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Examining the female leader in Octavia Butler's dawn and Fledgling

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ABSTRACT

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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EXAMINING THE FEMALE LEADER IN OCTAVIA BUTLER’S

DAWN AND FLEDGLING

Committee Chair: Dr. Susan Wright

Thesis dated May 2011

This study examines the prototypical female leader as constructed by Octavia Butler in her science fiction novels, Dawn and Fledgling. The premise of the study relates to the protagonists’ capacity to undergo arduous tasks in extraordinary circumstances so that they can ultimately lead their people into a revolutionized society. Overcoming enormous obstacles, including the rejection of the very people they must lead, proves that both protagonists, Lilith Ilypo, in Dawn, and Shori Matthews, in Fledgling, are the women of the future, created to lead human beings into a “brave new world.”

The study further examines Butler’s portrayal of the “othernesses” that continue to plague societies, despite the societies’ “higher” evolution, and concludes that only through continuous compromise will the world become unified. Butler indicates that the onerous task of achieving this ultimate unification lies on the shoulders of women who will serve as, what I term, the future’s “female Adams.”
EXAMINING THE FEMALE LEADER IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S

DAWN AND FLEDGLING

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The female characters in Octavia Butler's science fiction novels are prototypes of the strong female of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. In two Butler novels, *Dawn* and *Fledgling*, the protagonists, both strong women, struggle to survive in their cultures. In addition, the main characters, Lilith Iyapo, in *Dawn*, and Shori Matthews, in *Fledgling*, are challenged to lead their people despite the resistance the people demonstrate against any changes in their traditional way of thinking. Lilith must face the dawning of co-existence of humans with aliens, and, indeed, the dawning of a new species of which she is "mother." Shori Matthews has to face living her life as the only dark-skinned genetically engineered vampire of her species. But in the end of each novel, Lilith Iyapo and Shori Matthews not only survive their ordeals through wit, strength of character, and their ability to adapt in their contentious environments, but they also serve as paradigmatic figures of a new, potentially more highly evolved "human" race.

Although both *Dawn* and *Fledgling* make clear Butler's intention to create female leaders in their the novels' fantastical settings, the title of Butler's novel, *Dawn*, along with the name of the novel's protagonist, Lilith, make it obvious that this novel will deal with a new era in time and this new era will be ushered in by a prototypical female protagonist. Butler clearly intends that the reader recognize a parallel between the first
female created by God, Lilith, and the themes of the novels—especially in *Dawn*. Butler has placed this post-modern Lilith in two fantastic environments to probe her themes of the role of females in a highly advanced scientific society. Butler’s re-creating Lilith seems to suggest that it is time for the strong female prototype to come of age, and Butler uses the science fiction genre to explore the role of the feminist protagonist because it allows for the development of complex and complicated ideas. Butler’s novels highlight the fact that without woman, mankind would not exist, despite advances in gene studies and other sophisticated scientific studies. Lilith is resurrected by Butler in these novels to give credit to the nameless women who have been involved in the evolution of many societies.

According to the book, *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* or *Alpha Betha of Ben Sira*, in the ancient Hebrew tradition, Eve is the second wife of Adam. His first wife is Lilith. Lilith is made at the same time as Adam and refuses to be submissive to Adam or to serve him. She sees her role as an equal to Adam, not as an inferior. It is after Adam tries to force her into submission that she flies away. In doing so, Lilith proves her strength, both physical and mental. She does not blindly obey, and she forges her own destiny. It is at Lilith’s point of departure that Eve is created from Adam’s rib: Adam needs a partner to assist and to submit to him in the way that Lilith would not or could not do. The story of the original Lilith makes the following comment by Butler, one relating to her reason for writing science fiction that includes historical facts combined with various literary allusions. Butler simply states, “In order to predict the future, we must know the past” (63).
Lilith, in Butler’s *Dawn*, is the science-fictionalized version of the first Lilith. She is the last of her kind, and she is searching for others like herself. Lilith is forced into the role of leader because of her genetically strong past, and she knows her past is connected with her present state. She also knows that without the past, she would not be in the position in which she is placed. Just as the ancient Lilith’s choices were dictated by her circumstances, Butler’s Lilith’s choices are dictated by the situations she is in.

As the title *Fledgling* suggests, Shori, too, is an original, a more youthful, “type”: she is the first of her people who has dark skin, thus setting her apart from the rest of her kind. As a prototype, Lilith has no reason to search for others like herself. Shori is forced into the role of leadership because she is her parents’ only heir. She is genetically different, and is aware that her existence is the missing link that will lead to the “cure” of her people’s succumbing to sun damage. Shori’s past is unknown to her, but she quickly learns that the knowledge of her past is the key to her survival. Significantly, both protagonists, Lilith and Shori, are women placed in difficult positions that depend on their ability to balance their decisions to act against their decisions to inaction in their particular environments as a means of surviving and, in turn, helping their species to survive. Their situations provide the venue that enables these strong female characters to use their knowledge as well as their inner strength to will help their people move from tragedy to progress.

