Beyond Allegory: Postcolonial Debates in Science Fiction

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Beyond Allegory: Postcolonial Debates in Science Fiction

A Thesis by

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ABSTRACT

Beyond Allegory: Postcolonial Debates in Science Fiction

by Su Chen

Marxist allegorical reading in Third World literature and the pertinent analysis of binary class struggles in First World literature, typified by Fredric Jameson’s 1986 essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” have long been canonized in literary studies. The undertaking of a postcolonial debate on literary interpretation is a necessary step toward readjusting postcolonial study into the paradigm of critical analysis prioritized by Marxism. Here, I demonstrate that both The Three-Body Problem (2014) from China and Dawn (1987) from the U.S., science fiction novels typifying Third and First World literature, respectively, primarily reflect a postcolonial struggle rather than class conflict. By examining the varied, unconventional forms of resistance of the heroines from the two novels against different male-centered colonial dominances, I illustrate individual women and women of color’s determined anticolonial endeavors for their emancipation from their oppressors. Such an attempt supersedes the male-centric Marxist class interpretation. I also use the critique of classic postcolonial theories and integrate other anticolonial perspectives in the analysis, such as the philosophy of romance and the politics of betrayal, to elaborate on the two female protagonists’ unique attempts at decolonization in the genre of science fiction, which not only provide individual women and women of color with the agency to defy various forms of domination but also invigorate the conventional Marxism-focused literary discipline by incorporating it with a postcolonial rubric.
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Beyond Allegory: Postcolonial Debates in Science Fiction

Fredric Jameson controversially argues in his essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” (1986) that the Marxist canonical tradition in the literary analysis of Third World literature must be read allegorically. Such a presumption, according to scholars such as Aijaz Ahmad, presumably ignores postcolonial perspectives. According to Yogita Goyal, however, Jameson’s publication strongly argues for the value of Third World literature that emphasizes the Marxist method in postcolonial reading practices such that the gap between postcolonial critique and Marxist analysis is a false dichotomy. She suggests that even the term “Third World” itself cannot exist without a direct relation to its subordinate position to the First World, and that Jameson’s use of the term lacks the discernment of the historical colonial underpinning that demarcates the master–slave economic or class dialectic, merely positioning the “worlds” in a binary relationship (Goyal 523). While integrating the critique of imperialism into an analysis of classic 19th-century British literature, Spivak also reminds us that the “worlding” in literary history exists in the context of European imperialist culture and should not be overlooked.

In fact, the postcolonial debate within the Marxist paradigm started decades before Jameson’s article was published. As Robin D. G. Kelley argues in his article “A Poetics of Anticolonialism” (1999), in the mid-20th century, Aimé Césaire particularly called for the anticolonial struggle to supersede the proletarian revolution in colonized (Third World) countries (10). Applying Césaire’s call to literature studies in the reading of diversified literary genres, I argue that speculative fiction, such as science fiction, helps refocus the postcolonial debate in literary analysis and rebalances the long-standing generalization of Third World literature as allegorical solely through the lens of Marxism.
Indeed, science fiction often goes beyond the canonization and the typical framework of Marxism, illuminating how anticolonial struggles cannot be separated from class conflicts, particularly given Franz Fanon’s claim in “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” that local elites will replace colonizers in the postcolony. I extend these arguments to examine the role of women as the classic allegorical framework assumes a male subject who stands in for the collective. Instead, I argue for an intersectional postcolonial framework that helps us understand the unique circumstances of women under colonial regimes. Thus, discussing two female characters in the science fiction novels *The Three-Body Problem* (2014) by Cixin Liu and *Dawn* (1987) by Octavia Butler, Ye Wenjie and Lilith, respectively, reveals how both First World literature and Third World literature oppose multiple colonial influences in unique ways. Such a perspective not only interrupts the prevalent Marxist reasoning in postcolonial literature but also heightens postcolonial discussion and exemplifies the battle of women of color against heterogenous male-dominant colonial discourses, such as radical communist regimes in *The Three-Body Problem* and extraterrestrial colonial oppression in *Dawn*.

Accordingly, I investigate the diverse scope of colonial power (e.g., extreme communism, imperialist capitalism, male-centric domination, and extraterrestrial imperialism) in *The Three-Body Problem* and distinguish how each battle primarily represents a colonial struggle in addition to Marxist class conflicts, particularly in the modern Chinese sociopolitical landscape. I discuss the female protagonist Ye’s defiant reactions to colonial domination and argue that her revolt against humanity signifies her struggle to liberate herself from colonial subjugation as a woman, even though she betrays humanity. Subsequently, in *Dawn*, I show how extraterrestrials’ seemingly generous efforts to help humans disguise their colonial attempts. The colonizers’ varied schemes to dominate the female protagonist, Lilith, mirror historical colonial discourses, such as
colonialism in Latin America and antebellum US slavery. Accordingly, I explore how Lilith constantly fights the aliens’ colonial coercion. As she is African American, her struggle against alien imperialism not only signifies her resistance to colonial dominance but also serves as an individual representation that symbolizes the historical efforts of women of color to free themselves from the androcentric colonial mainstream grounded in the history of enslavement.

Furthermore, in response to Jameson’s argument regarding Marxist critiques as a philosophy of romance, which offers a possibility to perceive some other “historical rhythms,” or “Utopian transformations” amid oppressive representation in realistic literature (Political Unconscious 104), Goyal also encourages an anticolonial romance reading in postcolonial literature to reclaim an emancipatory anticolonial future. Such novels reconceive “vanishing lifeworlds” or rewrite “unsatisfactory histories” that readdress a longing for a utopian world (526). Goyal’s idealistic longings for postcolonial readings might not seem to perfectly demonstrate Ye’s and Lilith’s unique struggles against various male-dominated powers in both novels. However, the heroines in the two novels both possess distinctive idealistic visions that are upheld in their battles against their colonial influences. Although different from each other, both Ye’s and Lilith’s idealistic longings, which I will discuss separately, might not necessarily contribute to the typical romantic interpretation of recreating a better future. Nevertheless, their aspirations for deliverance drive them continuously to defy predominant patriarchal powers despite the constant hindrances, thus still expressing a utopian desire for a postcolonial emancipatory world that is in line with the philosophy of romance, as Goyal suggested.

