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When Worlds Collide: Applying Critical Race Theory and Ecocriticism to *Parable of the Sower*

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Abstract:

In Octavia E. Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower*, the protagonist, Lauren Olamina, faces life through the lens of a young black woman in a dystopian world. The novel depicts our planet as a place where government systems have broken down from years of abuse and neglect of the environment. Although written over thirty years ago, modern society must change globally or face Butler's vision. Through her protagonist, Butler details future world problems such as unstable inflation, growing racial tension, and global warming. This article analyzes the depiction of the characters as they treat each other through a lens of critical race theory (a systematic construct) and how they treat their environment through an ecological lens. Critical race theory (which is defined by the links between injustice and systematic racism present in our society) and ecocriticism (which looks at the relationship between the environment and humans) are both essential topics in Butler's novel. Via Pippa Marland's call for a reassessment of the human/nature dynamic in her chapter "Ecocriticism" found in the textbook *Literary Theory: An Anthology* and Toni Morrison's insights on race in her book "Playing in the Dark," this article shows the discerning reader how they can view the ways that the novel's setting is synonymous with how humans treat each other as they affect Butler's character.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Critical Race Theory, Dystopian Society.

In Octavia E. Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower*, the protagonist, Lauren Olamina, faces life through the lens of a young black woman in a dystopian world. Earth has become a place where the systems of government have broken down, and years of abuse have damaged the

environment. Although written in 1993 (31 years ago), Butler's novel has created a vision of what the world could look like if it followed its current path. In an almost prophetic turn of events, Lauren's experiences of unstable inflation, growing racial tension, and global warming have already come to pass for us in 2024. "Octavia E. Butler in *Parable of the Sower* (1993) depicts and critiques the social crises and environmental degradation of our time" (Kouhestani). How humans treat each other is a systematic construct (critical race theory) projected onto how we treat our environment (ecocriticism). Critical race theory analyzes the links between injustice and systematic racism present in our society. Ecocriticism looks at the relationship between the environment and humans. Via Pippa Marland's call for a reassessment of the human/nature dynamic and Toni Morrison's perceptions of blackness in her book "Playing in the Dark," the discerning reader can view the ways that the novel's setting surrounding water scarcity and environmental degradation, social inequality with white privilege and modern-day slavery for working-class minorities, and treatment of the environment as synonymous with how humans treat each other affect Butler's character.

In the novel's first half, the setting reinforces ecocriticism's worst fears emulated through an inner-city wasteland of chaos, filth, and squalor brought on by a critical environmental catastrophe where the economy has collapsed. "There are too many poor people—illiterate, jobless, homeless, without decent sanitation or clean water" (Butler 53). The protagonist, Lauren Olamina, is constantly reminded that her world is barren and degraded. In a research article from the Central University of Punjab that studied the novel, the author's articulation of environmental issues found in the book says, "It [*Parable of the Sower*] portrays a society where human beings as well as human values are trampled after an environmental breakdown" (Lone 24). Through Butler's initial scenario, an ecological nightmare sets the stage for the remainder of the novel.

The setting in the novel's latter half (barren landscapes of the outer city countryside) depicts future rural California as having suffered from severe environmental degradation that affects the lack of a basic human need such as clean water. Lauren observes, "This place is dying" (Butler 140). The destruction of nature implies that conditions throughout Lauren's life worsen. "There is still a little water left in San Luis Reservoir. It's more fresh water than I've ever seen in one place, but by the vast size of the reservoir, I can see that it's only a little compared to what should be there—what used to be there" (Butler 258). Through Lauren's eyes, the setting paints the scene of a suffering world that once was full of life, but due to severe weather and drought

brought on by climate change, water becomes a scarce commodity. Kouhestani observes in her perspective of the novel that “Butler views the future with many environmental and social problems like global warming and shortage in water supply and natural resources.” Butler paints a picture of what happens when the earth can no longer provide most necessities.

While the setting not only describes natural resources, such as scarce water, it also explains that what little water there is is unsafe for human consumption. Survival for Lauren is even more complicated when she struggles to meet her basic needs. “Boiling kills disease organisms but may do nothing to get rid of chemical residue—fuel, pesticide, herbicide, whatever else has been in bottles that peddlers use” (Butler 201). Despite the rare occurrence that she finds water, the source is so polluted that it may do more harm than good to drink it. “Some issues, like water pollution which seem trivial...are dealt so painstakingly that the importance of water...as a life determining factor is demonstrated” (Lone 24). Pollution has ravaged the environment so much that, in Butler’s world, the characters cannot trust the water they drink.

