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The Seeds of Change:

**Reviving the Black Community through a Critical Analysis of Octavia E. Butler's
"Wild Seed"**

I worry about criticism influencing me because it can create a vicious circle or something worse... It's not very good for storytelling. – Octavia E. Butler

The cycle of violence towards Black Americans has been around since the colonizing of Africa. In America its presence is still being felt over five hundred years later and has become an institutionalized, economic, and social hierarchy where those of darker skin are at the bottom of an ever changing hierarchal scale. How can racism be defeated for the prosperity of African Americans? What must be done for change to happen? Octavia E. Butler's 1980 novel, *Wild Seed* mirrors the societal problems, not only in the American society, but specifically in the black community. If America's history of patriarchal race supremacy and racial division of womanhood which still segregates America's present cannot be addressed; than the black community will not have a prosperous future. Butler's novel addresses the ills of several literary theories particularly between the "relationships of power on the human body as a site of conflict: between men and women" (Potts 331). Although she, herself, has claimed to not be influenced by any type of critical theory, her work stands as a significant artifact of Black American literature and history.

Butler's novel is a prime example of Afrofuturism where the text uses science fiction themes such as "abduction, slavery, displacement, and alienation to re-narrate the past, present, and future of the African diaspora" (Ramirez 3). Readers can be interested by this novel because

it takes a genre dominated and characterized by mostly white males and turns it into a story of fictionalized truth of the African American journey allowing the past to be made easier to understand. The reader can enjoy a story filled not with otherworldly beings, but supernatural subjects right on Earth living in a time that was despicable to persons of color. Readers can merge that conscious of thought to how humans would treat real aliens, if not, imagine and experience the horror and pain those deemed as “others” actually endured. As the author is a Black American woman in the science fiction community her work inevitably makes her unique to American history.

As far as criticism goes, what a reader brings to the work is as important as what I put into it, so I don't get upset when I am misinterpreted. Except when I say what I really meant was so-and-so, and I am told, “Oh, but subconsciously you must have meant this.” I don't mind attempts to interpret my fiction, but I am not willing to have critics interpret my subconscious. I doubt they are qualified (Potts 337).

Regardless of Octavia E. Butler's perceptions of her work this novel's literary body has an impact on the American culture, particularly in African American life and literary criticism.

Butler used the topics of race, gender, and power along with themes of eugenics, mutant or magical abilities, immortality, loneliness and alienation, set within American slavery. Her science fiction characters are able to thrive in the past, conveying real history, and live to a prospering future. Butler portrayed the mindfulness of the importance of black history and black excellence (strength and prosperity of the mind and body) through her characters' thoughts, objectives, choices, and actions which helped create an individual and unique black consciousness, goals that have been steady, but surely growing in the Black American community.

Writing has mostly been a form of an author's individual expression, unless noted, but critics mark them as hallmarks of history. This is especially true among African American literature where writing for self-expression has been considered a selfish luxury while its people are being oppressed. A most important aspect of African American criticism is "analyzing the ways in which literary texts undermine or reinforce the racist ideologies that have kept black Americans politically oppressed and economically disadvantaged" (Tyson 348). Early Black literature became one of the battlegrounds for the showcasing of the black life especially to promote visibility and the advancement of the race outside of enforced racial inferiority and stereotyping.

The literary war was seen through the New Negro and Harlem Renaissance movements, the former preferring the depiction of African American lives as educated, middle class, nuclear families in order to promote social change (the burden of representation) and the latter, depicting African American lives as they really were: the good, the bad, and the worst (the fullness of representation). Butler's novel conveyed both: the New Negro movement by bringing in the presence of a male, dominant figure, a lover and a father, a presence deemed lacking in the present day black community. However the novel embodied the Harlem Renaissance by drawing on pain and revealing the destructive hyper-masculine presence as well as the struggle of black womanhood.

In black literature "black male and female authors have been known to place black men and black women in stereotypical roles...black female authors illustrate black men to be users and abusers. The negative depictions are believed to have come about as a result of slavery" (Wyatt i). Butler fell to the stereotyping of the male through her main character, Doro. Doro's character was portrayed similar to that of a black slavemaster. At the beginning of the story it states, "Sometimes, one must become a master to avoid becoming a slave" (Butler 28) which can

explain why Doro, an immortal becomes master of his own seed (breeding) villages. Doro displayed the characteristics of a conqueror, such as the dominating white society. He was willfully ignorant to the value of human life, except how he saw fit to use and control it. Just as white society in America has Doro broke down his people's sense of individuality and self-worth settling them in communities which he dictated through abuse. Once he was finished with them, could not control them, or they finally had the courage to rebel against and escape him, he hunted them down and killed them. Doro's hyper-masculine physical strength, aggression, and sexuality gave way to his hyper-visibility in his murders. However because Doro has the position of power his behavior which mirrors white society, although unorthodox, is leadership: "people often hesitate to challenge a man who seems to be important and purposeful" (Butler 28). His alpha male personality allowed no questioning of his power without demise which is how white supremacy has lasted and become institutionalized.

