

Environmental and Social Crises: New Perspective on Social and Environmental Injustice in Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower

Maryam Kouhestani

Abstract—We are living in a world of environmental and social crises which justice is under a grave threat all over the world. In *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia E. Butler indicates a world thrown into chaos by environmental and social disasters, a world that has forced people to dramatically change the way they live. This article attempts to expose and critique social and environmental justice issues with utilizing Butler's critical view. Butler delineates the features of our social and ecological dystopian society and by means of that facilitates reader identification. Through her novel, Butler forces us to reflect on real world instances of environmental degradation and social inequality.

Index Terms—Environmental degradation, Social injustice, Neo-Slavery and Spiritual changes.

I. INTRODUCTION

We are living in a world of environmental and social crises which justice is truly under threat all over the world. Octavia E. Butler in *Parable of the Sower* (1993) depicts and critiques the social crises and environmental degradation of our time. She argues that human beings are destroying their life by demolishing the environment and expanding the social injustice. In an interview Butler criticizes our society and states that “the greenhouse effect has intensified and there has been a certain amount of starvation and agricultural displacement. There are real problems. Some of our prime agricultural land won't be able to produce the crops that it's been producing... These are big problems” [1]. She views the future with many environmental and social problems like global warming and shortage in water supply and natural resources.

The connection Butler makes between environmental disaster and social injustice in her novel demonstrates that our society already disproportionately victimizes the powerless groups –racial minorities, women, the poor, homosexuals and so on– with environmental degradation. Furthermore, her discussion of social inequality and spirituality reveals some of the roots of social injustice. The purpose of this paper is to study some of the issues of environmental degradation and social injustice by providing a focused look at Butler's

depiction of environmental and social crises in *Parable of the Sower*.

II. NEW PERSPECTIVE ON ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler creates a world in which the social crises of our time have rapidly moved toward destruction. Social and environmental disasters severely threaten the survival of humans, the Earth, and all its existing creatures. Most of Butler's critical views are centered on exposing human disasters, whether human on human or human on the environment, which threaten our society. Hence, Butler reveals the realities of the social injustice of our time through Lauren's viewpoint who is the narrator of the story. Lauren critiques her present situation and refuses to accept dominant ideologies that allow the few to rule over the many. In this society, humans and the environment move toward deterioration.

Rachel Stein, in the introduction of her book *New Perspective on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality and Activism*, argues that environmental justice activists and scholars attempt to make a connection between “race, class and [the] environmental ill” to show that communities composed of racial minorities and the poor suffer more from environmental ills than those who are white or belong to wealthier communities [2]. Stein likewise suggests that another basic group that has received scant attention are women, especially women of color and working-class women, who considerably suffer from societal ills. Similarly, ecofeminists have particularly examined the connections among patriarchal ideology, racial discrimination, and environmental decline. The ideology that shows the value and superiority of white people, men, and the rich over the rest of society, meaning those of colored skin, women, and the poor, is utilized to justify the destruction of the society and environment in the name of progress. As Greta Gaard states, “at the root of ecofeminism is the understanding that many systems of oppression are mutually reinforcing. Building on the socialist feminist insight that racism, classism, and sexism are interconnected... between those forms of human oppression and the oppressive structures of speciesism and naturism” [3]. Therefore, studying the area of environmental justice allows us to realize the interconnection between various forms of oppression, which prompts scholars to examine various ideological systems, such as science, technology, religion, and humanism, to demonstrate how these systems function in the current situation.

