

An Analysis of Racial Research and Species Relationship Research in *Fledgling*

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Abstract: African-American writer Octavia Butler is one of the most important contemporary American women SF writers. Her last work *Fledgling* is a collection of Gothic elements, “vampire” and genetic variants in science fiction as a whole. This article summarizes the racial research and species research on *Fledgling* and finds that it could be an innovative point to analyze the symbiosis in *Fledgling* from the perspective of Ecocriticism.

Keywords: Octavia Butler; *Fledgling*; Literature review; Ecocriticism

Introduction

Octavia Estelle Butler (1947-2006) is one of the most important contemporary American women writers of science fiction. She has been the only winner of the MacArthur Genius Award for science fiction since 1995. She was also the first black female writer who won both the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award. Her works cover many universal themes such as gender, race, power, human dignity, plague, genetic engineering and ecological issues.

Fledgling, published in 2005, is her last novel, and is one of her most important novels according to Butler’s manuscripts. In the novel, vampires and human symbionts live together showing the symbiotic relationship between them. Vampires named Ina lives on the blood of human symbionts without harming humans and possesses high intelligence as humans. However, due to fear of sunlight, vampires are unconscious during the day so they can only be active at night. This is their only fatal flaw. In order to maintain adequate food (blood) and considering the health of symbionts, every vampire has at least six human symbionts. Once several ordinary humans become symbionts of a vampire, they will become addicted to the chemicals in Ina’s saliva and establish physical and emotional connections with the vampire. In addition, the immune system of the human symbionts will increase, and even the life span of them will be extended to 200 years.

1. Racial Research in *Fledgling*

Scholars have carried out relatively rich interpretation of literary values of *Fledgling* for more than ten years after the republication of it. Overall, they all have the same view on the novel: it is looking for a substitute. Butler constructed a symbiotic community of vampires and humans in which the mainstream of humans is impracticable.

In racial research, most scholars believed that *Fledgling* is an allegorical novel, in which racial issues are formulated by the contradiction between the white-skinned vampires and the black-skinned vampire, Shori. Stephane Smith (2007) criticized the heroine’s behaviors and physical characteristics deepening the stereotype of black women; he also believed that the heroine seemed to be a literal black panther fighting for the equality of blacks. Ali Brox (2008) believed that the discussion of race is not only reflected on the skin color but on the racial discourse in the novel. Racial discourse has become a way of expressing the conflict between vampires and humans. Butler uses the kind of discourse to create a hierarchy that both the characters and readers of the novel want to challenge. Brox believed that by constructing a protagonist who becomes black due to genetic engineering, Butler wants to tell readers that there are biological and social reasons for the prejudice against blacks. Brox also believed that as the only successful genetic hybrid, Shori has strong physical fitness and the advantage of being able to be active during the day, which indicate that Butler is trying to criticize the historical anti-miscegenation law. Gregory Jerome Hampton (2010) claimed that “Shori is the best proof of the value of black female body and her capability as a key component of Butler’s approach to difference and power. Explicitly or implicitly, her special

identity on the one hand limits her liberation in time, place and scope; on the other hand, it offers her a navigation to survive in the edge of the violent society, so as to hope for the rewriting of the politics” (120). Susana Morris (2012) analyzed the black-skinned vampire image in *Fledgling* from the epistemology of Afrofuturist Feminism, and believed that it challenged the white culture represented by traditional vampire novels. In addition, the image of a black woman like a superman expresses the author’s commitment to describing the future vision centered on people of color. Pramond Nayar (2012) used posthumanism theory to analyze the symbiosis of species in the novel. He guessed that the novel also expressed Butler’s call for society to eliminate all forms of racism through genetic engineering.

2. Species Relationship Research in *Fledgling*

A few scholars interpreted the symbiotic relationship between humans and non-humans or animals embodied in the novel from the perspective of species relations.