Doro's selection of persons based on their supernatural talent can be a metaphor for the potential for human greatness through mating. In past and present American society this breeding has taken root within the black community due to the effects of colorism and its benefits since slavery. Due to the negative effects of slavery African Americans have realized that by having a lighter complexion and/or less African features equates to a better living, acceptance, and favoritism in the Eurocentric American society. The black community has been trying to find ways to maneuver around white supremacy since slavery and the concept of interrelations remains the strongest. Although interrelations could destroy white supremacy, a primary problem the black community fears is that the mixing will inadvertently destroy the Black American culture in favor of lighter skin tones and more white beauty standards which prospers white supremacist's control over the black race. Doro's actions in creating seed

villages suggests a strong case of Eugenics for the creation of a master race through the breeding of races of those aforementioned. In comparison to America the interrelations between races could create that unified American culture, the melting pot America was dreamed to be. The unification of races will always contain the distinctions of each race, but the ideal goal is to produce children that will break the established color barrier and the social hierarchy, ultimately creating a new and improved society.

Scott Solomon of *Aeon* article, “The Future is Mixed Race” established America as a state of hybridization, the mixing of genes due to a constant state of movement ultimately “strengthening and prolonging the human race” which is what Doro was trying to do, but under his control. If people can have the freedom to choose where they live, how they live, and who to mate with, and not be dominated then the American racial hierarchy could collapse on itself \ giving the black community the freedom it has deserved. However it still serves white supremacists ideas that only through mixing can the black race get under from their inferior label.

Such as many fiction novels have made it ideal that the leading lady will go through turmoil with the male lead often causing unbridled problems within the relationship, the Cult of True Womanhood remained strong in Butler’s *Anyanwu* despite that the concept being desired in white women. “Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (or artifacts, cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political social and psychological oppression of women” (Tyson 78). Throughout the relationship Doro often kept Anyanwu submissive by keeping her pregnant and threatening her children, but even then his threats were hollow because he knew she would and could leave him if harm ever came to them. For over thirty-seven hundred years Doro, the immortal has lived a very controlled and murderous

lifestyle, but Anyanwu who contained impeccable supernatural abilities, far greater than his, despite not being immortal was his better. He knew he would never find someone like her again and that's why his constant need to keep her bound to him was his greatest goal, but his domineering aggression proved beyond unlivable for her and so that is why she left to create her own community.

Patricia Hill Collins' novel, *Black Feminist Thought* gives details discussing the portrayal of black female independence and the myths of negative black matriarchy. This portrayal is very similar to the negative slave stereotype of the Mammy, a nurturing black matron who is submissive to her master, yet is able to voice her own thoughts, making her a beloved and trustworthy person capable of running the plantation (the villages) while the master (Doro) is away. However once Anyanwu decided to leave Doro his obsessive nature of a slavemaster reclaiming his runaway property appeared.

Anyanwu's independence, according to Collins, portrays the black matriarch who is able to redefine herself only once she has freed herself from her husband/lover/master as now she has the will power to take care of herself. This new found independence emasculates the man hence why Doro reappears in Anyanwu's life trying to reestablish that control. Anyanwu's decision to depart her master/lover was an act of defiance of the natural order and so had to be corrected as such freedom for the black community was once equated with manhood and the freedom of blacks with the redemption of black masculinity.

In terms of reviving the black community for the black woman's sake, she is going to have to, according to Collins, adopt a "watching" perspective of double consciousness by becoming "familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection" (114). African American women's ideas and actions force

a rethinking of the concept of hegemony, that they are the objectified “Other” because of their willing participation in their own self-oppression. By understanding this concept Collins suggests in present society African American women can help break the cycle of oppression and thereby revive the black community by insisting on “black female self-definition” (145), no longer viewing one’s self-worth through the eyes of white society or the black man’s. Freedom comes from self-determination to no longer be the victim nor being ashamed of one’s person.

The novel, “Wild Seed” showcased three harmful binaries: patriarchy vs. womanhood, masculinity vs. femininity, and the possession of vs. free persons, entwining them into the problematic black identity. A deconstructionist interpretation of this novel in reference to the building of the black community would deem that it’s best for black men and women to separate in order to grow. However it contradicts itself at the end with the idea that by separating it actually allows for each person to focus on their needs to which collectively builds communal worth which is what the two characters did. The ending of “Wild Seed” portrayed the relationship of Doro and Anyanwu as loving partners growing separate seed villages as one, the interpreted black community by not only separating for periods of time, but also including other races of supernatural persons into their community.

For a race to completely dismantle itself it would have to come at the hands of its own people by disregarding each other, but through learning and understanding one’s past and cultures will destroy the prejudice game of us versus them that has plagued the black community for over 500 years. Once this new consciousness settles into the individual and is shown throughout the collective Black American minds the barriers of the American society will fall and lead the country into an era of equality, freeing everyone from the restraints of oppression, and leading into the age of the true American cultural identity of homogeneity.

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