In *Dawn*, Lilith Iyapo, who serves as the novel’s narrator, is one of only few humans alive after a world war which led to a nuclear holocaust that destroys the Earth, leaving it barren and mostly uninhabitable. The wasted Earth is discovered by a nomadic
alien species, the Oankali, who rescue the surviving humans and work to restore the health of the survivors for their own purposes. The Oankali’s ultimate goal is to combine their genes with human genes in order to ensure their own survival, a survival that depends on creating genetic diversity among themselves which they have lost as a result of their own protracted genetic engineering. Intended to create a species more highly evolved than human beings, who the Oankali believe are intelligent but excessive and self-destructive, the Oankali’s genetic engineering has, instead, resulted in a species that is virtually sterile. Lilith’s role is to become the progenitor of a hybrid race of human-Oankali through a process of “gene trading” initiated by the invading Oankali.

In *Fledgling*, Shori Matthews, the protagonist of the novel, is a genetically engineered vampire. Once she awakens from a deep sleep, Shori is forced to rediscover that she is one of a species who depends on human blood to survive. Shori’s induced coma has been part of a DNA experiment initiated by her own people, the Ina. Though Shori has lost all memory of her past, she slowly discovers her purpose: her double role is to make it possible for her people, the Ina, to live like normal human beings who can function during the day, and to exact justice for the wrongs committed against her and her family.
CHAPTER II

LILITH’S DAWNING

In *Dawn*, Butler uses Lilith, as a catalyst to begin the re-creation of the human species which has been decimated by a nuclear war. Lilith is introduced to the reader while she is being completed isolated: she has no idea that the room she is locked in has become a “womb” for her rebirth; and, as it turns out, the isolation room is located on the genetically engineered space ship of the Oankali. The representation of the alien “womb” of Lilith’s isolation is similar to the human womb during pregnancy. It is in this room that she learns that the cancer gene that had plagued her family and her has been removed by these unseen “alien mothers,” the alien Oankali. It is in this “womb” that the yet to be seen alien “alien mothers” inform Lilith of her newly created status: she is chosen by the Oankali to lead the surviving humans. She is tested by these “alien mothers” in several ways, including her isolation in the womb-like cell. While in isolation, Lilith is deprived of clothing and is left naked for unspecified periods of time; she is also often put into a deep, chemically induced sleep for long periods of time. The deep sleep allows for the Oankali to examine and study Lilith’s body.

The Oankali are grotesque by human standards. Lilith is shocked by the appearance of the first Oankali she has the chance to see up close. Prior to her closer contact with her Oankali captors, Lilith had noted that the captors were unusually hairy;
upon closer inspection she notices that, instead of hair, the aliens are covered in tentacles:

“Oh god,” she whispered. And the hair—the whatever-it-was—moved.

Some of it seemed to blow toward her as though in a wind—though there was no stirring of air in the room. She frowned, strained to see, to understand. She backed away, scrambled around the bed and to the far wall. When she could go no farther, she stood against the wall, staring at him [an Oankali]. Medusa. (11-12).

Butler introduces the Oankali to the reader as she does to Lilith, in a slow and gradual reveal that leaves the reader and Lilith in shock. In a single moment, Butler gives the reader and the protagonist the feeling of hysteria that is not easily overcome by Lilith. The jarring looks of the Oankali are never quite resolved by Butler, but Lilith’s referring to them as “Medusa” cannot be overlooked: such a name suggests that only a human being as powerful as the ancient hero Perseus will be able to stop the Oankali from destroying human beings. That human being, the one who first looked on the Oankali, is Lilith, and it is she who becomes the hero of this novel. Otherwise, Butler’s Oankali are humanoid so as to appear human, and bipedal like humans. The look of the Oankali is the one thing that humans have a hard time accepting. She allows Lilith to accept their looks, although in an uneasy manner, and Lilith is one of the only humans who is able to adjust her mind to overlook what is considered ugly in the Oankali. The Oankali’s ugliness for Lilith is centered in the fact that they aim to change what is human in the human race. But Butler leaves the appearance of the Oankali to the reader’s imagination.
In the novel, Lilith is the strongest of the humans who has to face the Oankali. It is through Lilith’s strength that the other humans are able to find a way to deal with the Oankali’s grotesque physical features. Lilith shows the humans that the fear they harbor for the Oankali is a fear that is unrealistic as the Oankali are simply a different type of being. Like Lilith, the Oankali have a desire to remain “normal.” The “normal” for the Oankali is to remain in their constant state of change; Lilith, contrarily, wants to remain human, which means that she would not change, especially not genetically as the Oankali must do to survive.

Once Lilith is released among the other surviving humans, she is often isolated by the humans and accused of a conspiracy to replace the human DNA with the Oankali DNA. The humans have no idea that Lilith’s DNA has already been mixed with the Oankali DNA. When Lilith is released from the isolation room, she becomes the new leader of the remaining humans, and is placed in charge of “Awakening” 40 more humans. The Oankali, in order to help the humans survive, place the humans in other isolation rooms and wait on the proper time to free them. The proper time comes after Lilith has studied the human’s dossier and learned enough about the human to feel sure enough they will not try to kill her or anyone else out of fear. Most of the humans do not trust Lilith and believe that she is working for the Oankali in order to make the humans slaves to the Oankali (167). Butler uses the mistrust of the humans to illustrate Lilith’s ability to stand her ground as the leader of the human survivors. Lilith never backs down when she is faced with opposition from humans or the Oankali. Her belief is that she
must assist with the continuation of the human species, even if it means that she will not be trusted by those she seeks to save.

