



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 10. Issue.2. 2023 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

INTERPRETING EARTHSEED IN OCTAVIA E BUTLER'S PARABLE SERIES

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Article information

Received:20/5/2023  
Accepted:24/06/2023  
Published online:30/6/2023  
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.10.2.206](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.10.2.206)

ABSTRACT

The incomplete Earthseed Series depicts a vision of human society divided by walled communities. These walled communities build the binary of inside and outside, which the predators of Lauren's society use for their own profit. In the two novels that Butler wrote there is a clear analysis of the effects of neoliberal corporate control coupled with the violence of the older forms of patriarchy and racism. Moreover, in their suffering the people recall the older world with rose-tinted nostalgia that allows for the demagogues to establish their political control. Having been ghettoised in such fashion, the protagonist, Lauren Olamina, of the first novel, *Parable of the Sower*, realises that in order to create a just world, the human race must unite to both survive and thrive. With this view in mind she establishes the Earthseed religion that posits God as change. This paper argues that Lauren Olamina, in the guise of a religion, is proposing an ideology that benefits all while standing opposed to the hegemony of ruling class. Furthermore, the paper also suggests that Earthseed would become the reason for human emancipation as it conceives humanity as an ever-changing facet of history, rather than confine it to the abstraction of human nature.

**Keywords:** Humanism, Ideology, Hegemony, Octavia E Butler, Earthseed

Introduction

As is her wont, Butler distends the fractures of the reality composing a coherent whole by exacerbating the symptoms so as to posit the logical telos of the road already taken. At the same time, she also speculates a possible alternative against the backdrop of seemingly bleak present. Her major works, especially the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* and the *Patternist Series*, inquire upon the issue of human nature, arguing against the tumid ossification of an intransient essence.

The reality depicted in the Earthseed novels, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of Talents*, was already prescient to the readers of the late twentieth century, and even two decades into the twenty-first, the unfinished trilogy has not lost its relevance. The civilization that Lauren knows and navigates is similar to the contemporary one, a centralized neoliberal economy with failing structures of corporate control.

The political power is concentrated in the hands of a demagogue, who is simply a stooge of the broken corporate order. In order to maintain their hegemony, this order supports a dealer of nostalgia, Donner, who is

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capable enough to radicalize an already broken and afraid mass. The conditions of wage slavery in the degenerate system of neoliberal economy are not unknown to Butler. Also known to her is the fact that sooner rather than later the ghettoization and polarization of the world would eventually lead to the unwilling enslavement of anyone who dissents.

“It really distresses me that we see these things happening now in American society when they don't have to. Some people insist that all civilizations have to rise and fall-like the British before us - but we have brought this on ourselves. What you see today has happened before: a few powerful people take over with the approval of a class below them who has nothing to gain and even much to lose as a result” (Potts 334)

Ghettoization is an important facet of the novel's premise, as Lauren Olamina, the protagonist calls a gated community, Robledo, her home. That the community is gated reveals the insecurity of the masses that populate the novel. Outside the gates of Robledo, Los Angeles is an environment hostile for any civilization.

However, both inside and outside any gated community, the misery that pervades has the same name. Lauren's society is in crisis, broken by capitalism, it wallows in the nostalgia of better times, turning to demagogues, who package the idea of a glorious past as promise of the future. As a hyper-empath, Lauren can sense the vulnerability and the pain of the people in her community. She is revolutionary enough to understand that something essential must change for her people to free themselves and pragmatic enough to realise that before the change could happen, people must survive the pitfalls of the ensuing tragedy. As Hampton observes,

“Members of the middle class have been forced to surround themselves with protective walls, and the unskilled masses are left as scavengers on the streets of what was once a thriving metropolitan. It is through Lauren's observations and opinions about the state of her world and its gods that she begins to construct Earthseed: The Book of the Living. Earthseed is Lauren's formulation of parables that outline a religion that identifies God as change and seeks to propagate itself and humanity throughout the stars. The stars or space is Lauren's vision of the ultimate frontier” (Hampton 105)

Lauren fashions Earthseed as a religion, constructing aphorisms that convey to the followers, paths that humanity must take in order to take root among the stars. The conditions that necessitate such a measure are manifold, but the greatest impediment is the trauma that has taken hold of the people.

