

Dystopia and Female Subjectivity in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993): A Feminist Reading

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Abstract

Octavia Butler's speculative sci-fi novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993) emphasizes the need ecological sustainability and socialist living by highlighting the civil morose and anarchy of an America in the near future. Lauren, Butler's adolescent protagonist in the novel navigates home-away life inside a gated community in a post-apocalyptic society in 2024 Los Angeles. Her childhood has been marred by dysfunctional parents and the disintegration of the greater society at large, primarily because of environmental degradation, climate change, wealth inequality and civil unrest. The novel focuses on all these issues by bestowing upon Lauren an extraordinary instinct for survival and self-preservation. Her childhood is beset by evils; still she becomes self-resilient. The apocalyptic setting of the novel contributes to heightened sense of emergency that she feels at every other inconvenience and upsets. Butler's narrative schema focuses on the intersections between post-apocalyptic living and adolescent restlessness of Lauren. The AfroFuturist obsession of the novel comes out in Lauren's preparation for survival by gathering Indigenous knowledge systems and imparting it with her friends. Butler also reasserts the belief that technological advancements aren't enough for survival, a familiar refrain in AfroFuturism.

Dystopia and Female Subjectivity in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993): A Feminist Reading

29

Theoretical framework would include feminism, AfroFuturism and Post-Humanism. This paper aims to evaluate *Parable of the Sower* as a canonical piece of children's literature that incorporates sci-fi speculation, apocalyptic anxieties and an AfroFuturist vision of Black History that was decimated by chattel slavery. Lauren's survivalist progression through a wasteland of economic downturn and ecological devastation has much relevance for preparing today's children and future generations for developing the need for sustainable, responsible living and this paper wishes to explore that through a close reading of *Parable of the Sower*. Theoretical framework would include feminism, AfroFuturism and Post-Humanism. The paper would try to focus on the impact of dystopian urban life upon an adolescent protagonist and would conclude that Lauren's bildungsroman is as much her own as it is a metaphor for contemporary American society.

Keywords: Dystopia, Adolescence, AfroFuturism, Survival, Apocalypse.

Introduction:

The 1990s were a period of great social anxiety in the United States of America, fuelled by the opioid crisis, fraught race relations, urban inner-city violence, and growing distrust in the veracity of the government and big businesses. Public frenzy surrounding the immanent death and doom of the American way of life was at an all-time high, and in hindsight it seems right to remember the time when Octavia Butler's seminal work *Parable of the Sower* came out when it did, that is in 1993- a year marked by the bombing of The World Trade Centre, an outbreak of *Cryptosporidium* protozoan, The Waco Siege, The Great Flood in the American Midwest, amidst various other tragedies and disasters. Butler was wise to have published her novel when she did, as it perfectly captured the incumbent public mood and the spectre of death and destruction that occupied the popular imagination of the age. *Parable of the Sower* its narrative in the year 2024, in a post-apocalyptic society that is teeming at the brims with chaos and anarchy, The protagonist, an African-American teenager named Lauren Oya Olamina has a medical condition called "hyper-empathy" one that compels her to share in the abundant pain of the earth.

It becomes apparent to the reader that Lauren is the moral epicentre and the heartbeat of the novel as the gated community that she is living in has fallen into disrepair and is dangerously on the verge of being swallowed by the ensuing housing crisis and the failing public services that

are rapidly converging upon it. In such a dystopian setting Butler examines Lauren's adolescence through the lenses of AfroFuturism and the threat of an Apocalypse. Throughout the novel, Lauren is aware of the fact that she must use all her cunning and survival skills to see through this apocalyptic nightmare, a crisis that greatly heightens her sense of emergency, and to the readers' delight, Butler's narrative shines through, enabling Lauren to shine.

Research Methodology

This paper aims to study the influence of AfroFuturism and apocalypse on the narrative schema of *Parable of the Sower* and examine the portrayal of Lauren's childhood from 2024 to 2027. To achieve that end, the focus will be on the character arc of Lauren and close reading of the novel will be done. Theoretical framework would include the notions of AfroFuturism and the literary representation of apocalypse in the novel, one that is imminent and closing in on the gated community. This sense of crisis is palpable through the passages when Lauren loses her brother and her father to the engulfing chaos, one that perils Lauren's subjectivity and readies her for the uncertain future that awaits her. A methodological exploration of the adolescent facets of Lauren's self- such as her becoming aware of her sexual currency in a sexually violent climate, her growing sense of taking on more responsibilities, the necessity to equip herself with survivalist skills and form meaningful strategic alliances in a time of great uncertainty, contributes to her becoming more lively and believable to the reader and contrasts beautifully with the futuristic setting of the novel and close attention will be paid to this element.

