

Gjødingseter, Bodil Andrea Nygaard

The Attempt to Abolish the Binary of Sex and Gender in Octavia Butler's Dawn

Bachelor's thesis in Lektor i språkfag

Supervisor: Cowan, Yuri

June 2022

Gjødingseter, Bodil Andrea Nygaard

The Attempt to Abolish the Binary of Sex and Gender in Octavia Butler's Dawn

Bachelor's thesis in Lektor i språkfag
Supervisor: Cowan, Yuri
June 2022

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

The Attempt to Abolish the Binary of Sex and Gender in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*

Octavia Butler's works are explorative in nature and pose an excellent opportunity to explore a wide range of ideas, including the concepts of sex and gender. There is, however, a question of how well she utilises this opportunity, which I will explore in relation to her novel *Dawn* from her Xenogenesis series, written in 1987. In the novel we see unconventional gender representations particularly in the form of the alien race of the Oankali and their division of biological sexes. The sexes of the Oankali differ substantially from the division of sexes we are accustomed to in humans. In addition to the existence of this unconventional sex it is also helpful to look at how individuals of this sex are referred to and described, as this indicates how these individuals and their sex as a whole are viewed, in addition to what attitudes there are towards them.

To explore the above issues, I will delve briefly into the science fiction genre and explore why, and whether, this genre is a suitable platform for exploring issues of this nature. If the science fiction genre is indeed a suitable platform, how well have Butler exploited this suitability and has she managed to escape the binary way of thinking about sex and gender? In addition to the above, it is necessary to delve deeper into what the terms sex and gender entail and how they are understood to get a nuanced look at the issue. I will explore how this is reflected in the novel, and how different characters, both human and Oankali, act towards issues of sex, gender, and gender identity. Particularly interesting is how the novel treats those who are not accepting of deviation from the binary, and what implications this has for members of society in our reality. The novel's non-normative portrayals of sex and gender reflect issues of gender identity and attitudes towards them, and the existence of these non-normative portrayals are possible due to the experimental nature of the science fiction genre, and Butler is largely successful in exploiting this nature. Butler is, however, not fully successful in this endeavour and she is unable to fully escape the binary divisions of sex and gender, but she is able to create some clever metaphors regarding people's attitudes towards gender, sex, and gender identity.

Firstly, an exploration of the terms "sex" and "gender" can help see what differences there are between these terms, as they tend to be used somewhat interchangeably in everyday-speech. Traditionally, the term "sex" has been used to refer to biological differences whilst using the categories male and female. "Sex" can be defined as "a biological construct that encapsulates the anatomical, physiological, genetic, and hormonal variation that exists in species" (Johnson & Repta 2012 p. 18) and it can be said to affect an individual's physical attributes such as the distribution of muscle cells and fat (Johnson & Repta 2012 p. 18).

“Gender”, on the other hand, can be said to be more concerned with men and women and their role in society, and more concerned with social factors and with masculinity and femininity than the term “sex”. It is still important to keep in mind that while it is simple to make the distinction that sex is biological and gender is social, both pieces of terminology have been crafted in a social context. This means that the terms and their meaning can change over time if the collective social understanding of them changes (Johnson & Repta 2012 pp. 17-18). The terms sex and gender are “continuously being defined and redefined” (Pluretti 2015 p. 392), and literature is a platform that contributes to this, perhaps especially literature of the science fiction genre, as Pluretti said that “Science fiction texts [...] provide platforms for debate and redefinition of our gendered society” (2015 p. 392). This again speaks of the explorative nature of the science fiction genre and poses it as a great opportunity to address issues such as gender and sex.

It is exactly this explorative nature of the science fiction genre that is mentioned above that enables it to be so fitting to explore issues such as sex and gender. At the very base of the science fiction genre, we find the question “what if” (Merrick 2003 p. 241). This poses an excellent opportunity to explore a wide range of ideas and concepts that might not be as easy to explore in other genres of fiction. It has been argued that due to this experimental nature science fiction should be able to escape societal limitations, which makes it an ideal genre to explore ideas such as gender (Šporčič 2018 p. 51). This means that science fiction should be able to explore all facets of gender as a concept and move away from the binary norm that can be seen in large parts of the world, taking the division of male and female for granted.