Critical race theory’s idea that race inequality is a systematic issue is reflected in the experiences of Lauren as she tries to navigate race relations. “This country has slipped back two hundred years” (Butler 305). As Lauren observes, due to economic imbalance and a lack of opportunity, America has slipped back into a state of haves and have-nots, enslavers and enslaved people. Trying to work within this system without becoming enslaved to those in power is something Lauren struggles to do in her daily life. “Slaves did that two hundred years ago. They sneaked around and educated themselves as best they could, sometimes suffering a whipping, sale, or mutilation for their efforts” (Butler 218). Morrison describes the effort and ingenuity of oppressed enslaved people as significant, saying, “The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable” (1167). When combined with Lauren’s view, Morrison illustrates the need for disadvantaged populations to find a way to survive despite the oppression they face.

Butler further demonstrates critical race theory’s conception that there is an imbalance between wealth and power between whites and minorities. Because of this imbalance, Lauren must attempt to make it independently or submit to the wealthy minority and become an indentured servant. “That’s an old company-town trick—get people into debt, hang onto them, and work them harder. Debt slavery” (Butler 121). Morrison speculates that understanding the issue is important, saying, “Equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the

mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (1167). To fully understand the imbalance, Butler shows Lauren’s point of view by trying to traverse the complicated reality of the struggle of living in poverty while understanding why the “masters” do what they do to avoid becoming their property.

While Lauren’s experiences take the reader through the desolate inner-city Los Angeles, she learns of a distant “promised land” that represents the racial imbalance described by critical race theory. In this privileged city, those of significant wealth and power offer to “enrich” the lives of those who would submit to their rule. “[Olivar] is an upper middle-class, white, literate community of people who once had a lot of weight to throw around” (Butler 118). “...to accept smaller salaries than their socio-economic group is used to in exchange for security, a guaranteed food supply, jobs, and help in their battle with the Pacific” (Butler 119). Critical race theory could explain the prevalence of a white-dictated, racially imbalanced city where the differences in skin colour determine the outcome of a person’s economic survival. Olivar minimizes the imbalance by calling for the separation of people, citizens vs. workers, instead of pitting the whites against the minorities. According to Morrison, “...in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language” (Morrison 1167). Despite not calling the situation what it is, Lauren realizes that Olivar cannot evade the fact that opportunity and freedom boil down to race.

The white-ruled, privileged city of Olivar, which functions as a distant antagonistic force, emphasizes that comfortable, successful survival is directly related to skin colour. “I doubt that Olivar is looking for families of blacks and Hispanics, anyway” (Butler 122). Lauren’s father tells her that the minorities inside the “safe” walls of Olivar must pay the price for their safety with their freedom. “He thinks Olivar is a trap. ...the end is debt and loss of freedom” (Butler 128). There are those in the story who fall prey to Olivar’s promises. The promise of a better life blinded those minorities who were subject to the perpetual imbalance described by critical race theory. “Habit, manners, and political agenda have contributed to this refusal of critical insight” (Morrison 1169). Morrison’s statement alludes to the fact that in Olivar’s society, an accepted policy is casually enforced due to the lack of critical thinking by those underclass minorities.

Free to identify as a black woman in the first half of the novel, Lauren is “safe” within the walls of her neighbourhood. However, not only does Lauren struggle as an African American outside the city, but she is also even more vulnerable in society when appearing as a “weaker” woman. Lauren explains that to stay safe, “I intend to go out posing as a man when I go” (Butler

138). Forced to present herself as “stronger” than the black woman that this apocalyptic society dismisses and abuses, Lauren is taken outside herself to survive at the expense of her comfort. “It still felt strange to be called ‘man.’ I didn’t like it, but that didn’t matter” (Butler 202). While Lauren prefers to be herself, a strong-willed, capable black woman, her world is not as simple as just being allowed to exist. In Halls’s essay on the subject, he says, “Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think” (1191). To ensure her safety and fight against the systematic unfairness and imposed danger of being of a minority race and sex, Lauren must become someone else to survive unharmed.

