

The God-Human Relationship in Octavia Butler's "The Book of Martha"

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between God and a posthuman representative of humanity in Octavia Butler's "The Book of Martha" (2005). Using Daphne Hampson's feminist post-Biblical ideas, the article argues that the story, as a sample of science fiction, exposes a posthumanist perspective where existence and subjectivity of human kind is defined based on a mutual, non-hierarchical relationship between human being and God. The article aims to explore the capacity of the story to embody a positive standpoint of science fiction towards the transformation of the human. This article suggests that "The Book of Martha," reflecting this transformation together with an unothered perspective of the God-human relationship, illustrates the potential for a more humanitarian life on Earth. The relationship is investigated through an unorthodox theological perspective that confronts Christian norms, particularly the norms dealing with what is considered as true femininity. In this way, the story describes a fictional space in which the Christian concept of human as a fallen, condemned, and passive object before a ubiquitous Almighty is substituted with a non-Christian active concept of the human entity. This active representation is based on the recognition of a posthuman agency which is free from surrender to divine power. "The Book of Martha" is about the gradual awakening of a black woman who, in interaction with God as the source of goodness, becomes aware for the need to redefine an authentic sense of self beyond that of an obedient servant before a masculinized God. This article explores this awakening.

Keywords: Posthumanism; post-Biblical; Octavia Butler; "Book of Martha"; Daphne Hampson

INTRODUCTION

"The Book of Martha" is a story that deals with the concepts of power and agency in the God-human relationship. It embodies the positive standpoint about "the possibility of transforming the human" in science fiction (Clayton, 2013, p. 319), opposing the traditional representation of humanity in it. According to Jones (2003), "sf is a genre devoid of convincing characterization" because it is "bound to foreground the imagined world, the action-adventure and the gadgets" (p. 171). This is worse when it comes to women because science fiction is a masculinist genre which reflects human as man (Hollinger, 2003, pp.127-134). However, in "The Book of Martha" a different view of the human is portrayed. Within

the framework of dialogues between what is assumed to be God and a black woman named Martha, Butler discusses a range of concepts related to humanity, including identity, race, gender and sexuality.

The story focuses on the concept of the individual as “posthuman.” Posthumanism considers the human being as a “subject” who “comes to be by conforming to a strictly dialectical system of difference” (Wolfe, 2010, pp. 11-12). This dialectical system is based on the recognition of communication between divinity, human, and nonhuman worlds in a way which exceeds the fixed boundaries between divinity, as a “Transcendent” entity,¹ the human, and non-human world (p. 6). The fixed boundary creates a hierarchical system in which God is the master of universe and the male human being is His true representative. The female human being stands somewhere between male human being and the natural world. (Hampson, 2002, pp. 6-9). Posthumanism challenges this hierarchy. This posthumanism is in line with postmodern feminist assumptions of subjectivity which embodies Butler’s feminist wish to exemplify a “changed relation to difference, identity, and agency” (Jacobs, 2003, p. 92). In this article, using Daphne Hampson’s post-Biblical perspective expressed in her concept of “theology as experience” as well as Virginia Woolf’s notion of “centeredness,” we will try to demonstrate that the characterization of the protagonist could be seen as Butler’s unique representation of posthuman identity.

Hampson (2002) explains that theology of experience “places the human self center-stage,” and makes God “known with and through the self” (p.283). She discusses “attending,” “honesty,” and “order” as spiritual practices through which humanity comes to recognize and reflect a true understanding of its entity and ability, and, consequently, develops the confidence to be true to itself. Indeed, the practices recognize Woolf’s feminist views of self-awakening beyond sex-consciousness. Theology of experience verifies an egalitarian theological direction in which there are no “sexist presuppositions about the ‘natural’ ordering of society” (Hampson, 2002, p. 272). It does not presume a hierarchical order in which God stands above humanity, determining select male or female mediators as the best representatives to convey His message.

In tracing this self-awakening, we were conscious of the orthodox Christian perspective of human being, particularly women. Using arguments of critics like Laurie (2009), who rejects “top down” understanding of ethical behaviour of humanity in Butler’s writing, helped us to elaborate on the characterization of the protagonist as tenable and trustable in “The Book of Martha.” We were able to move away from the negative views which relegate women to inferior positions, and consider arguments like that of Lorde (2007) who, similar to Hampson, asks to discard the discourses which guarantee men’s power.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“The Book of Martha” narrates a feminist post-Biblical perspective of the God-human relationship. Butler develops her story by revealing a non-Christian approach to this relationship in which a benevolent God accompanies a woman in her journey towards real understanding of self and the world which surrounds her. This model of God-human relationship embodies a utopian hope for change in which God commissions the protagonist of the story to do something to save humanity from itself.

