

Fantasy/Science-Fiction Rhetorical Analysis: Rhetoricity within *Fledgling*

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Abstract

Cultural rhetoricity helps unveil the broader implications and ideologies found in the various depictions of the fantastical within science fiction and fantasy. This analysis specifically examines speculative fiction rhetorics in *Fledgling* by Octavia E. Butler. Its intent is to analyze how cultural rhetoricity can serve as a way to make meaning from a marginalized perspective through allegory. The allegory within *Fledgling* utilizes vampiric creatures to explore antiBlack racism, colorism, and ableism. By contrasting archetypes and tropes such as the 'Strong, infallible woman' and the 'Superwoman,' this analysis identifies how such characterizations and stereotypes are subverted in Butler's novel. This analysis also explains how rhetorical expectations of Black women are manipulated to parallel lived realities of biracial and dark skinned women. *Fledgling* provides social commentary and representation for young women of color, who oftentimes are excluded, dehumanized, and even vilified within the genres in which fantastical creatures and cultural prejudices reside.

Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* guides the reader through the struggles and conflicts of a vampiric creature named Shori. At the beginning of the novel, we find Shori on the cusp of death. After suffering from severe head trauma, burns, and blindness, Shori kills and eats someone that entered the cave she was hiding in to regain her strength. She then explores her surroundings and finds a burned town. While heading along the road, a man named Wright picks her up and provides her with shelter. On the car ride to Wright's home, however, he provides Shori with what she really needs—human blood. Wright suggests Shori is a vampire. Because she has lost her memories due to her head injury, Wright's suggestion causes Shori to begin researching vampires.

Eventually, Shori discovers another of her kind, a man named Iosif, who

claims to be her father. Iosif tells Shori that she is part of the Ina, a fantastical species that forms bonds with humans by drinking their blood. The humans Ina bond to are called symbionts and need Ina venom to survive. Because of this, Ina and their symbionts live communally, maintaining a symbiotic and mutualistic relationship. The town which Shori discovered upon recovery was the remains of the female Ina community, who were massacred by an unknown group of people. Shortly before Wright and Shori were to move into the male Ina community, the unknown attackers strike again and murder the male Ina community. After discovering the remains of her family, Shori sets off on a revenge quest with Wright and a couple of surviving symbionts to avenge the community she has lost. Shori hopes to uncover more of her culture and her memories along the way. In this analysis, I will examine speculative fiction rhetorics and identify those present in *Fledgling*. Moreover, I will classify the archetypes and tropes present in the novel, noting where said archetypes and tropes are depicted, manipulated, and/or refuted. After identifying these facets of the novel, I will connect the allegory of the Ina to the rhetoric surrounding minorities within our culture, as speculative rhetorics continually refer to the world we live in.

Speculative fiction is a genre that oftentimes includes the supernatural and/or futuristic elements that we frequently see in fantasy and science fiction. The first speculative fiction rhetoric I see within *Fledgling* is intrusive fantasy. According to Jamila Kareem, intrusive fantasy is when “the fantastic is the disruptor of the established order of things” (“Rhetorics of Speculative Fiction”). In this case, the elements of fantasy that intrude on the world are the Ina (vampires). Upon researching vampires, Shori discovers that “They were fictional beings. Folklore. There were no vampires” (Butler 16). Therefore, since the Ina are thought to be fictional, their existence does intrude on the world in which they exist. By making the main character a part of this group, Butler uses meaning-making as an opportunity to explore the unknown. By giving Shori amnesia, Butler explicates the Ina’s culture in a manner that would not be possible (or feel natural) otherwise. Since Shori does not remember who she is, Iosif helps her in understanding what humans do not know about her kind. She learns that the Ina have their own history, language, and religions. Iosif makes it clear that Wright, Shori’s first symbiont, cannot provide her with the information she needs: “And you will teach her about her people and their ways? [...] You’ll teach her her history, and help her into the adulthood she is approaching?” (Butler 68) Therefore, Shori’s amnesia serves a plot device that moves the story forward.

This brings in another speculative fiction rhetoric I found to be present in the text: reality extension. People in our world that suffer from memory loss and amnesia are provided with representation through Shori. In addition to serving as representation for those with disabilities, Shori is a young Black girl, thus providing representation for women of color. Although *Fledgling* deals with fictitious elements such as vampires, Shori’s race affects the way both Ina and