Childhood and Social Chaos in *Parable of the Sower*

The novel opens with the anxious portrayal of a socially chaotic and environmentally decaying neighbourhood in California in the 2020s, a distant futuristic landscape that is going through troubled times, natural resources have dwindled, employment numbers are staggeringly low, women fear sexual assault, interracial relationships are stigmatized and there is an acute awareness of an impending doom that is apprehended to be all too powerful and is expected to wipe out human existence off the face of the earth. Despite the novel being set in a near future, the calamities and social ills that trouble Lauren and her fellow residents seem to uniquely primeval and arcane. Two millennia's of human civilizations is shown to be haplessly limited when it comes to negating the baser instincts of humans; especially at a time when there is perceivable danger to their lives and the government and existing structures of authoritarian morality are falling short of assuaging public fear and suspicion, creating an environment of prejudice and disproportionate rise of crime.

Dystopia and Female Subjectivity in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993): A Feminist Reading

31

Amidst such a despondent climate, Lauren grows up to be a hyper-empath, a condition that she has been cursed with due to her mother abusing drugs while pregnant with her. It causes Lauren to realize the social evils and ills around her more acutely and feel her fellow man's pains more abundantly. By showing Lauren to be a hyper empath, Butler seems to suggest that childhood is the best possible time to inculcate the values of egalitarianism, which empathy is a part of. Butler's dystopian vision of the future means that Lauren will have to shade her childlike naiveté and inhibitions quickly if she is to survive the apocalypse that is to come. Lauren is not accorded the luxury of enjoying her childhood, which is mired by the disappearances and deaths of her father and brother, leaving her stranded in a cesspool of anarchy and chaos, compelled to fend for her herself. Such a feral childhood, that too in an era of unprecedented levels of depravity from her fellow residents end up being the catalysts for her growth, helping her realize the necessity to move out of her crumbling gated-community-residence.

The world that is failing rapidly seems to close in on Lauren's insulated existence, making it impossible for her to continue with the life that she has known. Such externally afflicted alienation compels her to seek out human connection which she does by forming a survivalist alliance of sorts with Zahra Moss and Harry Balter. The rise of the authoritarian administration of President Donner ends up diluting labour protections and workers' rights, a disturbing development that endangers the lives and prospects of an already vulnerable population that is battling climate change and social inequality, of which Lauren is also a victim of, due to her race, sex and juvenile existence. Her life at Robledo, California becomes too untenable for her to continue, necessitating an immediate change in locale.

AfroFuturism in *Parable of the Sower*: Radical Thinking for Dystopian Times

AfroFuturism works to reclaim a history that was decimated by chattel slavery and colonization both in Africa and America. The novel *Parable of the Sower* is an Anti-Racist novel in the sense that it actively creates a narrative that shows the perils of succumbing to racist prejudices and ignorant caricatures of black people. The AfroFuturist vision of the novel comes out in the following manners:

1. **Alienation and Otherness:** *Parable of the Sower* is such a coming of age story that the protagonist Lauren Olamina must come of age immediately. Lauren feels alienated from the world that surrounds her due to the colour of her skin. Butler's narrative vehemently argues that Lauren's must embrace racial and class diversity, otherwise it will perish inevitably.

2. **Speculative Futures as a Form of Resistance:** inherent in the name, AfroFuturism means that one must conceive of a future that is at once hospitable and accommodating of changes and heterogeneous thinking. Towards the end of the novel, Lauren marries a man named Bankole, moves in his land in northern California with her commune, starts preaching the gospel of Earthseed and founds the first Earthseed society of Acorn, a settlement that is emblematic of the future that one must welcome in order to survive the apocalypse.
3. **The Cyclical Nature of History:** In the novel, Butler conceptualizes time as cyclical, forever tugging at the personal life of her protagonist. Lauren tries to remember her mother, she fails; she tries to imagine her father and her brother as guiding influences on her life, she misses the comforting shelter of family and her residence, but the entire calamity surrounding her gated community forces her to migrate. Lauren's mother had a difficult pregnancy while she was pregnant with her and right at the cusp of turning eighteen and now Lauren must also reconcile with her difficulties, thereby being stuck in the cyclical nature of history which is beyond her control.
4. **The Duality of Technology:** Butler's narrative does not provide impunity to technological innovations, rather shows it as a double edged sword. She suggests that only technological advancement is not enough to lead a peaceful life, one must become harmonious and unitary with nature to truly partake in the joys of life.
5. **Reclamation of History and Identity:** By positioning an African-American teenager as the protagonist, Butler inverts 400 years of slavery, oppression and dispossession. Her vision of Lauren providing a respite to the weary travellers with her gospel of Earthseed and the commune of Acorn, is radical in its novelty. Butler seems to suggest that it is possible for Black women to rise above the constraints imposed upon them by the burden of history and society at large, which is not only necessary for self-actualization but also for formulating one's own identity, an identity that is informed by the need to undo historical injustices.

