

Emerging Gender Perspectives of the African Americans in Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* and *Parable of the Sower*

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Abstract

The words, 'discrimination', 'racism' and 'sexism', constitute serious canker that continues to eat deeply into human relationships, just as the victims at the receiving ends of the concepts suffer dehumanization, injustices and brokenness in their daily existence even in societies that brag of equality, democracy, freedom and fundamental human rights. This paper thus uses Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* and *Parable of the Sower*, as creative binoculars to interrogate acts of prejudices and discrimination that continue to bedevil humanity in an endless history of discriminated over the centuries. Over the centuries many selfish, self-centred individuals and leaders have thrived on their egoistic desires to usurp the energies of other people/nations, to build massive structures and economies for themselves and countries, without taking into cognisance the repercussions of their actions on fellow humans. The paper adopts Afro-futurist strand of feminist theory in the bid to bring gender sensitivity into the future prospects of the Black Americans. It deconstructs traditional mindset of the female gender, who is often subsumed to be gentle, submissive, despondent, devocalized women, by creating women who challenge racial and sexual obstacles thus, traversing gendered spaces. The paper concludes that the female gender of black extractions have continued to muster energy and hope for recognition and acceptance as active contributors to the development and growth of societies in every ramification.

Keywords: *Racial Discrimination, Alienation, Aspiration, Determination, Gender Future*

Introduction

The African Americans whose ancestry is traced to Africa are a racially discriminated minority in the United States of America. Between the 19th century and now, their plights have been copiously captured by many literary writers and scholars in different narrative canons: such as Slave Narratives, Post-Slavery narratives, Harlem Renaissance, and Civil Right Movement Era/Black Art/Black Power, great speeches, Autobiographies, among others. Most literary critics, especially of Nigerian extraction, have captured the past and present racial discriminatory conditions that the African-American people suffered and are suffering in the American socio-political mainstream. For example, Imoh Emenyi does a social determinist reading of early African-American literature, where she identifies that society is a major determinant of the responses and choices which people of African ancestry in the United States have made in the last four centuries. This nature of writing is generally tagged as racial studies. The biological difference, of humans is captured in the term '*race*', the root word of racism; which brings about the many terminologies, Mongoloid, Capoid, Australoid, Caucasoid, and Negroid as types of races the world over. Like the Africans of the Sub Saharan Africa, the African-Americans belong to the Negroid race.

According to modern history, Blacks became nationals of the United States of America through slavery. Julia Udofia notes that "Negro slavery was initiated by the King of Spain on September 3, 1501 and began with the transportation of numbers of Christian

Negro slaves from Spain to the West Indies. The African slave trade began shortly afterwards" (20). Known as the "transatlantic slave trade," the forbears of present day African-Americans were uprooted consecutively for four hundred years, from Africa and transported to the Americas. They were subjected to slavery and other dehumanized forms of existence; even the demeaning treatments by White supremacists still reflect in their interrelationships today.

By the nature of their origin, the African-Americans are greatly discriminated and alienated upon in several vocations, in spite of their huge contribution to the development of the world that they find themselves. This disconnection or estranged treatment results from hostility which the blacks experienced and to some degree, are still experiencing, not because of their incapacity at tasks, but due to the pigment of their skin. The effect of the disconnection leads a majority on a journey motif in search of their roots.

Ademola Dasylyva and Oluwatoyin Jegede summarize that the literature of African-American literature reflects a passionate concern for race and identity, nationhood and dignity, self-integration and self-assertion and a general quest for roots and freedom; and that this stemmed from the physical and psychological dislocation which slavery had caused them (191).

In the words of Iniobong Uko, African slaves, which constitute an inferior population in the United States America (USA), impedes the spirit of true racial harmony till date; a fact that is drawn from "the misconception of the status of the black man in the pre-slave era, which in the view of many non-blacks, seemed to suggest that he (the black man) was not human, was less than human and had no soul" (760).