humans view her. Iosif said he believed Shori would survive the massacre, and when prompted by Wright as to why she would have a better chance of surviving, Iosif responds “Her dark skin” (Butler 66). Iosif explains that it can better resist sunlight. Moreover, Shori is also the result of an experiment and “genetic engineering” (Butler 66); Wright goes so far as to call her “the new, improved model” of Ina (Butler 120). Despite Shori’s dark skin serving as an advantage in terms of survival, racism still exists in the world that Shori inhabits. When Theodora responds negatively to Shori’s daylight visit, Shori asks: “Is it my skin color or my apparent age that’s upsetting you so?” (Butler 89) Moreover, Victor, a man that attacked the Gordons’ village, calls Shori a “Dirty little nigger bitch” (Butler 173). Through these interactions, we see that *Fledgling* serves as reality extension because it reflects real-life racism that Black people experience. By including racial discrimination in her work, Butler is exploring how being Black creates a different experience of living in the world, and therefore makes meaning through a lens not commonly seen in science fiction and fantasy. As Susana M. Morris puts it, “[Butler] (re)configures vampires as powerful beings not outside the history of racism, but as powerful, enchanting beings that are both vulnerable to the constraints of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism [...] and [is] committed to creating futures for them and those they love that reject these ways of knowing” (155).

To explicate the cultural rhetoric of the archetypes present in *Fledgling*, I must first compare and contrast the archetypes that are present within the novel. Two notable ones include the ‘Strong, infallible woman’ (“Femininity in Speculative Fiction”) and ‘Superwoman’ (“African American Female Literacies”). The former is a trope used for all women, including women of color. The latter, however, is exclusive to African American women. According to Kareem, the ‘Strong, infallible woman’ is the “opposite [of] the damsel in distress, [she is a] woman character who can take on all the baddies without the help of masculine characters [and] is often ‘unburdened’ by emotional attachments” (“Femininity in Speculative Fiction”). *Fledgling* subscribes to this archetype to some extent, as Shori does not need masculine characters’ assistance (namely Wright’s) in dangerous situations. In fact, we see Shori save our secondary male protagonist by putting “[herself] between [Wright] and the gun” (Butler 43). In addition to not needing the assistance of masculine characters, Shori also shares an intimate relationship with Wright, developing an emotional attachment that the conventional ‘Strong, infallible woman’ would shun. Shori tells Wright: “I crave you. I do. And I enjoy pleasuring you” (Butler 87). Moreover, when Shori wants to leave the male Ina community with Wright, she says “I think I need to go home” (Butler 78), which prompts her father Iosif to say, “You are home” (Butler 79). Despite Shori knowing Wright for only eleven days, she considers her home to be with him, thus implicating a deep bond (an “emotional attachment,” if you will). Later on, we see Shori tell Wright that she “treasures” him, showing an

attachment beyond sexual satisfaction (Butler 158).

The ‘Superwoman’ archetype is similar, but depicts African American women specifically as “independent, invulnerable, world-carrying women” (“African American Female Literacies”). According to Knighton et al., “Historically, the concept of strength was derived in part due to the fortitude exhibited by African American women to withstand the emotional, psychological, and physical atrocities committed against them during slavery [...]. During the post-slavery era, African American women were praised for their strength and ability to assume multiple roles, be the backbone of their respective communities, breadwinner in the household, provide for their families, and ensure family survival [...].” (Knighton et al.). Shori embodies this archetype to some extent, as she is strong both physically and mentally. She says she will “do what’s necessary to sustain [her group]”, making her the primary caretaker and provider (Butler 122). However, despite this, Shori is also shown to be codependent, vulnerable, and communal. According to Morris, “the Ina do not just require human blood from anonymous donors, they need to coexist and share intimacy with human beings (and each other) in order to survive” (158). Brook tells Shori “You need to touch us and know that we’re here for you, ready to help you if you need us” and “[touching] pleases us just as it pleases you” (Butler 177). This need for physical touch and intimacy shows that Shori is not wholly independent and invulnerable; she has needs that must be sustained by others. The broader cultural implications of this are that even as fantastical creatures, Black women are not inhuman and rely on the help of others. They are not invincible victors who triumph over every issue and can take over the world without assistance. Butler manipulates this trope to show us a sensitive Black girl, one who is soft and strong all at once, and defies multiple stereotypes and archetypes in the process.

The tropes in *Fledgling* constellate race and disability, both of which play large roles in the novel. As Theri Pickens puts it, “[Shori’s] identity is not collapsible into the binary of being a super-able black woman, nor an abject disabled person” (35). As discussed previously, racism serves as a reality extension and racist cultural archetypes are present throughout the narrative of *Fledgling*. In addition to race and disability, we see the tropes of biracialism and barbarism present in the novel as well. Because Shori is half-human, we see Victor call her a “mongrel cub,” reflecting what the Ina that sent him think of her (Butler 173). These Ina (the Silk) want Shori dead because she is both dark-skinned and part human (Butler 173). This demonstrates discrimination against her based on being biracial. According to Pickens, “being African American makes Shori more powerful since her skin color is both a product and a marker of her hybridity” (37). Throughout the novel, we see that Shori’s dark skin gives her the advantage of being able to move and operate throughout the day. Brook points out that “[Shori is] not only able to stay completely awake and alert during the day, but [she also doesn’t] burn” (Butler 133). Shori’s dark skin as a marker of her genetic engineering serves as both a negative and a positive. As Brook mentions, she can function throughout the day unlike other Ina, and as mentioned previously

by Iosif, Shori's dark skin is partially why she had a higher chance of surviving the massacre of the female Ina community. Moreover, we see the Gordons take positive interest in mating with Shori as her dark skin intrigued them. In a conversation between Brook and Shori, Shori inquires if the Gordons' want to meet her "All because of [her] dark skin?" (Butler 133). Brook then tells her, "That's the most obvious reason" (Butler 133).