Lauren's Progression in the novel:

Lauren Olamina is the protagonist of the novel. At the beginning of the novel she is fifteen years old, standing at the cusp of attaining womanhood and adulthood. By the time the novel ends, she is eighteen. Having been raised in a gated community in Robledo, California, Lauren is acutely aware of her own African-American identity. She is the daughter of Reverend Olamina and an unnamed woman who died at childbirth. Lauren's mother had been a drug abuser, leading a life of destitution and misery, succumbing to the demands of a strenuous labour.

Lauren is cognizant of what she has to do to make things bright for her and her community. She knows that her insulated and isolated life at the gated community will not save her from the distraught political economy that is ravaging lives outside. Brimming with the possibilities of a new life away from the stifling confines of the gated community, Lauren envisages the renewed vigour that she might have after going ahead with her plan of founding the burgeoning commune of Earthseed. Her association with Bankole, a kind old black gentleman, heralds new possibilities for her, enabling her to maximize her true potential and creating space regeneration and reinvigoration. Similarly for Bankole, the nuptial bond with Lauren is a shot at a new life away from the grit and grime of the dilapidated Los Angeles of the near future.

After realizing that she is endowed with the gift of hyper-empathy, Lauren uses it to her and her community's advantage. This ability to share with others, becomes a vantage point for her. It enables her to feel the sensations of pain in others and become aware of the myriad of affliction in the world. At its essence, *Parable of the Sower* is a bildungsroman, one that teems with the possibility of transcending its spatio-temporal boundaries, creating a literary register for a hitherto unarticulated feeling of raging against the nexus of evil corporations and state machinery, finding voice in Lauren's defiant survivalist mode of thinking.

Lauren loses her younger brother Keith to a rowdy group of vagrants and degenerates; when she is eighteen years old, her gated community falls prey to a concerted attack by outside miscreants, compelling her and others to flee the scene of attack. The journey towards Northern California is fraught with perils and missteps that threaten the group's existence but Lauren fends for herself by banking on the community wisdom and the tricks that she has learned in her travels. She is deeply aware of the fact that change is the only constant, thereby signalling a conscious decision to mould herself according to the demands of her environment and conditions. Even at her most desolate state, Lauren does not let go of her convictions and holds onto the acorns that will help her establish the new commune of Earthseed. Her journey highlights the lengths that people go to protect themselves from great calamities, especially at the face of government

inertia and indifference. Her survival is a valiant cry of triumph at a time in the novel when it is shown by Butler that slavery has returned in the form of indentured servitude, interracial relationships are stigmatized and gender relations have been altered for the worse.

Adolescence in the Shadow of Apocalypse in *Parable of the Sower*:

In the novel *Parable of the Sower*, the threat of the apocalypse is real and imminent. It disturbs the day to day life of Lauren, greatly heightens the resource scarcity, unleashes an era of crime and depravity that claims the lives of Lauren's family and makes her life inside the gated community highly repulsive. Growing up in such a climate, under the shadow of the apocalypse, Lauren must choose between the somewhat tranquil life that she has known and the uncertain journey that awaits her and her companions. Exacerbated by the climate crisis and ever dwindling resources, the apocalypse threatens to alter life beyond recognition. Lauren's hasty decision to leave her childhood home is also accelerated by apocalypse that is to come. Such precarious childhood is beset by evil on both sides by the social inequality; moral depravity and climate crisis and Lauren must tackle all of these to actualize her survival.

Conclusion

Octavia Butler's narrative schema is highly complementing of the fearless journey undertaken by Lauren, In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler portrays a picture of America bursting at the seams, stuck in a vicious cycle of rampant loot, misogyny, sexual depravity, racial animosity and massive distrust among the population. At times Lauren's task seems too daunting and Herculean, impossible for one human to achieve, but Butler's AfroFuturist vision mandates that Lauren lives to see the day and establishes the Earthseed commune. Her childhood may have been mired by crime, poverty, death of the loved ones but it is suggested towards the end of the novel that Lauren will have a fruitful life with Bankole and other members of the commune. This is not a story of despair and misery, but of resilience and determination and courage. Lauren manifests an AfroFuturist vision that rightly celebrates Black women for their role in nurturing the communities around them. The apocalyptic threat of death and destruction is superseded by the exemplary fortitude shown by Lauren, combining the rudimentary learning of her childhood and the notional applicability of Earthseed. This is the reason why it mentioned towards the novel that the commune of Acorn is founded in northern California, indicating that a change in the scenery is absolutely necessary to reverse the wheel of fortune. Another aspect of the novel that one must pay critical attention to is the fact that

Dystopia and Female Subjectivity in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993): A Feminist Reading

35

during after the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, there has been a renewed interest in perusing through the courageous tale of Lauren and her companions, partly because of the close resemblance of the apocalyptic shadow of the novel which mirrors the confusion and crisis of COVID-19 that Octavia Butler's text is of perennial; interest to the reading public, the bolstered readership figures are a proof of that, a figure that has remained untainted even after thirty years of publication, highlighting the creative and literary foresight of Butler that still resonates with new readers across cultures and generations.

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Author's bio-note

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