From the first page of “The Book of Martha,” Butler puts forth a feminist challenge to substitute the Christian image of the God-human relationship with a new one. She, it seems, creates a feminist “conceptual space” as a “different system of thought” to “critique the past from a feminist perspective,” and transform it to a “life-style, a value system, and a way of conceiving of the self” (Hampson, 2002, pp. 84-85). This new concept of self is entirely

different from the traditional Christian perspective. In the Christian tradition, normal self-identity, modelling a transcendent God as 'male,' "has served to undermine a sense of women as also made in the image of God" (Hampson, 1991, p. 45). Opposing this paradigm, Butler's model of self-identity development in "The Book of Martha" is based on a "differing conception of the self-in-relation" (Hampson, 2002, p. 84) between God and human being, where God is understood by improving human self-awareness. This modelling reflects a perspective, which Hampson terms as the "theology of experience."

This awareness is concerned with the feminist affirmation of self and the refusal of turning to God by first turning away from self. According to Hampson, in the theology of experience, the God-human relationship is neither heteronomous nor isolationist. It is not heteronomous because it does not assume that God can be understood in anthropomorphic terms as the perfection of imperfect humanity (2002, p. 244). In this relationship, He is not a transcendent presence beyond humanity, but humans are in "transcendental" cooperation with Him (p. 244). By "transcendental," Hampson (2002) means a concept of divinity following the conventions of empirical experience and pragmatism. Through this transcendentalism, Hampson (2002) believes that human determination plays the same effective role as that of the divine in shaping and turning situations and conditions of spiritual as well as physical life.

Hampson introduces three types of spiritual practices of "attention," "honesty," and "ordering" based on her view of theology as experience. These practices recognize the freedom of human agency in dealing with the divine dimension, with no gender-related restrictions. The practices stand on the fundamental principle of avoiding the great sin of "domination of other life" (Hampson, 2002, p. 259). Related to this view are Hampson's positions on patriarchy as the "first-order-crime," and "compassion for others" as the "hallmark of the spiritual life" (p. 259). She asserts that "truly spiritual people" in the theology of experience are those who "let others grow and blossom in their presence" and, therefore, "foster human becoming" (p. 259). "Attention" or "attending," in her words, is "a way of being in the world ... an ethical stance" which enables "listening to, and watching both oneself and others" (2002, p. 260). Based on this definition, she accepts that the practice of "attention" is "deeply involved, in the sense of caring for that to which one attends" (p. 260). Central to this practice of attending is acting as a good listener.

"Listening" is fundamental to Hampson's theology. Perfect communication depends on listening. Clearly, a genuine relationship can be cultivated with dialogue, where both sides exchange thoughts and emotions. Hampson extends the pattern to include the God-human relationship. Her symbolized God is not "that single eye which terrifyingly looked down on medieval worshippers from the chancel wall," but an "ear" (2002, p. 263). She puts forward her sense of God as "hearing" humans into being. This image stands contrary to the Christian conception of the God-human relationship which normalizes the image of humans listening to God through the reading of Scriptures; an image which is emphasized and reemphasized by male clergymen (p. 263). If the God-human relationship is understood and accepted as a mutual attending, it will have a healing effectiveness, addressing world problems. Hampson concludes this debate by emphasizing that nothing is possible if humanity does not achieve a centeredness (p. 264), that is to say, to come to an understanding and awareness that creates an "integration oneself" (p. 264). Due to its egalitarian stand, which, unlike the orthodox Biblical perspectives, does not presume the hierarchical dominance of God on human, Hampson's post-Biblical perspective reveals a posthuman nature.

The second practice of true spirituality, which Hampson directly links to integration and attention, is "honesty." This "honesty" is to have a "fundamentally friendly attitude towards others rather than a tendency to take oppositional and defensive stance" (2002, p. 265). Hampson emphasizes that "(...particularly in the case of women) it should entail the

ability to be forthright about one's own strengths and talents" (p. 265) to be receptive to others.

The third practice is "ordering." "Ordering," in Hampson's words, is "having a certain control over one's time and one's affairs" (2002, p.266). She claims that "ordering" is "a social discipline (p. 266). It is an aspect of the theology of experience which attentively aims at guaranteeing change and growth: "A person drowning in the chaos of her own life is unlikely to be free in herself to be present to another" (p. 267). It is clear that when someone is present to another one, s/he is practicing "attending." "The Book of Martha" vividly reflects such practices.

POSTHUMAN AGENCY

Comparing Butler's concept of "human" with that of Deleuze, Laurie (2009) writes that both reject the "'top down' structuralist explanations of human behaviour and cultural norms" (p.178). He argues that in the writings of both "the immanent and variable necessities of creation and survival, shaped by the urgencies and traumas of lived experiences come to the foreground as starting points for ethical thinking and living" (p. 178). In this explanation, Laurie (2009) reflects an understanding of the human being that touches our discussion of the notion of posthuman in Butler's writing. It recognizes a kind of human being who is neither shaped nor controlled by a superpower of any kind. From an ethical stance, it is humanity that, due to its experiences, earns an ability and confidence to apply its agency to control and shape its life. The following extract from "The Book of Martha" embodies this recognition:

"Don't you know what I see?" she demanded and then quickly softened her voice. "Don't you know everything?"
God smiled. "No, I outgrew that trick long ago". ...
This struck Martha as such a human thing to say that her fear diminished a little—although she was still impossibly confused.

