

Religion and Critical Dystopia: Afrofuturism in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

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Abstract

This paper uses the framework of Afrofuturism to address the issues of critical dystopia in Octavia E. Butler's science fiction novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993). Butler (1947-2006), who is considered as the first black woman science fiction writer in America, uses Afrofuturism to show how dystopia paves the way for a young black woman to begin a new religion called Earthseed whose God is Change. Earthseed strives for a diverse community, which allies with the concept of womanism, suggesting the connections between womanism and Afrofuturism, both of which are critical race theories.

Keywords: Afrofuturism; Change; Dystopia; Earthseed; Religion; Womanism.

Introduction

Published in 1993, *Parable of the Sower* depicts a futuristic society of United States from Saturday, 20 July, 2024 to Sunday, 10 October, 2027. Written in the form of a journal by Lauren Oya Olamina, a black girl from her fifteenth to eighteenth year, it uses the popular science fictional theme of beginning new life in a post-apocalyptic world. This essay examines the novel as an example of black science fiction that opposes the fixity of established religion and proposes a new religion based on activism and womanism as an alternative narrative that is emancipatory. The theme of hope and emancipation in black science fiction characterizes the genre of Afrofuturism, making the text a work of Afrofuturism.

The term Afrofuturism, first coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in 1993, is a genre of black science fiction and a critical framework that express the voices of the African American community. Ytasha L. Womack conceives

of Afrofuturism as, “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” (9). She defines it as “[b]oth an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory” (9), which incorporates genres of “science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs” (9). Afrofuturism envisions black futures that reanimates the black people’s struggle for human rights and in the process, imagines alternative futures.

Religion has been an important tool used by white racism to perpetuate slavery. White slavers used Bible to justify slavery and exploitation of labor. The argument used was obedience to master by Paul, the descendants of Ham who were black were assigned the role of servants, along with any Biblical scriptures which emphasized that servant should be obedient to master and should perform their Christian duty towards master with utmost loyalty. Some white Christians interpreted that God made the descendants of Ham black as punishments for committing sin. Early Christians believed black is the color of sin, evil and death and white is the color of God, goodness and eternal life. Black skin was identified as the color of sin and black people as sinners. Ecclesiastical authorities often segregated blacks to have separate churches and cemeteries and denied blacks of attaining priesthood. The White Church allowed segregated seating arrangement and did not allow to share prayer alter. Christianity imposed a Eurocentric white God and Black people were converted using coercion. The American Christian Church has been racist, defended slavery and segregation as well as aided the Ku Klux Klan which claimed to be a Christian organization.

On the other hand, the church and religion have been an integral part of African American life. Since color determined whether one is human in American society during slavery and after, Black liberation theology vouched for a black image of Jesus Christ which gives a sense of liberation and racial empowerment. Black theology developed as a result of the changing social dynamics of the 1960s when blacks sought to redefine the world from their perspective. They examined both religion and God from a black perspective. The Civil Rights Movement and the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. heightened the importance of the Black church. Malcolm X also emphasized religion to usher in social change. As Allison Calhoun-Brown says, “Black theology unites religion with racial empowerment. It offers a theological context for racial identification, racial autonomy and activist churches” (199). While White church constituted the principal sources of oppression, the Black Church gave a sense of freedom and free space. The Black Church has been rich in resources and connect-

ed with civil society. Being a dominant institution among the Black community, the Black Church provided organizational support, leadership, social communication networks and social change.

However, while Black Church protested racism, its patriarchal ethos made it skeptical of female voices and alternative sexualities, putting a check on its inclusivity. Although black women have been included in black civil society like the church, they have been assigned very subordinate roles. They did not possess the right to make decisions which was exclusively reserved for the male. They could not hold top leadership positions and struggled to express their ideas. On the other hand, Womanist theology proposes inclusivity. It proposes universality against separatism which includes loving all men, women and children whether sexually or non-sexually. It aims for mutual survival of all and community building, as well as maintenance of commonweal which involves survival and well-being of all irrespective of race, gender and alternative sexuality.

