

### Messages of Race and Sexuality in Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling*

In her final novel, *Fledgling*, Octavia E. Butler examines race, sexuality, and desire in a vampire novel that is radically different from others in that literary genre. *Fledgling*'s protagonist Shori, a young Black vampire, physically appears to be in her early teens. The novel begins with Shori waking up from a violent and traumatic attack that removed her memory of her vampire family or people, called Ina. The Ina have very different romantic relationships than traditional humans do. Several scholars have explored different aspects of *Fledgling*. Kristen Lillvis examines *Fledgling* in relation to social issues, Mildred Mickle discusses its connection to addictions, and Gregory Hampton examines how race and gender politics affect the heroines of both *Fledgling* and *Parable of the Sower*. *Fledgling* may appear to be a simple fantasy or science fiction novel, but it is also a comment on Black female sexuality.

Shori makes her own decisions about her relationships and their progression. She often instigates her sexual relationships with both men and women, which is in direct contrast to other works in the vampire literary canon. In those, a White man is the vampire and pursues White women. Karen Backstein explores how vampire and human romantic relationships have progressed in the current novel and television incarnations of the vampire literary genre, though she does not discuss *Fledgling*. Examining her essay shows a great contrast between *Fledgling* and other works involving vampires. Due to this difference between *Fledgling* and the others, Butler's novel uses the Gothic vampire monster to offer a different view of the ability of Black and/or queer women to make their own judgments regarding their pursuit and choice of romantic partners. *Fledgling* thus highlights the agency available to those who, in the past, did not have power in who they were romantically and sexually involved with: Black women, especially queer Black women. This is illustrated through the essays of Martin Summers, Patricia Hill

Collins, and bell hooks.

Backstein discusses traditional vampire and human romances in her essay “(Un)safe Sex: Romancing the Vampire.” She looks at several television shows and movies and the relationships within them, including *Twilight*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *True Blood*, and *The Vampire Diaries*. She describes these works as follows, saying that “many of these modern vampire narratives... spotlight young heroines—perhaps all the better to stand out against their centuries-old paramours” (38). In all of the couples she discusses, the man is the vampire, while the much younger woman is the mortal human in the usually heterosexual relationship. Backstein describes how the male vampire often tries to abstain from his natural diet of human blood since he has now either fallen in love with and/or become obsessed with the heroine. Both of these tropes are in direct contrast with *Fledgling*, in which Shori is a female vampire and is not only allowed but expected to take blood from her symbionts. Backstein’s explanation of tropes helps clarify and contextualize *Fledgling*.

Butler shows how a young Black woman pursues her own relationships with multiple people of both genders, and in doing so, gives a different view of what is acceptable for a queer Black woman. In the traditional vampire literary canon, a White vampire normally pursues a woman, who is usually also White. This can be seen in many different works that Backstein discusses in her article. Among her many examples, she mentions the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in which the female protagonist has a relationship with two different male vampires and also *Twilight*’s Edward Cullen, a wealthy young man who is drawn to the protagonist Bella Swan (38). Backstein describes the mainstream vampire as a

male vampire who serves as the narrative’s male lead and the heroine’s love interest—[he] has transformed into an alluring combination of danger and

sensitivity, a handsome romantic hero haunted by his lust for blood and his guilt for the humans he killed in the past. (38)

This traditional vampire tells the audience that they must be heterosexual and, preferably, White. It also shows them that men perform the actions and women must be passive and accept the man's attention. As evidenced above, the characters in *Fledgling* act completely contrary to these views. Butler's characters are not all White or heterosexual, and they can have as many people in a relationship as they wish, as long as all consent. Women actively pursue romantic relationships with men or women, instead of simply being the passive recipient of a man's affection.