Lilith is given the task of convincing a group of humans to give themselves over to the Oankali aliens who have plans to make a new species of humans. Hoda A. Zaki writes that Lilith is picked “as leader because of her stamina, intelligence, and tolerance for diversity, in the belief that Lilith could train other humans to overcome a major obstacle in the planned human-Oankali partnership: the horror and repulsion humans feel upon seeing a truly alien species” (14). The offspring of the Oankali-human symbiotic relationship will be a hybrid form of the two species. If the humans do not choose to mate with Oankali, they will be left unable to reproduce (245). There is an advantage to mating with the humans, longevity of human life. The humans who mate with the Oankali will live hundreds of years longer than they would if they do not mate with the Oankali.

Butler removes the idea of race and places the idea of what is human in the novel. The reader is forced to remove all prejudice of what makes a person better than another. The conflict is then given to the human characters to choose to become more than they are or to live and die as they were before, but without the advantage of living a longer life and with the inability to produce offspring. Lilith tries to make the humans understand that the part of what they will give up is small in comparison to what they will gain. Most of the humans though do not subscribe to this way of thinking; they object to the idea of allowing what they deem a drastic change to occur. Butler demonstrates the need for humanity to realize before it is too late that we are all connected by the things we
identify as human. The things like child rearing and the passing down of knowledge to our children is what we should value. When humans are confronted with the challenge of losing what makes us human, the concept of color and race is not an issue—a point that is important in *Dawn* and other Butler novels.

Lilith is chosen as the leader and the one to deliver the message of the Oankali’s true identities. The task of conveying to the humans that they no longer have a battle of skin color, but a battle for humanity proves to be the hardest part for Lilith. Butler gives Lilith the words of a non-violent peacemaker and civil rights leader, but Lilith’s words seldom have an effect on the humans who are set on a fight with someone or anything that scares them and challenges their previous view of Earth. Concurring, Adele S. Newson writes,

> In *Dawn*, Butler seems intent upon propounding a single didactic message: Until a solution is found (it is not a problem that is likely to be resolved unaided), future societies will be plagued with the same sexual racial prejudices faced in the present. This suggests that the battle of the sexes and the battle for dominion over racial groups are not battles at all, but rather full-scale wars. (39)

Lilith is forced to choose this new way of life with the Oankali making decisions about how and where the humans will live and exist, to have the ability to reproduce or to submit to the prison of a chemically induced sleep for an indefinite amount of time. This sleep keeps the humans in a static state of life without growing or aging. This choice is made hard by the fact that Lilith is handpicked by the Oankali to begin repopulating the
human race with a new breed of humans: this automatically makes Lilith a target of human scrutiny. It is only after Lilith agrees to be the one to Awaken a small group of humans that she learns that she has not been given the whole story of her role in the mission. The Oankali are genetic engineers who trade their genes with other beings in order to continue in their own physical development. If they do not continually trade genetic materials, their own genes will begin to break down, and they will eventually cease to exist. The choice in Lilith’s eyes is simple. She must breed or, in effect, die (89). What she views as death will come at the hands of the Oankali’s work on her and the other humans. Lilith will die and leave no trace of her existence if she does not produce any offspring; therefore, it is a dying off of humans that Lilith fears. Lilith, like the other humans is sterilized while she is sleep. The logic behind the sterilization is that the humans will be enabled to reproduce when they have proven they are ready to handle the addition of someone else to care for on the new untamed Earth. This promise of reproduction comes with a stipulation though. The embryo will have five parents, two human parents and three Oankali parents. Each parent will give genetic material to the unborn child.

Unlike Lilith’s counterpart from the Hebrew legend, she does not have the power to simply fly away. Her chance at flight comes when she agrees to go back to Earth and to allow the Oankali to do as they please as long as the humans agree with them. The Oankali have agreed not to interfere with the human’s decisions to mate or to remain sterile. This decision will allow for the part of the humanity that Lilith seeks to hold on to in order to remain intact. This part of humanity would be the human genes that she
would pass on to her human/Oankali children if she decided to mate in the way the Oankali have set.

Like Lilith, the surviving humans have been placed in a chemically-induced sleep that has suspended their growth and aging. This sleep allows the human bodies to be repaired of their various cancers, diseases, and handicaps. They are Awakened from time to time to get acquainted with their surroundings and the presence of the Oankali. It is when they are Awakened that they are given the choice of how they want to live out the rest of their lives, either on the Oankali ship or on the Earth. The humans who have chosen to return to the changed Earth are called Dinso; the humans who will remain with the Oankali aboard their vast ship are called Toaht.

Lilith becomes the new Earth mother and the link that will connect humans with Oankali, hence, she is the breeder of a veritable new civilization. Lilith is chosen by the aliens to be the first to give birth to a hybrid of a human and Oankali baby in order to make a genetic trade with humans. With this responsibility, she is given the task of introducing the rest of the humans to a new way of experiencing life. Lilith is created as the leader because of her mental resolve and her desire to remain human. The alien “gods” have chosen to Awaken her first because she is shown as the worthy one because of her genetic code and its abilities. She holds the key to cure cancer within her cellular and genetic codes. Her strain of DNA is perfect to make a new type of human that will be resistant to disease and sickness. Lilith understands that accepting the task of repopulating the Earth with the Oankali is an impossible choice, but she also knows that there is no way to physically fight the Oankali. Lilith knows that without the aid of these
alien beings any trace of humanity that is left in humans will disappear without a human intervention. Here, Butler shows the delicate nature of the situation that humans are forced to choose between. The choice is to fight the Oankali and lose their ability to reproduce or comply and lose their humanity. Lilith is convinced that once she is able to get back to Earth, she will be able to run away from the Oankali. Her mission is simple, comply with their wishes, get to Earth, and then run (144).