This essay argues that Butler's futuristic novel asks us to consider a world where religion is not patriarchal but womanist. Her female protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina lives in an utterly dystopian world ravaged with rape, insecurity, homelessness, destitution, robbery, vandalism, gangs and incessant illegal drug consumption. Water has to be purchased since it has not rained for six years. The public education system has become defunct; children learn to fire guns for livelihood. Multinational company Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton, and Company, in short KSF, privatizes the coastal city of Olivar, and perpetuates legalized debt slavery. In such a world, Butler's black female protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina rejects dominant white Christianity and also her black father's black church to invent a new religion which gives hope to the suffering masses and is inclusive of the rejects of society. Olamina's new religion is called Earthseed whose God is Change and destiny is to reach the stars. The essay argues that this new religion, generated in a dystopia, emerges as an alternative narrative that is inclusive and is allied to black womanism, which foregrounds acceptance of diversity. This presents Butler's textual dystopia not as a space of darkness and depression as dystopias are typically thought, but as a space that cautions us about the social structures of the real world and as per the hope impulse of Afrofuturism, also presents us with the blueprints of a better world.

Materials and Methods

Parable of the Sower has been read by critics primarily in terms of utopian

and dystopian studies. Jim Miller looks at how Butler looks into the dystopian future. He argues that she reinvents the desire for a better world and places herself in the tradition of feminist utopian writing. Philip H. Jos concentrates on relating the new belief system with central tenets of Christian theologians and writers like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Marcus Borg, Elaine Pagels and Parker Palmer. Peter G. Stillman talks about the dystopian and utopian visions in the *Parable* series. He observes that Butler presents the devastation caused by two future dystopias of the United States of America and their utopian solutions. Marlene D. Allen talks about Butler's incorporation of African American history in her futuristic texts. Her futuristic novels show how to avoid the boomerang effect present in the spiraling of history and time as a repetitive cycle for the African Americans.

Mathias Nilges makes an analysis of Butler's concept of change through the periodising distinction between postmodernism and post-Fordist culture. It also looks at Butler's contribution to contemporary political art that will cause the resurrection of Fordist and totalitarian structures within the struggle with post-Fordism. Douglas W. Texter talks about the critical dystopia, the dangers of being gifted children and how those gifts ultimately serve humanity. Jerry Phillips analyses how the novel seeks to reinvent utopian vision at a time when utopia is not possible. Madhu Dubey focuses on the novel's contemporary crisis of urban literary representation. It confronts the displacement of urban crisis through a starkly dystopian urban setting. David Morris argues that *Earthseed* challenges the 1990s utopian imagination to invent new modes of organisation which works within new social and material realities.

While the novel has been read through the lens of Afrofuturism, these readings are not comprehensive. For example, Kimberly J. Ruffin talks about how Butler rewrites the narrative of Bible and appropriates the parables. Michael Brandon McCormack also presents Afrofuturist critiques of Black religion in Ishmael Reed's play *The Preacher and the Rapper* and Octavia Butler's *Parable* series. However, neither of them read critical dystopia in the light of Afrofuturism, or seek connections between Afrofuturism and womanism, which amounts to a significant research gap. This paper seeks to address this research gap and reads dystopia in the light of Afrofuturism and also tries to see the connections between Afrofuturism and womanism.

Discussion and Result

Dystopia is a genre of literature which depicts a nightmarish place. Ac-

According to Lyman Tower Sargent, dystopia is “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived” (9). However, in the definition of critical dystopia, a term named by Sargent, he adds that, it “normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia” (222). The objective of critical dystopia narratives is to engage with contemporary politics and contemporary history, such as twentieth century capitalism and imperialism, and question them critically. These narratives contain a utopian impulse because they situate protagonist who are not subjugated by hegemonic discourse. They give voice to marginalized and dispossessed people and strive to transform the terrors of the present. In this way, critical dystopia allies with the hope impulse of Afrofuturism.