Lauren's hyper-empathy is a plot device that does not merely indicate her individual ability to feel other people's pain, but emphasizes on a broader level, the collective trauma of her times. Her ability is an indicator that a rot is indeed festering in the minds of the people, without any apparent cure, and the only prescription they receive for this putrefaction is the placebo of the past that led to it.

As Lee understands, trauma in the Parable series can be read both spatially and temporally, as the mechanics of inside and outside the walls are clearly stipulated in the novel. As he notes, the hostile forces outside the walls invade and lay waste to the ones within. Using Freud's schematics, he ascribes to trauma an unknowability concluding that the resolution, for Lauren, lies in time.

“Earthseed allows believers to internalize the fact that terrible things can happen while discouraging them from hiding behind walls or otherwise maintaining the status quo; however, it is the Destiny that offers the possibility for radical positive change in the future, a way to finally break free from traumatic repetition. Specifically, the Destiny can be considered a method for locating and mastering trauma because it is designed to prevent the ultimate manifestation of the death drive” (Lee 208).

In addition, trauma in the Earthseed series is a symptom that exacerbates the already existing condition. Detecting that there is trauma in the lives of the people is not a useful diagnosis, as the knowledge of a disease does nothing to cure it. Though proper understanding does lead to the formulation of a proper standard operating in order to mitigate and even prevent such a trauma.

Moreover, Butler makes it abundantly clear that certain events cannot be prevented, and even though the resulting trauma is mitigated later, the pain persists. This pain that pervades the collective unconscious of Lauren's America has a well-defined history and has shaped the individual and collective identities of the people.

### **Human Nature and Earthseed**

It is human nature that takes up the blame of such history defining pain, and the essence of being human, having been established as both blight and blessing, becomes the rationale behind the irrationality of pain. It makes sense, therefore, that Olamina takes the course of theology, having identified the root cause to be trauma, to mitigate and eventually create such conditions that would fundamentally transform the so-called human nature. That Lauren believes something as abstract as human nature to be malleable, points to her view in which essence in so far as it exists can be shaped as desired.

In the contemporary world, the developments of modern sciences have replaced the category of human nature with genetics and the concept of the essence of man with DNA. What was once abstract can now be plotted within the human body, as Vado notes,

"Butler rejects the social Darwinist leanings of genetic determinism by recognizing that although sociobiology and genetics may re-produce racialized categories, these very same genetic idioms can be strategically deployed to work with and from the tensions of sameness (unity and homogeneity) and difference (multiplicity and heterogeneity) that DNA, as the reigning metaphor of the twenty-first century, proffers. What is more, Butler refuses the nihilistic pessimism of classical sociobiology, suggesting instead that we (humans) need not be defined or delimited by biology." (Vado 149).

In Butler's stand against the fatalism of the genetic structure lies the echo of Bachelard's Prometheus Complex, in which curiosity and knowledge are chalked up to clever disobedience. Like Bachelard, Butler also believes in the human will to gain knowledge, just for the sake of knowledge, without any apprehension of utility.

"There is in man a veritable will to intellectuality. We underestimate the need to understand when we place it, as Pragmatism and Bergsonism have done, under the absolute dependence of the principle of utility. We propose, then, to place together under the name of the Prometheus complex all those tendencies which impel us to know as much as our fathers, more than our fathers, as much as our teachers, more than our teachers" (Bachelard 12).

It is clear, therefore, that for Butler there is no essence to man which is often used as an argument to protect the status quo. If at all, human beings possess any essence, then there is something immutable within that must remain so. Lauren's theology rejects this notion at the outset by positing that human beings are Earthseed, capable of transforming everything that they touch. In addition, in so far as they are capable of shaping their surroundings, the Earthseed can also be shaped by their surroundings.

### **The Basis of Earthseed**

Taking up a rather Spinozist attitude, Lauren calls the surrounding nature, the earth, the entire universe, God. One of the central tenets of Lauren's religion is the malleability of God which, for all intents and purposes, defies the notion of an omnipotent metaphysical being. Lauren's God is perfectible, and being so stands opposed to the notion of an eternal being outside the time-space that shapes reality.

This indicates that Lauren's theology is based on the temporal world of existence, having a material basis in reality seeking to demystify God as something that can be shaped by human labour. It is unsurprising that she chooses this path because out of everything else her greatest enemy is still capitalism which seeks to mystify both the labour and use-value it produces.