(Butler, 2005, pp.189-90)

This "human thing" that Martha senses in God's talk describes the non-oppressive nature of their communication which allows her to gain her subjectivity while her fear of His presence gradually fades. McIntyre et al. (2010) and Menne (2011) point to struggle for subjectivity as a permanent pattern in Butler's writing. McIntyre et al. (2010) describe Martha as Butler's "self-reflectivity and deliberateness about how she saw herself" as a black woman (p. 440). Menne (2011) argues it as Butler's struggle to represent human being's active role in shaping his social life (p. 723). This struggle in "the Book of Martha" is reflected in a model of question and answer which embodies a God who listens to and cares for his creature, letting her grow in His presence.

A look at the form and quality of interaction of God and Martha in "The Book of Martha" reveals practices of "attention," "honesty," and "order." Martha and God have a friendly interaction where exchange of views is not based on mono-directional orders from God to Martha. It is a dialogical practice of spirituality on both sides: God does not take an oppositional stance towards Martha's imperfect plans, nor does Martha feel threatened to repress and censor her own concerns.

In the beginning of the story, the narrator describes Martha's encounter with God in a spatial position which confuses her:

"Where is this?" she asked ... "Where am I?"
"Here with me," God said.

“Really here?” she asked. “Not at home in bed dreaming? Not locked in a mental situation? ... not lying dead in a morgue?”
“Here,” God said softly. “With me.”
After a moment, Martha was able to take her hands from her face and look again at the greyness around her and at God. “This can’t be heaven,” ...
“There’s nothing here, not one here but you.”
“Is that all you see?” God asked. ...
“Don’t you know what I see?” she demanded and then quickly softened her voice. “Don’t you know everything?”

(Butler, 2005, p. 189)

The conversation obviously shows that “The Book of Martha” is about a woman’s struggle to define a space for her thoughts or individuality. It prefigures two spaces: a space associated with divine presence which is described as grey and mystifying, and a space associated with Martha’s view and understanding, symbolized by the removal of her hands from her face, reflecting her desire to know where she is exactly and under what conditions. These two spaces alternatively describe masculine and feminine spaces related with the traditional reflection of the Christian doctrine of a masculine God and feminine humanity (Hampson, 2002, p. 125). From a feminist perspective, the removal of the hand embodies a self-declaring gesture of a woman who starts to put aside what has covered her self-consciousness, and demand a brighter space of her own based on self-recognition. Through this self-recognition, she develops an understanding of her power to shape an existential space of her own that is not based on passive acceptance of an omniscient divinity. Relying on this understanding, the protagonist initiates a “controlling” practice to take possession of her own life to create her own space and, then, contemplate plans to revive the lives of her fellow beings. She reflects the belief that “faith in humanity is a way out to salvation” (Taghizadeh & Ghaderi, 2016, p. 174).

The strategy or technique that she employs to actualize her own space is dialogue. By communicating with God, Martha gains the knowledge and confidence to control the way, aim, and end of her life. To deal with this notion, it is necessary to consider it in relation with the two other practices because dialogue is an “attending” pattern. They are “life practices” which equip one to be “at peace with oneself” (Hampson, 2002, p. 268). To be at peace means to be present to oneself and, therefore, it “involves clarity and directness” (p. 269). It creates an integrated person who “is free to attend to others.” (p. 269) and gain the confidence from having control over her or his own world. Such a person will come to feel “‘at home’ with oneself and in tune with the world,” have “strength in oneself,” enjoy “a level of self-integration to attend to oneself and to other,” and to be “fearless” and demanding of “self-control” (p. 269). These are virtues that openly oppose those assumed as virtuous, particularly for women, within Christianity.

Hampson names some of the traditional Christian disciplines like “self-denial,” “self-denigration,” and “self-flagellation” as fundamental virtues in Christianity. She also points to an essential belief in Christianity in which human beings come to know themselves as sinners (2002, p. 270). These disciplines are based on a profound theological ideology according to which “to place oneself at the centre is understood as a manifestation of the sin of pride” (p. 270). Opposite to this ideology, and unlike the tradition of looking to men for spiritual guidance, theology of experience provides a space for women to recognize and manifest their visions of spirituality (p. 271). In theology of experience, there is no necessity for the recognition of men as “counsellors of women,” and women are “empowered to take [their]

own needs seriously” (p. 272); they will no longer feel the burden “to serve the world of men” (p. 272).