Reading both The Three-Body Problem and Dawn through the lens of postcolonial critique illuminates individual women’s resistance to colonial control. However, considering the colonizers’ overwhelming power and the complexity of their domination, both female protagonists
adopt atypical yet unwavering methods, which illustrate their struggle for liberation. As Albert Memmi reminds us, “To live, the colonized need to do away with colonization. To become a man, he must do away with the colonized being that he has become” (151). While still echoing the traditional male-centered allegorical framework, Memmi emphasizes the inevitable goal of the colonized’s battle for liberation. However, in failing to account for how colonized men subject colonized women, Memmi’s analysis proves inadequate in illuminating the struggles that women face in the pursuit of freedom. The heroines in both novels represent the predominant model of anticolonial resistance as they fight against systems of oppression. Ye, for example, radically rebels against her oppressors, which will likely lead to the destruction of humanity, while Lilith makes relentless yet frequently futile attempts to defend herself against the colonial coercion of the extraterrestrial Oankali.

Incorporating Norma Alarcón’s discussions on the politics of betrayal in relation to Malinche’s historical treason of Mexico by aiding the Spanish colonizers, I will also examine separately how both Ye and Lilith betray humanity to help aliens, acting based on their individual objectives instead of advocating for the entire human race. This echoes Malinche’s controversial helping of the Spanish colonizers by translating for them when she spoke for herself rather than for her people, which, in fact, signified her resistance to traditional patriarchal dominance as a woman of color. As I mentioned earlier, inviting postcolonial reading in literary interpretation, particularly in science fiction, balances the Marxist literary norms, articulating the long-overlooked efforts of the colonized to emancipate themselves from their colonizers. The struggle of the heroines in both novels against their oppressors also supersedes the classic male-dominated allegorical interpretation either in class conflicts or anticolonial struggle and even goes beyond the
allegorical framework, underlining instead the decolonizing endeavors of marginalized individuals, specifically women of color, under diverse male-centric colonial supremacies.

I will now demonstrate in sequential order the two novels, in the context of alien colonization, juxtaposing in detail the female characters in both novels in their unique and unorthodox efforts to battle against male-centric domination.

**Radical Defiance in *The Three-Body Problem***

*The Three-Body Problem* elucidates the doom of the pre-alien invasion of Earth, depicting human society on a grand scale and how multiple entities (including humans and aliens) deal with an impending extraterrestrial attack on Earth. Trisolaris is a planet distant from Earth and with three suns whose defiance of their presumed planetary orbits can cause catastrophic extinction. Although imbued with scientific excellence, the Trisolarian inhabitants are distraught by their planetary conundrum, constantly looking for a stable planet to inhabit. With the help of a signal from Chinese astrophysicist Ye Wenjie, they locate Earth.

Ye’s deliberate reaction to the Trisolarian demand to colonize space during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) seems to be a common Marxist allegorical reference to abandoning the radical communist discourse to embrace the aliens’ imperial domination. However, I argue that Ye’s behavior instead reveals her defiance of the extreme communist colonial standards that oppress colonized intellectuals, such as herself. As an astrophysicist, Ye represents the revolution’s subjugated class, as “for this mass struggle session, the victims were the reactionary bourgeois academic authorities. These were the enemies of every faction, and they had
no choice but to endure cruel attacks from every side” (Liu 12). Intellectuals like Ye and her family, who are among the very targets of the revolution, remain at the bottom of the conflicts, oppressed by multilevel revolutionary socialist fractions, as cited by the author, including “the Red Guards, the Cultural Revolution Working Group, [and] the Worker’s Propaganda Team” (11). Each fraction has authority that can easily overpower or suppress intellectuals, such as Ye and her family.

Ye not only witnesses her father being tortured and killed by Red Guards but is also treated as “politically suspect” (34). She is sent to Inner Mongolia to do hard labor, placed under constant political supervision, and always conveniently suspected of “obtain[ing] intellectual weapons that could be used to attack socialism” (33). These reflect Memmi’s claim that totalitarian rule in colonial discourse is a fascist regime of oppression that is “founded on inequality and contempt, guaranteed by police authoritarianism” (62). During the Cultural Revolution, the repressed intellectual subjects were deprived of their occupation and social status and were regularly persecuted by the communist regime. The revolution, regardless of its original purpose, was, in reality, an extreme socialist autocracy that mirrored fascist tyranny against oppressed intellectuals instead of liberating the proletariat. The tension between oppressed scholars and radical communist oppressors more closely mirrors the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer than the binary class struggle between the academic bourgeoisie and the communist regime. Furthermore, Memmi argues that “liberty,” the most valuable right of the colonized, is denied by the colonizer, and “the colonized is not free to choose between being colonized [and] not being colonized” (86). As the subject of the dominant communist authority, Ye is deprived of legal rights and loses her legitimate freedom within the social system.
When Ye is wrongfully imprisoned and refuses to cooperate with the authorities to denounce her father in exchange for better treatment, the communist female cadre pours “half the [washing] water onto Ye and the other half onto her blanket” (39). The socialist authority pronounces Ye’s “counter-revolutionary crime” as “incontrovertible” (45), an act that indeed typifies Ye’s first denial of imperial socialist coercion, even though her resistance worsens her condition, which fortifies her “engraved” colonized position, as Memmi observes, when she (the colonized) refuses the colonizer’s charity (Memmi 82). Ye’s defiance indeed prepares her for continuous resistance to imperial powers and deeper emancipatory endeavors to liberate herself.

When Ye agrees to be confined and to work for the Red Coast military base, she encounters the imminent threat of world destruction by the nuclear missiles propelled by the West as part of its Cold War geopolitical strategies. Ye is fully aware of the destructive power of atomic weapons and the imperialist incentives for developing them. She realizes that “the insanity of the human race ha[s] reached its historical zenith” (270). This insanity is found in China’s socialist extremism and the West’s capitalist imperialism. Both regimes simultaneously cast their metaphorical colonial dominance over Ye. Memmi argues that the only way for the colonized to completely end colonization is “anything but absolute” (150). Thus, Ye’s decision to invite Trisolarian incursion reflects, in reality, her disavowal of the existing social systems that bring colonial despotism to humanity. Her seeming act of rebellion against civilization is actually her process of decolonizing herself from the hegemony of communist extremism and capitalist imperialism.