From the perspective posthumanism theory, Nayar commented that the biological experiment of the combination of species genes enables Shori to possess the biological value of vampires and humans, thus becoming a new biological identity that connects the two species of vampires and humans. The biological value of Shori is embodied in that she represents the beginning of a new community with caring, sharing and interdependent symbiosis. Nayar believed that posthumanism here does not regard human beings as the center of all things but just an individual in the environment, and also emphasizes the concept of co-evolution and co-existence of all living things, which is consistent with the thoughts of ecocriticism. But Nayar’s analysis has dualistic thinking because he believed that human genes make Shori sympathetic and rational, and that other species should strive to move toward humans. The author of the proposal believes that the novel expresses Butler’s attempt to deconstruct the dualism of the opposition between humans and animals, because she not only assumes that vampires have their historical culture longer than humans, but also condemns the persecution and slaughter of vampires by humans by the voice of vampires. Joy Sanchez-Taylor (2017) comparatively studied gene symbiosis and cultural symbiosis in the novel. She believed that the two species can merge at the cellular level because a single cell has no cultural awareness. However, at the individual level, the two species cannot coexist harmoniously because the conscious species will confine themselves based on their cultural knowledge. For example, some vampires believe that humans are low-level species, which hinders the harmonious symbiosis between species.

Taylor believed that Butler’s insistence on constructing a hybrid identity and a symbiotic relationship between vampires and humans, is trying to break the dualism of nature and culture. This is also consistent with a principle of ecocriticism, which requires humans to get rid of the separation of culture and nature.

3. The Significance of Species Relationship Research in *Fledgling*

Firstly, the research sheds light on the ecological thoughts in *Fledgling*. The highlight of *Fledgling* is the construction of a symbiotic community in which the two species, vampires and humans, are interdependent. In this community, humans are no longer the masters of nature. In contrast, vampires and humans establish a symbiotic relationship with each other. Vampires are set as advanced as human beings and at the center of power in the symbiotic community, which criticizes the anthropocentric thought; Vampires are accorded the right to speak out against humans’ attacks on them in history; at the end of the novel, Shori and her human symbionts have formed a truly harmonious model of symbiosis. Hence, the author of the proposal believes that Butler discusses ecological issues between humans and other species in *Fledgling*.

Secondly, the research enriches the research of female science fiction. Li Baojie (2021) pointed out that the research on contemporary science fiction has become common, but the overall study of female science fiction is still insufficient. Hence, he advised that the research on female science fiction should be strengthened. As a representative of modern American women’s science fiction, Butler’s works involve many universal themes such as gender, race, power, human dignity, plague, genetic engineering, and ecological issues, which can be used as a case study in the field of female science fiction. Moreover, *Fledgling* combines the gothic vampire element with the genetic engineering that embodies science. Hence, *Fledgling* also enriches the literary form of female science fiction.

Thirdly, the research inspires readers to be concerned about the living conditions of non-humans. The study on the symbiosis between the two species in *Fledgling* allows modern people to rethink their responsibilities on the earth and their relationship with other species, and let the sense of community take root in people’s hearts. The study also calls on humans to think about the living conditions of other species and how to build a society that coexists in harmony with all things in nature. In conclusion, the study on *Fledgling* not only has literary values but also has social significance.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, scholars interpreted *Fledgling* mainly from the perspectives of race and believed that Butler allegorizes human problems through vampire stories. Only a few scholars consider vampires as one species to analyze the survival pattern between humans and vampires. In the novel, vampires feed on human blood without harming human beings, and human beings also prolong their lives because the chemicals in vampire saliva enter their bodies. The mutualistic survival of the two species reflects the idea of ecogism. In *Fledgling*, vampires named Ina have the discourse right to criticize long-standing human evils. In reality, human beings claim to be the highest civilization in the world, but Ina in the novel has long historic culture and modern civilization, which breaks the anthropocentrism. The symbiosis community and the multi-culture within the community in *Fledgling* reflect that ecological holism maintains the overall interests while not neglecting internal harmony. The novel describes some human beings who are willing to give up their lives in the human world and choose to live with vampires, which embodies the idea of ecocriticism that humans should return to nature and integrate into nature. Therefore, it could be an innovative point to interpret the work from ecocriticism.

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