From the very start of “The Book of Martha,” it is clear that God has a mission for Martha. The very notion of mission and the exchanged arguments reflect a different non-Christian understanding of the God-human relationship. Unlike the traditional Christian perspective, it presumes a non-heteronomous relationship between God and human being, here woman, and reflects a new ordering of human life in contrast to the hierarchical, mono-directional conception of obey and worship. Hampson (2002) elaborates on worship and obedience as “hierarchical modes of being” (p. 251) which demand a full submission to God’s will. In what Butler depicts, we do not see any focus on such surrender, whether expected by God or felt by humanity. God’s mission for Martha is not that of the must-be-fulfilled variety as found in traditional Christianity depicting, for example, Jesus and Mary obedient to what God as creator decides. In fact, Martha resembles much more a free agent who is not beholden to a creator, but who works in cooperation with a benevolent transcendental being who recognizes her freedom to accept or deny His visions.

It is very important to notice the absence of an Almighty, ever-present, and holy divinity in the God-human relationship in “The Book of Martha.” Like Hampson, Butler’s concept of the God-human relationship focuses on humanity. This new human is not the male figure of the traditional Trinity who stands second to the Holy Father and has no other temptation besides fulfilling His wishes. Through Martha, Butler creates a new concept of posthuman which recognizes and develops an autonomous sense of self through a process of mutuality. Butler’s posthuman representative is a She missionary, or a She Messiah, who neither negates the presence of God, relegating Him to a phenomenon that results from human projection,² nor refutes the equal partnership of masculine and feminine force beside the divine-human relationship.

Martha’s gradual recognition of her “centeredness” enables her to “order” and discipline her surroundings. Nevertheless, it does not presuppose a sexist prioritizing of “attending” feminine virtues over “ignoring” masculine ones. Instead, it deals with what is human, regardless of sexual prejudices. Unlike the traditional masculine symbolism of Jesus Christ, it does not restrain itself by sticking to an alternative female iconic imagery replacing “the appalling picture of a naked and bleeding man impaled on an executioner’s gibbet” (Hampson, 2002, p. 270). This openness also includes Martha’s conception of God.

FEMINISM AND POST-CHRISTIAN THEISM

“The Book of Martha” narrates a story in which Martha’s concept of God changes step by step. The image of God alters from the “twice-live-sized, bearded white man” (Butler, 2005, p. 190) of the early part of the story to the “familiar woman’s body beneath the blue jeans and black T-shirt ... as though it had come from Martha’s own closet” (p. 212) at the end of the story. As the story continues, in the critical moment when Martha decides to choose her way and destiny, this figure fades, “becoming translucent, transparent, gone” (p. 213). The first image vividly echoes Virginia Woolf’s description of the embodiment of men’s power which domesticizes women as “looking-glasses” to reflect the superiority of men: “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (1977, p. 41). This power reflection, according to Woolf, constitutes the basis of the masculine worldview which has worked through centuries to enlarge its control over the rest of the world, especially women. The injustice of such an understanding is whitewashed by relegating women to the status of a “protected sex” requiring support (p. 40). Such a treatment has kept femininity malleable in

the hands of masculinity for a long time, and has prevented women from accessing the necessary knowledge to improve their position. Feminist awakening raised a big challenge against this domestication. The second and third images referred to above, embody this challenge or awakening.

To explain women's coming to self-understanding, Woolf (1977) points to the concept of "centeredness." She writes:

if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgment, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and specifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is? (p. 41)

This self-understanding is a simultaneous practice of "honesty," "attention," and "order." It challenges historical adjustments which have used religious justifications to keep women in their place. The second image which we referred to above, illustrates this self-understanding. Martha no longer sees God as a "twice-life-sized" man, but a woman like herself. Her God is not a man with legislative authority to whom she refers for the authentication of her thoughts and actions. God emerges as an entity on par with her. This new perspective equips her with the courage and freedom to trust her own understandings and, therefore, take control of her life. Butler reflects this kind of understanding at the beginning of Martha's communication with God:

"You see what your life has prepared you to see," God said.

"I want to see what's really here!"

"Do you? What you see is up to you, Martha. Everything is up to you."

(Butler, 2005, p. 191)

We see the conversation as recognition of human agency by God. Acknowledging the authenticity of human understanding is a reflection of His will. To explain, God here addresses Martha, stressing that her journey of understanding depends on her own determination.

Exposed to the conversation, Martha reflects on the entity addressing her and the nature of His mission for her. It is in this state of mind that she stops figuring Him as man and, soon after, forms a feminine conception of him. This phase reflects a movement forward in Martha's understanding.

Describing the phases of feminist awakening, Woolf (1977) explains two stages of sex-consciousness and sexlessness (pp. 106-10). Sex-consciousness is a state of mind in which femaleness is superiorized and concepts are attributed with feminine features to compensate for the ignorance and suppression imposed by masculine dominance. Martha's female conception of God reflects this stage. Though this conceptualization reflects the awakening of a mind, it still is susceptible to the same sexism which it recognizes in the masculine claim of superiority.

Sexlessness is the next stage of this process. As Woolf (1977) explains, this state embodies the most perfect human understanding and is achieved when humanity releases itself from sexual boundaries (pp. 106-10). When Martha ceases to have a female conception of God at the end of "The Book of Martha," this reflects a perfect posthuman outlook. This perfection is observable in Hampson's perspective.