Ye’s rejection of colonial discourse is also seen in her relationship with the Earth–Trisolaris Organization (ETO), which is founded on her collaboration with Mike Evans, the son of an American oil mogul and billionaire. ETO is an international pro-Trisolaris institution that leverages Evans’s fortune and power to promote Trisolarian culture and prepare for the aliens’
upcoming visit to Earth. However, as the Earth–Trisolaris movement grows, ETO is soon separated by the extreme Adventist group led by Evans as part of its scheme for political insurrection (318) and for stripping Ye’s modest Redemptionist group of its influence. However, the Adventists’ embrace of Trisolarian culture is merely a disguise. In fact, they “did not place too much hope in the alien civilization they served either” and “[t]heir betrayal was based only on their despair and hatred of the human race” (318). On the contrary, Ye’s Redemptionist group may be impelled to sacrifice humanity to a certain degree to help Trisolaris’s doomed civilization, yet its actual intent is to help Trisolaris survive in its own star system instead of invading Earth (320). Because of this fundamental difference in beliefs, the Adventists treat the Redemptionists as the greatest threat to ETO, are constantly in conflict with them, and even murder those who betray them for the Redemptionists (254).

As ETO, a global organization, grows bigger worldwide, the battle between the Adventists and the Redemptionists within it also prevails internationally, rather than being exclusive to China. When the Adventist group succeeds in becoming the influential group in ETO, it becomes the colonial power dominating ETO and Ye. Thus, Ye’s public rebuke of the Adventists during a Redemptionist meeting—“To protect ... [the] ideals of the ETO, we must completely solve the problem of the Adventists” (255)—signifies her denial of the Adventists’ colonial discourse. Her refusal to give in to the control of Evans’s Adventists also indicates her determination to decolonize herself as a woman from male-centric imperial domination.

As previously mentioned, the Redemptionists’ true intention is to save both Trisolaris and Earth (320). Similar to studying an ideological act from the Marxists’ view of allegory, if we look at Ye closely, her ambivalent actions toward Trisolaris reveal her true ideological act that contradicts her apparent endorsement of Trisolarian civilization. As a Redemptionist, she looks to
embrace Trisolarian ideology in a religious way (319) and is actually the one responsible for drawing the Trisolorians’ attention to Earth. However, as an astronomy specialist, she also acknowledges the potential threat of the Trisolorians’ attack on Earth. She tells Wang Miao, an ignorant nanomaterials researcher, that “with this [nanomaterials] technology, humans could easily enter near-Earth space and build up large-scale defensive structures” (277–278), adding that it “is the first technology our Lord [the Trisolorians] wishes to extinguish from Earth” (255). Ye’s warning to Wang serves as an announcement more than a threat, for if she followed Trisolarian doctrine, she would keep the aforementioned critical information from a potential enemy, such as Wang, who has the specific scientific training needed to ward off the impending alien invasion.

Thus, I argue that Ye’s warning to Wang not only contradicts her professed ideology but also reveals her real intention to at least prepare Earth’s defense against the coming Trisolarian intrusion. In other words, or at a deeper level, her ambiguity toward the Trisolorians’ imperialist ideology demonstrates her figurative denial of the extraterrestrials’ colonial intentions. Thus, Ye’s seeming compliance with the extraterrestrial colonial request remains a disguise or display that on a subconscious level hides her real intention to save Earth from the extraterrestrials’ attack and even prepare future human resistance to alien colonization with “defensive structures.”

Integrating romance reading into Ye’s idealistic vision, we see how Ye’s longing for a utopian community operates in her struggle against colonial influences. As mentioned earlier, Ye’s act of deliberately welcoming Trisolorians to target Earth derives from her agony over the Cultural Revolution’s extremism and capitalist imperialism. Yet her desolation acutely stems from depraved humanity, which inflicts colonial dominance over her more than the aforementioned distressing social systems do. Nevertheless, after Ye responds to the aliens’ intrusion request, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, she remains in the countryside at Qijiatun, where she first
experiences a peaceful utopian life, which she enjoys for a few more years. People treat her with respect (293), and “everything [is] warm and intense” (294). This “warm” community never existed in Ye’s life during the Revolution. It remains deep in her memory, and it transforms into her idealistic vision of bolstering her battle against diverse colonial powers, such as her campaign to “[e]liminate human tyranny” (251) during the ETO’s assembly. When she returns to the Red Coast ruins at the end of the novel under the doom of the Trisolarians’ impending invasion, her last action is to fix her gaze on Qijiatun (390), the place that harbors her request for utopia. The significance of Qijiatun apparently lies beyond its geographic and physical importance; it underlines a metaphorical underpinning that serves as Ye’s idealistic vision, signifying a romantic place or community free from any colonial dominance and where every member lives peacefully and treats all others with respect.

Ye’s utopian ideal may appear to negate her unconventional ratification of the Trisolarians’ imperialism against humans. However, I argue that her support of the Trisolarians is essentially based on their technological advancement; she believes that the extraterrestrials can help humanity reestablish Earth and reconstruct civilization into one without human corruption and autocracy, which remains an anticolonial utopian vision that mirrors the aesthetics of romance. Such an ideal not only provides incentives for Ye’s abiding resistance against multiple tyrannical powers but also informs the critique of a postcolonial romantic reading, which claims an idealistic longing for a salvational destiny for humankind.

Ye’s radical betrayal of humans by embracing the extraterrestrial colonizers also corresponds to Alarcón’s reasoning on Malinche’s controversial treachery in history. In Carmen Tafolla’s poem about Malinche’s submission to the Spanish colonizer Cortés in relation to her vision of creating a new race, Alarcón argues that Malinche even planned to be the founder of a
new people (73). In the discussion of Adelaida R. del Castillo’s essay on Malinche’s religious belief, Alarcón suggests that Malinche considered Cortés the incarnated Christ (75), who, together with the industrialized Spanish troops he brought, could be the savior of the archaic Mexican people, which led her to allegedly commit treason to embrace the Spanish colonizers and help them conquer the indigenous people. Similarly, as discussed, Ye later becomes a devoted Redemptionist in ETO, constantly referring to the Trisolarians as “our Lord” (254, 255, 277) and preparing for their arrival on Earth. Therefore, I argue that Ye’s determination to endorse the Trisolarian civilization also stems from her belief that the technologically advanced Trisolarians can save fallen human society from the socialist extreme (as a cultural revolution) and from capitalist imperialism, which poses an atomic war threat, both of which may draw the Earth to destruction.