Through this quest for roots, it becomes only natural for the African-Americans to want to know more about their origin, and perhaps, why the spirit of distancing is always trailing them. The result is their ever increasing desires at perfection in every endeavour. Octavia Butler confronts this alienate spirit by delving her imaginary mind further at scientific projection of the Blacks, into active space, especially the female gender.

By the 1960s, certain activist movements against the socio-political discriminations of the African-Americans emerged. Martin Luther King Junior, Bernard Lee, Malcolm X, John Lewis were notable civil rights activists of the time. They achieved, amongst other things, the enfranchisement of the Black people in America. In this 21st century, one of these movements, '*Black Lives Matter*', has come as a both movement and an organisation, to push for the total liberation of the Blacks.

In the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, many institutions aided and abetted slavery and Western empire. But beyond America, other institutions in the entire world are remorsefully renouncing their stance on the enslavement of Africans. What they have not done is to pay due reparations to the descendants of the erstwhile slaves. One of those renouncing institutions is the prominent Bank of England. On June 19, 2020, the bank issued a statement in relation to its links to slave trade. It says:

... There can be no doubt that the eighteenth and nineteenth century slave trade was an unacceptable part of English history. As an institution, the Bank of England was never itself directly involved in the slave trade, but is aware of some inexcusable connections involving former Governors and Directors and apologises for them. The Bank has commenced a thorough review of its collection of images of former Governors and Directors to ensure none with any such involvement in the slave trade remains on display anywhere in the Bank. The Bank is

committed to improving diversity and is actively engaging with staffs, particularly with our Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) colleagues, to help us identify and shape concrete steps that can be taken now to progress the Bank's efforts to be as inclusive as possible... (2).

In corroborating the above assertion Olatunji Dare writes that:

... across the United States and Europe, monuments erected often in mythic proportions over the centuries to men regarded as heroes not just of the epoch but of History have come tumbling down in the past three weeks, felled by those who had looked on them with indifference or had in silence felt taunted, haunted, cruelly violated even, by the presence of those images in those spaces... (3).

The quest of eradicating racism or establishing racial equality has given birth to a strong speculation the literary canon – Speculative Fiction, which holds that the future belongs to the black peoples of the world. To this, Mark Dery avers that Speculative fiction is a kind of writing that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno culture. It appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future-mightfor the African-Americans. It is termed “Afrofuturism”, and asks pertinent questions about the hope of African-Americans in the future. One of such enquiries is “can a community whose past has been deliberately robbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” (80). Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* and *Parable of the Sower* are examples of the “speculative fiction”, attempts to explore the identities found in the novels as gender creations as well as reflect on author's vision of the future. This paper is divided into five sections: the introduction, which is the foregone, theoretical framework, establishing the future of womanhood, gender and sexuality in Butler's *Fledgling* and *Parable of the Sower*, imagining Black future inButler's *Fledgling* and *Parable of the Sower* and conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Afro-futurist feminism theory in the analysis of the texts understudy. Afro-futurist feminism is a strand of feminism that explores the role of Blacks in mainstreaming gender sensitivity into Afro-futurism. Afro-futurism on itself is a philosophy of science and cultural aesthetic that explores the intersection of African Diaspora culture with science and technology. It is a platform that enables us explore our culture, imagine ourselves gaining higher achievements, without depending on external influence (online). Afrofuturism is a people's dream, their symbol of hope to imagine a brighter future for Africans, through the deployment of both scientific and historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afro-centricity, magic realism and black magic, without Western beliefs (online).

Afro-futurist feminism according to this paper is the reimagining of a future of African-Americans through synergy of the arts, science and technology, to explore themes like utopian ideologies, alienation, otherness, digital divide and the reclaiming of African culture. (online). Octavia Butler's feminist futuristic prospects for the Blacks in the world of development is portrayed in her works – *Lilith's Brood*, *Parable of Sower* and *Fledgling*– where she presents an all-Black women protagonists to explore the African past, the present and future, while at the same time, imagining a world with better conditions for Blacks.