Butler’s narrative presents young Lauren as situated in a dystopia. Lauren lives in a society which is rooted in violence. Her society is full of shaved and painted figures who consume a popular fire drug which disrupts their neurochemistry making it enjoyable for them to watch fires. In the novel, these pyroaddicts destroy the gated community in which Lauren live. Violence affects her psyche and manifests as recurring chaotic dreams. A good example is her dream of flying which ends in burning fire engulfing and swallowing her. This image becomes a trope signifying the limitations her environment imposes on her growth, which she has to explode and become her own person. This trope resonates historically too. Slavery and racism mandated that while black women could dream, their reality was exploitation in white hands. Having lost her home, Lauren takes a journey to North from a state of homelessness and encounters natural disasters like earthquake and man-made disasters like shooting, explosion, riots, gunfires as well as roaring wildfires.

Even though the novel utilises the future as the setting, it evokes past black experiences, which is characteristic of Afrofuturist narratives which situated in future look to the past. Ytasha L Womack suggests that Afrofuturism allows “a total reenvisioning of the past” along with visions of future “rife with cultural critiques” (9). In the novel, this is found in the trope of cross-dressing that Lauren uses to journey North. Taking advantage of her tall height and androgynous physical appearance, she passes by cross-dressing and cutting her hair. It is an act of pragmatic survivalism in a dystopian world. Lauren’s act recalls the trickster technologies of antebellum fugitives, namely Ellen Craft (1826-1891) who was light skinned and who escaped slavery in 1848 by disguising herself as a young

male slave owner and her darker skinned husband William Craft (1824-1900) as her valet. Lauren also contains echoes of Harriet Tubman (1822-1913). Tubman was a folk heroine known as Moses because she liberated black slaves and took them to the North through the system of hidden safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. Tubman also disguised herself with cross-dressing techniques during her work as conductor of Underground Railroad. As Lauren rightly mentions, "So we become the crew of a modern underground railroad" (292) and goes North in search of improved life and establishes her first Earthseed community called Acorn. Regarding Lauren, it needs to be mentioned that her middle name Oya is the name of an Orisha of the Yorubas. Lauren's last name Olamina is also a Yoruban surname suggesting her connection to African heritage. Oya is the God of the Niger River, who is intelligent, dangerous and highly unpredictable. Much like her namesake, Lauren emerges in her nontraditional role of shaper of Change with her action of explaining Earthseed, shaping God and the collective destiny of her multiracial community with immediate work and action.

As a child, Lauren thinks critically about religion and is a questing mind who interrogates established religion. Even though Lauren is the daughter of a Black Baptist minister and preacher, she rejects her father's God. The novel suggests that the notion of God in traditional sense is highly inflexible. Traditionally, people believe in "a big-daddy-God or a big-cop-God or a big-king-God" (15) which have patriarchal and authoritarian connotations. The young Lauren is intrigued by the unknown gender of universal God. She asks, "Is there a God? If there is, does he (she? it?) care about us?" (15). According to Lauren, The God in the book of Job is like "Zeus – a super-powerful man, playing with his toys the way my youngest brothers play with toy soldiers" (16). People "create super-people – super-parents, super-kings and queens, super-cops – to be our gods and to look after us – to stand between us and God (26). However, her dystopian context generates skepticism regarding traditional God as a benevolent deity. God being an all powerful entity, omnipotent and omniscient as he seems to be fails to care about the well-being of its subjects, fails to protect the poor people from natural disasters, fails to protect women from intersectionality of oppressions. Lauren is highly intrigued by the suicide of her neighbor Mrs Sims after her rape and robbery who was a staunch believer of the Bible. Even religion did not do any good to her brother Keith even though he was forcefully made to confess and apologize in church congregation. Her father's God does not protect the street poor, women and disenfranchised. She does not seek God who metes out judgement and punishment and protects rich people and disregards the suffering of

powerless, marginalized and disenfranchised people.