Lauren not only has to combat the oppressive material conditions of her world but also the ideology that allows for such a world to function. The struggle is as much against the ideology of the ruling class, as against the hostility of her immediate reality. As Althusser argues it is the ideology of the ruling class that allows for the acceptance of oppressive conditions are normal amongst the oppressed. Such an ideology, while it possesses a

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real relationship with the existing conditions, creates an imaginary play where unless the exploited accepts the exploitation, the ruling class will cease to exist.

Lauren's theology, on the other hand, resists against the ideology of the ruling class, by using the very device that allows their hegemony to shape history through deliberate actions. Economic reorganisation of society would not hold if the historic tendency that allows for the previous economic structure to flourish persist. According to Althusser,

"So in every society we can posit, in forms which are sometimes very paradoxical, the existence of an economic activity as the base, a political organization and 'ideological' forms (religion, ethics, philosophy, etc.). So ideology is as such an organic part of every social totality. It is as if human societies could not survive without these specific formations, these systems of representations (at various levels), their ideologies. Human societies secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life" (Althusser 232).

In this sense, any social organisation cannot exist without the driving force of an ideology as it necessitates the continued existence of human society. It is not merely Lauren's hyper-empathy that allows her to formulate that human beings as Earthseed must keep on transforming and adapting. This impulse to shape and change must be chalked up to her survivalist skills, which she acquires because of her experiences in the communities of Robledo and Acorn.

Furthermore, Lauren, akin to the Marxian doctrine, considers history to be a perpetual struggle of opposing forces, in which only the transformation of the existing socio-economic conditions allows the humans to progress. In so far as her aim is to make humanity ready for any extra-terrestrial contact, she knows that the Earthseed must not be afraid of change.

It is only because Earthseed is capable of transforming and adapting to change that they have survived through countless hostilities, social and natural. In other words, Lauren believes that human nature is capable of transformation at a very fundamental level, the point is to make sure that it is to the benefit of all rather than few. Here lies the essence of her theology that seeks to curb the obscurantism of the ruling ideology from the notion of humanism by making it coterminous with the underlying and overarching reality.

## Conclusion

The aphorisms presented in the Lauren's diary that became the basis of the Earthseed, manifest in the narrative as religion. It must be argued that the appearance of such a structure is necessary so as to unite a people broken by the hunger of those that control the state apparatus. In the case of ruling ideology, the structure of a religion, at once, invoked to alleviate the suffering of the oppressed, is also used to keep the oppressed content.

Lauren uses the theological structure to make it palatable to the sufferers who can no longer imagine an alternative where suffering does not exist. Her religion is devoid of any eschatological content and never offers platitudes to lessen human suffering. Instead, it presents an analysis of suffering, through which it is categorised and mitigated on the basis of the origin of trauma.

The only way to mitigate the trauma received from either Nature or human actions is through mutual cooperation and dialogue. Lauren clearly proposes that people can and must adapt to the changing nature or become consumed by it. Human beings, however, possess intelligence which is destructive when it is made to serve the purpose of maintaining the hegemony of the ruling ideology.

"Intelligence is ongoing, individual adaptability. Adaptations that intelligent species may make in a single generation, other species make over many generations of selective breeding and selective dying. Yet intelligence is demanding. If it is misdirected by accident or by intent, it can faster its own orgies of breeding and dying" (Butler 27).

Therefore, it must be posited that Lauren takes up the theological approach strategically to elaborate a theory through which the path to the transcendence of human beings becomes accessible. Earthseed is an

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ideology which, in the words of Althusser, “is the relay whereby, and the element in which, the relation between men and their conditions of existence is lived to the profit of all” (236).

Such an idea cannot be static, as a religion is, however, Lauren insistently calls it one because the breadth of her utopian vision depends fundamentally upon her belief that there can be no God for the oppressed in a society governed by the economic framework of the neoliberal ideology. It becomes necessary for the ordinary people to know the tools that would not only allow them to survive but also produce such conditions of existence where they thrive.

It is often argued, with reference to Lauren’s tale, that she wished to gather necessary skills and intelligence so that she could survive. It is true that the only way out of her immediate reality was survival, but it must also be argued that Lauren looked beyond survival, as can be gleaned from the stress she places upon the exploration of outer space.

Therefore, Earthseed becomes a necessary intellectual tool by which the peoples of various cultures express their solidarity. They become united, on the one hand, because they are oppressed by the homogeneity of the ruling ideology, and on the other hand, because Earthseed is the apparatus that encourages their emancipation.

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