A reader must understand relationships between the different Ina and their symbionts before analyzing how *Fledgling* portrays race and sexuality. Ina, who are genetically disposed to be White, mate only with Ina of the opposite sex with the ultimate goal of procreation (Butler 80). After feeding, they have sexual intercourse with their human symbionts, who are often both men and women. Butler clarifies that children cannot result from these relationships (67). Ina are polygamous in both their mating with other Ina and their symbionts. At one point, the character Celia even describes it as such: "The relationship among an Ina and several symbionts is about the closest thing I've seen to a workable group marriage" (127). Symbionts are allowed to have relationships with other humans as well (84). It does not appear that Ina are against relationships with symbionts of color, but they do not consider these relationships to be at the same level as Ina-Ina relationships (Lillvis 175). Shori is too young to mate with other Ina, but the Gordon brothers are interested in mating with her when she comes of age (Butler 210-1). She also finds several symbionts: Wright, Theodora, Brook, Celia, and Joel (27, 92, 104, 154-5). Most of these symbionts appear to remain with her after the novel's end, though Theodora is murdered by another Ina to hurt Shori (249, 264-5).

In *Fledgling*, race is a major matter for Shori, despite one Ina's claim that Ina are not racist (148). She is Black and partially human due to genetic experiments by her parents to create an evolved Ina that could stay awake and unscathed in the day (66). The rest of her people are light-skinned. Her late brother, Stefan, was also Black, though lighter skinned than Shori (76). Her skin color is a point of contention for her people: some think it is a gift, so she can walk in sunlight without too much damage, while others feel it is a curse that will ruin their people. When Shori meets the Braithwaite sisters, Margaret tells her that she is very unique and valuable, and then says, "You are a treasure. You would be an asset to any community..." (214). While Margaret is only looking at how Shori's skin color protects her from sunlight, this is a positive response regarding her race. Margaret believes that Shori's skin color would be a good aspect to pass on to her children, as it will allow them to guard their families in the day time. Margaret, a character portrayed as helpful to Shori, does not mind the idea of an interracial marriage between Shori and a white male Ina, and several of the other characters agree with her (208, 210). Since Shori's family and other Ina who are on her side clearly support her choice to mate with whomever she wants, this action intervenes with the current message sent from vampire literature. In *Fledgling*, Black women fall in love with and marry whomever they are interested in, regardless of what race that man is.

However, not all of the Ina see Shori as valuable or even Ina, considering her to be beneath them and animalistic. Russell Silk says, "Murdering black mongrel bitch... What will she give us all? Fur? Tails?" (300). Milo Silk also refers to Shori as a "dog" (238). From these quotes, it is clear that Shori's enemies see her as less than human because of her abilities—which are due, in part, to her skin color and human mother. Certainly, their anger towards Shori is due, partially, to a fear of science and experimentation. In her essay "The Politics of Addiction and

Adaption: Dis/ease Transmission in Octavia E. Butler's *Survivor* and *Fledgling*," Mickle says that "Some Ina and humans view her as deviant because she is a genetically engineered Ina who can walk around during the day" (71). While this is true, the insults used towards Shori are tied to her race and what it represents, regarding the future of the Ina (Hampton 118). In "Vampires and Utopia: Reading Racial and Gender Politics in the Fiction of Octavia Butler," Hampton says, "Shori threatens the utopian society of the Ina because she is half human and because her human identity is compounded with a racial difference" (118). While Shori's different skin color has the potential to save the Ina from being murdered as her mothers and original symbionts were, the two Silk men fear what this change in skin color could mean for their people, and this fear is shown in their verbal abuse to Shori and the history of these negative labels.

These epithets are derogatory towards the Black Ina Shori, as they were when White people used them in the past and directed them at Black people. In Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Sexual Politics*, she discusses how Black people were traditionally thought to be genetically sandwiched between white humans and apes (99). She continues and says that "...viewing Africans and animals alike as embodied creatures ruled by 'instinct or bodily impulses' worked to humanize apes and dehumanize Black people" (Collins 100). By calling Shori an animal or a dog, the Silk family is trying to show that Shori is not at the same civilized level that the antagonists consider themselves to be. Collins says, "...Western scientists perceived African people as being more natural and less civilized, primarily because African people were deemed to be closer to animals..." (99). The antagonistic Ina are implying that because of her skin color and heritage, Shori is beneath them on a genetic level, just like the Western scientists mentioned by Collins. According to them, she is nothing better than an animal that will ruin their species.