Ye’s act of treason is an act of desperation, envisioning a change for humans, as Malinche hoped for the Mexican people. The Spaniards and Trisolarians are considered saviors only because they may subvert the corrupted patriarchal social dominances that Malinche and Ye consider unacceptable. Malinche’s and Ye’s traitorous actions conversely reflect their resistance to the varied imperialist dominance as individual women. As Malinche’s devotion to Cortés induced her to have his child, Ye’s devotion to the Trisolarians propels her to murder her husband and her superior so that the extraterrestrials’ attention will be fixated on Earth (283). She even expresses no remorse for her treason, confessing to her investigator, “I did it without feeling anything” and “I had finally found a goal to which I could devote myself” (287). Ye’s “goal” may be seen as a form of betrayal, but in essence, her resolution opposes various colonizing influences. In addition, as discussed earlier, as Ye is a Redemptionist, her actual commitment is to address both humanity’s corruptions and the Trisolorians’ conundrum, not necessarily to lead the Earth into
extraterrestrials’ colonization, which impels her to notify Wang of the need to prepare for a possible future resistance to the aliens’ invasion of Earth.

The defiant reactions of Ye, as an oppressed subject and woman, to the various colonizing forces in *The Three-Body Problem*—extreme communism, imperialist capitalism, androcentric dominance, and extraterrestrial imperial powers—essentially reflect her efforts to decolonize herself from multiple forms of colonial control. Nevertheless, her methods of resistance are unconventional and even radical as she seemingly ratifies the imperialist attempts of the aliens but her external extremeness reflects her firm determination to repel human colonial tyranny. Ye’s radical pursuit of total liberation is indeed her way of demolishing the colonizers’ power over her, reinforcing Memmi’s claim that only the complete annihilation of colonization “permits the colonized to be freed” (151).

Moreover, as mentioned, Ye’s anticolonial role in a typical Chinese science fiction novel disrupts the conventional class-struggle Marxist interpretation of Third World literature. Ye’s battle manifests more as an individual colonized woman’s fight for her liberty and rights in the diversified male-dominated colonial discourses than as a simplified literary symbol representing Chinese proletarian destiny. Thus, *The Three-Body Problem* should not be regarded as a Third World national allegory. The novel actually goes beyond the Marxist allegorical framework that prioritizes androcentric binary class struggle and emphasizes women’s decolonizing efforts, with Ye serving as an emblem of individual oppressed women defying their varied oppressors. Ye’s model admittedly reflects what Goyal notes is an example of “the immense heterogeneity of postcolonial literary styles and forms” (524). As aforementioned, this Third World science fiction novel thematically echoes the same genre in First World literature typified by oppressed subjects against their oppressors’ dominance, as I will discuss next in *Dawn*. As Ye in *The Three-Body
Problem unorthodoxly rejects varied forms of colonial domination, Butler’s Lilith in Dawn also uses unconventional methods to defy various extraterrestrial imperialist demands. Yet, Lilith’s anticolonial attempts are often disguised as seeming compliance with the aliens’ colonizing discourses.

Heretical Resistance in Dawn

As if a sequel to The Three-Body Problem, Butler’s Dawn is set after the arrival of aliens on Earth in the devastating aftermath of a nuclear war that caused the near extinction of humanity. The Oankali save Lilith, one of the few human survivors. They also attempt to save the other human survivors and enable them to continue living on the planet. The Oankali not only biologically enhance humans to make them stronger and more adaptable to the new Earth environment but also intervene in human reproduction to create hybrid human–alien offspring. The extraterrestrials choose Lilith as the intermediator between them and humans so that they can establish a mutually dependent relationship.

However, in response to the Oankali’s professed charitable request, Lilith uncovers the aliens’ colonial intention and deliberately attempts to defy their imperialist demand. Jdahya, the first Oankali to make contact with Lilith, explains the nature of the seemingly benevolent proposal of a mutually beneficial trade: that the Oankali intend to exchange genetic material with humans to both evolve and regenerate themselves with humans, and through the ooloi, a special kind of Oankali, intervene with humans’ reproduction to crossbreed new generations of Oankali and humans who will inhabit Earth (43–44). In essence, this involves conducting experiments on humans with the aliens’ advanced genetic technologies purportedly to help evolve humans’
physical conditions but, in reality, to use humans for reproduction with the Oankali. Jdahya tells Lilith, “We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it” (Butler 43). As the Oankali intend to conduct scientific experiments to dominate humans, the so-called trade is an attempt to colonize human bodies.

The Oankali’s enhancement of Lilith’s biological functions without her permission proves such a colonizing scientific approach toward humans; Jdahya informs her that they boosted her immune system and its resistance to the usual diseases (35). The Oankali’s improvement of Lilith’s physical condition might seem benevolent, but as they did it without informing her of the procedure beforehand and seeking her approval of it, it reveals their colonial intention to perform experiments on humans, which mirrors human dominance over animals. To defy the Oankali’s colonizing intention, Lilith tells Jdahya that what they did to her is similar to how humans treat animals: subjecting them to experiments and “eat[ing] them later” (35). Improving humans’ physical conditions is the aliens’ colonial rhetorical strategy to coerce humanity and replicates the former human imperial practices to dominate animals. By uncovering the Oankali’s imperialist intention from Jdahya’s discourse, Lilith demonstrates her resistance to the Oankali’s coercion.