Parable of the Sower criticizes these ideologies and shows how society is deeply involved in this system. Lauren is a

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Maryam Kouhestani is with the English Literature Department, University of Malaya, Malaysia (e-mail: maryamkouhestani@gmail.com).

sharp critic of the American Christian tradition. Although she is the daughter of a Baptist preacher, Lauren has totally lost her faith and does not believe in her father's God. She cannot reconcile her observations and experiences with what she has been previously taught about biblical scripture. All Lauren sees and feels are disgusting: suffering, hatred, violence, and murder. She then asks, "Is it God? Most of the dead are the street poor who have nowhere to go... Where's the safety for them anywhere? Is it a sin against God to be poor?" [4]. Lauren questions the connection between poverty and suffering and believes that the poor suffer much more than any other sector in society. Lauren asks if God is only for rich or "how will God... behave toward us when we're poor?" [4].

Butler wants to involve her reader in environmental crises to show how those in power, namely, the church and the government, use religion to deceive the illiterate and the poor by promising them that if you suffer in this world, God will give you Heaven. Through these claims, those who are in power are able to dominate the poor and enslave them for the benefit of those in power. Lauren believes that the church uses God to justify the poverty of some and the wealth of others. Lauren's doubt in Christianity stems from her inability to believe how God possibly allows several terrible things to occur to so many innocent and naïve people. Lauren is disappointed by the passivity of the Christians around her, which causes her to wonder why oppressed communities do not try to change their lives. Instead of hiding behind the walls and waiting for destruction, these communities can act to improve their lives. Lauren then attempts to encourage the community act and change their lives. She starts to share her idea with her close friend Joanna, telling her, "we can get ready... for what's going to happen, get ready to survive it, get ready to make a life afterward. Get focused on arranging to survive so that we can do more than just get batted around by crazy people, desperate people" [4]. Lauren believes that the only way to save the community is through efforts to change the situation. However, the desperate and passive community does not have the ability to accept sudden change. Joanna gets scared of Lauren's words and tells her mother. Lauren's father later hears about the tale from other people and warns Lauren, "These things frighten people. It's best not to talk about them" [4]. Although the father knows that Lauren is right, he thinks that people do not have the ability to accept the truth and that sometimes people in society deserve their bad fortune as they accept their circumstances and choose peace and comfort rather than attempt to change their situation. Change comes with resistance, and people who want change or reformation must have the ability to insist on their ideology. Lauren is extremely frustrated that the community does not listen to her; thus, she prepares herself for a journey to leave the place and find a new society.

Lauren's ideology is very different from those who are older than her in the Robledo community because she has no memory of how American society was in 20th century as she was born in 21st century. The community elders talk about the past as "the good old days" when people were wealthy and safe [4]. Adults believe that reconciling themselves with the present situation is difficult as they had experienced a time when "there were churches all over the place and too many

lights and gasoline was for fueling care and trucks instead of for torching things" [4]. Lauren blames the previous generation for the environmental decline. She knows that if those generations had not wasted natural resources, then the people of her generation could have lived in better conditions. Furthermore, because Lauren's generation lives with fewer sources, shortage in gasoline, water supply, and others, they can adapt themselves to life. In contrast, for those who experienced the previous lifestyle, living in this terrible condition is difficult. Indeed, when Lauren's stepmother remembers her past life, she tells Lauren that she misses those good days. Lauren thinks differently and sees society's losses as a positive aspect, discovering a potential for change in society.

A. Earthseed

Lauren thinks that society requires a new sense of spirituality different from Christianity to encourage people to change their lives. Lauren therefore creates and forms a new spirituality, a religion she calls Earthseed, which is something that she believes society requires to make changes and take action. We gain knowledge of this religion through Lauren's notes. Earthseed is a religion of action, which negates the Church and its passive behavior. Her spiritual notes are in verse, in which she writes, "All that you touch/ You Change. / All that you Change/ Change you. / The only lasting truth/ Is Change. / God/ Is Change" [4]. Lauren believes in a God that can change whatever is wrong and change inequality, injustice, and the environment to a better place. Lauren's religion is not passive, but one that emphasizes the importance of action and independence. Earthseed is a religion that assigns people the responsibility to create a better destiny. As Lauren says, "there has to be more that we can do, a better destiny that we can shape" [4]. In other words, Earthseed is a reformation against Christianity; it is a religion that refuses the destruction of the Earth and the injustice of the human race.

