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Apocalypse and Reclamation of a Multispecies World: A Speciesist and Ethnographic Reading of Octavia E Butler's *Adulthood Rites*

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Abstract

*Multispecies Ethnography is the interconnectedness and inseparability of human beings with other forms of lives. This article employs Multispecies Ethnography to critically examine human-nonhuman relationships in Octavia Butler's *Adulthood Rites*, uncovering speciesist attitudes and practices embedded in the novel. This novel is the second in the Xenogenesis Trilogy. Akin, the protagonist of the trilogy, tries to build communal harmony between the humans and the extraterrestrial clan called Oankali. This paper emphasizes the intersection between speciesism, power dynamics, and ecological sustainability by incorporating the theory of ecofeminism. The trilogy parallels the story of African slaves in America and the conflict that generations of African Americans feel regarding their integration into American society. The experiences of Akin, the first human-oankali hybrid in the earth with other humans pave the way for the exploration of Multispecies Ethnography and Speciesism in the novel *Adulthood Rites*.*

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Speciesism, Xenogenesis, Octavia Butler, Science fiction.

Ethnography usually focuses on human society and human culture, whereas Multispecies Ethnography focuses on the entanglement of human beings with other non-human species such as plants, birds, animals, fungi, and microbes within ecological, social, and political contexts. Human beings used to keep them on the top of the hierarchy. They consider themselves as the dominating species and believe that they can control all the other species of the earth. They view themselves to be superior and the other species to be inferior. This phenomenon is known as the Anthropocene, the epoch where humans dominate other species. There might be a possibility for the Post-Anthropocene epoch, where non-human species from the earth or from any universe can control and dominate human beings. This paper highlights the relationship and interaction of humans and a non-human species named "Oankali" who are from the extra solar system. These extraterrestrials saved the earth when it was completely

destructured by an atomic holocaust, which was created by human beings. They not only saved (abducted) the dying humans from the earth but also reconstructed the earth into a livable planet. Butler's *Adulthood Rites* serves as a pivotal narrative that questions the boundaries of identity and the nature of societal hierarchies. In this novel, the Oankali's genetic manipulation and the resulting hybridization with humans create a new cultural and biological identity that transcends traditional ethnic categories. Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway are the key theorists of Multispecies Ethnography.

Adulthood Rites, the novel taken for the present study, is from Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis/Lilith's Brood* trilogy. This is the second novel of the trilogy. This novel is divided into four parts as "Lo", "Phoenix", "Chkahichdahk" and "Home". This novel tells the coming of age story of Akin, the protagonist, who is the first human-Oankali hybrid male child. As the first male child born to both human and Oankali parents, he experiences his life from the perspective of both humans and Oankali. Being the part of the Oankali, Akin is the only one who cares for humanity to flourish alone. He requested the Oankali to allot the planet Mars for human beings. Jeffrey A. Tucker mentions this in his critical work on the trilogy as, "The entire Oankali project is itself scrutinized in *Adulthood Rites*, when the experiences of Akin among the resisters convince the construct son of Lilith, Nikanj, and the deceased Joseph, whose name alludes to the father of a saviour, that humans deserve to have the option to determine their own futures without Oankali interference, and they prompt Akin to convince the Oankali to allow resisters to colonize Mars" (Tucker 173). He sees it from the perspective of both human beings and the Oankali. Though the Oankali wanted to live life in an interconnected and inseparable way with human beings, the human entirely rejected this idea. This paper highlights the aim of Oankali to create multispecies ethnography with the human beings, whereas the humans practice speciesism and xenophobia. The Oankali embrace difference, whereas the human beings are afraid of difference. Jeffrey A. Tucker denotes this in his article as, "A critique of race as biological essence removes an impediment to embracing difference among humanity; and in order for difference to be embraced it must be cultivated, articulated, and valued. Butler's *Xenogenesis* performs both of these, only apparently contradictory, functions" (Tucker 175).

Octavia Butler introduces the alien species Oankali to illustrate the readers to embrace the "otherness" and the "others". Octavia Butler is an African American writer who is known as the "Mother of Afrofuturism" for her excellence in blending African tradition and culture with today's technoculture. She has contributed several short stories, two standalone novels, two series of novels and a trilogy. She is the recipient of Hugo and Nebula awards. She is the first science fiction writer to receive the prestigious McArthur Fellowship. Her novels have the Black people, especially Women as the protagonist. She doesn't portray them as the oppressed instead she portrays them as practical and radical who has the desire to live. Butler creates bonds between groups that are generally considered to be separate and unrelated, and suggests hybridity as the potential root of good family and blessed community life.