However, one can also argue the opposite; that this means that the science fiction genre is best suited to explore hypothetical ideas that do not exist in the world we live in, and that issues such as gender, that are existing concepts in our normal lives, may not see the same level of success in this genre. It may be best suited to explore ideas that are far from our sphere of reality, and this could perceivably be why the themes of aliens, time travel and the apocalypse are so frequently used in science fiction, as these are themes we do not see in our day-to-day lives. Meanwhile we can see the gender binary being constantly broken in our day to day lives, and it is just a part of our lives though it might still be seen as breaking the norms to some groups. This could be seen as a reason why gender as a theme in science fiction literature is not as explorative and ground-breaking as one might think.

Following this, Šporčič makes the point that “authors overwhelmingly use the binary gender division as a binding element between the fictional world and that of the reader” (2018 p. 51). This proves the point that the binary gender division is both indeed a norm in our world,

and that it is not broken as frequently in works of science fiction as one might expect. Šporčič's argument poses the idea that though science fiction writers want to ask hypothetical questions in their work and create a world unlike our own, they still want to keep some aspects of the literary world they are creating similar to the world we live in. This ensures the author that the reader has some way of relating to the world they have created, as the reader might feel too alienated from the story, and they may be unable to relate to it if its contents are too unfamiliar. Thus, it is beneficial for the author to include familiar aspects in their works, but this does not necessarily mean that this familiar aspect has to be the binary division of sex and gender.

Butler does attempt to not let this binary be the only binding element, as she has written the humans in the novel to be as we are accustomed to them being, but it is the alien race of the Oankali who are different and that breaks with the binary. In this way Butler can be said to both reinforce the binary in some respects, while also attempting to break it in other ways. As a writer, "Butler, with her focus on the ambiguities of [...] gender" (Smith 2007 pp. 387-388), attempts to make the reader re-evaluate how the reader thinks about sex and gender. What she wishes to communicate to the reader in her novel *Dawn* is taking an existing concept and adding an imagined twist on it, but the manner in which she does this is not successful in all respects.

One striking issue is that she arguably stays bound by the binary division and understanding that society has of gender, even when the novel explores gender in a context very different from the society that we live in. This manifests itself in her novel through the alien race Oankali, a race that in some respects has a significantly different biological composition than humans. The most striking example of this presents itself in the form of the ooloi; the third sex of the Oankali. In addition to the ooloi the Oankali have the traditional sexes of male and female. In this way we see that even though Butler can perceive of a world in which there exists both an alien race and a third sex, the binary arrangement of the male and female sex still applies. Butler introduces us to a world where the division of genders is radically different to the one we know of with the introduction of the ooloi, and this does break the gender binary in a sense by discontinuing the norm of there only being two sexes. The issue some might have with the sexes of the Oankali is that though there is an additional sex Butler still included the traditional sexes of male and female. Thus, it does not fully break with the binary in the sense that the sexes of male and female that we are accustomed to are still included. The novel does, however, think outside the box by creating an entirely new sex with unique biological abilities and physical attributes.

The establishment of this third sex is clearly demonstrated when the novel's protagonist Lilith first encounters an individual of the Oankali. She then asks whether he is male or female,

