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Religion and Socioeconomic Status in *Parable of the Sower*

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) details the effort made by a poor girl to keep hope during the crumbling of America's economic state. Butler crafts her dystopian society in the novel from different real-life situations occurring at the time the book was written. The novel deals with social issues such as drug use, institutionalized racism, violence, and debt slavery, and expands these concepts into a world where all hope seems to be lost, and low-income communities are at a bigger risk of destruction than ever before. Butler's novel provides a commentary on religion and its place within poor communities during the 1990s, as well as a criticism of Christian fundamentalists' attitude towards different social issues, shown through Lauren Olamina's development of the Earthseed religion.

Butler's depictions of tragedy and violence in the novel exist as a reminder to her audience that there remain unsolved problems that stem from impoverished communities. The presence of violence continues to exist, and Butler asks the reader to acknowledge these facts and try to make a difference. In Lauren's community, there is a large presence of murder, rape, and thievery.. The richer people in the community close off their houses with gates, in order to stay away from the horrors outside. Mr. Olamina, a Baptist minister, wants to keep himself closed off and focuses on his own safety instead of the others. Lauren, however, wants to fix the circumstances of the less fortunate in her community along with protecting herself. Butler's

description of these gated communities reflects the way that the upper class tends to close themselves off from the less fortunate, and seemingly want to pretend as if oppression does not exist in their world. By creating a “gate” between the outside world and Lauren’s family, there is no progress to be made. Deep down, Lauren knows that actual change needs to be made, or eventually the thieves in the neighborhood will be able to break through the gates and harm the people. She begins planning “what [Lauren’s family and friends have] got to do before [disaster] happens so that we can survive and rebuild” (Butler 55). There is no way to ignore the tragedies that occur, and Lauren seeks to help instead of remaining passive like her father chooses to do.

Parable of the Sower also acts as a reference to the race and class relations that were occurring in America at the time. Racial discrimination and injustice has carried a large presence throughout American history, and although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed less than 30 years before the novel was written, there was (and is) still tension between minorities and the white populations in the country. As a Black writer, Octavia Butler has a firsthand look into the interactions and relationships between the majority of the U.S. population and the different minority groups. In the 1990s, more large-scale efforts began to arise in corporate America in order to improve race relations, because of the fact that “some companies... [began] to perceive commercial advantages in developing equal opportunities policies” (Jewson 603). These are great accomplishments to have been made, but Butler suggests that there is still injustice and discrimination outside of these jobs, especially to citizens and communities that are not as financially stable. Lauren states that her hometown cannot have these opportunities because it is “too poor, too black, and too Hispanic to be of interest to anyone” (Butler 120).

To further her point about unequal job opportunities for the lower class and minorities, Butler introduces the company KSF in the novel. KSF rises as a possible escape from all of the poverty in Lauren's town, and announces that it is looking for different people "who would be willing to move to Olivar and work for room and board. The offer wasn't put that way, of course, but that's what it meant" (Butler 120). Lauren makes this comment about the company because she is aware that KSF will take advantage of the minority and impoverished people of her community. She knows that it is very easy for lower-class workers to become economically enslaved into the system of companies, and so she is wary of her neighbors accepting the company's offers. However, there seems to be no other choice but to work for them. Therefore, KSF becomes an example of debt slavery, where the people are forced into labor in order to have safety and basic resources. There is seemingly no other choice that ensures financial security or freedom from danger. Butler uses KSF to display the different corporations that make a profit off of the exploitation of their workers, and how these companies and their mistreatment continues to exist in lower-class communities. Despite the efforts that were made in the 1990s to bring equality into the workplace, there are still places that do not have these opportunities.

The drug epidemic in America is also referenced in the novel. Lauren's character relates to this, as she has a personal connection to the misuse of drugs, specifically psychedelic ones. Her mother was a drug addict, and Lauren was physically affected by her mother's addiction during the pregnancy. Lauren's brother, Keith, also begins to sell drugs in order to earn money for this family, and he is eventually killed. His reason behind this choice lies in the question he asks Lauren: "What was I supposed to do? Wait for God to come and give me some money?" (Butler 110) Drug abuse has been a consistent problem throughout the 20th century in America,

and Butler addresses this issue in a way that provides sympathy for the drugs' users. She responds to the continuous lack of sympathy for lower class people who are drug addicts, as they are typically denied support and stereotyped as violent individuals. Butler uses the main character's familial connection to drug abuse, and acknowledgement of the fact that drug abuse is a very common problem among the lower class. These facts act as a means to provide sympathy, making these people more humanized and worthy of understanding by the outside community.