Afro-futurism, uses literature, music, technology and arts, to underscore a people's dream for a society that is completely devoid of both physical and social bondage, such as alienation, discrimination or racism. among others, reflected on a tradition of black speculative fiction. This reflections was theorized by Susana Morris, when she writes that: “Speculative fiction, that is science fiction, fantasy, horror, and futurist fiction, has largely been (mis)understood a genre written only by whites (mostly men)... (152). It was first used by Sun Ra in his musical performance in the Nineteen Eighties (1980s) in Chicago, when he combined Jazz music with scientific forms and space travels. The term was coined by Mark Dery, (forty years after Ra's performance, at about the time Ralph Ellison' *The Invisible Man* [1952], was published), in his famous edited work, *Flame of War*. By the publications of Butler, especially in *Fledgling* and *Parable of the Sower*, the destiny of African Americans began a reshaping through thoughts of futuristic utopianism. Bernard Dickson avows that the “emergence of Butler heralded the arrival of black writers on the scene of speculation writing” (772).

Afro-futurism has as its major concerns, alienation of the Blacks, their historical past, the realities of their present, to re-examine their narratives and attempts to build a new truth outside the dominant narratives. By analysing ways in which their alienation occurred, the theory works to reconnect the Africans in the Diaspora with histories and knowledge of racialized bodies. Afro-futurism, as reflected in the work edited of Mark Dery (2008), hammered on the future of the Blacks, thus becoming a springboard for literary scholars to begin to look beyond the present realities of African-American people and to speculatively appreciate their prospects in the future of humanity.

For the most part, Butler expresses the hope of a better and greater future where the Blacks all over the world might even rule over all other races of the world. Isaiah Lavender comments that, “the African American historical and cultural condition is inherently the stuff of science fiction” (37). He points out that “both science fiction and African American literature are the consequence of cultural memory: they are related to the rise of industry and slavery, respectively—two key factors in the history of the United States” (39).

In corroborating Lavender's views, John Rieder expresses these conditions explicitly, stating that: environmental devastation, species extinction, enslavement, plague, and genocide following in the wake of invasion by an alien civilisation with vastly superior technology—all of these are not merely nightmares morbidly fixated upon by science fiction writers and readers, but are rather the bare historical record of what happened to non-European people and lands after being 'discovered' by Europeans and integrated into Europe's economic and political arrangements from the fifteenth century to the present (124).

To put it simply, a large portion of both science fiction and African American fiction examine the past in the hopes of making sense of the present and establishing hope for the future. Both are deeply committed to questioning reality through the device of symbolism, as well as engaging in questions of cause and effect.

Establishing the Future of Womanhood, Gender and Sexuality in Butler's *Fledgling* and *Parable of the Sower*

Womanhood is expressed through sexuality, which in turn refers to the way in which people sexually experience and express themselves. According to Jerrold Greenberg, Clint Bruess and Sara Oswalt, it embodies biological, erotic, physical emotional, social or spiritual feelings and behaviours”. (5). Traditional societal constructs sexuality as the perception of gender in terms of one's biological birth; it sees one as biologically male or

female. The male is socially construed to be virile, assertive, authoritative, domineering and having strong macho dispositions, while the female is expected to be gentle, submissive, despondent, devocalized and generally seen as weak. Butler in her writings thus deconstructs the traditional classifications of sexuality to accommodate other sexual descriptions such as hermaphrodites and other Disorders of Sex Development (DSD), as well (Dickson, 773).

In *Fledgling*, Butler's protagonist, Shori, expresses her sexuality without fluttering an eyelid. Her choice of sex partners as well as her cravings is not determined by the male partner. She makes the choice of who to have sex with, when and how, without waiting for the partner to decide. She is both heterosexual and lesbian without fear or inhibitions, thus breaking the barriers of patriarchy in her forwardness. This manifests in her relationship with her first human male symbiant named Wright Hamlin, "I don't know enough about myself to say what my age might be... But I'm old enough to have sex with you if you want to"... (29). The protagonist initiates the drama of sex in the relationship. Her boldness is irksome to the traditional position of female gender role. This self-confidence and assertive personality reflect later in her relationship with Joel as well. Shori's domination of her sexuality is also manifests her lesbianiac encounter with Theodora, Brooks and Celia, thus making her bisexual in nature. She owes no one explanations for her actions, neither is she bothered about their opinion.