Butler uses religion to criticize fundamentalist Christianity and its destructive role in society. Butler's dystopian narrative is related to the reader in the form of Lauren's "personal journal and a theological and political manifesto", which shows the terrible world of the 2020s and her self-reflexivity in a collapsing society [5]. Butler initiates Earthseed as a religion against Christianity to show that religion is not passive by nature, and that it can be dynamic and constructive. Butler uses religion and history to reveal the reality that those in authority use people's faith and beliefs to have a dominant influence over them. Foucault argues that the religious body is shaped by belief in a non-binary society in which a theological idea thoroughly covers the surface of the body [6]. Therefore, people accept everything in the name of religion, and this acceptance connects the body and religious belief. Foucault explains that the spiritual body is redefined through the "modern soul", which is similar to how disciplinary practice shapes the body [6]. Foucault mentions that in this connection between body and soul, the coordination of religious practices is a dualistic challenge to develop its force on both sides [6]. Butler truly shows the interconnection between body and belief in her work. For instance, when Lauren starts to talk about her new

ideology, she receives an unpleasant reaction because for people whose lives are still rooted in the church, any idea against their belief is unacceptable. The souls of such people are totally connected with their beliefs. As Lauren's father says, "these things frighten people. It's best not to talk about them" [4].

B. Space Travel

Lauren realizes that understanding how to deal with this frightening life requires clarifying what she believes and informing people of their terrible condition. Hence, Lauren understands that the body is always the target of belief and that changing people's lives entails changing their beliefs. In this perspective, Lauren observes how her family, friends, and neighbors are suffering, and hopes that one day, people will "benefit from her version as a materialist and activist spirituality" and seek to achieve control over society in the name of a transcendental endeavor [5]. However, Lauren thinks that merely surviving suffering and continuing their lives as before is inadequate while "things get worse and worse" [4]. She believes that if people live their lives in this manner, then someday they will lose everything and become weak, poor, and hungry; they will be unable to even protect themselves. "Then [they]'ll be wiped out" [4]. Therefore, Lauren believes that a "collective responsibility for Change" should be present, which is based on her "spiritual discipline" that moves toward a better destiny and a new way of life [5]. Lauren develops and refines her religion of survival and transformation through her writing. She believes that writing will "keep [everything] from going crazy" and works to help the bodies survive and transform the minds rooted in human history [4]. Finally, Lauren realizes that space travel, one of the key elements and cultural opportunities of her time, carries the potential for change and expands humanity's self-realization and self-respect through "temporal solidarity and a cosmic transcendence" [5]. As Lauren explains, "space exploration and colonization are among the few things left over from the last century that can help us more than they hurt us" [4].

For Lauren, space travel is mingled with heaven, pointing out that "space could be our future". This statement could mean that darkness will be over and that it is a departure for liberty in the "North" that she seeks particular promised lands. At this stage, Lauren is looking for utopia; she proceeds to develop a spiritual and political discipline in a decision to move from her town to survive and go to a place to establish a new community in which people can regain control over their lives. This goal represents Lauren's ultimate aim of departure from a place that is under the colonization of another. She plans to move from suffering and destruction to a new community without any pain and depression. Lauren thinks that perhaps people will one day be able to leave Earth and live on other planets. The name "Earthseed" contains the essence of her "dialectical plan", from seeking change to renewing the Earth [5]. The Earth contains the cosmos and Earthseed shows all of the stages of Lauren's desire. Lauren looks for a promised future and views the present as a time of survival and a "time for building foundations — Earthseed communities — focused on the Destiny" [4]. Right from the first pages of the novel, Lauren resists the social chaos of feudalized capitalism. As she explores the situation, Lauren

understands that the problem is not localized in the place or country she lives in, but it is a global disaster. She writes that the "world is in horrible shape. Even rich countries aren't doing as well as history says rich countries used to do" [4].