There is a trend among some Christian Feminists who, in an attempt to unite themselves with divinity, liken God to themselves as "our friend" (Hampson, 2002, p. 244) and endow Him with a feminine entity. Hampson emphatically refutes this belief as

paganism. She believes in a God who has His agency and power, different in quality from that of humans, and yet He recognizes human agency. This understanding is a kind of optimistic theism that acknowledges the possibility of change and growth by accepting the effectiveness of both divine and human agency. Butler ends her story with the same theistic understanding.

Through the story, we see God discussing and demonstrating the shortcomings of Martha's plans so as to help her fulfil her mission. The first point here is that the mission is from God and Martha is asked to accomplish it. In this way, Butler stays away from compromising the divinity of God at the expense of human subjectivity. The second point is God's trust in Martha's decision making. As we see, God does not impose His presence and propositions on her. Instead, throughout the story, He emerges as an inspiring goodness who guides Martha.

"The Book of Martha" depicts two forces: divine entity and female humanity. In an inspiring comparison at the outset of the conversation, Martha likens God to "a living version of Michelangelo's Moses ... Except that God was more fully dressed than Michelangelo's Moses, wearing from neck to ankles, the kind of long, white robe that she had so often seen in paintings of Christ" (Butler, 2005, pp. 190-191). The comparison continues in the conversations that follow. The way that Butler describes this awesome God (regarding the solemnity with which Moses is associated and Christ as God's son) and the fact that Martha is addressed by this God as a Moses-figure and, unlike the traditional Moses, does not surrender herself to His ubiquity, highlight the two forces mentioned above. Despite their traditionally presumed hierarchical relation, the forces merge to reveal a notion of unity; both God and Martha are Moses-figures.

Other descriptions also evoke the gradual merging of the two forces in the story. For example, in early discussions, Butler shows God's interaction with Martha along with a male gaze:

He didn't answer at once. He looked at her with what she read as amusement—looked at her long enough to make her even more uncomfortable.

"What do you want me to do?" she repeated, her voice stronger this time.

(Butler, 2005, p. 191)

Martha's response to God here reflects a sense of obedience. Nevertheless, at the same time, she starts to raise her voice before this God, moving away from His shadow. Another example is the role models God puts in front of Martha, asking her to consider them:

"I want you to keep three people in mind: Jonah, Job, and Noah. Remember them. Be guided by their stories."

"All right," she said because he had stopped speaking, ... "All right."

(Butler, 2005, p. 191)

Here we have the masculine voice of a God who demands obedience through naming some examples, all male missionaries. The stories of these models are reminiscent of the tradition of reward and punishment. However, this mono-directional power play does not continue. The other non-Christian understanding that Martha develops in interaction with this God emerges as a mediated power relation in the story.

First, it is important to note that this Moses-like God is described as wearing a robe similar to that worn by Christ. The God of the Jewish tradition, reflected in the Hebrew Bible, embodies a powerful Father-figure whose will rules the world. It is a rule with no interruption from any other agent. The form and content of His relationship with humanity is defined

within the frame of the Covenant.³ The God of Christianity is the same Father-figure borrowed from Judaism. As Hampson (2002) emphasizes, both Jewish and Christian traditions share a similar belief about the nature of human relationship with God, which is hierarchical (p. 129). He is a kingly father who resides ‘in heaven,’ and His will is fulfilled, though not realized (p. 129). In such a patriarchal understanding, every kind of relationship is legitimated within the Father/Son relationship – the Incarnation – where “the essence of the father” as “seed” is transmitted to the son (p. 135). The Biblical tradition recognizes it as a liberating mechanism which, prescribing and receiving obedience and sacrifice, makes it possible for humanity to gain salvation.

Butler in “The Book of Martha” remains detached from the dichotomy of the Father/Son as the spine of Christian belief. Reflecting Martha’s first consideration of God, the Moses-like God somehow reflects the notion of a transcendent present Father. But, following the comparison, we see Martha is reciprocally likened to Him as a Moses-figure, being addressed and verified by Him. Martha’s character here, in one sense, interferes with the Father/son imagery, transforming it into something like a model of Father/daughter. In another sense, it substitutes the hierarchy of the traditional Father/son with a more levelled pattern of God-human relationship through which the agency of human being as a partner of the divinity is acknowledged. Later on, Butler talks of another binary – a Mother/daughter relationship – in referring to Martha’s mother. The reflection of this relationship makes it clear that the story, unlike the Christian prescription of Mary and Jesus as the perfect pattern, is concerned with a gendered pattern of relationship.

