

“Earthseed” – Utopia within Dystopia in Octavia E. Butler’s Parable of the Sower

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Present day climate change, global warming, economic disparity, political chaos, and corporate greed are presented in the 1993 Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower. Catastrophic events are presented from the eyes of the novel’s protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, through her journal entries. The novel also portrays the problems of racism; classism and gender inequality prevalent in the United States of America with the journal entries from 2024 to 2027. Lauren’s only source of relief is writing quotes on her notebook and creating a new sort of religion called “Earthseed” based on her beliefs upon the world. From living safely inside a gated community to roaming on the streets like a nomad, Lauren finds hope solely through her newly found religion “Earthseed.” Despite of her bitter encounters in the dystopian world, she finds a kind of relief through her newly found community “Acorn.” This paper highlights Lauren's belief in the dystopian world and her desire to live instead of dying. This paper is viewed under the prism of Afrofuturism, where Butler, through Lauren, focuses on revisioning the past and predictions of the future through a black lens.

Keywords: Utopia, Dystopia, Science Fiction, Octavia Butler, Parable novels

1. Introduction

Afrofuturism is the art of blending African culture and tradition with today’s technoculture. It is an intersection of speculation and liberation inspired by the concerns of people of African descent. Although the word Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery, the use of the term was popularized by many science fiction writers. In a collection *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* edited by Mark Dery defines Afrofuturism as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture— and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future to explore how people of color negotiate life in a technology intensive world” (Dery, 136). The pioneers of Afrofuturism are Samuel R. Delany, and Octavia E. Butler. Butler is known as the “Mother of Afrofuturism” for blending African culture and tradition with elements of speculative fiction. Afrofuturism is used in this paper to analyze the novel *Parable of the Sower*, which portrays the problems

faced by the people of dystopian society.

Parable of the Sower is the first of the two novels in the Parable series. This is an extrapolative dystopian fiction which covers the period from 2024 to 2027. The novel is narrated through the journal entries of the novel's protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina who was 15 years old when the novel begins. The novel is set in a dystopian world where few people live inside the gated community and many people wander around the streets of America in hunger and thirst. The government collapsed, the economy was troubled and the ecology was tortured. This novel not only predicts the political chaos of the future, but also alludes to the fugitive slave narrative. The novel begins with the hope that,

All that you touch
You Change
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change
God is Change. (Butler, 1)

2. Community and Transformation in a Dystopian World

Butler's writing can be placed well with the writings of the movement of feminist utopia. The writers of the feminist utopia share familiar political characteristics, which can be seen in Butler's works. A wide range of women writers started to adapt the genre of science fiction especially feminist utopias which attracted a great range of critical attention. Hoda M. Zaki mentions this in her article as, "Taken as a group, feminist utopias appear to share a number of significant political characteristics. One of the most obvious is their elaboration of a basic model of community: a cooperative society which emphasizes the organic nature of its ties and the overriding importance of the common good, enjoys a high degree of unity and cohesion, and is liable to no serious tension between the individual and the larger community" (Zaki, 245).

In this novel too, through the protagonist Lauren, Butler emphasizes the importance of a community that will nurture each and every individual in the community. By preaching the ideas of Earthseed, Lauren wanted to start her first community named "Acorn" in California. At the end of the novel, a place belongs to Mr. Bankole becomes Acorn as wished by Lauren. The community was filled with people who share the same thoughts and who followed the ideologies of Earthseed. The people in the community care for, teach, and nurture each other in every possible way. Amidst all the chaos and pessimism of the outside world, there is a kind of peace and harmony among the people of Acorn, which seems to be an ideal place. Lauren considers Acorn as an experiment that transcends the differences in race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Even before starting Acorn, Lauren lived in a gated community which was protected by the

neighborhood’s armed members of the community. They safeguard the community from the street poor, who roam on the streets with insufficient food and water. The poor are ready to thieve the community anytime if possible. The human nature of the people outside the community is turning beastly. The street dogs are turning wild and eating the babies those roam on the streets. Inside the community, there is a kind of communitarian ethos that binds the community together from being destroyed.

Butler once mentioned about the ideal place which is denoted by Beal in one of his essays as, “I’ve actually never projected an ideal society. I don’t believe that imperfect humans can form a perfect society” (Beal, 14). Butler, in this novel portrays a dystopian state, where people suffer in all possible ways. The characters in this novel are from different ethnic background who came together to form a community by following the principles of Earthseed. Here, Butler debates the issues of power, unequal relationship among human beings and the constituent elements of human nature. The portrayal of the people outside the gated community in Robledo, who can do anything and go any extinct to survive, seems to be highly dehumanizing and extremely unpleasant.

Parable of the Sower is a novel that depicts the near-future happenings in a realistic manner and this novel stands as a harbinger of the future world in the case of climate change, political chaos and troubled economy. In this novel Butler provides an umpteen amount of questions regarding religion, once she mentioned God as “Maybe God is a kind of big kid, playing with his toys” (Butler, 15). The day-to-day life of the people of The United States of America goes worse. The cost of the water goes up day by day. The people in the earth research for the living elements found in the Mars to settle down there, which was mentioned by Butler as “Mars is a rock-cold, empty, almost airless, dead. Yet it’s heaven in a way” (Butler, 21). Further, Butler mentions the sordid state of human beings in the earth and compares it with Mars as, “We can see it in the night sky, a whole other world, but too nearby, too close within the reach of the people who’ve made such a hell of life here on Earth” (Butler, 21).

