

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Texts, Contexts and Media

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An Ecofeminist Reading of Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling*

J. Hindu Sree

Ecofeminism is a subgenre of Ecocriticism which emerged as a vital part within the second wave of ecocriticism. Women's role cannot be viewed apart from the natural environment which in turn shapes the character and personality of them. Scholars such as Karen J. Warren and Greta Gaard have emphasised on the necessity of ecofeminism. There is an interconnection between the oppression faced by women and nature. Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling*, an afro-futuristic fiction focuses the life of a post-human named Shori and it explores the pain and struggles that a human as well as a posthuman faces concerning identity and existence. This research article aims to analyse the suppression faced by Shori and how the ecosystem determines the nature of leadership as patriarchy or matriarchy in the posthuman world.

African American Literature is an amalgamation of voices and experiences of writers from African descent produced in the United States. It propounds the major issues and concerns from the perspectives of African Americans. The major themes dealt with are slavery, African American culture and tradition, identity crisis, migration, women's role in the society and so on. These ideas also became part and parcel of Science Fiction. Science Fiction, also known as SF, is a genre of speculative fiction that deals with imaginative and futuristic concepts. It is also known as 'Literature of Ideas' and it explores science and technology, time travel, parallel universes and extraterrestrial life. There is a sub-genre called Black Science Fiction or Black Speculative Fiction where the people

of African Diaspora, their sufferings, their alienated selves and stories are depicted against the canvas of different cultures and environments. In the later part of the twentieth century, the term 'Afrofuturism' has been used by a number of cultural critics to delineate a cultural and literary movement of the thinkers of African Diaspora who incorporated science and technology to portray black experience. According to Kali Tal, "readers and critics need first to be familiar with the traditions of African American Literature and Culture" (65). He adds that there is an interconnection between black culture and black science fiction.

African American Women Writers play a significant role in depicting the society and the trauma of black women in their poetry, prose and novels. The most important African American Women writers are Zora Hearle Hurston, Toni Morrison, Octavia E. Butler and many others.

Octavia E. Butler, an African American Science fiction writer, was brought up in the radically integrated community of Pasadena. Her final work is the Science Fiction Vampire novel *Fledgling* which was published in 2005. She gained interest in SF from the magazines. Each place has given her an opportunity to experience cultural and ethnic diversity in the midst of racial segregation. Her notable works include *Patternist Series*, *Kindred*, *Lilith's Brood*, *Parable of Shower*, *Parable of Talents*, etc. The themes of her novels deal with the transformations of humanity, genetic alterations, hybrid individuals, dystopia and identity crisis.

Ecofeminism is also known as Ecological Feminism that explores and analyses the connections between women and nature. The term 'Ecological Feminism' was coined by French Feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. The main tenet of ecofeminism exposes the domination of women and domination of nature as integral. Ecofeminists focuses on the hierarchical and dualistic patriarchal thinking which see women and nature as inferior. They draw on the concept of gender to delineate the relationship between humans and the environment. They critique the connection between nature and women in almost all fields including culture, economy, politics, literature and so on. Ecofeminism stresses much on paying respect towards women and nature. There is

an interconnection that exposes the female values of nurturing, cooperation, reciprocity which are quite present in both women and nature. It also connects everything to creation and other cycles which concerns childbirth, moon cycles, etc.

The main principles of ecofeminists include both the oppression of nature and women are intertwined by a cause, replacement of culture of domination to the ethics of care, any form of oppression is unacceptable because they are interconnected and understanding towards these connections for an inevitable change. The connection between women and nature is generally based on empirical, conceptual and epistemological character. According to Mary Mellor, "If women's and men's position in the nature-culture dualism, is seen as biologically determined or essentially different, it is clear that the dualism will never be bridged".

Fledgling is an Afrofuturistic novel that deals with race, sexuality and human nature in a vampire tale. It narrates the story of young Shori Matthews who wakes up to find herself in a cave. Initially, she resembles a ten-year old African American girl, but in the course of the novel, her real age is revealed which is quite surprising. She goes into the surroundings and finds a burned site that triggers her memory. Yet, she could not recall anything. Wright Hamilin rescues Shori and initiates a sexual relationship with her. He renamed her as "Renee". Shori bites him on the neck and wanders all over the night to find who she is and where she is from. She undergoes the trauma of an identity crisis. There, she meets Theodora Harden, an old woman whom she bites once again. After an incident with the Gunman, she comes to know about her and her family. She happens to meet her Father Iosif who explains that she is actually fifty three years old. Then, she realises that she was a part of a vampire race called "Ina".

Shori comes to know about the fact that Ina needs human blood to survive. The humans are called symbionts and they cannot live without their vampire. Most importantly, Ina community is a matriarchal society. Shori is a successful genetic species born to a black human woman. Other communities are not ready to accept this kind of genetic environment which makes them face the sunlight without any obstruction. So they destroyed her parent's

community. At that moment, she rescues two Ina. They are Celia and Brook who she kept alive and they help her in finding her origin through their association with the Gordon family.