In the select novel, *Adulthood Rites* the protagonist Akin's coming of age stands as the beginning point for the development of a new kind of relationship between human and non-human species. The Oankali's intent to create a new form of life by reproducing with human beings is identified by the humans to be a problem. At the end of the first novel of the trilogy the humans who were against the idea of gene trade with the Oankali are sent to the earth to settle down there. They were deprived of their sterility. The Oankali sterilized the human beings before sending them down to the earth. On Earth, the humans who were against the gene trade are known as "resisters". They have their own villages and weapons. They were against the Oankali who settled down on the earth. Lilith is one of the mothers of Akin. He is the child of Joseph Father (Human male), Lilith Mother

(Human Female), NikanjOoan (ooloi), Ahajas Ty (Oankali Female) and DichaanIshliin (Oankali Male). Akin looks so much humane when he was born and when he was a child. The people of the resister village are fond of thieving the construct babies. The babies who are born to the Oankali and humans are known as construct babies. The resisters of fond of construct babies thinking them to be human babies. Nikanj mentions this as, “Your people have made Human-looking male babies a very valuable commodity” (Butler, 9). The resisters are especially fond of male babies because they think that humanity can be flourished once again with the fertilized construct male babies.

The resisters care for only male babies. They consider male babies as treasure. Lilith mentions this in this novel as, “Un-Human women are offensive to them, but they don’t usually try to hurt them, and they do sleep with them – like a racist sleeping with racially different women” (Butler 11). The resisters abduct Akin, wrongly identifying him as a male human being. Akin, being the first human-Oankali male hybrid embodies the tension between human and alien heritage. His struggle to reconcile his dual identity raises critical questions about belonging and the nature of community in a multispecies society. Speciesism, defined as the discrimination against non-human species based on perceived superiority, leads to the exploitation of humans, raising ethical questions about power dynamics and the treatment of marginalized groups.

When viewed from the perspectives of the Oankali, their actions are justified as they seek to save humanity from its self-destructive tendencies. However, this paternalistic approach reveals the dangers of speciesism, as it inherently devalues human autonomy. Akin’s journey challenges this perspective, emphasizing the need for mutual respect and understanding between two species. Butler critiques anthropocentrism by illustrating the consequences of placing human experiences above all else. The Oankali’s manipulation of human genetics for their purposes serves as a metaphor for colonial practices, where dominant groups impose their will on others. This parallel underscores the need to recognize the agency of all beings, regardless of species, and to advocate for ethical coexistence. In *Adulthood Rites*, Octavia Butler masterfully weaves themes of multispecies ethnography and speciesism into a narrative that challenges conventional notions of identity and hierarchy. By exploring the complexities of interspecies relationships, Butler invites readers to reflect on the implications of their own societal structures and biases. As we navigate a world increasingly aware of the interconnectedness of life, Butler’s work remains a poignant reminder of the importance of empathy and ethical considerations in our relationships with all beings.

The novel not only explores the biological hybridity between humans and Oankali but also invites a critical reflection on the nature of ethnography and the ethical implications of speciesism. Through the character of Akin, Butler interrogates the complexities of navigating a dual identity in a world rife with prejudice and power imbalance. The Oankali, characterized by their distinctive biological and social traits, play a pivotal role in reshaping human identity. The concept of genetic manipulation introduces a radical shift in identity formation. Akin’s hybrid nature is significant in illustrating the potential for new identities to emerge in a multispecies context. He is seen as both a product of collaboration and a target of speciesist prejudice, forcing him to grapple with his sense of self in relation to both human and Oankali expectations. This duality complicates the notion of ethnography, demonstrating that identity can be multifaceted and fluid, shaped by diverse experiences and interactions. Butler also weaves intersectionality into her narrative, highlighting how different forms of identity intersect in complex ways. The Oankali’s view of human beings as inferior mirrors real-world ethnic hierarchies, where marginalized groups face discrimination based on arbitrary characteristics. Through characters such as Akin, Butler critiques these hierarchies, emphasizing the necessity of recognizing and valuing diverse identities.

From the Oankali’s perspective, their actions are justified in the name of survival, positioning themselves as benevolent protectors of a self-destructive humanity. However, this justification

obscures the ethical implications of their dominance. Akin's journey becomes a critical counter-narrative, challenging the notion that one species can rightfully impose its will on another. His experiences highlight the need for recognition and respect for individual agency across species lines. The novel prompts readers to reflect on their own societal structures and biases, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of identity that transcends species boundaries. As we confront a world that increasingly recognizes interconnectedness, Butler's work remains a poignant reminder of the importance of empathy, ethical coexistence, and the celebration of diverse identities in all their forms.