Lilith is one of a kind, and the she proves this repeatedly. Lilith believes that she and the other humans have a chance at rejecting the Oankali’s desires to restart the human gene with a mixture of the Oankali and human genes if they run from the Oankali. It is through this resistance that Lilith finds comfort in “betraying” the other humans by convincing them to go along with the plans to integrate their DNA with the Oankali.

Lilith, like the Lilith of the Hebrew legend refuses to submit. Whether it is to the Oankali or to the humans whom she is entrusted to guide, she refuses the duty she is assigned and makes her own path. While she is looked to both as the leader to the humans and liaison to the Oankali, Lilith has no real ties to either side. Her loyalty is to her own self preservation. As Lilith sees things, she has lost any trace of what was her original family and in a sense has lost the part of humanity that she knew in her life pre-Oankali, which is her only connection to her family.

Lilith re-lives this loss deeply when her Oankali guide, Nikanj takes her to visit another human, Paul Titus. During this encounter, Lilith learns that human males are less civilized in many ways than the Oankali. Butler, interestingly, has Paul’s chronological age as 14, the age of puberty, when the war on Earth broke out. He still has the mentality
of a 14 year old boy though he has grown up to be older than Lilith. He is an African American who was living in Denver when the nuclear war broke out. Paul has decided to become a Toaht, one of the humans who will not return to Earth. He has not seen or talked to another human for many years. It is expected that upon their meeting the two will mate, in order to exchange genetic material to produce a pure human baby. Lilith views this as akin to the way Africans were bred to produce stock for the slave owners. To her, this is another form of slavery that she must resist. Paul and Lilith are placed in a room alone to spend time with each other. They converse about their past lives on Earth and their dead family members. When Paul tries to force himself on Lilith, she is reminded of slavery, and how the enslaved people were treated like animals,

"No!" she shouted deliberately startling him. "Animals get treated like this. Put a stallion and mare together until they mate, then send them back to their owners. What do they care? They're just animals!" "Don't make yourself their dog!" she pleaded. "Don't do this!" (96)

Lilith is beaten and knocked unconscious by Paul, and Paul is then put into an indefinite state of sleep. Lilith tells the Oankali, Nikanj that Paul’s reaction is what they could expect when the humans are Awakened and kept away from other humans like he has been for over 15 years. This treatment of isolation proved to backfire for Paul. Like Adam of the Bible, Lilith is the person who will show the new way of living for survivors on Earth: she introduces the other humans to the new foods and plants they will eat once back on Earth and she has the ability to name the new foods and plants. She teaches the humans how they will have to learn to survive on the reformed and replanted
Earth. The new Earth is a new Garden of Eden that has not been touched by human hands. Lilith and her charges will be the first to do so in over 250 years. Along with her new abilities and responsibilities, Lilith has learned of the supposed “human contradiction” that afflicts all humans according to the Oankali, and that, in part, is that human beings are a repugnant combination of high intelligence and self-destructive violence. Further, this contradiction affects the way humans love and hate at the same time. In an additional way, Lilith is herself a human contradiction: it is up to Lilith to explain to the humans how the Oankali plant works in the human’s favor, and how it can also hinder the humans to the point of near extinction. In his article, Jeffrey A. Tucker writes,

Gender essentialism would establish a causal link between Lilith’s gender and her ambivalence to the power concomitant with leadership. However, the assertion that women are innately reluctant to occupy leadership positions, quite evidently, is at odds with (contradicts) both Xenogenesis's feminism and the reader's common sense. (166)

This is in contradiction to other critics of Butler’s writing about the type of society she has built in the novel. In the article, “Utopia, Dystopia and Ideology in Science Fiction of Octavia Butler,” Hoda A. Zaki writes,

Like other critics of their work, I maintain that Butler is part of the post-1970 feminist and utopian SF trend which emerged when writers who were deeply influenced by the second (1960s) wave of women’s
movement began to use SF to explore issues from a feminist perspective. (241)

Lilith is made as a leader for the surviving humans; through hybridity she gains superhuman qualities that will make her survival in the new post-holocaust world a certainty. Due to her genetic codes, it is apparent to the Oankali that her ancestors had what would be considered superhuman strength. The dormant genes were activated medically by the Oankali once Lilith was Awakened from her chemically induced sleep. Her ability to run faster and to strike an attacker faster is unmatched by any other human. She has the power to heal quickly from any bruise and to never get sick. Lilith is also given the ability to “grow” walls from the ground using a chemically induced material given to her by the Oankali. She is able to give shelter or take it away as needed. The Oankali have equipped her with these powers in order to protect her from the humans who wish to harm her due to the fact that she was the one chosen to Awaken other humans. Her role is that she is forced to comply with “birthing” the humans who have been asleep. In relation to this role as new world mother, it is interesting to note Karla Holloway’s argument that “the woman-centered ideology in African and African American women’s literature places with women’s creative powers both the ability to create life and the ability to tell—to reveal the quality, dimensions, and history of living” (132).

