into posthuman beings with physical, cognitive, and moral faculties that supposedly exceed those of the humanist conception of humanity (Bostrom, 2005, p.5). Human beings and posthumans have the capacity to reproduce themselves with each other, but posthumans' transition into transhumans cannot be done without scientific enhancement. Thus, with technological development and scientific understanding, human species are entering a whole new stage in the history of the humanity because in the near future, artificial intelligence, new kinds of cognitive tools, molecular nanotechnology, neuropharmacology will enable humanity to eliminate disease and unwanted aging, and improve our capacity of controlling thoughts and emotions. These transhumanistic utopian visions to form "ultra-humanism" (Ferrando, 2013, p. 27) seem as enhancement for humanity but as Francis Fukuyama states Transhumanism is "the world's most dangerous idea," (cited in Doede, 2004, p.40) because some of the coming technologies could potentially cause great harm to humanity. Moreover, Moravec predicts that "before the next century is over, human beings will no longer be the most intelligent or capable type of entity on the planet" (cited in Hansell and Grassie,2001,p.20) because the new technologies would cause the end of human existence by creating "Robo sapiens" or "aliens" that would replace "Homo sapiens". Livingstone argued that transhumanism has its roots in "occult" culture, which has "mysticism" at its core, that is, it asserts a person can become one with "God" (2015, p.7).

Transhumanists would be "playing God" intending to create a utopian future for humanity in which every illness can be cured and every humanistic problem can be solved but ironically while finding alternatives to cure or enhance human beings by giving them greater strength, intelligence, perception, and perhaps even by creating entirely new powers, such as the ability to fly, or even powers unimagined, they will attack human consciousness, the thing that makes human beings human. Briefly, transhumanism may have scientific utopian ideas in enhancing humanity to a post and trans being, but utopian ideas can lead to dystopian results. In other words, enhanced scientific utopia can have different scientific conflicts that would cause humanistic dystopia.

2. *Dawn* by Octovia Butlers

2.1 Transhumanist dawn: The trans-future

Octavia Butler, an African American woman novelist, uses science fiction features such as time travel, post holocaust life, transhumanism, and contact with extra-terrestrial beings to create alternative worlds where evolution is not only technologically influenced but catastrophic and xenogeneic. Butler in her trilogy, *Xenogenesis*, asks the question what it will mean to be human in a transhuman future. While Naomi Jacobs interprets the *Xenogenesis* trilogy as "a series of perspectives on posthumanity" (2003, p.109), Zaki characterizes Butler's writing as "pessimistic, or anti-utopian, dystopianism" (1990, p 241), and in this paper, I intend to analyze Butler's *Dawn*, the first novel in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, as a scientific utopia or humanistic dystopia in the light of transhumanism.

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Dawn is the first novel in Octavia Butler's the *Xenogenesis* trilogy; *Dawn, Adulthood Rites and Imago*, which was republished as *Lilith's Brood*. Written in 1987, Octavia Butler's science fiction, dystopian, transhuman novel *Dawn* is divided into four chapters: "Womb," "Family," "Nursery" and "The Training Floor". The novel opens with humanity having destroyed itself in a nuclear war and the main character, Lilith Iyapo in her twenties, awakening 250 years after this catastrophic nuclear war on a spaceship where she is a captive and a patient of the alien, transhuman Oankali that are grotesque, tentacled with advanced biotechnologies, including the growing of an organic ship, genetic engineering, and post-human reproduction.

The Oankali can "mobilize human adaptability to a species that arrives on earth to reform humanity" (Green,1994,p.185). They shape their immortal lives upon metamorphosis by gene-trading. The Oankali who shape their lives with the gene-trading and cultural diversity of the species have rescued the lives of a small group of humans and kept them in an unconsciousness state to make use of their organic ability to alter the bodies of other creatures genetically and to improve the human memory, strength and life so that they can form a new society with human-Oankali mating which means the transition of human beings to other species. For the Oankali mating with a human is a scientific utopian evolution but for the humans the inter-species breeding with the Oankali is a humanistic dystopian deconstruction of human race.

The "long, multispecies Oankali history" (p.61) shows that the Oankali cannot live with a fixed identity as Naomi Jacobs states: "for the Oankali restriction to an unchanging shape or fixed identity would mean the end of life" (p.96). The alien race, Oankali, has three sex types: male, female, and Ooloi which is the third gender capable of diagnosing "what could be normal or abnormal, possible or impossible for the human body" (p.21). The Ooloi contributes to "the organelle" that inhabits every cell of an Oankali driving and enabling its capability for metamorphosis" (Jacobs,2003, p.102). The third gender, partly human and partly Oankali, the Ooloi did not have human "eyes, nose, or ears" (p.24), but were able see without eyes and fix genetic problems. The grotesque and "ugly" (p.51) aliens, Oankali had tentacles all over their bodies, and were able to see the world differently through their sense abilities. They had "androgynous voices with a good memory and a strong olfactory sense" (p.100) and "the Oankali don't eat it [meat]" (p.152), therefore, they were vegetarians. Bogue states that Oankali had their own language, therefore they "cannot lie, whereas humans can say one thing and mean another" (2010,p.143). The Oankali lived a nomadic life, and by "captur[ing] living animals and keep[ing] them alive for a long while, they used their carbon dioxide and supplied them with oxygen and slowly digested nonessential parts of their bodies: limbs, skin, sensory organs. Thus, they gave a very, very long death" (p.54). The Oankali by cross-breeding and gene-trading both offer and impose simultaneously the species' existence. Namely, for Oankali gene-trading was the only way to survive in their transhuman world.

Jdahya is the Ooloi who awakens Lilith from her two hundred and fifty years of sleep, and explains her the importance of Oankali trade:

JDAHYA. We are committed to the trade, he said, softly implacable. [...]