Moreover, by applying their superior scientific knowledge to genetic experiments on humans, the Oankali use science as an instrument for realizing their imperialist dreams. This exploitation through the conduct of scientific experiments for colonizing purposes reflects what Aimee Bahng refers to as historical “imperial science” (151), which is predominated by white men who abuse marginalized people, such as women of color. The Oankali’s scientific treatment of Lilith reflects this colonial approach to dominating her. When Lilith confronts Jdahya about the fact that their experiments on her body are the same as humans’ manipulation of animals, Jdahya becomes angry and tells Lilith, “Doesn’t it frighten you to say things like that to me?” Lilith’s
answer was “No” (35). Under the overpowering technology and dominance of the Oankali, Lilith continually chooses to reveal the imperial purpose of their seemingly benevolent scientific operations as an act of defiance of the Oankali’s coercion. When the Oankali Jdahya is provoked and asks her a question in a threatening tone, Lilith replies with a “no,” maintaining her defiant attitude against the Oankali’s discourse. Although Lilith later reconciles with the Oankali, her attempt to unveil their imperialist motive despite the risk of inciting their anger demonstrates her rejection of the alien colonizers’ ascendancy. Aside from mirroring the human history of exploiting animals by conducting scientific experiments on them, the Oankali’s scientific attempt to colonize Lilith’s body through scientific experiments parallels past enslavers’ enforced experimentations on their women slaves. Thus, Lilith’s proclamation of the Oankali’s imperialist purpose is also a metaphorical defiance of historical scientific imperialism.

Further in the novel, the Oankali disclose blatant colonial tendencies toward Lilith, preventing her from claiming human heritage. When the Oankali start to train Lilith, they pair her up with Nikanj, a young Oankali, also an ooloi, so that the two can study each other’s culture and language. Lilith learns from Nikanj that the Oankali preserved evidence of Earth’s civilization (e.g., in books, tapes, disks, and films) during Earth’s nuclear destruction, yet Nikanj refuses to let Lilith see these vestiges, saying, “None of your people are permitted to see them” (69). When Lilith asks why, Nikanj does not respond. Nikanj’s rejection of Lilith’s request to access the records of human culture undeniably reveals the Oankali’s dominating colonial discourse over Lilith’s legitimate human right to preserve human civilization. Even though the entire civilization has been annihilated by nuclear destruction and despite Lilith’s unequal colonial relationship with the Oankali, her demand for the lost human cultural heritage is still important for her cultural identification as a surviving human, which typifies the same pursuit of historically colonized
subjects. As Franz Fanon reminds us in his book chapter “On National Culture,” the colonized reclaiming of the past “triggers a change of fundamental importance in the colonized’s psycho-affective equilibrium” (148). Nikanj’s obvious rejection of Lilith’s justifiable demand to reclaim her human heritage again proves the Oankali colonizers’ dominance and intent to reduce human legitimacy.

Later, the Oankali even refuse to allow Lilith to take notes of their language, which uncovers their colonizing attempt to clip the human ability to learn. When Lilith asks Nikanj for paper and ink so she can take notes of the Oankali’s language, her request is again denied. “I cannot give you such things. Not to write or to read … it is not allowed. The people have decided that it should not be allowed” (69). Paper and ink are basic tools for humans to learn, such as a new language. The forbidding of the use of paper and ink limits human learning skills. It restricts humans’ liberty to execute their legal rights, further illustrating the Oankali’s imperialist supremacy that constrains humans’ ability to obtain knowledge. In fact, this aliens’ tactic of restraining learning clearly replicates enslavers’ actions in the antebellum south, where enslavers often prohibited their slaves from being educated. In response to the Oankali’s oppression, Lilith decides to avoid them whenever she sees them, without any concern that she may be punished for ignoring them (70). Lilith’s intentional avoidance of the Oankali demonstrates her nonconfrontational resistance to her colonizers’ coercion. The Oankali’s supposedly philanthropic intention to help human survivors restart their lives by preventing them from reclaiming their cultural inheritance and constraining their ability to learn exposes their true plan to colonize humanity. This mirrors historical colonizers’ enforcement of repressive measures against their subjects. Lilith’s oxymoronic attitude toward the Oankali’s compulsion conveys her resistance to their colonial preeminence.
The Oankali’s attempt to colonize Earth and humans is further exposed in the testing field emulating the Amazon, where human survivors are placed before they are sent back to Earth. “Once [humans] were on Earth—somewhere in the Amazon basin, [Lilith] had been told—they would at least have a chance” (132). While the text does not offer detailed information on why the aliens chose the Amazon, this choice brings to mind human colonizers’ same endeavors in the Amazon jungle in history. The Oankali’s efforts to assist underdeveloped humans settling in the pristine natural jungle are actually part of a rehearsed colonial discourse that illustrates conflicting historical colonial narratives in the Amazon. The geography reference even makes this resemblance clear: the aliens’ apparent benign attempt to encourage humans to work with them in the jungle disguises their colonial purposes of conquest and exploitation. Bahng accurately summarizes “nineteenth-century European representations of the jungle as a space of unspoiled, unfettered nature, in need of discovery and discipline through interpretation, conquest, and/or exploitation” (33).

Correspondingly, the Oankali indeed seek further colonial dominance over humans by making ooloi—as mentioned earlier, the Oankali responsible for pairing males and females for reproduction (252)—live among humans. As humans have already lost their ability to conceive (280) unless with the help of the ooloi, the only way for them to have descendants is to mix their genes with those of the extraterrestrial species. Again, the Oankali’s pretentious charitable act of involving the ooloi in human reproduction to help humans produce offspring is a colonial effort to manipulate humans to produce human–alien crossbred children. The Oankali’s real reason for making humans live in the Amazon is imperialist in nature: to intervene with and exploit human reproduction.
Lilith’s later departure from the testing jungle camp cohabited by humans and aliens reveals her deliberate opposition to the Oankali’s colonial discourse. Encouraged by Joseph, her human partner, to free herself from the aliens’ control, Lilith chooses to be with him and other humans from the camp, leaving the jungle without telling any Oankali, who monitor the place (242). Lilith’s attempt to escape from the clutches of the Oankali despite knowing that they would discover her departure demonstrates her intentional rebellion against the alien authority. Her deliberate choice to make her fellow colonized humans rather than her alien colonizers her companions represents her quest for freedom from colonization. Although, as with her previous resistance, Lilith avoids direct confrontation with the Oankali, and although her action eventually leads to Joseph’s death and her alienation from the other human survivors, her refusal to follow the aliens’ instructions underlines her attempt to decolonize herself from their colonial discourse. If the Amazon setting echoes the historical colonization and exploitation of the Amazon people, as discussed, the fleeing of Lilith, a woman of color (95), from the Oankali’s domination to connect with her human roots represents the reconnection of historically colonized people of color with their indigenous culture to decolonize themselves from white culture.