The destruction of the species is evoked later, near the end of the novel. Katharine

Dahlman says, "You want your sons to mate with this person. You want them to get black, human children from her... When I came to this country, such people were kept as property, as slaves" (Butler 272). Here, Katharine explains why Shori would be a bad mate, since any mate of hers would be a White Ina. She also references slavery in the Americas and mentions how poorly the Black people were treated then. While her fears could be seen as reasonable—she is afraid of persecution, something that Ina already fear due to humans' ideas of them, she does not confront this fear in a rational manner, which leads to her undoing. Ina are allowed to protest another's actions or decisions: "If you believed I were doing something to the detriment of the Ina... that you seriously believed was harmful, you could ask for a Council of the Goddess" (292). Yet, as Shori points out, the Silk family as well as Katharine ignore this procedure in exchange for violence. Instead, Katharine verbally attacks Shori using racist language. bell hooks elaborates on Katharine's ideas in her book *Ain't I a Woman: black women and feminism*: "...the black female was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault" (22). As the Ina have a much longer lifespan, one can assume that *Fledgling*'s other antagonists would have seen this cruelty during the slavery of Black people, and also that some might share this belief of superiority of White people, due to the specific names they call Shori. Because of this, they would not agree with the idea of an interracial marriage or mating, and thus not want Shori to mate with another Ina and create biracial children.

With this idea, they mirror the traditional human world, which still does not fully accept marriages between two people of different races. In "'This Immortal Practice:' The Prehistory of Homophobia in Black Nationalist Thought," Summers discusses how both White and Black people were against the idea of interracial marriage: "...it reflected two ideas that the UNIA

(Universal Negro Improvement Association) and white supremacists held in common: racial purity and the integrity of the women of their respective races” (29). Katharine and the Silk family could be considered the Ina version of white supremacists, as they appear to share these ideas with their attempts to destroy Shori, along with the ways they communicate regarding her. Though while they dislike the idea of her mating with her own species, they do not disagree with her choice of symbionts or her sexual relations with them, likely because they view symbionts as being beneath them (Butler 131, 257, 285).

Shori’s actions and story do not fit the majority of the tropes in current vampire lore, especially in regards to the symbionts, and this is what makes *Fledgling* different from other works in its genre. One of the differences between this novel and the vampire shows Backstein discusses is Shori’s subsistence on willingly given human blood. As the novel progresses, it is revealed that Shori’s culture encourages her to drink blood from humans. Both Ina and human symbionts find the act of drinking blood pleasurable, and Shori commonly has sexual intercourse with her symbiont after taking blood. Mickle examines the connection between the love between Ina and human symbiont in regards to the addictive venom from the Ina’s bite. She says, “To some degree it is chemical, based on the practical blood exchange between Ina and human” (Mickle 71). This is a valid point; likely, the attraction between an Ina and human is strengthened after feeding, shown when the humans cannot imagine leaving their Ina after becoming addicted (Butler 161). Butler’s Ina believe in having multiple human symbionts of both genders, and Shori is no exception. She is encouraged to live in a polyamorous relationship with both men and women of multiple races and ages. While some Ina mistreat their symbionts and resent them, Shori does not; “she sincerely loves and accepts herself and her human symbionts” (Mickle 72). In this instance, because children are not possible from an Ina-human copulation, race is not a

concern.

Shori's first symbiont is a man named Wright Hamlin, in his mid-twenties (Butler 15). Wright is described by Shori as "pale-skinned" (7). At one point, Shori bites him, and Butler describes his reaction as follows: "He writhed under me, not struggling, but holding me as I took more of his blood... 'So what was that?' he asked after a while. 'How did you do that? And why the hell did it feel so fantastic?'" (12). After that moment, Wright and Shori are bound, and he finds her sexually attractive. He calls her jailbait at one point, which she does not understand, though she does recognize his attraction to her (12). Later, Shori reveals that she is not as young as she looks, and invites Wright to have sexual intercourse with her (21). This is the beginning of the traditionally taboo relationships portrayed in *Fledgling*. Wright appears much older than Shori, as he has finished a few years of college (15). Shori is of a different race than Wright and appears to be thirteen, though she is actually 53 (21, 64).

