



# Ecofeminism in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents*

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## Abstract

*This paper explores ecofeminist perspective in Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents. Butler's dystopian series are set in a world ravaged by climate crises and social collapse. The paper illuminates the intricate relationship between ecological devastation and patriarchal control. Lauren Olamina, the protagonist, embodies ecofeminist principles and resists domination through her Earthseed philosophy. This paper also critically examines women's oppression and their subjugation which extends to the extremes of enslavement and reduction to mere objects of reproduction. Despite these severe manifestations of patriarchal control depicted in the series, the female protagonist emerges as a visionary leader, striving to establish a more equitable and sustainable future for humanity. Her efforts culminate in a significant achievement as she successfully implements her idea of creating a hope for the human beings. This analysis situates Butler's works within ecofeminist discourse, demonstrating how the novels challenge dualistic thinking and advocate for a reconceptualization of power and care. By examining the oppression of women and marginalized groups alongside the destruction of the natural world, the paper reveals Butler's vision of an ecofeminist future that transcends domination and fosters ecological and social justice.*

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, climate change, environmental degradation, dystopian, patriarchy and earthseed

## Introduction

Climate change has become as a major concern in the contemporary world, as evidenced by the escalating frequency and severity of natural disasters globally. While its impact extend across all human beings, women bear a disproportionately greater burden compared to men. Amid extensive environmental degradation caused by climate change, the complex interplay between women and the environment gains critical significance. This prompts an essential inquiry into the extent to which patriarchal structures independently exacerbate harm to both women and the environment. Ecofeminists assert that this interconnectedness is well-documented, highlighting the adverse impact of

patriarchy on women. Rosemary Ruether defines ecofeminism stating that "Ecofeminism brings together these two explorations of ecology and feminism, in their full, or deep forms, and explores how male domination of women and domination of nature are interconnected, both in cultural ideology and in social structures" (Ruether 2).

Ecofeminism constitutes a multidimensional paradigm connecting environmental destruction and gender-based subjugation to patriarchal structures of exploitation and control. Merging feminist and ecological ideologies, it challenges binary hierarchies that marginalize both nature and women while emphasizing women's distinct susceptibilities to ecological risks, especially in rural and indigenous



settings. Concurrently, ecofeminism highlights women's pivotal contribution to fostering environmental resilience, championing inclusive, fair, and collaborative strategies for reimagining the interaction between humanity and the natural world. The concept of ecofeminism has been advanced to address these dual challenges, underscoring women's pivotal role in environmental stewardship and their indispensable contributions to ecological restoration.

Octavia Butler, a distinguished African American writer, addresses environmental degradation and the escalating impacts of climate change in many of her works. Her narratives frequently feature female protagonists who advocate for the betterment of society through principles of community living. In her novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Butler issues a stark warning about the emergence of a dystopian future. She introduces Lauren Olamina, a resolute female protagonist, who persistently cautions her family and neighbors about the perils of venturing beyond their gated community in a world ravaged by climate change.

### Material and Methods

The primary texts *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* are selected for this research paper due to its dystopian theme. The series' primary concern of changing climate and its relevance to the contemporary discourse sets the novel apart. It also equally addresses the issues faced by women in the society ravaged by climate change which creates a grate impact on the readers. Secondary sources are cited from research papers, articles and book chapters related to the topic ecofeminism, climate fiction and the series. Textual analysis method is followed for writing this research paper.

All the citations of this paper follow the guidelines of MLA Handbook, 9<sup>th</sup> edition.

### Findings and Results

Butler's portrayal of a female protagonist in the *Parable* series challenge the marginalization of female characters, particularly within the context of saving the world from danger. Observing how such

marginalized individuals are often excluded or sidelined in mainstream representations, writer N. K. Jemisin states:

... *Star Wars and Star Trek and the "golden age" novels of science fiction, depicted a future that was shiny and exciting...for white guys. The rest of us were present only in token form, if we were present at all. Usually, we simply did not exist. There was no future for us ... (We were never the heroes.) And depictions like this were so ubiquitous in the speculative fild that for many years I accepted them without question. Just more dire predictions. The radicalism of "merely" envisioning a future – while American, while black, while female – had not yet become a part of my consciousness. (Butler viii)*

Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* offers a vivid portrayal of the advantages of embracing ecofeminism as a fundamental truth, sheds light on the damage white capitalist patriarchy has inflicted upon the world, and provides a glimpse of what may lie ahead after the long, dark path we have followed due to our indifference to nature. Through Lauren, Butler portrays a world where peace and prosperity emerge from the unity of the people under a woman's guidance and the new vision she embodies. In this way, *Parable of the Sower* evolves into a tale of a world being reconstructed, re imagined, and ultimately healed by an ecofeminist force. She centers her narrative around non-acceptance of male dominated society, emphasizing a planet in dire need of feminine influence. This is explained by Vandana Shiva in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. She states that "at one level, nature is symbolized by the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance" (Shiva 38). In Butler's narrative, the Earth is portrayed not merely as a feminine symbol but also as a source of life and sustenance. However, Butler delivers a clear warning that the Earth has been deprived of care for far too long, necessitating a complete renewal as the only viable path forward.

Butler depicts the journey of Lauren Olamina who grows up in a closed and protective society, yet she witnesses violence against women in and outside



her community. She normalizes force against women as they are used to it. She witnesses the horrific condition of woman outside the world on her journey to the church for baptism, "A woman, young, naked, and fitly stumbled along past us...Maybe she had been raped so much that she was crazy. I'd heard stories of that happening. The boys in our group almost fell off their bikes, staring at her. What wonderful religious thought they would be having for a while (Butler 9). There are so many victims of physical abuse who are forced to suffer due to the destruction of the environment. Lauren criticizes the boys for being unsympathetic even after seeing the plight of the woman. She is just seen as a body without emotion in spite of their religious trip outside the world after a long time.