From this point on, we understand that Lauren's (or Butler's) narrative works between her prophetic view that seeks a utopia in history and an apocalyptic view that comes from history. The reader achieves this realization at the end of the novel. The narrator strongly believes that one day, humans will achieve salvation and security in this world. However, the reader finds out the lack of hope for a better society.

III. NEO-SLAVERY AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE

A review of the history of the United States shows that in the 20th century, several industries started establishing towns where the said industries were being built. Numerous factories were established near these industrial towns in the suburbs or far from the cities. In *Parable of the Sower*, corporate towns such as Olivar refer to the history of the United States. Lauren states that "there are still people in Olivar, who are uncomfortable with the change. They know about early American company towns in which the companies cheated and abused people" [4]. Lauren and her family, except her father, believe that working in Olivar presents a chance for a better life because it is a rich town with many large companies. *Parable of the Sower* is a novel that depicts a huge gap between the poor and the rich, in which private companies such as KSF are so powerful that people have to work for them if they want to exist comfortably. In these companies, workers are not substantially paid. Instead of money, the workers receive vouchers and a place to live. Those who work for the companies have to live in gated communities. Lauren explains the situation: "wages were paid, but in company scrip, not in cash... Workers had to pay for food, for clothing... for everything they needed, and, of course they could only spend their company notes at the company store. Wages — surprise! — were never quite enough to pay the bills" [4]. Lauren's stepmother wants to go to Olivar because she believes that the town is far more developed than their own town, Robledo. However, Lauren's father rejects the idea of going to the company town. He says that "Freedom is dangerous... but it's precious, too. You can't just throw it away or let it slip away. You can't sell it for bread and pottage" [4].

Butler urges her readers to refuse the utopia established by companies, which she shows to be a false utopia that smoothly enslaves its people. In Butler's interview in *Crisis* magazine, she suggests that slavery is occurring in American society in the present time, as "people have been held against their will and forced to work after having been seduced by lies about good salaries and that sort of thing" [7]. She remarks that in the North of the United States, this sort of slavery happens mostly to the Hispanics, whereas in the South, the same thing happens to the Blacks. This statement means that slavery never vanished, and that the United States currently faces neo-slavery. Butler adds that these people cannot leave their work. If they do, they are beaten and killed. Indeed, Butler reveals in her fiction what we refuse to see in

the real world. She believes that people are not thoroughly aware of the occurrences around them.

Lauren's father believes that people living in Olivar are unaware of the existence of slavery because the companies never let those people realize their own situation. The companies give their people whatever they need to ensure their comfort and satisfaction, never understanding that they have lost their freedom. In this system, workers are exploited by the company they work in and have no way out. Butler critiques this economic oppression of workers who are not paid or are underpaid and receive vouchers instead of money as a sort of invisible slavery.

To Butler, the excessive rights received by companies from the government have never existed before in the history of the United States. She believes that the state is losing its power and position and that over the years, these companies have become more powerful and have achieved more rights to control their workers. Workers were historically protected by the government against the violation of companies. Today, however, many companies gain more rights than individuals, which give them more authority to control their employees and increase the difficulty for the employees' voice to be heard. This ineptitude of the government and the power of companies drive the people to throw themselves at the gate of Olivar for lower salaries but safer lives. Butler views that the future is worse than the present because power is decentralized, and the government is too weak to provide security for its people. Butler believes that this desire to trust capitalism to protect people from social violence is a dystopian vision. How can people possibly trust capitalism, which only thinks of its own benefits and uses employees as an instrument to expand its commercial power?