As Fanon posits, a colonized intellectual realizes the need to return to “his roots” and “among his barbaric people” to “escape the supremacy of white culture” because he is alienated by the dominating mainstream, which threatens to wear him down. His escape from the colonizer’s dominance prevents him from becoming a drifting, stateless individual who is “without an anchorage” (155). Fanon’s assertion illustrates the desire for the colonized subjects to flee from the coercion of European colonial domination to restore their cultural heritage. Clearly, Lilith’s decision to free herself from subjection to aliens and reestablish her human connection mirrors classical colonized subjects’ inevitable pursuit of their cultural roots, as claimed by Fanon.
Nevertheless, Fanon’s emphasis on male subjects still reflects the conventional allegorical paradigm that centers on males as the representatives of the repressed group, even though the colonized subjects here are considered intellectuals, dominated primarily by Eurocentric imperial ideology.

However, Fanon fails to demonstrate how historically colonized female intellectuals not only faced the prevalent European supremacy but also confronted the controlling patriarchal superiority, which is easily daunted by women’s distinguished intellect or competence. This is also evident in Lilith’s struggle against both the Oankali and humans amid her retreat from the jungle camp. Curt, a male survivor whom Lilith awakened to be a member of the chosen humans who would start new life on Earth, earlier participated in the attempted rape of a female survivor and challenged Lilith’s authority (200, 201). After Lilith succeeded in stopping him due to her reinforced ability, he sought revenge on her. Curt, representing the male-centric stereotype, feels intimidated by Lilith’s outstanding strength and knowledge. His desire to retaliate against Lilith exemplifies traditional male domination’s intolerance of female eminence threatening or challenging classic androcentric authority instead of submitting to male subjugation.

To eliminate the threat that Lilith poses to men’s cultural status, Curt adopts perhaps the most regular method that traditional masculine standards would use: violence. Not long since Lilith leaves the camp with her human partner, Joseph, she immediately faces violent human confrontation as she reunites with another group of escaping humans led by Curt. The instant Curt sees Lilith, without exchanging a word with her, he “hit her across the side of the head with the flat of his machete” (253). Moments later, Curt kills Joseph with his ax (256). As discussed, even after Lilith runs away from the Oankali’s domination, she still strives for human opposition represented by traditional male-centered preeminence, especially when the men appear inferior to
the biologically enhanced Lilith. “He blames you for almost everything” (257), Nikanj explains later to Lilith about Curt’s attack on her and Joseph. “Blames” here indicates in Curt’s mind that “almost everything” is Lilith’s fault. Within the context of the novel, during the nearly extinct nuclear war and looming alien occupation of Earth, “everything” could mean all the misfortunes that happen to people or humans. In other words, with Curt’s logic, eradicating all mishaps requires annihilating the person he thinks is responsible for them: Lilith. I argue that Curt’s blame for Lilith conceals his anxiety about her existence. What really makes Lilith unbearable for Curt is not only her non-human qualities that frighten him but also her improved superior strength and authority, which challenge the long-standing sociocultural standard of women’s inferiority.

Curt’s fear and hatred of Lilith provoke his violence against her, symbolizing male dominance’s repression of women’s intellect and excellence, illustrating correspondingly Lilith’s anticolonial battle against both extraterrestrial supremacy and classical male influence. The challenges that Lilith imposes on multiple forms of domination parallel historically colonized intellectual women’s grappling with the ideologies of Eurocentric white primacy and traditional patriarchal superiority. Thus, Fanon’s straightforward affirmation of male colonized intellectuals’ endeavors to escape white supremacy is inadequate to illustrate women intellectuals’ and women of color’s anticolonial endeavors against different forms of male dominance, such as Lilith’s struggle with the Oankali’s manipulation and the classical male-centered control typified by Curt.

Meanwhile, by incorporating postcolonial reading of romance into Lilith’s fight against aliens’ prevailing influences, we can also find rich evidence of Lilith’s idealistic planning that sustains and even inspires her anticolonial defiance. Even before Lilith endeavors to awaken selected human survivors to be sent to Earth in the future, she already begins to consider how to make humans run away from the Oankali’s control. They (the chosen humans) should “learn all
she could teach them,” and they would “use what they had learned to escape and keep themselves alive” once they were free from the aliens’ domination (132). In fact, Lilith’s vision of fleeing from the Oankali remains throughout her persistent campaign against their manipulation. During Lilith’s withdrawal from the Oankali at the jungle camp, she again considers losing herself in the jungle, “go[ing] beyond the reach of the Oankali” (255). Even though all her attempts to run away from the aliens prove unsuccessful, and she eventually becomes pregnant with a crossbred alien child, Lilith still does not give up her vision of freeing herself and other humans from the Oankali’s control. She clings to her ideal that “if she [gets] lost, others [do] not have to be. Humanity [does] not have to be” (283).

Lilith’s vision also seems in contrast with her apparent unorthodox compliance with the Oankali’s prevalent discourse. Conversely, her buried ambition to escape from the Oankali reveals her real intention to liberate herself from alien domination, which remains a utopian longing for an anticolonial future that reflects a romantic prospect in reading. Similar to Ye’s vision in her fights against varied dominations and returning to Qijiatun, an idealistic perfect world, in The Three-Body Problem, escaping from the predominance of the Oankali is Lilith’s enduring goal of denying alien control over her in Dawn. Lilith’s intention may not seem like a conventional ideal of envisioning a utopia, but it nonetheless reflects her desire for liberation from the eminent colonial powers. If the critiques of romance emphasize the utopian desire for a better world, a world devoid of oppression and coercion, then Lilith’s everlasting attempt to gain freedom echoes her longing for an emancipatory future that is free from any colonial domination, which signifies a romantic vision in its interpretation.

Lilith’s seemingly contradictory acts toward the Oankali’s dominance in truth manifest her struggle against their colonization. Outwardly, Lilith’s actions can be seen as submissive,
seemingly compliant with the Oankali’s colonial standards. However, as discussed in detail earlier, concealed by her passive defense is a constant resistance to the alien colonizers’ overwhelming tyranny, a resistance that can be interpreted as a symbolic act epitomizing her attempts at decolonization.