Throughout the novel, Butler advocates that change is inevitable. She mentions about “change” in this novel as, “From the second law of Thermodynamics to Darwinian evolution, from Buddhism’s insistence that nothing is permanent and all suffering results from our delusions of permanence to the third chapter of Ecclesiastes (‘To everything there is a season’), change is a part of life, of existence, of the common wisdom” (Butler, 25). Even in the dystopian world, Butler, through the character Lauren, believes that change in the thought process of human beings can result in enormous changes in the lives of every person. Lauren turns her beliefs into a religion named Earthseed and tries to change the dystopian world, which will lead to Utopia.

In the dystopian world, people suffer from climatic changes, which cause people to suffer from various diseases. Butler mentions such things in this novel as “there’s cholera spreading in southern Mississippi and Louisiana” (Butler, 49). The condition of the polluted water is mentioned as “They have plenty of water down there, but a lot of it is polluted” (Butler, 49). Additionally, people suffer from measles, “And there’s a blizzard freezing the northern Midwest, killing even more people. In New York and New Jersey, a measles epidemic is killing people. Measles!” (Butler, 49). A strong view on the climate change is mentioned as “Sea level keeps rising with the warming climate and there is the occasional earthquake”

(Butler, 111).

The only hope for Lauren in the dystopian world is Earthseed, the religion shaped by her. When she decided to move from her gated community to travel towards the north, her desire was to earn money only by teaching. Gradually, she developed the desire to teach the ideology of her religion. This creates a kind of hope within her. She mentions drawing people towards her and Earthseed in one of her journal entries,

All successful life is
Adaptable,
Opportunistic,
Tenacious,
Interconnected, and
Fecund.
Understand this.
Use it.
Shape God. (Butler, 117)

Lauren clearly understood that everything around her was getting out of control. "But everything was getting worse: the climate, the economy, crime, drugs, you know" (Butler, 176). Even though she was surrounded by all kinds of pessimism, Lauren's diary-writing habit and her phrases on Earthseed kept her motivated to live her life. Despite all the evil, she believed in the ideology of Earthseed, which might unite people even in the worst kind of situations. This was mentioned by Lauren as,

Once or twice
Each week
A gathering of Earthseed
is a good and necessary thing.
It vents emotion, then
quiets the mind.
It focuses attention,
strengthens purpose, and
unifies people. (Butler, 201)

The major suffering faced by Lilith mentally, physically, and socially is her hyperempathy syndrome, which was transferred to her by her mother when she was pregnant with Lauren. This causes her to feel the pain and pleasures of others. In such a pessimistic world, feeling the pleasure of others is completely rare. From a young age, Lauren suffers from feeling the pain of others, which she calls "sharing". People often don't understand the sharing

characteristics of Lauren. They consider her to be a mind reader, or the one who manipulates the minds of others. Lauren emphasizes this as “He was not a sharer. He didn’t understand that to me pain was the evil. Death was an end to pain” (Butler, 187). Thus, Lauren is a “Sharer”, which she calls herself. Jerry Philips mentions this as, “a person whose sense of self is phenomenologically bound up with the humanity of the other” (Phillips, 306). The doctors in this novel, mention this syndrome in the book as “organic delusional syndrome” (Butler, 12).

Sheldon Wolin, in one of his dystopian works mentions about “posting warnings”. He emphasizes that, if certain social trends go unchecked, the future will exhibit certain undesirable qualities. As Wolin writes, “a warning is usually made by a person who feels some involvement with the party or persons being warned; a warning, in short, tokens a commitment that is lacking in (scientifically neutral) prediction” (Wolin, 13). The works of Butler, especially *Parable of the Sower* illustrates a wide range of elements which stand as a harbinger for society. In an interview with Pomerantz, when Pomerantz asked, whether her writings are self – fulfilling prophecy or a kind of aversion therapy, Butler denied both the views. She answered that they are like dumping a phobia or decentralization. But in *Parable of the Sower*, Butler portrayed America in 2020s, in which the major concerns are global warming, nuclear war and a state in which people surviving inside “walled communities”.

Here, Butler projects the United States of America as a place where government, at all levels have lost minimal ability to maintain order, defend human rights, and protect the environment, whereas the multinational corporations act repressively and freely. The *Privatopia* where Lauren lives has the communitarian values for the people are only inside the community. Lauren finds this idea to be a failure. Madhu Dubey, in his critical work on Butler mentions that, “*Privatopia*, the walled or gated community, is, at bottom, a fantasy of escape, that one can be in the world without having to live through the sharp contradictions that the world presents. Lauren sees that a community based on such bad faith has little hope of averting eventual catastrophe” (Dubey, 302).

3. Conclusion

Thus, Lauren’s development of “*Earthseed*” serves as a beacon of hope and a guiding principle for her journey. Despite all the harsh realities of the dystopian world, Lauren tries to find the possibility of utopia through *Earthseed*. Lauren emphasizes the importance of adaptation, self-reliance, and the belief in human capacity to create a better world. Every Utopia has its own kind of Dystopia within it. Here, Butler, through the character Lauren portrays that even in Dystopia and Apocalypses; there lies a sort of Utopia which can be attained through communitarian values. Butler through the character Lauren and Lauren’s book name “*Earthseed: The Books of the Living*” portrayed the ways in which one individual’s thought process can change the life of a whole community by uplifting one another. Lauren explores the society around her to be a place for community-building, social justice, and alternative forms of social organization. The people in Acorn community follow the principles of cooperation, collective decision-making, and mutual aid. Lauren’s resistance, hope, and collective transformation are some of the characteristics which have utopian values in dystopian world.

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