Despite the fantastical element of the Ina, prejudice is present since most Ina are perceivably white. Shori's dark skin and biracialism serves as a reason for contempt among the Silk family specifically because of the Ina's white norm, thus establishing an allegory for racial minorities. Pickens asserts that "white and abled privilege fundamentally shape Ina understanding of ability and whiteness as standards, implying disability and blackness are deviant" (37). Although Brook tells Wright "[The Ina are] not human [...]. They don't care about white or black" (Butler 162), this is clearly not the case. If the Ina did not care about race, they would not be trying to exterminate Shori and calling her antiBlack slurs behind her back. In terms of cultural rhetoricity, according to Chuck Robinson, "Butler's interest lies in the power and meaning of abnormality as the movement away from normal" (484). Butler, in a sense, empowers Shori through her skin tone by giving biologically sensible reasons that said skin tone helps her survive. However, her skin and being a biracial experiment serve as the foundation for the hatred the Silk harbor against her. In this sense, Butler speaks to the complex nature of race in culture and how it constellates a unique existence, one that blends questions about privilege. Is Shori's skin color a privilege, since it allows her to be awake during the day and has helped ensure her survival? Or is it oppressive, since the Silk are hunting her for being biracial? Such rhetorical questions demonstrate how Butler made this issue multifaceted in order to guide us in our understanding and meaning-making of how race affects the lives of women of color.

In terms of barbarism as a trope, Butler blatantly refutes the idea that Shori is savage or uncivilized. The Ina have specific morals relating to how to live collectively with their symbionts; despite not knowing such morals, at one point, Shori says, "I think it would be wrong for me to keep you with me against your will" (Butler 48). Iosif praises Shori for her judgment, saying "You've forgotten who and what you are, but you still have at least some of the morality you were taught" (Butler 66). As questions of agency, consent, and codependency are raised throughout the novel, and even as Shori is placed in a position of dominance and power, we see Shori offer Wright "freedom" (Butler 83) and continually try her best to care for the others that surround her. Although not reaching the level of tender servitude as the "mammy" archetype ("African American Female Literacies"), Butler does humanize Shori to show the character of real-life Black women. As mentioned previously, showing a young Black girl being simultaneously soft and strong refutes stereotypes and contributes positive representation for Black women in the science fiction and fantasy community.

To conclude, through speculative fantasy rhetorics, cultural archetypes, 5

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and tropes, Butler pushes against culture-based constructions: cultural assumptions, expectations, prescriptions on a rhetorical situation, and the dexterity of embedded culture-based ideologies (“Cultural Rhetoricity”). The fantastical rhetorics in *Fledgling* show us how racism is present in the novel and serves as reality extension. Through this rhetoric, I gained insight into how intrusive fantasy parallels cultural ideologies about women of color. The allegorical representation of the Ina allows nonBlack people to learn about a material reality that is not their own and therefore explores what is unknown to this audience. Considering race and disability in the novel through cultural rhetorics allows us to understand how fiction reflects real life issues and mentalities. For instance, constructions of African American women as independent and invulnerable reinforce the cultural assumption that Black women are inherently “stronger” than other women because of their history with slavery. By humanizing a partially nonhuman Black character and having her retain moral values despite her amnesia, Butler presents us with rhetoric that pushes against the idea that Black women are world-carrying superheroes who care for absolutely no one, or—on the opposite end of the spectrum—are savages that need to be saved through colonization. Butler dives into Afrofuturism, which serves as “a free space for women, a door ajar, arms wide open, a literal and figurative space for black women to be themselves” (Womack 100-101). Rather than falling into harmful archetypes or tropes, Shori is empowered and balanced as a character that has emotions, requires intimate relationships with others, and strives to keep those with her safe. She is a complex heroine in which Black women and girls can see themselves, thus providing positive representation for a marginalized group. The cultural rhetoricity surrounding Shori’s character shows that progress for maintaining a diverse genre is ongoing and evolving. Butler shows the assumptions and expectations placed on Black women in society should not have a place in this genre if they are not going to be criticized, refuted, and manipulated, just as they are in *Fledgling*.

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