to which he responds: “It’s wrong to assume that I must be a sex you’re familiar with” (Butler 1987 p. 12) before confirming that he is male. On the one hand, this sets the tone for the reader and establishes that the Oankali are fundamentally different from humans and that our assumptions of sex and gender are not applicable to them. However, this segment has a slight feeling of taking the reader on a rollercoaster. It starts with the Oankali reproaching Lilith for assuming the binary gender division she knows of to be the standard for the Oankali, which seems promising for this novel to escape the limitation of binary gender. However, the Oankali quickly turns back on himself by saying that he is male, and that the norm of the male and female gender does still apply. This segment reads as a missed opportunity to fully break with societal gender norms and to escape the binary division of sex and gender, as the Oankali states this could be the case but immediately identifies with a sex she does know of. When the Oankali says that we should not assume them to be of a sex we know of, the reader might start to imagine that the sexes we can find amongst the Oankali are completely different from what we see in humans. We do, however, quickly learn that the male and female sex still exist. Even though they introduce a completely unknown third sex it is slightly anti-climactic as the opportunity to create something completely new was there but was not utilised to its full potential. As an example, Butler could have said that there was no such thing as gender amongst the Oankali, but what she has come up with is simply the binary division we are used to, with the addition of the ooloi. The remark that Lilith should not assume the Oankali to be of a sex with which she is familiar could simply be a nod to the existence of the third sex, but it still reads as a missed opportunity to abolish the gender binary.

Regardless of whether Butler missed an opportunity to abolish the gender binary or not, it is still interesting to look at instances in the novel in which Butler does diverge from the binary. One such instance is one in which the differences of the ooloi are displayed, specifically their physical differences. This is seen by the ooloi having two additional tentacles that the ooloi Kahguyaht refers to as “sensory arms” (Butler 1987 p. 57). These sensory arms are also hinted at being used for sexual reproduction and being able to complete gene manipulation. The ooloi is the only sex responsible for sexual reproduction (Butler 1987 p. 43), which makes them fundamentally different from the other two sexes. This is a break with sex and gender as the readers know it in their own lives, which means that in this aspect Butler has managed to equip the science fiction genre to explore ideas of sex and gender. The ooloi are different both regarding the physical attributes and abilities such as gene manipulation and sexual reproduction. Sexual reproduction consists of the ooloi wrapping their sensory arms around the others’ necks, accessing their brainstems, and directly stimulating their nervous system (Mann

2018 p. 62). This establishes the ooloi as something completely different from humans, which successfully breaks with the gender binary as it establishes the ooloi as a distinctive sex and gender, as well as establishing that sexual reproduction happens in a manner different to how humans would do it. The sexual act is no longer only between a man and a woman the way it is with humans, but all three genders are included in the act. This gives an insight into the relationship between the sexes of the Oankali and shows us the roles they may play amongst themselves.

Building off of the above, it is interesting to look at pronoun use towards the ooloi by Oankali themselves, which speaks of the attitudes other Oankali have towards the ooloi. In a conversation between Lilith and the Oankali male Jdahya, the latter describes how one of his relatives performed surgery on Lilith while she slept, and that this individual was an ooloi. Jdahya says: “My relative is not male – or female. The name for its sex is ooloi” (Butler 1987 p. 22). Here we see that Jdahya himself refers to the ooloi with the pronoun “it”. It could be a simple solution just because the ooloi needed a pronoun to be addressed by, but on a linguistic level it can be interpreted as the other Oankali seeing the ooloi as more of an object than an individual, due to this pronoun traditionally being used to refer to objects. Lilith and the other humans are following the other Oankalis’ lead when it comes to pronoun use, as it was Oankalis who first referred to ooloi as “it”. This could speak to the attitudes from other Oankali towards the ooloi, and it can be seen as the other Oankali viewing the ooloi as worth less than themselves.

The pronoun “it” is not only used consistently by other Oankali, but also by Lilith and other humans. The only exceptions from this are provided by the human males Paul Titus and Joseph. This could indicate that they are not able to shake the binary way of thinking that they may have been accustomed with using when they still lived on Earth. An example that embodies the inability to escape binary thinking is when Lilith meets Paul Titus, another human living with the Oankali. In the exchange between Lilith and Paul, the latter calls Nikanj, an ooloi, by the pronoun “he”; to which Lilith responds “Nikanj isn’t male [...] it’s ooloi” (Butler 1987 p. 99). In this response we see both Lilith saying Nikanj is not to be seen as male because it is not male, but we also see Lilith using the pronoun “it” to talk about Nikanj. This pronoun use is in conformity with how the rest of the characters in the novel speak of the ooloi. Paul responds to Lilith’s statement with: “Yeah I know. But doesn’t yours seem male to you?” (Butler 1987 p. 99). Here we see that Paul has not escaped the binary thinking, as he still thinks of Nikanj as appearing male even though Paul has lived amongst the Oankali for many years. His mention of how Nikanj “seems male” shows that even though he logically knows Nikanj to be of a