Lauren criticizing and comparing the boys' vulgar thoughts with religious and exploitation of women is the major theme in the second series *Parable of the Talents*. The president Andrew Steele Jarret who is elected by democracy turns out to be a dictator who forces people to follow Christianity. His law is against Lauren's creative Earthseed philosophy. Earthseed is more like a new religion created by Lauren to unite people together to find a new planet or environment. Her religion completely opposes Jarret's religious principles. Jarret forms a secret team which is unknown to the common people, to capture the people who practise Earthseed or any other religion for that matter. They are taken to secretive place and kept as a prisoner. Lauren is also one among them. All her companions who accepted Earthseed are also captured which includes both men and women. They are tortured. Every women in that prison are sexually exploited every day. They endure physical, mental and sexual violence for many days until some of them die and escape the prison.

The conceptualization of the Earth within the binary framework of gender may be interpreted as an ecofeminist response to the extensive degradation inflicted upon nature by a patriarchal order. If male supremacy obstructs the flourishing of the feminine force whether in relation to women or the perceived femininity of the Earth then female supremacy must

reclaim power from those who perpetuate destruction and repression. This foundational belief among certain eco feminist scholars that the Earth, symbolized as Mother Nature, necessitates female stewardship to thrive is grounded in the conviction that women possess a greater proclivity for nurturing. This inclination stems not only from a presumed natural disposition but also from experiences shaped by their historical suffering. Through such adversity, women are conditioned to nurture, a role culturally assigned and devalued within a patriarchal society that has historically exalted warfare, conquest, and dominance through colonization and destruction.

From the outset of *Parable of the Sower*, we observe how traits labeled as feminine weaknesses are dismissed by a society governed by traditional masculinity. In this harsh, survivalist world, emotion, femininity, and race are all seen as vulnerabilities, and Lauren embodies all three perceived flaws. Her hyperempathy condition, inherited from her drug-addicted female parent, forces her to physically feel the pain of others. Lauren's introduction as a "sharer" centers on her deeply personal experience of this burden. Her ability, seen as a liability, must remain concealed for her safety. However, society does not recognize the strength in such empathy; instead, it stigmatizes sharers like Lauren, perceiving their compassion as a form of weakness or illness.

Lauren functions not only as a hyperempathetic lens through which readers experience the world of *Parable of the Sower* but also as a symbolic representation of Mother Earth, embodying the collective pain and pleasure of a harsh patriarchal system. Lauren's hyperempathy presents a profound vulnerability. She believes that killing a living person will pave way for her own death out of guilt. This condition is depicted as an inherently "female" affliction, regarded as burdensome by both Lauren and the men around her. Lauren herself describes it as a "desperate vulnerability" and speculates that it might be "harder on a man" (Butler 289). Her father, however, dismisses the condition, framing it as something temporary or easily overcome. As Lauren reflects, "He has always pretended, or perhaps believed, that my hyperempathy syndrome was



something I could shake off and forget about” (Butler 7).

Lauren’s hyperempathy contrasts sharply with her brother Keith’s dismissive and mocking attitude. Keith taunts her, exploiting her condition as a joke, embodying a detached masculinity incapable of feeling what she feels. Despite viewing her condition as a burden, Lauren’s empathy extends to others, even to Keith when he is punished by their father. Her actions reflect her sense of responsibility. The social hierarchy in Butler’s world mirrors our own, revealing a society where the balance and harmony between masculine and feminine values has yet to be restored (Kelly 114). More crucially, Butler’s novel paints a world where violence is a form of currency and both material wealth and physical pleasure are commodified.

The devastation of Lauren’s community renders her a refugee. She foresees the perils inherent in a woman journeying alone under such circumstances, saying that “In the night, a woman and three kids might look like a gift basket of food, money, and sex” (Butler 154). But Lauren being aware of facing such a situation in her life, she manages to escape the violent journey on the road. She has setup her own Acorn community with people who share her same thoughts and principles. She draws people’s attention with her new Earthseed philosophy, which primarily focuses for a better world by infusing the attention seeking phrase “God is Change” (Butler 25).

## Conclusion

In a world portrayed so cruelly, Lauren is shown as a leader who unites the people with her teachings. Opposing the brutal dictator ruler Andrew Steele Jarret, Lauren succeeds at the end against all odds. Climate change being the main conflict of the novel, the rivalry between Lauren and the president Jarret can be drawn as a parallel conflict between two leaders (men and women) implementing their contrasting ideas to rule the ravaged world. Jarret is imposing violent power on people to take them under his control. “Jarret preached that woman was to be treasured, honored, and protected, but that for her

own sake, she must be silenced and obey the will of her husband, father, brother, or adult son since they understood the world as she did not (Butler 97)”. On the other hand, the ordinary young girl Lauren without any powerful position is uniting people for the development of the environment under her harmless philosophy. “Even if they don’t like every aspect of Earthseed, I hope they’ll like enough of it to recognize that they’re better off with us than without us. I want them as allies and as members, not just as ‘friends’” (Butler 68). It depicts the feminine approach towards the environment and the men approach to the environment. Her determination, vision and focus on her goal has made her to achieve the dream of uniting people at one principle ‘settling humans in a better world’.

Butler being herself a woman, knows the power of women’s determination and the willpower to change the world. Her vision of the dystopian future, and the knowledge of environmental sustainability reflects in the novel *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. The thought of giving equal importance to the environment and the people can be called as good governance depicts her mastery. She has thrown light on how women see the world and care for the environment also which defines the word ecofeminism.

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