As the story proceeds, we see that the God of “The Book of Martha” is not a patriarchal authority dictating gendered rules and obligations. Diehl (2013) discusses Butler as a writer who subverts “racist and sexist discourses” (p. 85). Regarding the second example we referred to, it is important to notice that God in his mission for Martha likens her to the three people – considered as fair or light-skinned males – whom she is expected to keep in mind. It is not to refer her to some male role models. In this case, God directly addresses Martha like a Moses-figure, as if she is another one in the line of prophethood. Clarifying Martha’s mission, God says: “This is what you’re to do, ...You will help humankind to survive its greedy, murderous, wasteful adolescence. Help it to find less destructive, more peaceful, sustainable ways to live” (Butler, 2005, p. 192). To do it, God emphasizes “You’ll borrow some of my power” (p. 193).

God’s order to turn back and consider the stories of the prophets works as a motivator that not only revives a sense of social responsibility or “attending” in Martha, but also functions as a more active theological modelling from God on her behalf. Explaining her mission, God tells her:

“When you’ve finished your work, you’ll go back and live among them again as one of their lowliest. You’re the one who will decide what that will mean, but whatever you decide is to be the bottom level of society, the lowest class or case or race, that’s what you’ll be.” (p. 193)

The mission and this conversation lead Martha to review her entire childhood and the miseries that used to afflict her and her mother’s lives. When Martha alludes to her upbringing, we see her mother’s only concern was to raise her as “good,” that is to say, a religious person. Arianna Gremigni (2011) argues that “religious belief is what literally kept black people alive when going through traumatic life experiences” (p. 544). In this kind of religious education, Martha, as a black woman, is not ultimately responsible for anything. She has models like Saint Mary and a few other Biblical women as well as a lot of men. What she learns from these models is just to follow what is asked of her as a good Christian.

Her duty is to be patient and leave everything to a God who will finally overturn the abusive condition. The extract above does not denote or connote such an understanding. To explain it, first we should consider the tradition of Liberalism in orthodox Christian theology.

The Liberal tradition of Christian orthodoxy talks of a God who works “to overturn the hierarchies of this world” (Hampson, 2002, p. 132). In Hampson’s explanation, this kind of theology embodies a God who stands for the repressed. In the end, He replaces those in power with those whose rights have been violated. Christian Liberalism guarantees the interference of a God who, whenever necessary, will act as a saviour to save humanity from the evil of its deeds. He does this by sending his representatives, who are men, to convey and preach His message.

Regarding the references to the difficult life of Martha’s mother as a devoted Christian, and then comparing it with that of Martha who has left her Christian belief – in the case of the stories that God refers her to, Martha emphasizes that she “had come to regard their stories as parables rather than literal truths” (Butler, 2005, p. 192) – and who is now a writer with a much better social position, the efficacy of Christian theology as a liberal doctrine of belief to end the suppression of women becomes doubtful. Hampson observes Christianity as a belief whose basis is laid on the passing of the divine essence and responsibility from the Father to the Son and, therefore, paves the way for the integration of power in the hands of His male representatives. Lorde (2007) also elaborates on the same idea of patriarchy when she argues that we cannot “dismantle the master’s house” when relying on “master’s tools” (pp. 110-14). Highlighting the masculine nature of Christianity, Hampson does not believe that Christianity, as a liberating belief, has the potential to understand and address the problems that affect women’s lives. It is a religion which focuses on a special male figure (Jesus Christ) whose character, time, and deeds suit the needs of a patriarchal society, while this figure and his time and its norms are particularized and are to be replicated in all times and situations (Hampson, 1991, pp. 9-11).

The above-mentioned quotation, where God emphasizes that Martha will be at the “bottom-level” of society, dismantles the Liberal tradition of Christian theology. The God whom Butler depicts here does not reveal any intention to interfere on behalf of His messenger and overturn the repressing consequences of her mission. Unlike the traditional stories of reward which she knows about Noah, Job, and even Jonah, Martha is warned that she cannot expect to be rewarded for her suffering and patience. In other words, He does not persuade Martha with another Covenantal mission. He is a God who, practicing “attending,” invites Martha to share His power to improve the situation; He no more is her master to reward her.

The mission is also an “attending” practice which Martha is expected to accomplish because of herself and her fellow beings. In this case, God openly shows that it is partly the duty of humanity to rise and change the situation and not leave it entirely to God. Due to this divine “attention,” Martha develops an understanding of her role and responsibility towards herself and humanity. Addressing God about her low level in society, she says:

“I was born on the bottom level of society” ...

“I was born poor, black, and female to a fourteen-year-old mother who could barely read. We were homeless half the time while I was growing up. Is that bottom-level enough for you? I was born on the bottom, but I didn’t stay there. I didn’t leave my mother there, either. And I’m not going back there!”