Suffering from the disease hyperempathy syndrome, Lauren emerges as a protagonist who can share other's pain—a dystopian condition—which leads her to contemplate the need for a new religion and a communal social order invested in people's happiness. According to doctors, hyperempathy is "organic delusional syndrome" (12) which occurred because her biological mother consumed "Paracetco, the smart pill, the Einstein powder" (12), causing permanent damage to Lauren's neurotransmitters. She can share both pain and pleasure but is forced to experience more pain because she lives in a violent society. Forced to experience the pain of others, which is plentiful in a dystopia, and with no faith in a traditional God, Lauren conceives a new religion Earthseed inspired by the workings of nature. The name Earthseed comes from seeds of plants which travel great distances via wind, water and animals. Lauren believes in humans seeding themselves far away from dying places to begin new life amidst challenges. She believes in adaptation and acceptance of change.

Butler shows hyperempathy as "biological conscience" (115) instead of disability. Belonging to the African American community which has suffered violence since centuries, a black girl having a biological conscience implies the world can be a better place. As Butler says to Juan Williams, it is a sort of "biological conscience" (163) in which "she can't give pain without receiving it" (163). Lauren also reflects in a similar tone, "But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?" (115). Lauren wishes there are other sharers because according to her "A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all" (115). Although Lauren suffers immensely living in a violent society surrounded by pain which she experiences intensely, her hyperempathy is also a sign of hope in a critical dystopia. As Tarshia L. Stanley suggests, hyperempathy "liberates her from egocentrism in that it requires her constant contemplation of the safety of the collective in order to guarantee her own" (151). Thus, Lauren ponders about the safety and well being of all people. Her hyperempathy ensures that she feels more about the safety, survival and solidarity of all in her community.

The title of the novel *Parable of the Sower* emphasises the importance of accepting change and adapting to circumstances. It refers to the Biblical parable of the sower which suggests that when a man goes to plant seeds, some of the seeds fall on the rocks and fails to grow, some seeds are eaten by birds, some seeds fall on the weeds and is choked by them but the rest grows and multiplies into a thousand plants. Similarly, after losing their

families and almost everything, Lauren begins from scratch. Her new religion and belief system instills hope where there is no hope. Earthseed is a religion which is meant for surviving in the dystopian world. Lauren is an activist preacher who believes that people have to work themselves and help each other instead of waiting for God to solve problems. Since God do not take care, people have to take care of themselves. Thus, Earthseed is the metaphorical seed of utopia.

As a female protagonist who creates a new religion, Lauren exemplifies qualities of critical dystopia and Afrofuturism. In her refusal to accept a violent society as the norm, Lauren performs as a protagonist of critical dystopia who does not bow down to hegemony. However, as a black female preacher who envisions a new religion that is inclusive, subjective and communal and is rooted in science, Lauren envisions a new path which contests black female subjugation. This makes her narrative an Afrofuturist one. Historically, black women have been always dismissed as thinkers, intellectuals and preachers. They have been relegated to the status of chattel, slave and domestic servant. Lauren's venture as a founder of a religion is unconventional as historically major world religions have been initiated by men, their Gods are men and their prophets and preachers are also men. Lauren's book of verses titled *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* which is her personal journal of "survival notes" (80) becomes a religious manifesto. Through it she propounds a secular religion whose God is 'Change'.

Envisioning 'Change' as divinity is distinctly Afrofuturist because it is non-hierarchical and is allied with science. Change is a sexless, genderless and a non-patriarchal entity. The first tenet of *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* emphasizes upon change,

All that you touch
You Change,
All that you Change,
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God
Is Change. (3)

Lauren's Earthseed proposes freedom from rigidity of rituals, reification and deification of any God. There is no fear and hope from supernatural or anthropomorphic entities. Her God is much similar to the second law of thermodynamics which rely on the dynamics of change. Lauren's God is flexible, malleable, tangible and inclusive. Her God does not come from any "mythology or mysticism or magic" (217). Earthseed just demands a gathering once or twice a week. Earthseed does not demand any observance of rules and regulations, sacrifices or monetary benefits apart from attending the weekly gatherings. As it is mentioned,

A victim of God may,
Through learning adaptation,
Become a partner of God,
A victim of God may,
Through forethought and planning,
Become a shaper of God. (31)

Lauren's God does not have any image but the entire universe is "God's self-portrait" (315). As Lauren explains, "Earthseed deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures. Worship is no good without action (219). Her God is not an entity but a process, her followers are not a cult but pray to themselves.