Lilith is almost godlike in her ability to bring human beings “back to life”: Lilith rubs her hand across a green pea-like pod to release the sleeping human of her choice. When the human go through the Awakening process, they are still groggy, and not able to
move without some assistance. Lilith gives the one she Awakens clothes and food and slowly explains to them where they are and who she is. Lilith is complex in that she makes decisions for what she wants to happen, but in every choice she still considers what the group as a whole would like to see happen (180).

Lilith is looked at as a traitor to the humans, and she accepts this label because she knows that with every choice she has made, she has thought out the consequences whether they are good or bad. Lilith is the strong feminist prototype because she is given the task of guiding humanity into a new era. Like the biblical Lilith that came before her, Lilith Iyapo is independent; this, in part, leads to her demonization by the human beings for her cooperation with the Oankali. Nonetheless, Butler’s Lilith follows the idea of the Lilith of the myth because once the Lilith of the myth becomes independent, she becomes a literal demon and flies away. Fleeing from the Oankali is Lilith Iyapo’s means of flying away. The humans suspect her of treason because she chooses not to fight the Oankali in relation to their ideas as to the means of the re-inhabitation of the Earth (200). Lilith has her own ideas about the Earth and how it should be governed, but most of the other humans fail to see her rationale. They fear her and her strengths. They are also afraid of the special abilities given to her to by the Oankali to “grow” walls and shelter with the touch of her hands. This fear of Lilith further shows the vulnerabilities the humans are experiencing daily.

One deals with a side-effect of miscegenation with the Oankali. One could argue that Butler submerges an interesting comment on human behavior by making one of the ramifications of miscegenation between Oankali and humans sexual addiction. Lilith is
made aware that this addiction that comes into play while maintaining a relationship with the Oankali, and as the leader she must inform the humans of this addiction (170). When the human/Oankali connection is made, physically there is chemical that is released that has the same affects on the human brain as an opiate. The connection is made through the tentacles of the Oankali and the brain of the human, a point that might serve to clarify the Medusa allusion early in the novel. This is the method of neurological-sexual stimulation that is used by the Oankali, the humans who submit to this type of contact then become attached to the Oankali host. There is a relationship that is built from the mental connection that proves that the physical body is not necessary in order to receive pleasure. Butler shows that the human idea of what feels good can be viewed as destructive for humans because of the inability to restrain the human inclination of addiction.

Lilith chooses to continue with her own plans of escape from the Oankali. Her desire to run from their ever present gaze gives her the motivation to appear as if she is compliant. Butler uses Lilith to show how with Lilith’s existence, the possibility of the survival of the human race is guaranteed. It is through Lilith that Butler designs the fate of humanity. Butler takes the responsibility out of the hands of man and places it in the hands of a woman. The choice that Lilith Iyapo makes is to assist humanity the best way she knows how while defying the Oankali.

Butler’s Lilith Iyapo is the heroine and the villain at the same time. She is the main reason the humans are able to survive once back on Eërth, but she is also the reason the humans do not trust the Oankali. Lilith chooses no sides in the struggle, but she is
forced to understand both sides of the problem. In the end Lilith does find a way to “fly away” as did the original Lilith. Lilith Iyapo does not run away; she finds her place in the “New World” and realizes that she is the only one in control of her life, not the Oankali and not the humans.

The title, *Dawn*, is a reflection of the actual story. Butler positions the story as the dawn of a new way of life for humanity. It also reflects the awakening of a potentially new way of thought. Humanity has been asleep in Lilith Iyapo’s world and as a result of that sleep humanity has suffered. Butler writes *Dawn* as the ultimate wake up call for the world and its habitants.
CHAPTER III

A FLEDGLING CHILD AS A LEADER

In the novel *Fledgling*, Butler creates a world in which different two different races co-exist; these races are human beings and a people called the Ina. The Ina are centuries-old vampires, living in a highly sophisticated science-fiction world, who differ significantly from vampires represented in classic literature. One important difference is that the Ina are not instantly destroyed by sunlight; they burn slowly which could result in their deaths if they are not protected from the direct sun. This is why the protagonist, Shori Matthews, is the object of persecution. Shori, unlike any of the other Ina, has skin that produces melanin; her Ina “mothers,” performed a genetic code experiment, mixing Shori’s Ina DNA with that of a black woman’s DNA, which explains Shori’s dark skin, a skin hue that sets her apart from the rest of the Ina community.

The Ina, unlike vampires of literary lore, are not evil, *per se*: they are not repulsed by crosses, holy water, or garlic. They are subject to injury by humans even though they are stronger than humans. The Ina clan that Shori is a part of is characterized as being thin, and having pale skin and white-blond hair (42). Shori is the exact opposite from this description of other Ina because of her dark features. At first, Shori believes she is afflicted with a medical condition, but with the help of the internet she realizes she is a “high-tech” vampire.