Butler's futuristic prospects of the Blacks women in the world of development as portrayed in her works – where she presents Black women as protagonists - are her attempts to enforce gender sensitivity. She projects an utopian culture of African women, free to demonstrate their sexuality without a backward glance on the choking effects of patriarchal domination.

The construction of gender identity is a dominant issue in Butler's *Fledgling* and *Parable of the Sower* are not exceptions as they show female self-assertiveness. In both novels, she deconstructs the canonized science fiction paradigm by introducing protagonists who are endowed with extraordinary powers to take decisions about themselves and dominate their enclave. In *Fledgling*, we find radicalized monsters, aliens, and cyborgs all existing in both early and contemporary science fiction, which discourage some readers on the one hand, while it encourages others to examine this radicalized power relations. Through scientific modifications, the protagonist, Shori, is genetically engineered to have both human and vampire DNA, which enables her display extraordinary abilities in empathy and healing propensities. She is dark-skinned, a deviation from the Ina tradition, where the protagonists are usually Whites. This dark skin colouration makes her very active in the day time, where other vampires cannot withstand the scourge of the sunlight. This hybridized nature empowers Shori with the ability to function in both the human world during the day, and the nocturnal lifestyle of the vampire family at night. Bernard Dickson avers that her experimental genetic engineered outcome empowers her with greater abilities in physical healing, wherefore "she becomes the strongest Ina and strongest human" packed in one (775).

In Butler's writings, gender explications do not undergo a revision in isolation but rather change as a result of the hybridization with humanity, thereby becoming something new. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren Olamina serves as a perfect representative of the type of characters Butler is known and respected for; she continues to grow and change throughout the novel. By this, Butler challenges racial and sexual obstacles by traversing gendered spaces.

Butler uses *Parable of the Sower* to demonstrate that Black women would earn self-

definition and self-assertion in the future. Written in 1993, the novel is set in the future time, 2024. Lauren, the protagonist, is a Black woman who is intelligent and desperate to craft a plan for survival. She is also a person of faith. Without the formal knowledge of astrology, Lauren contemplates leaving the earth to colonize other planets. The novel offers a complex and thought-provoking commentary on the need for the interaction of gender and race in modern society. For Butler, gender is one of many tired and ineffectual modes of identity that humanity would be better off ridding itself from. Moreover, she constructs gender in the light of race and sexuality.

In her final novel, *Fledgling*, Butler examines race, sexuality, and desire in a vampire narrative that is radically different from others in the afro-futurist genre. *Fledgling's* protagonist Shori, a young Black vampire who, physically appears to be in her early teens, but ideally, she is fifty four years of age. 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. Shori makes her own decisions about her relationships and their progression. She often initiates her sexual relationships with both men and women, which is a direct contrast to other works in the vampire literary canon, where a White man is the vampire while the symbionts are women. 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.

Butler creates a conventional science fiction heroine: she is black, she is disempowered, she is poor, she is often ill, and she compromises and nurtures, rather than fights. Her novels are deliberate deployment of Afrocentricity in science and technology, by including black magic and magical realism (Afrofuturism), to deconstruct black history, especially with the intent to right the prejudices of Western misconceptions about Africans. Her writings therefore are attempts to project a better future for Africa, through the recapturing of African past, present, especially their travails in Diaspora which embodies slave era and the aftermath (Dickson, 772).