Here, Butler begins showing the alternative relationships considered acceptable in Shori's world. To the traditional world inhabited by humans, this relationship would be seen as offensive for one reason besides their different races: Shori is clearly much younger than Wright, at least according to her physical appearance. Wright mentions this when he tells Shori that he is likely to get in trouble for their relationship if they are discovered (29). However, this is only in the conservative human culture. Shori's father, Iosif, mentions that the relationship between Shori and Wright would be accepted among the Ina: "Once you're living with us, there will be no need to hide. And to us, there is nothing improper about your relationship" (68). This idea is clearly a new one to Wright, though he eagerly accepts it. Shori, Iosif, and Wright do not consider her race in this instance. Yet this is not the only taboo aspect of Shori's sexuality.

Shori also welcomes romantic and sexual relationships with several women symbionts



throughout the society, specifically Theodora, Brook, and Celia. Theodora Harden is one of the first people that Shori feeds from, after Wright. Shori finds Theodora after she realizes that she cannot only take blood from Wright, as it would weaken him too much (22-4). It is clear from Butler's description that Theodora will become important to Shori later in the story, as she is the only one of the five Shori visits that night described in detail and who receives Shori's promise to return (24-5).

Upon Shori's return, Theodora is the one who initiates sexual contact instead, though Shori does not mind at all: "She kissed me. After a moment of surprise, I kissed her back. I held her, and she seemed very comfortable in my arms" (38). However, unlike Wright, who did not mind Shori's appearance much, one can see that Theodora would have preferred the stereotypical vampire: a white man. She says, "You are a vampire... Although according to what I've read, you're supposed to be a tall, handsome, fully grown white man. Just my luck" (91). Obviously, Theodora is very aware of the genre that Backstein has examined, and appears—if only briefly—slightly disappointed that Shori does not fit the stereotype (Lillvis 175). With this in mind, Theodora's previous kiss could have been initiated because Theodora thought her seemingly immortal partner was in fact a man. Lillvis examines this relationship in "Essentialism and Constructionism in Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling*," saying, "However, humans enter same-sex partnerships with the Ina. These relationships are sexual, yet they are always located in an environment of heterosexual identification" (175). While Shori does not mind that this symbiont is a woman, we assume that Theodora—if she had been given a choice—would have preferred a male Ina instead and might identify as heterosexual if asked. However, since Shori has now visited multiple times, it is too late for Theodora to turn Shori down: she is addicted to Shori's venom. Lillvis mentions several other symbionts that would have preferred relationships with an

Ina of the opposite sex: Joel Harrison, Martin Harrison, and Brook (175). Yet Theodora is not at all an unwilling partner to Shori; instead, she clearly enjoys and reciprocates her attentions, even after Shori's appearance is revealed (Butler 93).

In the traditional human world, this relationship between Shori and Theodora would very likely be frowned upon, yet Ina culture does not care. The only worry Iosif has is of Theodora's age; even though Ina venom will keep her alive longer, she will not maintain the age span that younger symbionts like Wright will have (74-5). Yet in this new world that Butler's readers and Shori are introduced to, this is considered a mildly unfortunate part of Shori's relationship with Theodora. Iosif does not discourage his daughter making Theodora part of her family—it is merely a warning that it will be painful for Shori when Theodora dies, a necessary caution since Shori does not remember losing her former symbionts (155). Yet in America's past, Theodora and Shori would not be as welcomed as they are by the Ina.

Years ago, the majority of people frowned upon homosexual relationships like this one. Summers paraphrases Houghton in his essay, saying that "...black lesbians, aided by 'secret propaganda... of the opposite race,' who 'discourage natural intercourse with the young people.' Eventually, he argued, 'race extinction' would result" (33). The Black Nationalist Movement considered lesbians to undermine racial purity and progress for Black people, and thus opposed that sexual orientation among Black people (Summers 34). Summers also discusses how scholars Houghton and Cake considered homosexual relationships and their inability to produce biological children to cause their race to "stagnate" and thus "depopulate" (35). While this idea may have been preached by an older movement, it is easy to see how these beliefs have been passed on through another institution as well.