As a religion, Lauren roots Earthseed in community and inclusivity, which are also core ideas of black womanism. Lauren ponders about beginning an Earthseed community which relies on adaptation, communal harmony, human dignity and toleration for difference. While journeying North, with white Harry Balter and black Zahra Moss, she finds the highway crowd, "a heterogenous mass – black and white, Asian and Latin" (176). Lauren creates a mixed family and mixed community. Following the principle of action which brings change, she saves lives and brings people together. Lauren fights coyote and wild dogs to save the life of a mixed race baby belonging to a "deep-black" (204) man named Travis Charles Douglas and a "light-brown" Hispanic-looking woman (204) named Gloria Natividad Douglas. Lauren invites the mixed couple saying, "We're natural allies – the mixed couple and the mixed group" (208) suggesting acceptance of plurality, diversity and difference. This signifies the hope impulse of Afrofuturism. Gradually, Lauren becomes the leader of a group which according to Jim Miller comprises of "a multiracial band of

people" (354). The common feature of her group is that they either belong to the oppressed class of slaves or are survivors. For example, black Lauren includes in her group Allison and Jillian Gilchrist who are "two medium-size, brown-haired white women in their twenties" sold into prostitution by their father (233). Next, brown-skinned Asian woman Emery Tanaka Solis and her daughter Tori join the group. Emery Tanaka Solis is "the most racially mixed" (287) with "a Japanese father, a black mother, and a Mexican husband" (287). Grayson Mora who is a black Latino and his daughter Doe also join Lauren. Lauren describes her community thus, "We are a harvest of survivors" (295) united into a family. Lauren's Earthseed will give freedom to slaves and foster hope to begin new life in a post-apocalyptic world.

The belief in community, activism, and diversity which are also core ideas of Butler's Afrofuturistic narrative *Parable of the Sower* are central to black womanism, thus suggesting the connections between both. According to Layli Phillips, womanism aims at solving "all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension" (xx). The concept of womanism is not confined to the well being of black women alone but all humanity including both male and female and involves both empathy and activism. Womanism seeks to harmonize, reconcile and coordinate difference. The five prominent characteristics of womanism are anti-oppressionist, vernacular, non-ideological, communitarian and spiritualized. A womanist fights all forms of oppression either individually or collectively with others. Vernacular implies the grass-root connection of womanism with the happenings of everyday life. Womanism is non-ideological in that it is against rigid lines, binaries and boundaries and emphasises inclusiveness and interrelationship. Communitarian implies the well being of commonweal which means collective well-being of all members of a community. In womanism, the spiritual realm is real and palpable, not abstract. For Lauren, her religion Earthseed incorporates tolerance and is against oppression of all kinds. She believes in a religion based on everyday action not worship. Earthseed is against rituals, rules and regulations. For her, the well-being of her community is more important than individual sustenance. For instance, when her future husband Bankole asks Lauren to leave the group and go to "a safe haven" (272) with him, Lauren tells Bankole, "I need you to take me the way I am or go off to your land by yourself" (276). So, Lauren's Earthseed incorporates the five prominent characteristics of womanism.