On the other hand, Lilith’s superficial compliance with the wishes of the extraterrestrial influence, especially with regard to her conceiving a crossbred descendant with the Oankali, reinforces Alarcón’s arguments regarding Malinche’s choice of a lesser evil when confronted with her potential rape by the Spanish colonizer. Alarcón suggests that how Malinche chose to bypass rape and violence against her body was a legitimate choice to protect herself (82). Lilith finds herself in a similar situation, facing the Oankali’s dominance over and desire to manipulate humans particularly by intervening in human reproduction to produce a hybrid human–alien species. Even though Lilith is unaware that she will eventually become pregnant, her non-resistance to the ooloi Nikanj’s pairing her off with Joseph for reproduction testifies to her deliberate choice to avoid rape and violence against her body (181).

Lilith’s decision, however unconscious, signifies her intention to legitimize the violation of her body. This can be proven by the fact that she previously valiantly resisted being raped by a fellow human survivor, Paul Titus, who severely beat her despite her pleading and reasoning with him (105, 106). The text does not indicate that the Oankali may endeavor to use extreme force to impregnate Lilith, but, as discussed, due to the Oankali’s devotion to their trade as their imperialist goal of manipulating humans, they may consider violence a necessary means to compel humans to submit to their control, giving them overpowering domination over them. This is also plausible from the case involving Paul Titus because, according to Paul, it was the Oankali who originally set up his meeting with Lilith, and they consented to Paul’s mating with her (106). In addition,
while Lilith is struggling against being raped by Paul, the Oankali do not intercept Paul’s assault until Lilith loses consciousness (106, 107). Lilith’s unwavering opposition to her rape signifies her determination to resist the male powers’ dominance over her, and her oblivious agreement to conceiving a human–alien descendant is justified as a lesser evil. Thus, Lilith’s choice, seemingly a betrayal of humans by conniving with aliens, actually symbolizes her denial of traditional male-centric colonial violence against her body as a woman of color, echoing Malinche’s historical decision to bear the colonizer’s child, which was legitimized by her motive of evading rape.

In addition, because Lilith is a woman of color and because the text frequently reflects the historical colonial discourse that exploited people of color, especially women, such as slavery and the colonization of the Amazon, Lilith’s continuous struggle with alien subjection is not only a typical example of the struggle of the colonized against the colonizer but also reveals the unequal historical battle between women of color and Eurocentric white supremacy. Thus, Lilith’s literary representation reflects a predominant postcolonial endeavor that both disrupts the canonical Marxist reading in the First World narrative and exceeds the conventional allegorical standard that individual oppressed male subjects showcase a collective oppressed struggle. Butler’s novel crosses the framework of male-dominant allegory in representing the collective voice, adding the individual voice of a woman of color to confront the unique male-centric colonial dominance over her with heretical methods of resistance to decolonize herself.

**Finding the Voice of Individual Women of Color in the Postcolonial Context**

Applying the postcolonial reading in both science fiction novels, we discover that both novels refocus postcolonial battles beyond the regular class conflicts that highlight the unwavering
decolonizing efforts of women and women of color under diverse male-dominant colonial discourses. Thus, while positioning the postcolonial perspective in reading science fiction, in response to Goyal’s plea for a postcolonial intervention in literary interpretation, I argue that the postcolonial focus in Third World and First World literature analysis must be refashioned, expanding the monolithic and generalized Marxist method in reading world literature and providing heterogeneity to literary analysis approaches.

Through the lens of postcolonial romance reading, we examine both Ye’s and Lilith’s idealistic visions, which stem from their desire to liberate themselves from multiple imperialist powers, and how their ideals galvanize them and drive them to persevere in their anticolonial battles. Despite the fact that Ye’s and Lilith’s visions appear to contradict their actions (i.e., Ye’s longing for a peaceful community with mutual respect in contrast to her public advocacy of the Trisolarians’ future incursion, and Lilith’s oblivious submission to the Oankali in contrast to her persistent planning to run away from their dominance), their true ideals both imply a utopian world without colonial complications, which indicate a figurative view of a romantic future. Their longings for liberation from colonial power reinforce their determined fight for freedom from oppressive domination, which exemplifies the romantic perspective of postcolonial literary reading.

As we also looked at Ye’s and Lilith’s unique resistance against their multiple oppressors through the lens of the politics of betrayal in relation to Malinche’s controversial historical treason of her people, we learned that their unconventional denial of repression suggests either their commitment to bringing a change for depraved humanity (in Ye’s case, by inviting the Trisolarians to occupy Earth) or their resolution to prevent a greater evil: the violation of their body, as we see in Lilith’s submission to having a crossbred child with the Oankali. Both Ye’s and Lilith’s
supposedly traitorous decisions to embrace aliens rather than humans reflect their individual aims of liberating themselves from the dominant male-centric discourse, which are similar to Malinche’s conventional assumed treason by embracing her colonizers instead of her own people, implying her personal decision to defy the long-standing patriarchal domination.

In addition, as I discussed earlier, the two female protagonists’ anticolonial endeavors against their respective colonizers bypass the traditional male-centered allegorical readings either in favor of class struggle or prioritizing colonized subjects over their oppressors, underlining individual oppressed women’s consistent resistance to their unique aggressors. I argue that both The Three-Body Problem and Dawn, as distinctive science fiction novels, carry the storytelling beyond the allegorical framework, increasing the agency of an individual woman or woman of color in her unique endeavor to decolonize herself from different forms of male-centric colonial dominance.

Furthermore, even though The Three-Body Problem and Dawn are considered Third and First World literature, respectively, within the paradigm of science fiction, they have a similar theme concerning the looming alien occupation of Earth, and we see clearly that Dawn displays the Third World conditions in the First World. Moreover, Ye’s struggles with the colonial powers in The Three-Body Problem are analogous to Lilith’s unequal battles as a woman of color against the Oankali’s repressive dominance in Dawn. The particular postcolonial condition in Third World literature, as in The Three-Body Problem, is notably identical to the postcolonial circumstance in Dawn. Thus, science fiction in Third World literature echoes the specific postcolonial context of science fiction in First World literature, which not only gives a voice to the individual colonized woman and woman of color to articulate their unique anticolonial resistance but also reclams the agency of the individual colonized woman and woman of color in their unconventional efforts for
emancipation and decolonization. Perhaps belying Spivak’s famous verdict, a subaltern (an individual colonized woman or woman of color) can speak through science fiction, not to bypass her subalternity by choosing the side of the colonizer (aliens) but, given the agency provided by the genre, she may eventually articulate her voice to express her rejection against her aggressors.