In her book, Collins discusses how churches have passed these opinions on to their

audiences. She says, “Greatly influenced by Black Church teachings, African Americans may have accepted homosexual individuals, but they disapproved of homosexuality itself” (111). Collins adds that many Black people considered homosexuality to be “a white disease” after being told such by ministers (108). She also mentions that homosexuals have been shown as threats to the traditional family model, as people made the assumptions that they “neither want nor have children or that they are not already part of family networks” (108). With Summers’ facts and Collins’s ideas in mind, one can see how Butler’s portrayal of positive same-sex relationships between Shori and her female symbionts differs from the current literary genre. By using Shori’s perspective, Butler creates a character that not only welcomes attention from other women but also pursues optimistic relationships with them. However, these homosexual relationships are only between an Ina and her human symbiont. Ina do not mate with other Ina of the same biological sex, since mating is reserved for relationships that would produce children. With this thought in mind, while Butler maintains the idea that heterosexual relationships that can produce offspring are for adults, while relationships with symbionts, thus including homosexual ones, are merely child’s play and, therefore, should not be taken seriously (Butler 80, Lillvis 176).

In addition to the dismissal of Ina-human homosexual relationships as sport, all of Shori’s female symbionts are marked by tragedy and trauma. Two of them she inherited after her father and brother were murdered and they needed another Ina to survive, while Theodora was murdered after Shori brought her to the Gordon compound (Butler 104, 249). Lillvis notes that Shori is also the only Ina “noted to engage in a public display of lesbian sexuality with her symbiont” (176). While the connection between Shori’s affection and Theodora’s death may appear coincidental, only her male symbionts—Wright and Joel—remain unharmed throughout

the course of the novel. Brook and Celia originally bonded with Iosif and Stefan, respectively (Butler 101). Yet when the two were murdered, Shori was the only Ina nearby and they needed her venom, or they would die (104). While they do eventually desire Shori as they did their original Ina, it does take awhile for them to adjust to her (128, 151, 247). Theodora originally supposes that Shori is a man, and comes on to her with that assumption (91). Thus, this could be interpreted to insinuate that heterosexuality is the norm, as all three women are introduced in a relationship either with a man or with someone they assume is a man. Shori is their second choice, and thus a homosexual relationship is as well. Lillvis echoes this when she discusses how same-sex relationships are considered child's play, as they do not include reproduction: "The difference between sex as recreation and sex as procreation operates on a hierarchy... and with the positioning of reproduction over playing comes a ranking of heterosexual behavior over homosexual or lesbian relationships" (176). This prioritizing does send out an interesting message to Black women that men should not be ignored when searching for a romantic partner. However, Butler does not only limit relationships to include just one partner, which expands the aforementioned message—her Ina have polygamous relationships with multiple symbionts.

Unlike human monogamous relationships, Ina culture requires each Ina to have multiple symbionts in a sort of group marriage (Butler 127). At the end of the novel, Shori's family of symbionts currently consists of Joel, Wright, Celia, and Brook, as Theodora was murdered (284, 249). This is not for frivolous reasons; an Ina needs more blood than one human can provide. Iosif tells Shori that eight is the best number of symbionts, though he has sometimes had any number from seven to ten (72). With this number, he tells her, they are able to have their own lives outside of the Ina world yet still get the necessary venom (72). In addition to this, with multiple symbionts, an Ina would easily be able to take blood from another, should one die. With

this style of relationship, Butler creates a marriage that does not have to include just two people; if all parties consent, all members can get something out of it, be it Ina venom, human blood, or something intangible.