Parable of the Sower shows a form of slavery in which slaves know that they are imprisoned. Lauren talks about a new form of slavery popular in this futuristic time, known as "debt slavery", in which companies provide workers with room and board; therefore, the employee owes money to the company. The employees cannot leave their work or the community until their debts are paid. Lauren describes the life of these employees through Emery Tanaka Solis' miserable story. Emery is 23 years old, a mixed-race woman of Japanese and Black parents who escapes from the company with her elder daughter after the death of her Mexican husband. She is obliged to work for the company with a very low salary to pay her husband's debt. However, the company takes away Emery's two sons as payment. She cannot tolerate the oppression and runs away. Lauren exposes how in the future, life can be exchanged for money, and how a company can own an individual's life.

In her *Crisis* interview, Butler mentions that this sort of slavery can be known as "throw-away labor" [7]. She remarks that some American companies, especially in Mexico, employ cheap labor without following labor laws. Such companies employ people but make no arrangements for their safety. The employees may be poisoned with chemicals or injured by equipment, among other things, but they have to live in this horrible condition. These companies do not acknowledge any responsibility, they only take advantage of these people as long as they can, and throw away the workers after a certain time.

In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler uses Olivar to criticize the

influence of capitalism on contemporary society. Through the dialogue among Butler's characters, we realize that the economic situation of the early labor exploitation in the United States has returned. Lauren's father explains that companies in Olivar sound "half antebellum revival and half science fiction" [4]. He distrusts these companies because in exchange for security, room, and board, they take away individual freedom. Butler criticizes company towns that deceive people by saying that they will provide security and give the people support and money. She reveals that Olivar does not care for the health or economic situation of its workers. Therefore, Butler expresses the danger of giving up individual rights and losing one's freedom.

Dystopian novels always reflect a catastrophe of a certain time or of the near future. As Lauren remarks, perhaps cities will be controlled by large companies in the future. She believes that the "company" was always a "subgenre" of science fiction, in which the hero attempts to overthrow or escape the company. The so-called hero "fought like hell to get taken in and underpaid by the company. In real life, that's the way it will be. That's the way it is" [4]. Therefore, the reader realizes the danger of exchanging security for freedom.

Lauren's awareness of social injustice increases as the novel progresses. When Lauren leaves Robledo and starts her journey to the North, she meets different people with miserable destinies that reflect the dystopian environment and social crises of our time. The first people Lauren meets and gets to know in her journey are a mixed-race family called the Douglasses that consists of an African-American husband, his Hispanic wife, and their son. Lauren learns about neo-slavery and the evils it entails through this family's experience. Although the Douglasses, Travis and Natividad, do not seem to be slaves by name, their sad experience reminds Lauren of the revival of slavery in the late 20th century. Travis presents a sad picture of modern slavery through his story. His mother had to work "as a live-in cook" after his father died [4], and she taught him how to read and write. Travis explains that his mother worked for a man who had a large library but forbade Travis from reading any books. His mother then sneaked the books to him so that she could teach him how to read. When Lauren hears this story, she says, "Of course. Slaves did that two hundred years ago. They sneaked around and educated themselves as best they could, sometimes suffering whipping, sale, or mutilation for their efforts" [4]. Travis' story shocks the reader because it is reminiscent of the 19th century slavery in modern time. His story reveals a resurgence of slavery when he continues that his wife, Natividad, was also a maid working for the same master his mother worked for. Lauren views the story as a strange event of our time when she says "the son of the cook marrying one of the maids. That was like something out of another era, too" [4]. Her surprise is complete when she understands why the couple finally left the master's house. He says that "the old bastard we worked for decided he wanted Natividad... Couldn't let her alone. That's why we left. That's why his wife helped us leave" [4]. Lauren realizes that the sexual abuse and rape of slaves were common during the period of slavery, and that the same story is occurring in our time. Travis and Natividad are lucky to escape the house because "in slavery when that happened, there was nothing

the slaves could do about it –or nothing that wouldn't get them killed, sold, or beaten" [4]. Lauren realizes that slavery persists in our time. Travis' miserable story is reminiscent of the terrible slavery in the 19th century that Lauren reads of in history. The masters are malicious and the innocent slaves are victims of oppression. Lauren writes in her diary, "[How] many other people were less lucky –unable to escape the master's attentions or gain the mistress's sympathies. How far did masters and mistresses go these days toward putting less than submissive servants in their places?" [4].