Butler's novel presents black women's resourcefulness which is empha-

sized by both womanism and Afrofuturism. Black women who have been at the bottom of social hierarchy are actually leaders in times of crisis as they have the wisdom to survive with less resources and “making a way out of no way” (xl). Similarly, Lauren wants to do “something purposeful and constructive” (275) in this world which is “falling apart” (275). At the end of the novel, she plants seeds in dead places full of skull, bones, and ashes, creating a garden which can be settled by her community. The act of gardening is an ordinary occupation practiced by black women in hard times to gather food for the family. As Alice Walker suggests in her work, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, it was also an outlet for creativity which was stifled by patriarchy and racism. In keeping with the hope impulse of Afrofuturism, Lauren’s planting removes traces of violence from the soil and creates a space where community can flourish. The wasteland gives way to life. Lauren gives birth to her community called Acorn in Bankole’s land in Humboldt County. Here instead of tombstones, the dead receive a “grove of oak trees” (326) because “Trees are better than stone—life commemorating life” (326). Womanist theologian Katie Cannon talks about D.I.Y. or do it yourself without using institutional structures and institutional powers. When there is a crisis at hand, black women do not wait for assistance. For instance, Lauren does not take help from police but takes immediate action herself. Womanist theologian Cheryl J. Sanders talks about black women’s need to assert themselves and search for freedom with or without the assistance of God. Black women have the right to name their own experience and to name one’s own deity. In this regard, Michael Brandon McCormack describes Lauren as a “Afrofuturist (fifth wave) womanist theologian who only embraces notions of God that can be corroborated with her own experience and ultimately can be beneficial to her community” (19). Thus, Lauren successfully builds her first Earthseed community on the barren land, suggesting that dystopia can be combatted through activism, and change is possible.

Lauren’s Earthseed with its belief in change brought about by activism is also political in the work. It is opposite of the prevailing culture of non-concern and passive acceptance advocated by the political regime in the novel. For example, Lauren describes the Presidential candidate Christopher Morpeth Donner as a “human banister” who advocates social irresponsibility (56). Donner is afraid of change as is evident from his prejudice against space and scientific exploration. On the other hand, the young Lauren believes, “Space could be our future” (20). She aspires to create Earthseed communities beyond earth in extrasolar worlds and takes interest in the “findings of the big Anglo-Japanese cosmological station on the moon” (83). Her religious manifesto *Earthseed: The Books of the*

Living mentions that, "The Destiny of Earthseed/Is to take root among the stars" (84). Here Butler radically brings together religion, science, and black history, whose coming together is a characteristic feature of Afrofuturism. According to Kimberly J. Ruffin, Butler shows "the possibility that religion can be compatible with scientific advancements that may help secure the continuation of the human species" (89). Lauren uses religion as goal for travelling to interstellar space unlike other religions whose collective destiny is heaven. Shirley A. Waters White states, "Whites ... recoiled at the idea that Africans, whom they considered less than human, could indeed have the right to heaven just as they did" (37). However, the religion initiated by this young black woman straightforwardly rejects heaven. In stark contradiction of the concept of afterlife in other dominant religions like Christianity, heaven is tangible and secular, space being the salvation of humanity. Heaven is real and literal and can be shaped; it is not a mythological or philosophical concept. Her Earthseed community can hope to reach heaven while being alive instead of after death.

Thus, although *Parable of the Sower* has dystopian circumstances, it has the utopian stance of critical dystopia as well as hope impulse of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism envisions an alternative future consisting of an emancipatory religion which strives for diversity, social justice and freedom from oppression. In the field of science fiction which was supposedly dominated by white, male writers who talk of a color-blind future or post-racial future, Butler's black science fiction appropriates the genre of critical dystopia to depict a new religion with a non-patriarchal and genderless God. In defying both white and black images of Jesus Christ, in challenging dominant white Christianity as well as renouncing the Black Church, Lauren shapes God herself. She creates a religion which ensures the continuation of the human species in extrasolar worlds, in stars and planets. She rejects afterlife and heaven which defies the belief of whites that blacks as sinners are not liable to go to heaven. Hence, Lauren is a non-conformist Afrofuturist shaper and not a preacher. Earthseed accepts difference and otherness needed for sustaining entire human race inherent in Lauren's multi-ethnic community, and thereby presents womanist strand as existing in Butler's Afrofuturism.

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