Another notable quality in her heroines is the ability to resist pressure; they rely more on stealth, negotiation, and intelligence than on strength or force. With this hero, Butler replaces war with compromise, human arrogance with cooperation, and hierarchy with collaboration. She has likewise revised notions of uncomplicated power relations and has also questioned the equation of motherhood and worth that some feminist utopia and Black literature espouse.

Butler is certainly among the authors whose works exemplify Afro futurist feminism. As a shy child, Octavia Estelle Butler found escapism at the library reading fantasies and writing about them as a teenager; which made her the first science-fiction writer to receive a MacArthur Fellowship. Her emphasis on the transformative potential of speculative fiction underscores her Afrofuturist work as defined by a feminist sensibility, and not only adhere to the tenets of Afrofuturism but are also self-consciously interested in the connections between race, gender, sexuality, and abilities, that are at the core of Black feminist thought. These connections are evinced in her novels *Fledgling* and *Parable of the Sower*.

One of Butler's most notable interventions involves the redefinition of heroism. Paul Gilroy defines Black cultural practice as “a specific ... positionality of inbetweenness in Western modernity” (25) and Butler's heroines exist clearly in this space that is between acceptance and exclusion. It is their ability to exist between centre and periphery that shapes their heroism, while their privileged positionality results largely from their race, gender, and

class statuses.

Douglas Kilgore, while observing the social, political, and economic placement of most of Butler's heroines states that "...if humanity as a whole is subject to the fear of bodily violation and exploitation, in Butler's futures it is black women who have the longest familiarity with it. Such unfortunate experts know the best strategies for survival" ... (355).

Their blackness, their femaleness, their poverty, their status as mothers, even their illnesses and/or disabilities are precisely what equip Butler's heroines to lead in future worlds. Their previous disadvantage becomes competence and their historical familiarity with marginalisation makes them ideally compassionate leaders.

The future as imagined in *Fledgling* is the tendencies of vampires to ensure symbiosis and hybridity. It projects a central theme that humanity can actualize symbiosis and hybridity particularly in the areas of sexual relations, race, class, etc. Butler's Lauren Olamina in *Parable of the Sower* is the metaphor for the futuristic Black women. With Lauren, Butler shows that Black women in the future can be well read outside of the realm of academia. She also reveals that women are capable of conceptualising difficult aspects of science including space travel. Butler uses what she knows of the state of the world to make a fair and just assessment of what the world would be like in year 2024. When the novel was released in 1993, one could say that she offered a piece of hope to the Black community in the face of disaster; hope and perseverance in the face of adversity; and self-definition in the face of silence.

Conclusion

This paper took a copious look at Octavia Estelle Butler's projection of hope for the Black African-American women, using *Fledgling* and *Parable of the Sower*. In the paper, literature is a tool for the exploration of the present and the prediction, and/or imagination of the future, especially that of the Blacks. The study highlights the fact that indices of racism and sexism still exist for the non-Whites, despite centuries of abolition of slavery. Shori (*Fledgling*) and Lauren (*Parable of the Sower*) still suffer from these oppressive structures even in the future where the text is set.

Afrofuturism, which does not only mobilizes science fictional tropes but also reflects the future possibilities of Black people in the African continent and people of the African Diaspora, is adopted as the analytical instrument for the study. The theory presents itself as an aesthetic element that aims to speculate the future reality of the Black race, especially black women, as Butler's *Fledgling* strips vampires of both their omnipotence and potentials of universalizing whiteness. Butler makes a statement that vampires' potential strength is not a matter of whiteness, and that blackness is not a determinant of degeneration as White racists hitherto presented in their literary oeuvres.

The paper also avers that even the future of Blacks in White dominated societies is jerky because racism and sexism still run in its administrative machinery of the new world. Science Fiction is a genre in literature that tries to imagine the future within the spheres of science; this is the concerns of Butler in *Parable of the Sower*, set in 2024, although published in the nineties. Octavia Butler, mainstreaming speculative fiction, depicts women, especially women of colour (Black women) and girls as significant in the present and more so, can be a source of ground breaking innovations in the future.

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