However, this relationship—while appearing to be mutualism—could be deemed slavery as well, as the human cannot leave their Ina for a long period of time. Joan Braithwaite explains this to Shori, saying, “Symbionts... give up a great deal of freedom to be with us. Sometimes, after awhile, they resent us even though they don’t truly want to leave, even though they love us” (269). Symbionts, like the historical slaves before them, even take their Ina’s name: for example, “Judith Cho sym Ion Andrei” (202). Mickle discusses the addiction between Ina and symbiont in her essay, mentioning that as long as the Ina treat their symbionts respectfully, the relationship is a beneficial one; it is only when an Ina mistreats their symbiont does the union deteriorate (70-2). Nevertheless, Butler does not consider this bond slavery. As she elaborates through Joan, Ina cannot live without their select symbionts, either—while they can temporarily feed from other humans, they deteriorate physically without the bond that the symbiont provides (Butler 270). Both Ina and human benefit from this relationship when all people involved respect each other. Similarly, the Ina-Ina relationship is mutually beneficial to the Ina involved, assuming that all participants respect each other.

For the majority of Ina, while same-sex sexual relations with symbionts are not an issue, marriage and mating are for the purpose of procreation. While they do love each other and the matings depicted in *Fledgling* are consented to by all involved, they are mated in heterosexual pairings so that they can have children. When they come of age and even after mating, Ina live in houses only with others of the same sex (67). Iosif tells Shori that this is because Ina are “sexually territorial:” “...you’re a little too old to be sharing territory with the adult males of

your family—with any adult Ina male since you're too young to mate" (79). He also states that mated Ina cannot live together, due to their sexual desires (80). This aspect is in direct contrast to how history has perceived White people as civilized. Collins says, "Linking African people and animals was crucial to Western views of Black promiscuity" (100). She adds that animals do not have intelligence or civilization, and so they are promiscuous (100). In the past, White people have linked this idea to Black people, to dehumanize them as stated previously. hooks discusses this further when she mentions the stereotypes associated with female Black slaves: "...Black women and men faced a society that was eager to impose upon the displaced African the identity of 'sexual savage'" (33). She elaborates by explaining how Black women were seen as seducers of White men, forcing them to commit adultery (33). From Collins's and hooks's ideas, one can see how this stereotype could impact a Black woman's self-esteem. However, Butler changes this impression by creating a species of fantasy White people who cannot live together or they will not be able to resist their sexual urges. By creating a species of light-skinned people who can become almost animalistic in their sexual ferocity, Butler turns the stereotype on its proverbial head. She shows that it does not matter what race someone is; anyone can be taken over by passion.

Mated Ina are also married in groups of men and/or women. Different characters speak several times of arranged mates for Shori. At one point, Brook describes a male Ina who came to Iosif to try and negotiate for Shori and her sisters to be mated to him and his brothers (131). She also mentions the Gordon brothers, who were also interested in mating with Shori and her two sisters (133). This conversation is continued later in the book, when Daniel Gordon and his brothers show interest in mating with Shori, despite the fact that her sisters are dead (210-1). It is also easy to see that many Ina who are mated are romantically and sexually interested in their

partners. This is evidenced by the Gordon brothers' reaction to Shori; even though they have not mated yet, due to Shori's age, it appears likely that they will do so in the future. Butler describes one brother's reaction as follows: "Daniel looked at me with that strange, strained look of his that ranged between hostility and hunger. I had come to see that look more and more as my stay with the Gordons lengthened" (210). Yet Shori is not appalled by their hunger; she seems to welcome it as well, and this counteracts a negative stereotype as mentioned earlier (Butler 211, Collins 100, hooks 33).

These concepts are especially important in light of the historical beliefs and notions that Summers, Collins, and hooks present as the norm for Black people. These authors discuss how Black women were encouraged to remain in heterosexual monogamous relationships with men of the same race while homosexuality and polygamous relationships were highly discouraged. With her creation of the Ina and her protagonist Shori, Butler shows a world apart from the traditional human one in which women may do as they wish in romantic relationships without the traditional opinions telling them not to behave as such. By doing this, Butler's *Fledgling* intervenes within the current vampire literary genre and the values historically held by Black people to create a new, positive alternative of what is acceptable regarding sexuality, desire, and relationships.

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