LILITH. No! [...]

JDAHYA. Can you hold your breath, Lilith? Can you hold it by an act of will until you die?

LILITH. Hold my-

JDAHYA. We are committed to the trade as your body is to breathing. We were overdue when we found you. Now it will be done – to the rebirth of your people and mine. (p. 41)

The alien Oankali race was committed to trade into the bodies of different species to live as human were committed to breathing. Jdahya explains to Lilith: "You'll awaken a small group of humans . . . and help them to deal with us. You'll teach them the survival skills we teach you" (p.32). Thus, Lilith as the first awakened human is given the task of waking the other humans, and to prepare them for their future breeding with the Oankali and life back on Earth. She is chosen to teach Oankali survival skills to the rescued small group of humans. Lilith was amazed to see that the "Oankali knew human body better then the humans do because they knew "how to fix her cancer" (p.178). Nikanj heals Lilith's biologically inherited cancers and uses her proneness to the disease, or "gift" as it calls it (p.236), to regenerate later part of its arm. In other words, "the Oankali remove a cancerous growth loaded with valuable genetic information that later helps to save Nikanj's life from Lilith's body and extend her life expectancy to over one hundred years" (Tucker,2007,p.173). Oankali's ability to reprogram the human cancer cells is transhumanistic because they use advanced technology and nonhuman talents during the interbreeding. Actually, Lilith feels herself as treated as "an experimental animal" (p.60) because "she did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched" (p.6). Lilith rejects when her Oankali companion Nikanj wants to increase her memory capacity so that she can better understand the Oankali language by saying; "I don't want to be changed!" (p.76) but the Oankali treat her as a "useful [tool]" (p.58) believing that their greater powers and knowledge give them the right to choose what is best for the human beings.

The Oankali believed that interbreed with the humans to create a mixed Oankali-human race will benefit both their own race and the human beings but such an inter-species breeding will destroy human race. Lilith accepts to convince the small group of people to have inter-species breeding with the Oankali, thinking that she might escape their power, once she returns to Earth and make it a habitable place again. Yet, the humans act against her treating her as supporter of the aliens, and the one who belongs to the community of the Oankali race because they fear that the seductiveness of the Ooloi, the third sex of the Oankali will trans the humans to a dystopian future. When two males (human and Oankali), two females (human and Oankali), (the Oankali male and female partners are siblings), plugged into a Ooloi, as plugged to a computer, are unconscious, passive, not touching each other but able to feel each other's sensations as well as their own and those of the Ooloi. During this interbreeding, the Ooloi both physically and psychically inhabit their mates' bodies and transmit sensation between the two mates maintaining physical sensation of imaginative touch. Lilith plugged to an Ooloi with Joseph and Nikanj, "never knew whether she was receiving Nikanj's approximation of Joseph, a true transmission of what Joseph was feeling, some combination of truth and approximation, or just a pleasant fiction" (p. 162). This coupling or tripling is an out-of-body experience that makes the humans feel dirtied and shamed because they have no control over their bodies, and such a genetic mixing means transition of humans to other species, and creation of a multiple posthuman and transhuman beings having multiple gender, sexuality, race because in transhuman dystopian world the posthuman body would not be fixed and definable.

Lilith is impregnated against her will with the first mixed breed child from Nikanj who uses the remainder of Joseph's DNA, her mate. Lilith is horrified with this impregnation process because of the things Nikanj could do against her will, and when Nikanj says: "You'll have a daughter" Lilith comments

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saying: "It won't be a daughter", "it will be a thing—not a human [...]. A monster" (p.246). Lilith's concern that her child will be something other than human suggests that the coming future would have trans-species who or which would become something more than humans. Before his death, and before their entry onto the training room floor, Joseph had told Lilith that their hope to survive and remain human is impossible and he said; "What will we be, I wonder? Not human. Not anymore" (p.196). For Lilith, "post-humanity means another life form, to come other than human" (Youngquist, 2010, p.182) forming a transhuman dystopian future. Lilith Iyapo, a human by birth but mutated by the Oankal ends the story as the mother of monsters because of her transition, she is accepted as one of the members of the alien Oankali race at the end of the novel. Butler's novel ends with a Transhumanist Dawn of a trans-future for humanity.

3. Conclusion

Transhumanism is narrative of ongoing scientific progress and development from primitive to advanced technological societies which offer new dimensions for everyone both utopian and dystopian. *Dawn* by Octavia Butler presents a transhumanistic story in which both the dystopian dangers and the utopian potential of posthumanism is explored. Michelle Erica Green states: "Butler is not interested in creating a utopia of human beings who seem too gentle to be believed [...] Her works border on the dystopia because she insists on confronting problems that have occurred so often in human communities" (p.170). In *Dawn* genetic manipulation is significant because interbreeding with other species and the creation of new ones is done by technologic devices and genetic engineering is used to cure diseases, to acknowledge DNA information and to research other objectives. Butler's exploration of genetic manipulation and the capability of raising current scientific questions using fictitious scenarios makes her novel *Dawn* become an interesting science fiction in which the future of the humanity is a dystopia because for the sake of technological developments they have created their catastrophic end in which the new breeds are monstrous, genderless hybrid things rather than beings, and the future for the aliens is a utopia because they have found ways to live longer and create their own needs. In sum, Butler predicts a transhuman future in which technology without wisdom becomes destructive leading to nowhere, therefore transhumanism seeking for a scientific utopia with advanced technology and wisdom could cause a humanistic dystopia because there will be no limit in the creation of enhanced technology, reformation of subhuman beings and reconstruction of human nature in the post-transhumanistic dystopian future.

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