Butler reveals that even after centuries, slavery persists in society. Even in these days of democracy, we can easily see oppression. In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler predicts a catastrophe in the near future that has roots in our present time. In this case, Fredric Jameson remarks that one of the main features that makes science fiction an especially fertile form of fiction is its ability to "break through history in a new way" to gain historical consciousness "by way of the future rather than the past" [7]. According to Jameson, science fiction functions by "transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come" [8]. Therefore, in this type of fiction, our present is seen as the past of some unexpected future rather than the future itself. Science fiction writers warn their readers of an unpleasant future in which the chance of change or promise is lacking.

Lauren's curious mind realizes that social injustice is based on race, class, gender, or even different religions in society. She believes that her present society has returned to the days of slavery with one basic difference, which is that slavery is not limited to the blacks but can be imposed on anyone who lacks power and accepts slavery. Therefore, the reason for slavery is no longer racial superiority but the power of the employer, regardless of race and class, over employees through "debt slavery" as well as "company slavery". This type of superiority is an obvious result of social injustice that Butler reveals in her novel. Butler provides a new perspective of environmental injustice and explores social crises in a general manner. Through rhetorical analysis, Lauren criticizes the social crises and attempts to change the present situation in which any form of difference is viewed as a reason for oppression and exploitation in society. The victims of such exploitation are usually racial minorities, women, and members of the lower class. Therefore, people are aware that if they do not make severe changes in both the way they treat the Earth and the way they treat one other, the situation of social groups that are oppressed by powerful groups will worsen as the environment continues to decline.

IV. CONCLUSION

In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler illustrates the future of the world. She predicts that the future will be considerably worse than the present. Social inequality, environmental degradation, and injustice are real problems that are occurring in our time. The present social and environmental crises of our world may seem less than what Butler depicts in her novel, but they certainly have the potential to worsen in the future. If we do not change the way we live, we threaten one other's lives and the Earth and endanger the global economy. Butler warns her reader of oppressive social

hierarchies in a dystopian system. She shows the controlling systems of industrial companies that invisibly exploit their employees in a way in which the workers never realize that they are subjugated bodies. The workers obey the rules automatically without any opposition because they believe that these companies provide them with facilities and security that protect their lives.

Butler's novel shows a complex understanding of the importance of fear, empathy, and tolerance. Lauren, the narrator of the novel, has the capability to feel the pain and suffering of others. Through Lauren's diary, the reader sees the harsh conditions of living in the community and Lauren's self-awakening process, through which she realizes that people must change their way of life; otherwise, the future will be considerably worse than the present. Lauren starts to warn the community, including her family, friends, and neighbors, of their terrible condition.

Lauren (or Butler) believes that the time is ripe for a great change. Although *Earthseed* is defective, it has the potential to change the world. The most important revision is human destiny. Destiny must be changed. Lauren asserts, "the Destiny of *Earthseed* / Is to take root among the stars or among the ashes" [4]. In this case, she views travel as the immediate goal for change. *Earthseed* will not save the world but it should influence the readers. Butler involves us, her readers, in environmental and social crises to make us feel unsettled, and incorporates us into the slave narrative to allow us to see the world through different eyes and end the slavery that exists around us.

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Maryam Kouhestani was born on 28th of June, 1977 in Iran. In 2000 she received her bachelor degree in English language and literature from Ferdowsi University/ Iran. In 2007 she received her master degree in English literature from Puna University/ India. She is a PhD candidate of English literature in University of Malaya/ Malaysia.

Ms. Kouhestani is one of the staff of Ferdowsi University since 2000. She is a member of MICOLIAC (Malaysia international conference on languages, literatures and cultures) since 2010.