

# Transformation of the Human Race in Octavia E. Butler's *Clay's Ark*

M.Prakash<sup>1</sup>, Dr. K. Lavanya<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Scholar English (part-time), St. Joseph's College of Arts & Science for Women, Hosur.

<sup>2</sup>Head & Asst. Prof. of English, St. Joseph's College of Arts & Science for Women, Hosur.

**Abstract:** This paper is on Butler's *Clay's Ark*, constitutes the beginning of a history played out in the earlier volumes. A man returns to earth from a distant galaxy, inadvertently carrying a disease organism that begins the transformation of the human race. The organisms invade and recode human DNA. Threatening the lives of their hosts if they are not transmitted to other humans. Because transmission requires the breaking of the skin of the uninfected person, the organisms trigger violent behavior and overwhelming lust. The children of the inevitable sexual couplings between infected individuals are not human; they look like catlike, graceful animals and mature rapidly into highly intelligent quadrupeds with superhuman senses of smell and hearing. Resistance to the organism's need to spread, which is impossible except in the case of isolated individuals, ensures physical and mental anguish culminating in death. *Clay's Ark* the least utopian of the patternist book presents three recently infected individuals attempting to maintain their humanity, which in this context signifies their control over biological drives.

**Key words:** organism, transmission, biological, overwhelming...

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*Clay's Ark* the least utopian of the patternist book presents three recently infected individuals attempting to maintain their humanity, which in this context signifies their control over biological drives. Black Maslin, a doctor, believes physical strength and medical technology can prevent the disease's spread; his beautiful and brilliant daughter Rane relies instead on mental willpower and morality.

Both try to escape the consequences of the disease, refusing to adapt to the physical and psychological changes it demands, and both ultimately lose their lives in the struggle. Only the younger daughter, Keira, who was wasting away with leukemia before surrendering to the new disease, survives. In progressing toward death, she has already begun to transform into something ethereal not quite of this world, with a vastly different physiology and psychology from her father and sister. Keria survives because she takes the step neither her father nor sister is willing to take: she bonds with disease and its carriers, willingly accepting the inevitability of the changes necessitated by the organism.

Such evolution represents the only possibility for saving Keria's life, for the recently invented epigenetic therapy, a process that has all but eradicated leukemia by reprogramming faulty genes, has failed to correct her cells. Keira may have less of a stake in protecting human biology because her own biology has never been normatively human; she has less of a stake in protecting human morality because, unlike her sister Rane. She understands it as a utilitarian construct that can be discarded when its social value ceases to function.

The human lose to the organism and to another group of humans carrying a different mutation. The species divides into three competing groups. The self-destructive, telepathic "patternists", bred by the ancient patriarch Doro for their struggle against monteopathic humans and "Clayarks" (the decedents of the characters in *Clay's Ark*). Telepaths treat the nonpsychic humans as an inferior race, referring to them by the denigrating label mute. The

clayarks, considered non-human by the others, are despised and shunned as carriers of the terrifying disease.

Like the patients aboard *Clay's Ark*, the DGD sufferers subtly resemble AIDS victims. Butler portrays them as heroic, attempting to commit suicide or quarantine themselves to avoid injuring the healthy. As in the case of AIDS, some people angrily blame irresponsible sexuality for the spread of DGD: "The damned disease could be wiped out in one generation, but people are still animals when it comes to breeding. Still following mindless urges, like dogs and cats" (12). Although this sounds like essentialist rhetoric people are at the mercy of their biological urges it is important to note that the speaker has undergone voluntary sterilization, proving that biology does not have to be destiny.

Lynn's response to his urging that she do the same is to insist on maintaining control of the one part of her biology functioning normally. "I don't want kids, but I don't want someone else telling me I can't have any ... would you want someone else telling you what to do with your body?" (40), she has. The DGD victims also share some parallels with babies born addicted to crack. They suffer from motor and speech dysfunctions; some have never met their fathers for their own safety, while others have met only the brain-damaged ruin of their mothers; the crimes that cause prejudice against them are not their own.

Butler's appeal for victims' rights, however, shifts dramatically in light of her insistence that the disease may actually benefits society in long run. Just as AIDS research has lead to new discoveries about the immune system and provided valuable information in treating cancer, leukemia, and chronic viral infections, DGD produces highly intelligent individuals who devote their lives to improving life for others; the special value for double-DGD females was discovered by DGD victims, and their own laboratories represent the best hope for a cure. "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" would thus seem to offer the most essentialistic position in a Butler story, dividing humanity into the haves and the have-nots. But even here Butler demands diversity. The first half of the story focuses on the prejudice still-healthy DGD carriers suffer; although many of them have spectacular careers as scientists ironically, DGD victims cure many forms of cancer, they are ignored or abused by uninformed and frightened associates.

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