Monsters or Misunderstood?

Octavia Butler’s bizarre, parasitic Tlic aliens in her short story “Bloodchild” are a true triumph of the imagination. They are so strange to the reader that they are terrifying. The most terrifying aspect is that they are intelligent parasitoid creatures that need a living host to reproduce. The preferred host: human. Certainly there can be made allusions from the story to caste systems, slavery, and the basic mistreatment of other groups that humankind inflicts upon itself; Octavia Butler has had a long career of writing about these themes. I will not argue that the treatment of the Terrans (humans) by the Tlic was fair, but I think that it was far fairer than it needed be. It is my belief that the Tlic aliens are not monsters, and that many are, in fact, as compassionate toward the Terrans as they believe that they can possibly be.

A fair way to interpret Butler’s “Bloodchild”, as I stated previously, is as a metaphor of the injustice between one group of human beings to another group of human beings. If taken more literally, as the injustice between one species of creature to another species of creature, I think that the Tlic come up looking far more favorable creatures than most. The Tlic keep Terrans on preserves where they can live a life similar to that that they led before encountering the Tlic (although the occasional harvesting of Tlic larva from a family member is certainly unnerving and new). Yes, Terrans are confined and treated as second class citizens at best, but Tlic need not treat them as anything more than food; they choose to let Terrans live as normal and fulfilling a life as they believe they can and still self-preserve.

Tlic were not always so kind to Terrans. When the Tlic first encountered the Terrans they viewed the Terrans as “not much more than convenient big warm-blooded animals” (Bulter, *Bloodchild* 4). The Terran narrator, Gan, shared that, “they would pen several of us together, male and female, and feed us only eggs. That way they could be sure of getting another generation out of us no matter how we tried to hold out.”

This passage is important to understanding the limited, but clearly present, compassion that the Tlic hold for the Terrans. It was possible and successful historically to pen the Terrans and feed them the narcotic Tlic eggs to keep them easily in line like cattle. Yet, the Tlic chose not to do so. One can argue that the Tlic only gave the Terrans their family structures back to quell the small rebellions that humans were starting to rid themselves of the unfair treatment they received at the hands of the Tlic. However, the humans would not have been able to host a rebellion had the Tlic left them in a constant drug induced stupor. It was in giving the Terrans more freedom that the Tlic suffered.

The Tlic chose to let Terrans have lives other than that of a literal cattle creature. This is a mercy that humans have rarely possessed. There are very few creatures that humans eat or keep that are allowed to keep any shadow of their family or former habitat. Even in “Bloodchild” Gan is sent out to slaughter an animal that his family keeps in a pen for eating. “It was a handsome breeding male and my mother would not be pleased to see me bring it in”(Butler, *Bloodchild* 6). If the Terrans are caging other creatures, breeding them against their will, and killing them to survive, then the Tlic can hardly be seen as monsters in comparison.

The Tlic can be further sympathized as trying to treat the Terrans as well as they can when one considers their reproductive nature. The Tlic, including T’Gatoi, a government official whom is very close with Gan’s, are all parasitoids.

“A parasitoid is an organism that spends a significant portion of its life history attached to or within a single host organism in a relationship that is in essence parasitic; unlike a true parasite, however, it ultimately sterilizes or kills and sometimes consumes the host. Thus parasitoids are similar to typical parasites except in the more dire prognosis for the host” (Wikipedia, *Parasitoid)*.

Tlic are creatures that evolved most likely millions of years ago to eat creatures from the inside out before being able to exist free from the host. It was not a conscious choice of the Tlic to destroy other life in order to exist, simply something that they were thrust into. Primitive humankind (Terrankind?) adapted to consume living creatures, ending their lives, in order to exist. By the time Terrans were conscious enough to consider the fairness of their existence at the expense of the lives of other creatures, the damage was done. Tlic can no more survive as a species without hosts than Terrans can without ending the lives of plants and animals.

Despite the inherent injustice of the Tlic birthing process to other lifeforms, the Tlic have tried to be as compassionate to the Terrans as they can be. They must grow their young inside of hosts in order to survive; allowing the host to survive is optional and a mercy that the Tlic have chosen for the Terrans. The Tlic usually only submit a human to a “birthing” two or three times lifetime. Gan’s father only went through the process three times and he lived nearly twice as long as the average human. In order to preserve the family unit of Terrans Tlic only choose one Terran from each family to lay eggs in. This means that each family only produces two or three eggs maximum. Considering that a family must have at least a mother, father, and child to exist as a family by practical definition, the Tlic could still “birth” three times easily and let the entire family of Terrans die in pain. The result for the Tlic is the same.

Rather than submit all humans to a painful death in an animal pen, the Tlic choose only one Terrans from each family to go through the experience, and choose to save their life. I think that this practice is more than simply the best and easiest way to use humans for “birthing” Tlic. The process may seem horrible, but this practice of choosing only one Terran and sparring their life is done out of compassion as much as practicality.

A third area of compassion above what is necessary exhibited by the Tlic for Terrans is that of a limited freedom of choice. T’Gatoi is the Tlic in charge of Gan’s Terran family. T’Gatoi “overseas the joining of families” (Butler, *Bloodchild* 2). In fact, she introduced Gan’s mother to his father. Gan goes to on to narrate, “My parents, pleased with each other in spite of their very different ages, married” (Butler, *Bloodchild* 4). This sentence allows us to postulate that Terrans, to at least a limited degree, have the ability to choose who they marry.