Shori’s tale begins in the middle of things where the reader is first introduced to
the novel’s protagonist who is covered in blood; Shori blindly kills, drinks the blood, and eats the flesh of the nearest “animal.” She has lost her memory due to an unknown injury; as a result she searches for information on others like her. Through retracing her steps, Shori meets others like her and is told that she has a family that is looking for her. After reuniting with her father, Shori is told that the “animal” she has killed and eaten was a family member named Hugh. It is explained to Shori that the reason she was not aware that she was attacking and eating a human was because her body was at a point of starvation. Shori’s body is in survival mode at the time of the incident and she is not aware that the animal is an Ina male who wants to help her. This survival mode only activates when an Ina has not fed for days and is in need of blood to survive. Shori, while only a child in Ina years, displays a hunger for blood that is expected of an Ina who is an adult and who has the ability to kill as an adult. In this way, Butler conveys that Shori is less in need of Ina adult guidance than are other young Ina. Her survival instincts further show that she is strong, independent, and capable handling herself even as a “child.” However, in the presence of other, older Ina, she is ignored and treated as a child. Her strength and intelligence is not initially received by the Elders, but Shori stands her ground and treats the Ina Council with as much contempt as they do her. It is understood that while Shori is a “child,” she has the mental capacity of an adult Ina. Days after the reunion with her Ina family, Shori discovers that her father and the rest of her family are killed in an attack on their family compound. The murders are executed by another group of Ina who wish to have Shori and her family punished because of their
ability to produce a daywalking Ina. Shori and her family were attacked by an Ina family named the Silks.

The Silks use their symbionts to execute the murders. They are able to use their venom to influence the murders. The Silks are the oldest of the Ina families; Milo Silk is the oldest at 541 years old. Milo is against the integration of human and Ina genes. He refers to Shori as a, “…black mongrel bitch…” (300). He continues his tirade against Shori and her differences by stating, “What will she give us all? Fur? Tails?” (300).

Milo’s words are felt by all Ina who are present. His racist rant adds to the evidence that is proof of his family’s part in the murders. He then accepts the punishment for his family that is handed down by the Council to have the male children in his family split up and sent to new families outside of the United States.

Shori then becomes the leader of her family. Because Shori looks different from the rest of her people, becoming their leader is an almost impossible feat. But Shori’s inner strength helps her face the resistance she faces on several levels. The fact that she is considered a child, she is dark complexioned, and she has no memory all factor into the resistance that she must overcome in order to lead her people.

_Fledgling_, written after _Dawn_, makes clear the evolution of Butler’s strong female protagonist—from Lilith to Shori. Butler gives Shori the same qualities ascribed to Lilith in that Shori is strong and independent in thought and action. The main difference between the two women is that Butler has made Shori from an admixture of the human and Ina species as well as from other races. The woman in this case, Shori, is saddled with the challenge of bridging the gap of racist thought and the chauvinistic ideas that
ruin the world’s societies. The reader is not initially made aware of Shori’s race or the differences between Shori and the other Ina. Butler removes the aspect of the race from the story to focus on the fact that Shori is viewed as a child, even at the human age of 53. According to Ina standards, she is still a child. The Ina live for hundreds of years, and because of that, Shori is still a child. Her body is small like a prepubescent girl. Her youth is what the reader initially suspects as the only problem that the other Ina have with her leadership qualities, but her youth is not the only problem. As previously stated, it is her skin color. Ali Brox states, “Shori’s existence forces readers into the ambivalent realm of the hybrid Third Space where one must rearticulate the conversation about identity beyond fixed racial categories” (395). Butler readers have come to expect a strong, black female protagonist in her novels; this novel is different and has a genetically evolved protagonist. But Butler withholds Shori’s identity of mixed genetics from the reader until the middle of the novel. This is important because Butler allows the reader to assume that Shori is just another of her African American female protagonist leaders. Butler withholds the racial identity of Shori to show that we as humans need to focus on the essential matters rather than on race.

Like other leaders throughout history, Shori’s “difference” could make a positive improvement for her people; but, as Butler, suggests in Fledgling, tradition, even if it is detrimental to a people, is difficult to accept, much less embrace. Butler uses Shori as a means of illustrating this point. Butler illustrates that mixing the human species and the Ina vampires is not a problem, but is, rather, a solution to a problem. Shori is told that because she can stay awake and alert during daylight hours she is an asset: if Inas are
awake during the daylight, they are not fully aware of their surroundings and are not clear headed. She is also advised that she is even more of an asset because “humanity works during the day” and that for the Ina “most human trouble makers cause trouble during the day” (214). Shori could help alleviate the problems of her people. But accepting that Shori’s children would be a mixed-race, human and Ina, gives the traditional Ina pause: they fear a change in their way of life or an end to it altogether. Butler again illustrates the fear of differences in this novel with the way Shori is perceived, and, as the reader knows, misperceptions can be destructive.

Shori’s existence is proof that there are other ways of survival, even though they are different; these ways of survival will insure that future generations will be able to integrate into the world without scrutiny. This situation is parallel to Lilith Iyapo’s position in Dawn. Lilith and Shori are subject to scrutiny and reproach from others of their kind because they are different and have different views on their respective species survival. The humans have a choice when it comes to living under the Ina influence, for unlike the Oankali, the Ina offer humans to possibility of overcoming diseases, especially those that are related to sun damage, such as skin cancer. On the other hand, there is little downside to the mixing of Ina and human DNA.