different sex, he still feels the need to sort Nikanj into the box of male or female in his head. He even admits later on in his and Lilith's exchange that he "never really lost the habit of thinking of ooloi as male or female" (Butler 1987 p. 99). Thus, we see that Paul very much exhibits binary thinking, as he does not seem to have been able to accept the third sex of the Oankali, instead sorting the individuals of the third sex into the categories of "male" and "female" that he is familiar with. This reads close to Paul not being willing to accept and respect Nikanj's gender identity, as him refusing to refer to Nikanj, and presumably other ooloi, by the sex with which they identify.

The above could be read as a metaphor for how individuals that does not identify with the binary category of male or female may not be fully accepted by all members of society. Paul could be a metaphor for conservative or otherwise non-accepting aspects of society that refuses to acknowledge any other gender identity than that of the binary, while Lilith is a metaphor of the parts of society that does accept that individuals identify outside of the gender binary. The fact that the majority of the characters in the novel follow Lilith's line of thinking rather than Paul's could be to show that society is largely willing to adapt and to accept this deviance from the binary, but that there are still individuals like Paul in the world that has not yet gotten to this point. The entire encounter with Paul is thus a metaphor for how individuals who identify outside of the binary may experience life in society. This can be seen as an indication that Butler has written a novel that does indeed break with the norms of sex and gender in the sense that she demonstrates how someone who deviates from the norm may experience reality.

These individuals who do not conform to the gender binary may experience hardships. Johnson and Repta said that: "Consequences exist for individuals who defy the gender order: In many parts of the world having an unclear presentation can result in discrimination, violence, and even death" (2012 p. 25). This shows that though the notions of sex and gender identity have changed in recent years the binary mindset of man and woman is certainly still present. Building off of the above Johnson and Repta argue that even in social contexts in which deviation from the binary is more accepted there can still be a sense of discomfort when individuals do deviate from it, as there is a "seemingly human need to "sort" individuals according to the two-gender system" (2012 p. 25). This can also be a possible explanation as to why a lot of people are seemingly unable to shed the idea of the gender binary. Johnson and Repta's phrasing it as a "human need" displays a tendency of thinking of sex and gender in terms of the binary. Paul's dialogue in the novel seems to be a personification of especially the last quote, as he seems unable to erase this need to sort individuals in the boxes of male and female. The inclusion of characters like Paul can be Butler criticising this normative thinking

of staying in the restrictive line of thinking that being bound to the binary offers. Paul is not viewed as a likable character, Lilith described that she was “afraid of him” (Butler 1987 p. 103) and he “seemed to be enjoying himself” (Butler 1987 p. 106) as he was physically attacking Lilith. Paul’s unlikability could be Butler criticising those who do not respect those who deviate from the norm and the gender binary.

Both of Johnson and Repta’s arguments can be an explanation of why Butler also seems to think in terms of the binary at times, as it is presented here as an almost natural human tendency. One could argue that a literary work of the science fiction genre should be the ideal platform to challenge the norm of the binary, and Butler does do this to an extent. It is not unusual for Butler to use her literary platform to raise issues of gender identity. She “uses the body to indicate the problematic and ambiguous nature of identity politics” (Lavender 2012 p. 131). This means that she uses an individual’s body to explain gender identity, as we can see with the ooloi having specific physical attributes. The physical attributes are representative of how the ooloi are different from the other sexes of the Oankali race.