Marriage is not the only choice afforded to Terrans. When T’Gatoi needs to lay her eggs in a host, she never considers Qui as a partner, although he is a more obvious choice than Gan being bigger and stronger. She knows that Qui does not want to be a host and that she has other options, making it unnecessary to force the process on him. When it appears that Gan does not want to carry her eggs she tells him that it is his choice and that she will put them in Hoa if he chooses against their plantation in himself. Although it is a terrible and limited choice, the choice to have T’Gatoi’s eggs inside of himself was ultimately Gan’s decision.

Along with allowing the Terrans some freedom of choice, the Tlic seem to truly be emotionally attached to the Terrans that they have paired with. Gan shares with the reader, “T’Gatoi and my mother had been friends all my mother’s life”(Butler, *Bloodchild* 2). T’Gatoi has allowed herself to get close to her Terran family. The Tlic would not allow themselves to get close to creatures that they only see as a resource; that would ultimately end in pain at the consumption of the resource. Clearly, T’Gatoi has more an invested interest in Terrans than just something to plant her eggs in. During her developmental years she is friends with Gan’s mother as she is developing, or growing up as a child. This suggests that the Tlic allow Terran children to play and grow with what is essentially Tlic children. I say what is essentially Tlic children, because although T’Gatoi was many times older than Gan’s mother when they played as children, she was still just a child in Tlic age and development.

Because of the close bond that T’Gatoi and Gan’s mother, Lien, share T’Gatoi considers Gan’s house as a second home, even going so far as to not require any formalities between the family and herself. T’Gatoi goes out of her way to allow Gan’s family the small honor of allowing them to be themselves around her. Furthermore, T’Gatoi seems to genuinely care about Lien and her family. She is concerned about Lien’s health when she refuses to eat the life-restoring sterile Tlic eggs. She even goes so far as to compliment Lien with, “I like being able to come here… This place is a refuge because of you, yet you won’t take care of yourself” (Butler, *Bloodchild* 2). T’Gatoi has few economic reasons for wanting to keep Lien alive; Lien is probably too old to bear more Terran children. T’Gatoi seems to only care about Lien as a friend rather than as a resource. It can easily be overlooked that T’Gatoi matched Lien with the man whom T’Gatoi was birthed from. This is not some coincidence. T’Gatoi cared greatly about both and probably thought she was doing both a great favor by matching them with each other. Simply put, T’Gatoi seems to care about the well-being of Terrans for reasons that go beyond just using them as birth vessels.

This belief of Terrans being more than animals to be used is deeply held value toT’Gatoi. Gan and T’Gatoi have a tense argument over letting the family keep the illegal rifle that Gan uses to shoot the achti. T’Gatoi allows Gan to keep the rifle when Gan says, “If we’re not your animals, if these are adult things, accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a partner” (Butler, *Bloodchild* 12). Despite the fear that T’Gatoi has for both her children and herself and the danger presented by letting Gan keep the rifle, she allows him to keep it. She does not see the Terrans as animals and could not bear herself to take the rifle when taking the weapon was presented to have that kind of implication.

I infer that T’Gatoi is not the only Tlic that cares about Terrans as more than birth vessels. T’Gatoi is part of a political party that is pushing for Terran preserves: a place where Terrans can be more than just an animal to be harvested. “Bloodchild” makes it apparent that there are detractors from this view as other Tlic look at Gan hungrily when he is off the Preserve and only stay away because he is with T’Gatoi. The fact that T’Gatoi is part of a like-minded political party suggests that there are other Tlic that see the value in letting Terrans live as more than animals. T’Gatoi is not alone in her beliefs.

Finally, even if everything that T’Gatoi has done for the family was purely manipulative, even if allowing Terrans to have families and some rights is all in the best interest of the Tlic (which I don’t believe), the Tlic still have given the Terrans a small and unnecessary act of compassion by making life seem better than it is. The Tlic could rule the Terrans by utter fear. The Tlic could let Terrans be conscious during the “birthing” process or make others watch it. The Tlic could break up Terran families until Terrans had no one to be loyal to or care about: until Terrans had no one to fight for. The Tlic could make the Terrans live in squalor or take away all freedoms, but they don’t. They don’t breed sedated humans in cages which would, as Gan states, “would make them little more than convenient big animals” (Butler, *Bloodchild* 4). No, the Tlic treat the Terrans better than simple host animals and it isn’t necessary.

The Tlic are a tragic race. They cannot exist without the pain of others and are designed to kill in order to be birthed. Perhaps they should be praised for choosing to temporarily harm victims rather than kill them, as they have evolved to do. The Tlic preserve as many rights and joys for the Terrans as they believe they can, sometimes potentially at their own danger in the case of T’Gatoi allowing Gan to keep his rifle. If they were true monsters the Tlic would not even try to give humans a comfortable life on a Preserve. The very nature of the Tlic should make them want to destroy the Terrans. The Tlic do not have a fair and equitable relationship with the Terrans: they never could as parasitoids. Instead, the Tlic are trying to make the relationship with the Terrans as fair as it can be. They cannot be considered horrible monsters for that. They allow the Terrans far more freedoms than humans ever have of another species. Perhaps for that, they should be applauded.

References

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