As between the humans and the Oankali in Dawn, a dependence between the Ina and humans will develop as a result of admixing DNA. But Shori’s continued survival depends on her ability to start a family. In order to accomplish this, Shori must gather seven to eight humans off of whom she will be able to feed and with whom she will have a close, often sexual, relationship. Butler uses the term “symbiont” when she refers to the
human role in the Ina feeding process (63). The humans supply food to the Ina, and the Ina supply a longer and healthier life to the humans once they mate. The human symbionts begin to age at a slower rate than other humans, something like the humans in *Dawn* who become chemically attached to the Oankali. The difference between the Ina and the Oankali is that once the humans permanently loses contact with their Ina, the humans do not survive. Shori learns that her saliva, which is transferred to the humans when she feeds, holds an addictive ingredient that causes the humans to become mentally and physically attached to the Ina (80). This is like the chemical addiction that the humans face once they become physically and emotionally close to the Oankali, and, especially detrimental, contract a sexual addiction from the symbiotic relationship with the Oankali. The main difference in the case of the Ina is that the human symbionts become withdrawn from others, and they do die, unlike the Oankali who simply withdraw. This human dependency is what makes the union between the Ina and the human complicated.

Shori allows her symbionts choice in their symbiotic relationship with her: not only so symbionts provide sustenance for the Ina, but also provide companionship for her and the other humans involved in the symbiotic relationship. There is an added benefit to the human/Ina relationships, and that is the humans have a choice as to living with or without the relationship. This is the choice Shori gives her newly formed family of symbionts. She wants them to be able to choose to stay with her and not mate with anyone else, or to leave her before the chemical addiction can set in.
In an effort to raise fundamental differences between the way human beings think and the way Ina think, Butler relates information about one of Shori’s symbiotic relationships with a man named Wright. Wright is a white man. When faced with knowing that one of Shori’s other symbiont lovers is a black man, Wright is upset that she never told him about the man’s color. Another character advises Wright that the idea of color does not matter to Shori because she is Ina: “They’re not human, Wright. They don’t care about white or black” (168). Butler suggests that the humans beings, specifically white humans, are the ones who think about life in racial terms; while the Ina do have problems relating to “differences,” there concern is with maintaining the purity of the vampire breed.

Shori is not aware of the hierarchy that exists among her people. The hierarchy deals with age and purity. The Ina believe that the older one of them is, the wiser he or she is. Pure blood is another basic tenet that the Ina hold dear. In relation to this, Brox writes of Shori’s impure blood, indicating that the insistence on pure blood is just another wrong-thinking prejudice among the Ina, one that will lead to their destruction:

Shori emerges as the symbol of change, and Butler does not portray Shori as someone whose mixed blood is tainted or weakened compared to previously pure origins, but rather emphasizes the advantages Shori possesses. Her dark skin and daywalker status allow her to escape the murderous attacks that killed the rest of her family. (399)

It is not until Shori questions her family’s death that she realizes the Ina are not willing to deal with the deaths because Shori is questioning the methods
used to solve the crimes. The Ina use an ancient method of tribal council that employs the testimonies of the captured conspirators whose minds have been tampered with to place the blame on Shori. Butler uses this to show that even in the utopian society that the Ina have set up, there are customs that need updating. The council members who Shori must face will not speak directly to her because she is not considered an adult of proper age. She has no one to defend her family that was considered of age, so Shori must stand and face the council as a child. Butler shows how she is treated with contempt by the oldest Ina present at the council:

There were several seconds of absolute silence [after Shori speaks to the council]. Then Milo Silk stood up. “Does this child have an advocate?” he demanded. He spoke the word “child” as though he wanted to say a much nastier word but restrained himself. (236)

Her age causes the elders and other Ina to question her abilities as an Ina female. While she is young, according to Ina standards, she is wise like the Ina who are more than twice her age. Butler shows this in the way she sets forth Shori’s ability to think logically about the illogical murders of her entire family and to reason through the “cause” of their murders. Shori’s fight for justice is not a new occurrence for the Ina people; she is still a strong person who knows that she and her murdered family members deserve justice. Ruth Salvaggio writes about Butler’s novels and the protagonists in them stating that the main characters of the works include “…strong female protagonists who
shape the course of social events” (78). This is what Shori does successfully: she shapes how she is viewed by the Ina, and changes the way the Ina view the outside world.

Shori discovers that her family is the target of the oldest Ina family in the northeastern part of the United States, thus proving that age is not necessarily the best gauge by which to measure ability. Once the plot to kill her is revealed, all Ina are faced with the knowledge that the old way of seeing themselves has changed. Shori, it turns out, is the perfect age to guide the Ina to achieve the changes that must be made among the Ina if they are to survive. Butler uses Shori’s experience to illustrate that society can change with the help of the right leadership. The leadership role is placed in Shori’s hands, but not without opposition from the elders. The commentary about the fear of having a woman in a leadership position is very clear, but it speaks to the basic fears and apprehension of change. Through Shori, Butler offers a voice for the examination of the manner in which society views and judges the character of a potential role model and leader.

The title of the novel, *Fledgling*, is an indicator of Shori’s status. She is inexperienced and young. Shori is without the knowledge others feel she needs to succeed. Shori has no knowledge of the customs and ways of her people; most of what she knows comes from her basic instincts. This applies to the beginning of the novel when her instincts lead her to feed, and throughout the novel when she is questioned by the Council about her mental and physical ability. Shori presents herself as a self-assured adult even though she is considered a child. Butler’s title indicates that Shori may be
inexperienced in life, but she proves that her inexperience does not hinder or suppress Shori’s ability to show she is strong and capable of leading her family.
CONCLUSION

In the two novels, *Dawn* and *Fledgling*, Octavia Butler writes about two atypical heroines in atypical situations. The foundations of her stories are, in fact, about women who are faced with extraordinary circumstances that must be addressed and overcome. Unlike other writers, Butler gives Lilith Iyapo and Shori Matthews the task of ignoring the idea of color and addressing, instead, the problems inherent in cultures. A culture of change and acceptance of "difference" is her basic message. Butler examines the world from the perspective of the social construction of "otherness." Her goal is to have the reader examine the idea of "us" and "them" without the constraints of color or race, and, at some point, without any constructs of "difference" among people.