(Butler, 2005, pp. 193-94)

Regarding the notion of the bottom-level, one implication should be observed. God’s focus on this level somehow reflects Butler’s pessimist view about the imperfect nature of

humanity and human inability to create a perfect society. In an interview with Beal (1986), Butler emphasizes that she believes humankind is of imperfect nature and cannot establish perfect societies (p. 14). In the above extract, similarly, Butler points to the inequalities that would afflict the coming society. That Martha is going to be at the bottom level implies that this new society will also suffer from unjust distribution of power and wealth. In other words, the struggle of humans will lead nowhere: despite attempts, the same problems will continue to afflict humanity. It seems that while Butler openly propagates a non-Christian philosophy of the God-human relationship, she cannot completely unleash herself from the vestiges of Christian pessimism about human nature. The Augustinian concept of “original sin” and its pernicious effect on human nature is deeply rooted in traditional Christianity and its influence on Western perception of life continues (Duffy, 1988, p. 603). The belief is that because of the Fall, the human soul is contaminated and is bereft of perfection. This notion could reflect a discrepancy in Butler’s text, but what is significant to this study is whether the plot of the story verifies this pessimism.

Through the above quotation, Martha reveals herself as a responsible person who has worked to change the conditions of her mother’s life as well as her own. For her, it has been the practice of “attending” which has helped her to improve her family’s life. Now the mission has to expand the scope of this “attending” to include all humanity, especially women who have, thus far, been marginalized.

Hampson (1991) believes that if we look at the female role models that Christianity offers as suitable for women, we come face to face with passive characters whose passivity is recommended as their most precious value. The most notable figure of this modelling is Saint Mary. She has never been depicted as “part of the Godhead” (p. 74). In the picture that Christianity offers, Mary is represented as a devout mother; her existence is explained through her attachment to her son. Hampson considers her character as a “masculinist conception of femininity” whose only importance is to give birth to a “(male) child” (p. 74). In this model-making, it is Jesus who is centralized and Mary’s presence is defined due to her son: she fulfils the authentic role of “nurturing and caring” (p. 96), as has been decided for her.

What we get from the mission that Martha is appointed with is that she, unlike Saint Mary, is not a “holy mother” who patiently accepts what is decided for her. She is expected to, firstly, decide on a plan to change the life of her fellow beings in a positive way and, secondly, act based on that plan. Moreover, considering the male models who were suggested by God, it is a matter of curiosity that God does not refer Martha to Jesus Christ who is at the centre of Christian symbolism.

As pointed out earlier, Christianity is defined based on connection and reference to a particular past and to a figure that, alternatively, represent the cultural atmosphere of Old Palestine and Jesus Christ. But God does not refer Martha to this particular past. Butler here composes an image that disrupts traditional Christian role modelling. God chooses Martha, an intellectual black woman, reminds her of some past models and, then, asks her to go to her fellow human beings and save them from themselves. It is completely clear that through this mission, Martha is recognized as an active agent whose expected function does not resemble that of Saint Mary’s in the Bible. On the contrary, Martha is assumed as a saviour whose function is mediated through references to Noah, Job, and Jonah. Additionally, the emphasis on the “bottom-level” of society shows that reference to these names is not mentioned to confirm Liberal tradition of Christian theology. As Biblical references about them indicate, at the end of their mission, they enjoyed reverence and recognition.

Martha also does not embody a female version of a Christ-figure. In Christianity, Christ’s mission and his end are understood within the tradition of the Covenant. Jesus is a

figure chosen to serve, and he must serve (Hampson, 2002, p. 136); such insistence is not imposed on Martha. In Covenantal theology, everything is considered through God's will. Martha's case is different. She has a free hand to consider her situation and accept or refuse the mission. As is understood from the end of the story, she ceases to obsess over the mission:

She stepped away from God, and already God seemed to be fading, becoming translucent, transparent, gone.

"I want to forget," Martha said, and she stood alone ... She wondered at the words she had just spoken, wondered what it was she wanted so badly to forget.
(Butler, 2005. p. 213)

The extract, which is the climax of the story, highlights an alternative non-Christian liberalism that develops throughout the story. It represents a kind of ethical awareness that is achieved through interaction with God. The description of Martha's room as the space wherein this interaction happens, reflects this awareness. It is a room with three walls covered by bookshelves. Near the end of the story, when she asks God to leave and let her think about the mission, she turns on a lamp and looks at her books. Martha's room, in fact, is a spatial description of her personal identity, understanding, and desires. To use Virginia Woolf's phrase, it is "a room of one's own" that not only guarantees a personal space where she can scribe her mental workings, but also symbolizes an independent state of mind contemplating on her experiences, understandings, duties, likes, and dislikes. The lamp light in this scene is a metaphor which, reflecting Martha's enlightened state of mind, prefigures her emergence as an independent, strong woman.

Martha gains the courage to say no to God. It is exactly in the way that God, the true goodness, leads her to. He gives her the courage to observe and accept her fears and understand that she is not expected to be a perfect heroine to undertake what is demanded by Him:

"What if I say something wrong, make a mistake?"

"You will." ...

"Won't you fix it so I don't hurt or kill anyone? ... I could do something stupid and wipe out and not even know I'd done it until afterward."

"I won't fix things for you," God said. "You have a free hand."