Those affected by the drug epidemic are likely to either begin their addiction as a part of the lower class, or fall into poverty due to unstable addiction. A report from the Psychiatric Times in 1998 reveals that 13.6% of highschoolers have used psychedelic drugs at least once in their lifetime (Kaplan). As more and more Americans became involved with drugs, Butler writes in order to make this fact apparent. Her writing acts as a catalyst to spark better discussion and recognition of the drug epidemic in America, and the risks that come along with drug abuse. Lauren's birth defects from her mother show the devastating effects of drug addiction, and Butler provides these facts to show the terrible consequences of leaving drug addicts in poverty and not referring them to better treatment and rehabilitation. By promoting sympathy for drug users rather than resentment, Butler addresses addiction as a disease rather than a choice, and encourages her readers to look for better solutions to the drug epidemic in America.

To deal with these real-life tragedies that occur in the novel, people tend to turn to their faith and to what they believe in to cope. This fact is what leads Butler to begin her commentary on religion. Despite the fact that Christianity encourages its followers to love their neighbor and to help those in need, a sense of pride and entitlement can instead arise in those who identify

with these belief systems. Lauren states that “my father’s God [has] stopped being my God” (Butler 6), showing how her father’s ideals do not reflect the way that Lauren actually thinks. Christianity teaches its people that perfection is indeed possible, and this can lead to some believing that they are more perfect than others. Butler addresses how the Christian America movement tends to forget about the communal and loving properties of the Christian religion, and instead focuses on bettering the inner workings of its community. Rather than focusing on improving the circumstances of the less fortunate who do not belong to the Christian community, the Christian America movement tends to only focus on improving its own members and strives to give itself more power. This notion is expanded upon in Butler’s novel *Parable of the Talents* (1998), when Lauren’s world begins to be dominated by fundamentalist-driven politics. Butler understands the hypocrisy of these groups, and uses her examples of different social issues to highlight the people who actually need help in the world.

While Butler argues that Christians should be more aware of the social issues at hand, Christianity and its relationship with politics also comes into question. America’s attitude towards religion in the 1990s was very much reflective of the political climate at the time, and Butler’s writing acts as a response to the increasing trend of Christian fundamentalism in the country. Between 1987 and 1997, the time in which the novel was written, the percent of Americans who identified as having ‘no religion’ surpassed 10% of the country’s population (Schwadel 115). The increase of religion among the population, either practicing or not, became a more common point of discussion and an influence on political debate. Christianity and more traditional religious beliefs continued to be a staple of the Republican party, while atheism in the Democratic party increased between 1987 and 1997 (Rosentiel). As such, religion continued to

be a contributing factor in the American political system, and subject to questioning by Butler because of fundamentalist religions' inability to fix these current social problems.

Butler provides a commentary on how Christian fundamentalism seems to be affecting politics through the character of Charles Donner, a presidential candidate. Lauren's father begins to support his campaign, but Lauren is wary of Donner's standing and policies because she believes that "politicians have been promising to return us to the glory... of the twentieth century ever since I can remember" (Butler 20). Donner acts as the epitome of the 'fundamentalist candidate' that seeks power by using fear mongering tactics. Philip Jos's article on "Fear and the Spiritual Realism of Octavia Butler's *Earthseed*" describes the rise to power by these fundamentalist politicians as a product of "exploiting the fear engendered by economic collapse, environmental catastrophe, and public disorder, by promising a return to a mythical time when all believed in the same God" (Jos 4). In the novel, Lauren disagrees with her father's conservative approach to the ongoing crisis that her community is in. She does not believe in the idea that America must regain what is lost, but that "We can all learn more. Then... we can stop denying reality or hoping it will go away by magic" (Butler 59). She believes that we must focus on the future because change is inevitable and the past cannot be repeated. This mindset acts as the catalyst for Lauren's development of the *Earthseed* religion. Instead of encouraging the Christian America ideology of using religion to gain political power, Butler provides *Earthseed*, which can respond to fear by creating new ways to deal with problems and adapting to the circumstances at hand.