Butler positions the near-future as a place much like the world we live in now. Butler supposes that once race or color is removed from the picture, people will move toward the idea of weak and strong and intelligence and ignorance, and a new battle will ensue. Butler even suggests that the battle may one that pits male versus female if we do not put an end to the endless search for hierarchical differences—of what is "better."

In *Dawn*, Butler talks about the "human contradiction" that causes the human race to become consumed with hierarchy. The "human contradiction" causes humans beings to want to say they believe in one thing while they do the opposite, which creates violence. This dichotomy comes from the need to rule over something or someone else.
This hierarchy does not allow for a general consensus or coming together of the minds for all people. The Oankali have mastered the art of consensus in this novel. It is only with a sound understanding of what is agreed upon that Oankali make decisions for the whole species. It is through the Oankali that Butler proves the point that even if there is not a total agreement, there can always be an amicable solution to the problems that may come about. This method works even if there is not a problem, only a question that needs to be answered. While it is not perfect, this method proves to keep the dissention down amongst the Oankali. They have the ability to see past their own wants and desires for the good of the species. The problem of dealing with “outsiders,” the humans in this case, however, still raises a problem of imperialism and hierarchy.

In *Fledgling*, the problems lie with the Ina who believe that Shori Matthews is more of a threat than the agent of advancement for the Ina people. As such, she is seen as the catalyst of the conflict. The idea of change is hard for some of the Ina. They want their old way of life to remain the same. It is the thought of having a “child” as the head of an Ina family that causes fear and mistrust. Shori is not only a child in the eyes of the Ina, she is also brown skinned and a hybrid of human and Ina parents. Her existence challenges the idea that the Ina must remain in hiding and in the shadows, a wholly positive potential change that is, ironically, in conflict with the elders. Butler situates Shori in a society where the problems are not hierarchical; they are ones that deal with ageism, sexism, and fears of change. Prejudice is the reason Shori and her family are under attack. It is because of Shori’s parents and their willingness to search
for a new way of life that Shori is building an alliance to fight with her for the change. Butler gives Shori the role of leader in a time when the people she leads do not trust her. Because of her age, Shori is not able to claim that she has the knowledge of wise judgement and the experience of leadership. Shori’s leadership and knowledge is shown through her ability to convince the ones who oppose her that the times have changed, and so must the Ina. Shori’s mixed blood and DNA are a testament to this change. It is her life that is proof that there is another way for the Ina to live.

Butler has made the outsider a familiar character in these novels. Laurence Yep writes, “By transforming the familiar into the unfamiliar, writers can also change the ordinary into the extraordinary” (54). Lilith is the outsider to her people but in the two novels that follow Dawn, she is transformed into what becomes the norm for humans who want to reproduce. This is also reflected in the way Butler gives Shori a bit of human normality in a fantastic story; she allows Shori’s memory to become irreparable, which is a trait normally reserved for humans.

In both novels Butler proves that the status quo can be and should be challenged. If the way of our world must change, humanity can have a direct hand in that change. It is best if we change willingly now, rather than be faced with a hostile, forced change that will be hard to accept. The nature of humanity, once faced with change, is to oppose the change, whether it is good or bad. Butler uses Lilith and Shori to demonstrate this fact. Lilith has a choice to remain totally human and lose the ability to keep the human blood line alive with an the irony that she do so after being sterilized; or, it is to assimilate with the Oankali and her children will inherit the universe. Shori’s choice is to fight those
who want to keep her existence secret through her death, or to run away and try to hide from her persecutors for the rest of her life.

Butler gives the reader a strong female protagonist in both novels, as she does in most of her novels. The difference between these characters is they are both pushed into roles of leadership. They had no idea what they were about to embark upon, but they both succeed in their tasks in their own ways. Lilith leads the humans by showing them they had a choice, and Shori leads by becoming an example of the way her people could live in the light of day. In both novels, Butler succeeds in creating women who lead by example.

According to scholar Raffaella Baccolini, Butler rejects, the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups-women and other ex-cetric subjects whose subject position is not contemplated by hegemonic discourse- for whom subject status has yet to be attained. (520)

This corresponds with Lilith’s and Shori’s tales. They are women who are aware that they do not have the overall support of their people in order to lead. This is because Lilith and Shori are different from their people. The fact that they are women is never an issue in their eyes. Butler does not allow them to falter under the supposition that they are any less qualified to lead because they are not men nor that and they have been put in positions they have no control over; Lilith with her superhuman strength and Shori with her mixed race and “daywalker” ability have all it takes to be leaders of their people.
Butler's novels demonstrate the use of strong female characters to convey her message that change is always occurring and it is necessary. She does not allow any other option except to accept the change that is inevitable or to die, metaphorically and literally. The metaphorical death is the easiest to accept in the dystopian societies that she creates. In Butler's dystopian societies, females are considered the ones who are capable of creating the changes needed to better their societies. Butler's novels are necessary tools in the study of the dystopian society but, more importantly, her novels serve as a guide to enhance the study of the ever-evolving prototypical female of any era.
Works Cited