As illustrated by critical race theory, the systematic acceptance of racism in Lauren’s world puts minorities at a disadvantage. They must band together to stand against the forces of chaos and danger. “And they have no natural allies around here except us. Mixed couples or groups are rare out here” (Butler 206). Through Lauren’s experiences, the reader sees that just because people are together does not mean they are safe. While minorities make up the majority of Lauren’s group, there is a white man with them, which a racist society looks down on. So, Lauren encourages her group to join with another mixed-race couple to create strength in numbers. “We’re natural allies—the mixed couple and the mixed group” (Butler 208). While Lauren believes there is strength in numbers and a larger group of allies has a better chance of survival, she does not want them to sacrifice their own identity, as she has had to do. Grecca points out in their study of Butler’s novel and the race relations within that “Butler makes them [Lauren and her group] face the necessity to work on how to establish equality, reliance, authority, and empathy...above individualism.” Butler enables her character to go beyond the inequality described by race theory and allows Lauren to subvert the societal norm of segregation.

Through juxtaposing critical race theory and ecocriticism, Butler creates a setting viewed through the eyes of her protagonist, where environmental destruction amplifies the suffering from poverty created by racial inequality. “It’s illegal to camp out on the street the way they do—the way they must—so the cops knock them around, rob them if they have anything worth stealing, then order them away or jail them” (Butler 51). Being forced to live on streets that would have been considered dangerous even in our world, Lauren witnesses minorities subjected to homelessness and starvation. “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” (Kouhestani). Disadvantaged groups experience the full brunt of the consequences of not respecting the environment as society remains unsustainable.

When compared to the wealthier white Americans, Lauren, being a disadvantaged minority, witnessed those who were even worse off than she was at the beginning of the novel. Outside her neighbourhood walls is a grim horizon of the results of neglect, poverty, and the burdens of those less fortunate. “A lot of the houses were trash-burned, vandalized, infested with drunks or druggies or squatted in by the homeless families with their filthy, gaunt, half-naked children” (Butler 10). Marland states that an imbalance exists between safe, healthy locations and dangerous situations based on a person’s status in society, saying, “Carolyn Merchant...refers to the disproportionate siting of environmental hazards such as landfills and toxic waste dumps in underprivileged minority areas” (1514). Critical race theory would explain why these minorities are treated worse than whites and discarded in environmentally unsafe living habitats with waste and trash.

As Lauren navigates her struggles, she joins other like-minded individuals (both white and minority). She attempts to overcome the difficulties present in race theory, taking heed of the warnings of ecocriticism. Lauren takes her group to a remote location in hopes of building “Acorn” (their new society) (Butler 328). Lauren guides her group to a haven where the environment is salvageable, and inequality is left behind. She greets this new setting, the promise of a better life, with hope and reflects on where she came from and where she would like to go. Hall states that this kind of introspection is necessary, saying, “...there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather ... ‘what we have become’” (1193). Butler’s characters evolve in a way the larger population has been unable to do, thus allowing for a better tomorrow.

Although Lauren is immediately safe and looks to the future with her group, at the novel’s end, the inequality, injustice, and environmental devastation that critical race theory and ecocriticism define still exist. “You know, as bad as things are, we haven’t even hit bottom yet. Starvation, disease, drug damage, and mob rule have only begun” (Butler 328). Not only does Lauren have to worry about the larger setting in the novel, but naturally, as she leads, a new imbalance of power is created, as by definition, her followers must follow her if they are to maintain their new small collective. Grecca describes this in his study: “...contact zones also have inequality as a feature; no matter how successful they are, the participants are never totally equal, and nothing truly separates them from reproducing relations of power imbalance.” Butler has

evolved the setting from an antagonistic force to a copacetic safe zone. However, Lauren must heed the warnings of the past to thrive in her future.

Our world has existed for billions of years, and life has thrived. However, as life evolved, humankind rose and began influencing the world. Differences in man emerged, and imbalances arose between how we treat each other as well as how we treat our environment. Critical race theory reminds us of these inequalities, and ecocriticism warns us of what our actions do to the planet. In Butler's novel, these two theories combine to tell a cautionary tale to the reader through descriptions of the setting and the protagonist's experiences about what could happen if we allow these imbalances and injustices to dominate our future. If humankind does not heed these warnings, our world will continue to follow Butler's path. Humans may find themselves struggling, as Lauren did, to survive in an apocalyptic world plagued by discrimination and destruction.

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