Butler not only attacks the hypocrisy of certain religions towards social issues and the fundamentalist use of religion in politics; she also critiques the aspects of Christian religions that

do not seem to have any evidence to support their belief system. In a 1987 interview with Larry McCaffery, Butler speaks about leaving her childhood Baptist faith and how “Somehow you’re supposed to believe and have faith but not worry about having any *evidence* to support that belief and faith. That just doesn’t work for me, and I never went back” (McCaffery 17). This quote provides insight to some of the reasons why she felt the need to provide her own opinions of the Christian America movement. The mentioned ‘lack of evidence’ especially relates to how Christian fundamentalists seem to have a rationalization for not providing much help to the less fortunate. Butler critiques the fact that these people would deny aid based on a whim that “prayer works just as well”, which cannot be truly proven. Butler searches to find real truth that can be seen with her own eyes, and her Baptist religion never gave her enough answers to her questions.

Earthseed embodies Butler’s framework for the ideal religion. She searched for a religion that had true evidence, and the concepts that Butler understands to be evidence for God are that

“God is Power-Infinite, Irresistible, Inexorable, Indifferent. And yet, God is Pliable—Trickster, Teacher, Chaos. Clay. God exists to be shaped. God is Change. This is the literal truth. God can’t be resisted or stopped, but can be shaped and focused. That means God is not to be prayed to. Prayers only help the person doing the praying... God is power and in the end, God prevails.” (Butler 25)

Butler creates an essential doctrine of Earthseed to states how God can be adaptive and malleable, giving its followers a purpose to learn how to control change. Butler also points out the irrationality of prayer, as it does not actually change circumstances until action is made. This explanation of the use of prayer in the Earthseed doctrine lays out her plan for what must be done

to create change. While most Christian religions claim that prayer is essential and has miraculous qualities, Butler claims that it is only a mental coping mechanism. Earthseed allows a more broad term of analysis by the believer, therefore asking its members to take action into their own hands, rather than the way that Christianity allows its members the ability to use prayer as an excuse for inaction. Earthseed states that a person cannot simply pray for a difference in the world, instead they must stand up and go out into the world to begin it.¹

Lauren Olamina believes that religion can still hold the answer to solving social issues. She does not disregard the positive impact and influence that religion can have; she instead works on perfecting religion in order to benefit more people. She believes she must work with the cards that she has been dealt in her life, and Earthseed is her method to determine what she must do to survive. Lauren's attitude towards religion is contrasted by the opinions of Allie, a woman that Lauren meets while she is fleeing her home community. Allie says that she thinks "religion is dog shit... It's either phony or crazy" (Butler 238). Allie and Lauren hold different views on the subject, and this shows the many different attitudes that can come as a response from tragedy. Living in the environment that she is in, Lauren can either cling on to what she truly believes or lose hope. Being raised with a Baptist faith allows Lauren insight into perceptions of faith, and her curiosity to find truth along with faith is what creates Earthseed. She believes that having faith is not unrealistic or childish, as Allie believes, but one must be able to pair faith with reason in order for it to make a true, lasting impact on the world.

Parable of the Sower provokes questioning by the reader about how to respond to crises. Butler uses her writing to promote social change and strengthen aid for the lower class, while also creating sympathy to victims of drug addiction and racial discrimination. While reminding

the society around her of the atrocities at hand in the world, Octavia Butler's novel also acts as a suggestion for a better form of religion in America. Butler strives for a faith that does not contradict itself. She seeks for a religion that is encouraged to discover and adapt rather than sticking to a specific doctrine that can not be properly applied to new environments, and a religion that uses its teachings to help every individual, instead of catering to only one mindset or only to the group of people who share its ideals.

Endnote

1. It is important to note that while Butler says the practice of Christian religions may prove to be wrong in its execution, she does not believe that the concept of religion is completely corrupt. At the heart and soul of every religion, it seeks to spread good and nurture community, but this sentiment becomes twisted when theology and doctrine is added to it. *Earthseed* is not created to dismiss the idea of religion as a whole, but to provide a better version of religion and its components. It is important to recognize that Butler is not denying the existence of God or any intervention that God can have in the Earth. Lauren does not become an atheist in the novel, she instead creates her own religion that is not corrupted like the other ones that she is exposed to. She says that "Earthseed deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures. Worship is no good without action" (Butler 197). Lauren strives for a religion that is more progressive, flexible, and adaptable to the changing environment of society.

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