Notes

I would like to thank Dr. Renee Hudson for her valuable feedback.

1. Yogita Goyal comments in her article “National Allegory and Beyond: Postcolonial Critique Now” (2022) that Jameson’s article is “invoked in postcolonial studies mostly as an instance of a bad generalization, marking the moment, perhaps, of an unfortunate divergence between Marxist critique and postcolonial analysis” (521). Later in the article, she reiterates, “‘Third-World Literature’ makes a powerful argument for the value of the Third World text in the US classroom, one we are still grappling with despite much lip service to diversifying the curriculum and producing global citizens” (522).

2. China has insisted on its economic, social, and political status as a developing country until today. In addition, the discussion of Ye’s anticolonial efforts in The Three-Body Problem primarily relates to China’s Cultural Revolution and early capitalist progression right after the Revolution, the period when China was still grappling with poverty and collectivism and was thus considered a Third World country in the text.

3. Ye’s rejection of colonial discourse can also be seen in her relationship with Mike Evans. Before being persuaded by Ye to join the pro-Trisolaris movement at an early age, Evans had witnessed the environmental disaster of an oceanic oil leak that caused a mass extinction of
birds. The trauma drove him to become a biologist. Renouncing capitalist greed and human-focused Christianity, he embraces the Buddhist-inspired ideology of “Pan-Species Communism,” which claims that “all lives are equal” (307). He practices his faith in China during its post-revolution capitalist expansion by building “migratory paths” for an endangered swallow (305). Evans’s conversion can be seen as a refusal to accept the expanding capitalist discourse. However, his actual behavior contradicts his belief as he does not treat anyone as equal to himself, not even his partner, Ye. After Evans helps Ye establish ETO, he deems himself the organization’s mastermind and true founder, considering Ye merely the spiritual leader (318). In addition, it is he who first separates ETO with his extreme Adventist group. This proves that Evans’s belief in Pan-Species Communism does not translate to loving all forms of life, as the ideology advocates. Instead, it deepens his pursuit of obsessive justice, driving him to seek humanity’s punishment. In line with postcolonial discussion, however, Evans never really leaves Western capitalist discourse, especially when he inevitably inherits his father’s fortune and transforms a 60,000-ton oil tanker into a base for ETO (314). In fact, even his newfound faith in Pan-Species Communism maintains a disguise that echoes Edward Said’s argument on Orientalism.

- It [Orientalism] is a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an elaboration . . . of a whole series of “interests” which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, [and] psychological analysis . . . it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world. (Said 78)
According to Said, “In short, Orientalism [is] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (69). Thus, Evans’s belief represents the West’s regard for the Orient’s Buddhism as being rather what Said observes as “the exteriority of the representation” (87) but not the truth, an idea that remains in the Eurocentric capitalist mainstream. In this light, Evans’s effort to apply an ancient Oriental ideal in a modern, progressive, and capitalist China also celebrates a postcolonial assumption suggested by Aimee Bahng: “Asian modernity is represented as reliant on U.S. and European markets, simultaneously ahead of the curve and behind the times” (Bahng 126). This not only sufficiently demonstrates how Evans maintains his ideological supremacy by judging humans in general but also reveals his power as a dominating colonizer over ETO and Ye. Thus, Ye’s public denouncement of Evans during a Redemptionist meeting—“[M]en like Evans . . . can no longer be saved” (255)—represents her denial, as a woman of color, of the standard Eurocentric male colonial dominance.

4. The colonizing coercion through which Nikanj uses Lilith’s body as an instrument to produce a human–alien crossbreed is also evident near the end of Dawn, when Nikanj (the unsexed ooloi) reveals to Lilith that it has impregnated her with a girl without Lilith’s knowledge or consent, creating the first child of mixed human and Oankali genes. In her agony, Lilith says, “[I]t will be a thing—not human” (281). This imperialist alien tyranny that manipulates women of color for reproduction cannot be considered a mere invention as it echoes the colonial exploitation of slave women’s bodies. As Bahng notes, “Slavery in the U.S. antebellum South produces through racial difference a biopoliticized population that renders slave women’s bodies available for often violent, unanesthetized surgical and medical experimentation” (103). The only difference between Lilith and such slave women is that
Nikanj does not use violence to impregnate her. The act’s colonial purpose, however, is the same as that of the perpetrators of slavery. Butler’s depiction of Lilith’s pregnancy as alien experimentation by mixing the human and extraterrestrial species corresponds to Bahng’s argument in discussing science fiction narratives about medical experiments on black women that symbolize the future of mankind, which “will, in practice, sustain a long history of subjecting black women to experiments in reproductive science” (118). In response to Nikanj’s colonial discourse of insisting on the superiority of the future mixed human and alien offspring, Lilith repeatedly conveys her anguish about the fact of her pregnancy to Nikanj: “[T]hey won’t be human . . . that’s what matters. You can’t understand, but that is what matters” (282). Even at this time, Lilith realizes that, under the overpowering Oankali, her resistance to being left alone seems “a pointless gesture” (283). However, she keeps reminding herself to “[l]earn and run!” Lilith’s ostensibly passive opposition makes her appear docile, yet as she maintains her conscious choice to run away from the Oankali’s domination, her reaction remains a decolonizing gesture. If, as previously suggested, the Oankali’s exploitation of Lilith’s body mirrors historical white colonizers’ exploitation of black women’s bodies, I argue that Lilith’s persistent intent to be with humans and liberated from the aliens’ colonial control bears a resemblance to the national consciousness claimed by the colonized African people as the motive for their decolonizing struggle. As emphasized by Fanon, “national consciousness,” which is different from nationalism, “is the highest form of culture,” with its future and richness “based on the values that inspired the struggle for freedom” (179).
Works Cited