Initially, everyone in the Gordon family was shocked to see the failure in retrieving the memory of the incidents in Shori's mind. She learnt more about the history, language and lore of Ina. She becomes aware that she can read Ina language also. She gains another male symbiont called Joel which created a drift among the other symbionts. Gordon's farm is also set on fire by the human symbionts. Shori knows something that is related to her is causing destruction to anyone whoever comes in rescue of her. She wants to restore her memory so that she can do something to avoid further destruction. They come to know about the persecutors are the Sikhs who hate Ina's family because of the genetic experiment. The captured human symbionts who revealed the truth. An Ina council of judgement is called to question the destruction caused by Silks. The Silks had inquired about the mental stability of Shori. Shori witnesses one more death of her symbiont, Theodora. Finally, she succeeds in the trial and the entire dispute is resolved. Shori faces her future by tracing her memories with the hope of enriching her through education thereby leading the ended matriarchal descent to thrive once again.

In the context of ecofeminism, both posthuman and posthumanism explore and question the anthropocentric biases and binaries of human and nonhuman, the optimistic belief in technological process, hierarchical categories of nature and culture, the Other and the Self. Both anthropocentric and androcentric separate human from non-human that include the colonised and the enslaved, the marginalised and the non-citizen, the woman and the animal. They are considered as "the Other". Both Women and Nature are suppressed and marginalised to establish patriarchy. Ecofeminism emerges as a significant genre to highlight patriarchy which is being shaped by the ecology and ecosystem that they depend on. It is an interconnection that delineates the essence of power structures existing in a human as well as in a posthuman world.

In 1993, authors Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen wrote an essay

entitled "Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health" in which they outline what they referred to the "ecofeminist framework." She states:

Domination is built in to such dualisms because the other is negated in the process of defining a self. Because the privileged self in such dualisms is always male and the devalued 'other' is always female, all valued components of such dualisms are also associated with the male, and all devalued components are associated with the female.
(237)

Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* offers an ecofeminist reading by espousing the ideal of the power of matriarchy. This novel redefines human nature, race, sexuality beyond gender along with the role of nature in shaping the personality of women. Genetically engineered Vampire Shori Matthews is suffering from amnesia. She tries to recover her memory through an ecosystem that kindles her thoughts and it also leads to the extent of facing troubles because of her color and gender. Ecofeminism does not put man in the centre. It sees humans as co-evolving individuals with other life forms.

In *Fledgling*, Woman is at the centre and it is a matriarchal community of vampires called Ina. The notion of living together with nature is the basic aspect of this novel. Only after visiting the burnt places, Shori recalls everything that has happened to her family. She is marginalised for so many reasons. Firstly, she is not a human. She is a posthuman born out of genetic experimentation. Secondly, she is the first human female vampire. She is neglected by the patriarchal society which never allows women to be successful even in genetic births. Thirdly, she is a black human vampire and she is even criticised for her race. Octavia Butler has written this novel in such a way that Ecofeminism can be analysed by developing affirmative, ethical and political perspectives. Only after destroying matriarchy, Ina community becomes patriarchy. Within the community itself, she is portrayed as an outsider. She does not give up and she continuously puts her efforts to find who has killed her family. Through this, the author brings out a strong female protagonist who is ready to face afflictions.

Shori affirms that "I wanted to kill them, had to kill them. How else could I keep my family safe?" (Butler 105). Shori does not want to erase the existence of her matriarchal lineage. In order to suppress Shori, the patriarchal community of Silks argued against genetic experiments and they even questioned the mental stability of Shori. When the ecosystem is ready to allow the existence of vampires along with humans, Silks are not ready to permit and they even went to the extent of killing the other survivors whose blood Shori got fed. This incident can be seen from a gender perspective and the politics behind it says that the man is the ruler and the woman is the other. Shori says:

I don't believe I want to be adopted, I said. I can't remember my female family at all, but I'm part of them. I can learn about them and see that their memory is continued by continuing their family. If I'm adopted, my female family vanishes into history just like my male family did. (286)

Destruction of Shori's families and the ruined environment triggers the memory of Shori. Nature also participates in recalling incidents in Shori's mind. Ecofeminists stressed the gendered nature of social virtues and they have drawn an analogy between the exploitation of human values and that of other species. Shori finds solace in nature. She sees nature as a rescue and in turn shapes Shori as a confident young woman vampire.

The rain came down harder. It seemed still good to me. I let it wash away my prey's blood and my own, let it clean off the crust of dirt that I had picked up from where I had lain (3).

According to Simon de Beauvoir "In woman dressed and adorned, nature is present but under restraint, by human will remoulded nearer to man's desire". Both women and the environment suffer a similar fate of reduction, implicating each other in their own tales of abuse and oppression. The participation of nature in reflecting the culture is revealed in the following lines.

When we healed, we came out of our graves confused, mad with hunger...perhaps simple mad. Well, that's how in some cultures we became the 'walking dead' or the 'undead'. (189)

Salem witch trials are an ideal example of how man tried to disrupt the connection of living and co evolving with species. Here, in this posthuman world, it is a battle of power structures with the suppression of nature and other natural kinds. It redefines the definition of culture making it monolithic. Because of the genetic experiment, Shori's colour was changed from white to black. She is a black woman with the capacity to tolerate the sun. Nature even supports genetics. Ecosystem itself resemble like a symbiont. Shori stands as a measure of all things at the centre and allows her to treat everybody equally by neglecting anthropocentric perspectives. Shori is the manifestation of Mother Nature who is going to create a new humanity for the next generations.

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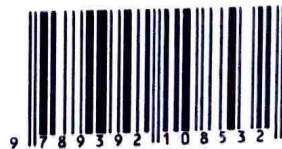
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