The issues of gender, sex and gender identity are ones Butler raise on several occasions, and *Dawn* is no exception. In the novel, Butler does seem to be aware that gender identity is a complex issue with no clear answer. At one point Lilith asks herself the following question: “How much did sex determine personality among the Oankali?” (Butler 1987 p. 91). This shows that Butler has given the relationship between sex and identity some thought, but Butler, in the form of Lilith’s thoughts, does not seem to come to a concrete answer, as we see in the passage following the one quoted above: “She did not know how much sex determined personality even among human beings” (Butler 1987 p. 91). This underlines the complexity of gender identity and Lilith attempted to understand the relationship between sex and personality and identity by looking to parallels to her own species, only to realise that there is no clear answer there either.

The way the question is phrased, by Lilith asking “how much” sex determines personality, implied that she does expect sex to have some influence on an individual’s identity. The question she asks herself is not open and neutral, it is a leading question that already carries an assumption, reflecting her underlying thoughts on the matter. It is not a question of *if* sex influences one’s identity, it is a question of *how much*. This shows that Lilith herself thinks in terms of norms, as she expects an individual of a certain sex to act in a certain way. She is thus not fully able to shake the habit of thinking in terms of norms and binaries. She still expects one’s sex to influence one’s “personality”, one’s most central aspect of who they are. She believes that a male should act a certain way and a female in another. She is, however, able to slightly shake this notion, as she realises that she does not know how much sex determines

personality. She seems certain that there is a connection, but she is not sure to which degree nor is she sure what exactly this would entail. By including Lilith's realisation Butler criticises the notion that one should blindly expect individuals of one sex to act or be a certain way. Thus, it can be said that this specific passage from the novel both follows the norms and rejects them, and this level of ambiguity is fitting for *Dawn* as a novel.

To conclude, Butler does a number of things to deviate from norms and to break the binary of sex and gender in her novel. She invents an entirely new sex that possesses unique abilities and physical attributes, and this sex is referred to only by the third person singular pronoun "it", which can be seen as derogative or simply as being a convenient solution for an author that needed to use a third pronoun. When the usage of this pronoun is deviated from, it is by a character that is largely unlikable, which could be a clever criticism of individuals in society who are not accepting of those who do not conform to the gender binary.

Butler chooses the science fiction genre to explore these ideas of gender, sex, and gender identity. Science fiction is a genre that allows for a larger span of possibilities than most other genres, which makes it suitable for exploring ideas that expand beyond what we may find in our reality. We do, however, see that Butler manages to create situations regarding sex and gender that go beyond the binary, which supports the notion that the science fiction genre is indeed suitable for an exploration into these themes. Butler is not always fully successful in her attempt to break the binary, and she could perhaps have gone further in her explorations into this attempt. Overall, she does however manage to create a work of fiction in which the gender binary is not automatically assumed. Butler could perhaps have created an alien race that deviated more clearly from the gender binary, but regardless of what one may call missed opportunities she is not unsuccessful in breaking mostly free of the gender binary.

Word Count: 4178

Works Cited

- Butler, Octavia. *Dawn* [1987]. London, Headline Publishing Group, 2022.
- Johnson, Joy L., and Robin Repta. "Sex and Gender." *Designing and Conducting Gender, Sex and Health Research*, edited by Oliffe, John L and Lorraine Greaves, London, SAGE Publications, 2011, pp. 17-38.
- Lavender, Isiah, I., II. "Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23.1 (2012): 131,133,184-185.
- Mann, Justin Louis. "Pessimistic Futurism: Survival and Reproduction in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2018, pp. 61–76.
- Merrick, Helen. "Gender in science fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by James, Edward, and Farah Mendlesohn, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 241-252.
- Pluretti, Roseann, Jessa Lingel, and Aram Sinnreich. "Toward An "Other" Dimension: An Essay On Transcendence Of Gender And Sexuality: A Review Of General Semantics." *et Cetera* 72.4 (2015): (2015): 392-9.
- Smith, Stephanie A. "Octavia Butler: A Retrospective." *Feminist Studies* 33.2 (2007).
- Šporčić, Anamarija. "The (Ir)Relevance of Science Fiction to Non-Binary and Genderqueer Readers." *ELOPE; English Language Overseas Perspectives and Enquiries*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2018, pp. 51-67.