Akin's relationships with the humans he encounters in *Adulthood Rites* are complex and multifaceted, reflecting both his hybrid identity and the broader themes of acceptance, prejudice, and power dynamics. Akin, as the first human-Oankali hybrid, grapples with a sense of belonging. His unique identity often alienates him from both humans and Oankali. Among humans, he faces suspicion and fear due to his Oankali heritage. Many see him as a symbol of what they have lost or fear—a hybrid that threatens traditional human identity. The humans Akin meets often exhibit speciesist attitudes, viewing him as an aberration or a traitor. This prejudice underscores the societal divides that Butler explores. For example, some humans express a visceral dislike or distrust of him, perceiving him as a reminder of the Oankali's manipulation and control over humanity. This creates a barrier between Akin and those who might otherwise embrace him. Despite these challenges, Akin also seeks to bridge the gap between humans and Oankali. His desire to understand both sides motivates him to communicate and engage with humans. He embodies the potential for coexistence and understanding, challenging the fear-driven narratives that dominate human attitudes toward the Oankali. Akin's interactions often reveal moments of empathy and connection. He encounters individuals who, despite their initial fears, come to recognize his humanity. These relationships illustrate the potential for compassion across species boundaries and highlight the importance of seeing beyond mere biological differences. Ultimately, Akin's role evolves into that of a mediator. He strives to foster understanding between the two species, emphasizing shared experiences and common goals. His journey is a reflection of Butler's larger themes of interdependence and the need for collaboration in a diverse society.

As a hybrid, Akin possesses a unique bond with the Oankali, particularly because he embodies their genetic heritage. He is raised among them and deeply understands their culture, values, and perspectives. This connection allows him to appreciate the Oankali's goals of survival and genetic diversity, which are central to their identity. Despite this cultural connection, Akin often feels caught between two worlds. While he is part Oankali, he is also human, leading to a dual identity that creates tension. He sometimes struggles with the Oankali's paternalistic views, particularly their belief in their superiority and their manipulation of human genetics. This tension highlights his desire for autonomy and self-determination. Akin faces expectations from the Oankali regarding his role as a hybrid. They see him as a bridge between humans and Oankali, tasked with fostering understanding and collaboration. This responsibility can be both empowering and burdensome, as he navigates the complexities of representing two species. Akin develops a deep empathy for both humans and Oankali, striving to understand their motivations and fears. This empathy allows him to engage with Oankali on a more personal level, leading to moments of connection and mutual respect, especially with figures like Jodahs, who shares similar experiences. As the story progresses, Akin begins to assert his agency more strongly. He challenges some of the Oankali's decisions and their views on human beings, advocating for a more equitable relationship. This act of rebellion signifies his growth and desire for a more balanced coexistence between the species.

Akin's journey encapsulates the complexities of identity formation in a world where boundaries between species are increasingly blurred. His relationships with both humans and Oankali

highlight the challenges of acceptance, the persistence of prejudice, and the potential for empathy and understanding across species lines. Butler's narrative invites readers to reconsider traditional notions of ethnography and identity, emphasizing that these constructs can be fluid and shaped by interspecies interactions. As Akin navigates his dual identity, he embodies the potential for bridging divides and fostering cooperation in a diverse society. Ultimately, *Adulthood Rites* serves as a poignant critique of speciesism and anthropocentrism, urging a reevaluation of how we perceive and engage with the "other," whether human or non-human. By challenging readers to reflect on the ethical implications of power dynamics and the importance of mutual respect, Butler's work remains relevant in contemporary discussions about identity, belonging, and coexistence. As we move toward a more interconnected future, Akin's journey serves as a compelling reminder of the value of empathy, collaboration, and the rich tapestry of life that emerges when we embrace the complexity of our shared existence.

Donna Haraway's idea of "becoming-with-companions" (Haraway38) in her book *When Species Meet*, aligns with the Oankali-Human hybridization, where survival is not about dominance but about rationality and mutual transformation. Her critique of Speciesism rethinks human-nonhuman relationships, which resonates deeply with the select novels. E.O. Wilson's concept of biodiversity and the ethical responsibility to protect life forms from extinction further underscores the stakes of Butler's narrative. The Oankali's manipulation of human genetics can be seen as a response to the ecological collapse caused by the actions of humans while the Oankali presenting an alternative path that resists the destructive forces of human beings. The select novels challenge the idea of species boundaries as fixed and instead propose a more fluid understanding of identity and existence. The Oankali's genetic engineering, which fuses human and alien DNA, question the very concept of "purity" and highlights the potentiality for new forms of life that transcend conventional species classifications. The hybrid beings in Butler's world offer a compelling critique of speciesist thinking, suggesting that diversity, rather than conformity is the key to survival.

Multispecies ethnography challenges the traditional anthropocentric frameworks where the perspective of non-human species is always excluded. Butler's exploration of multispecies relationships offers a blueprint for an alternative future where humans and nonhumans collaborate for mutual benefit and ecological balance. By focusing on the ethical implications of genetic manipulation and the potential for hybrid identities, Butler rethinks the future of life on Earth, suggesting that true survival may depend on our ability to see beyond species boundaries and to embrace the complexity of multispecies coexistence. Through her protagonists' journey of self-discovery and transformation, Butler crafts a narrative that is both a critique of the status quo and a hopeful vision for a more interconnected and equitable world.

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