(Butler, 2005, pp. 195-96)

The notion is completely against the Christian tradition of perfection through absolute dependence. It does not incarnate a devoted chosen messenger with no free will. It seems like a test where God guides Martha to arrive at a conclusion which solidifies her sense of self:

"Why should it be my work? Why don't you do it? You know how. You could do it without making mistakes. Why make me do it? I don't know anything."

"Quite right," God said. And he smiled. "That's why."

(Butler, 2005, pp. 196-97)

The answer and what follows, show that God wholly accepts human ignorance and imperfection. God goes on to ask Martha: "Think about this: What change would you want to make if you could make only one?" (p.197) No doubt, the God revealed here is a supportive Being who stimulates Martha to think and advises her where to start. In what continues, there is a serious discussion about the dystopian situation of life in the world, the reasons for this, and the solutions that Martha offers. Martha points to the "growing population" as perhaps

the most serious problem which makes “a lot of other problems worse” (p.197), and puts forward her suggestion to control it. In a subsequent exchange, God emerges as a patient “listener” who listens politely, distinguishes the shortcomings of Martha’s plans, and puts forward His suggestions. This practice of “listening” humanizes God’s power and accelerates His unification with Martha.

“Listening” is the tool by which God shares his divine power with Martha. It is a practice through which Martha also develops knowledge, understanding, and self-confidence. In fact, the practice is partly a divinization through enlightening dialogue. The conversation equips Martha with an understanding to change her traditional conception of God. She no longer sees Him as the embodiment of that monitoring eye gazing disturbingly at her. At this point, He becomes a listening ear that responds with a caring attitude: “She glanced at God and saw that he seemed to be listening politely” (Butler, 2005, p.197). This change already starts when God begins to address her and continues as the dialogue progresses:

Now when he looked at her, they were eye to eye. ... He saw that something was disturbing her, and he asked, “What is it now? Has your image of me grown feathered wings or a blinding halo?”

“Your halo’s gone,” she answered. “And you’re smaller. More normal.”

(p. 195)

The text reveals an essential change in Martha’s attitude towards God. Due to the change in her conception of God, she no more behaves like an obedient worshipper surrounded by the magnificent glory of a ubiquitous God. The text also does not offer a supernatural conception of God. The primary concern of the theology running through this God-human interaction is the focus on the human being, and not God, and how this focus changes the protagonist’s mental perspective.

CONCLUSION

Hampson’s theology of experience claims for itself an openness in conceptualizing both God and humanity. It questions the “affirmed norms of truth of identity” (Marwan Kadhim Mohammed et al., 2016, p. 125) regarding human being. This helps to shape a postmodernist, posthumanist understanding of God-human relationship and we believe “The Book of Martha” gets close to this understanding. Its conceived God is not “a ‘Thou’ placed in opposition to oneself,” and its assumed humanity is not a disempowered obedient object in the hands of a “higher power” (Hampson, 2002, p. 272). Martha is a prototype of such a posthuman, having a mission from God. She is tied to a realist perspective which neither heightens the position of any human figure as a perfect superman/woman nor condemns him/her fully. As such, Martha, as a science fiction character, challenges the traditional characterization of humanity in science fiction which, according to Jones (2003), embodies “set of stock figures, recognizable and emblematic as the characters of pantomime or Commedia dell’Arte” (p. 171).

Acknowledging God as a source of goodness, the story develops a non-hierarchical, non-Christian, natural theistic concept of the God-human relationship which is assisted by allusion to three male figures as models. In this way, Martha develops a new sense of “centeredness,” to use Woolf’s (1977) term, as well as responsibility through practicing “attention,” “honesty,” and “ordering,” free from spiritual and gendered distinctions.

Though figures like Laurie, Gremigni, Diehl, Jacobs, and Menne investigate positive, posthumanist aspects of Butler’s writing, our analysis casts a new light on her literature by recognizing its positive concept of human and divine entity through a white feminist, post-

Biblical perspective. To conclude, it would be illuminating to investigate a black woman's theological struggle for self-recognition and reflection through this theological view. Added to that, since Martha is a black protagonist, there is much room yet to address black issues and concerns within Christian discourse in Butler's writings.

ENDNOTE

¹A transcendent monotheism believes in an Almighty God who, "set over against" universe (Hampson, 2002, p. 244), exerts His power unilaterally, beyond the natural, causal system of universe. For further information refer to Daphne Hampson's (2002) *After Christianity*, chapter VI, and Griffin's (1989) *God and Religion in the Postmodern World*.

²This idea nested in the contemplations of figures like Hegel and came to flourish in the works of thinkers like Feuerbach and Marx. Complete discussion at: Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Philosophy of Religion*, 1837. Squashed version edited by Glyn Hughes © 2011.

³In the Biblical tradition, Covenants are agreements between God and humanity, based on which, God promises to protect and reward his chosen people if they have absolute dependence and obey in front of Him. For further information see: "Covenants, Pillars and Theologies in Ancient Judaism: Major Covenants between God and Humans Beings in the Bible" by Felix Just (2014).

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