

EXPLORING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN *PARABLE OF THE SOWER*

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Abstract

Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* focuses on the environmental and social concerns faced by the people of contemporary world. In addition to environmental degradation, the author is also concerned about the problems created by social injustice. She establishes a connection between social injustice and environmental disaster. The novel depicts how minorities in America are victimized with environmental degradation; as aptly pointed out by environmental justice critics. The paper attempts to show the novel *Parable of the Sower* as exemplifying environmental justice criticism. It studies the depiction of social injustice and environmental disaster in the novel.

Keywords: social injustice, environmental degradation, environmental disaster.

Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* exposes as well as critiques environmental issues and social disasters which are a threat not only to the United States society but to the entire earth and its inhabitants. Injustices are mainly perpetuated on the minorities and are heightened by these disasters. Using artistic expression, the novelist has also exposed the realities of environmental justice issues.

Robert D. Bullard describes the environmental justice movement as a framework which seeks to prevent environmental threats much before they actually occur. This framework also includes other social movements which aim to do away with harmful practices in areas like health care, waste management, land use etc.

Adamson, Evans and Stein explain this further in *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy*:

“We define environmental justice as the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment. We define the environment, in turn, as the places in which we live, work, play and worship. Environmental justice initiatives specifically attempt to redress the disproportionate incidence of environmental contamination in communities of the poor and/or communities of colour, to secure for those affected the right to live unthreatened by the risks posed by environmental degradation and contamination, and to afford equal access to natural resources that sustain life and culture”.(4)

The above definition helps understand the relation of environmental justice with *Parable of the Sower*. Instead of limiting the idea of ‘environment’ to untouched nature, Lauren extends it to include the community in which she lives. The environment in the novel is unhealthier for some because they do not have an access to the natural resources.

Environmental justice critics maintain that people without enough political or economic power are more prone to experience the impact of environmental disaster. The people in power hoard resources in order to ensure their own survival.

Butler in *Parable of the Sower* imagines the world as drastically changed as a result of no change in interaction between the humans and environment. The novel is particularly relevant to environmental justice critics as it can prevent actual environmental disaster.

The action takes place in Los Angeles, California, in the year 2024. The protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina, a fifteen-year-old girl, lives in a walled community in the suburb of Robledo. She inhabits a chaotic world- a world completely altered by environmental and social disasters and writes about it in the form of journal entries. People have been forced to change their lifestyle; rarely go out to work and do not send the children to school. They go out in groups and travel armed. Had they not been so vigilant, they would have endangered their lives. Lauren describes: "I think if there were only one of us, or if they couldn't see our guns, they might try to pull us down and steal our bikes, our clothes, our shoes, whatever. Then what? Rape? Murder? (*Sower* 10).

Her experience and observation are a reason of Lauren's fears.. She says, "My stepmother says she and my father stop to help an injured woman once, and the guys who had injured her jumped out from a wall and almost killed them "(*Sower* 10). Rotting corpses with empty eyes and sad, deformed faces of people beaten mercilessly are an evidence of violence all around her.

The fact that Lauren is an African- American, her youth and her middle class status contribute to her understanding of the situation around. Had she been rich, she wouldn't have been able to experience the atrocities. If she were poor, she would be accustomed to the worst her society offered.

Poverty in the novel is synonyms with illiteracy. An illiterate Lauren would have no knowledge about history, nor an understanding of the current problems and situation. Her analysis of the dominant ideologies imbues the novel with power. She is able to feel everything so deeply because of her "hyperempathy syndrome", a psychological disorder which is an outcome of an excessive use of drugs by her mother in pregnancy.

Lauren understands and analyses the rampant social inequalities in a world challenged by disasters; be it social or environmental. This understanding is not just confined to the backdrop of the text but can be reasoned out as the ongoing struggles of environmental justice activists and social activists.

In her journal, Lauren describes the world around her making it clear that American society's deterioration is a result of global warming and intense climate change. The enormity of the environmental problem is clear from the manner in which Lauren describes the rainstorm. It is the first they have witnessed in six years. She writes, "the barrels and things we put out are full or filling. Good, clean, free water from the sky. If only it came more often" (*Sower* 48). There is a scarcity of water and people spend most of their money to buy water and eatables. Gasoline and electricity have become luxuries and so are used sparingly. Lauren writes, "Dad says water now costs several times as much as gasoline" (*Sower* 18). Environmental justice critics raise frequent concerns about water. The idea that the powerful can control and profit from water is distressing in the novel. Commercialization of water supply by the people determines life span of the masses. Lauren's middle class status lends her a special privilege for she is able to have a safe life unlike the less fortunate who live in "neighborhoods so poor that there was were made up of unlimited rocks, chunks of concrete, and trash;" in "pitiful, unwalled residential areas[. in which]. A lot of houses were trashed-burned, vandalized ,infected with drinks or druggies or squatted in by homeless families with their filthy, gaunt, half- naked children"(*Sower* 9-10). In another entry, Lauren writes, "they often have things wrong with them. They cut off each other's ears, arms,

legs...They carry untreated diseases and festering bones. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores. They don't get enough to eat so they are malnourished- or they eat bad food and poison themselves”(Sower 10-11). Though she knows such men to be dangerous dangerous, she sympathizes with them.

She is also not oblivious of the wrong doings of the rich who indulge in profiteering business on the expense of the less fortunate. They pay them meager sums for labour, provide only “shacky little dependencies” as houses and do not even provide basic amenities required for survival.(Sower 9).Even the government implements laws that “suspend ‘overly restrictive’ minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws for those employers willing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board”(Sower 27). This political rhetoric cannot fool Lauren and she asks, “Will it be legal to poison, mutilate, or infect people- as long as you provide them with food, water and space to die?”(Sower 27).

Lauren knows that power and politics is behind this ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor; a gap increasing in the times of environmental disaster. The plight of the poor cannot be accepted as fair or inevitable.

Another injustice which Lauren experiences midst the dire social and environmental crisis is gender inequality. Her experience of this starts with the assumption her society has that to be successful girls need to get married and have babies. She sees the oppressed women and writes, “Some middle class men prove they are men by having a lot of wives[...]Some upper class men prove they are men by having one wife and a lot of beautiful, disposable young servant girls. Nasty. When the girls get pregnant, if their rich employers won't protect them, the employers' wives throw them out to starve” (Sower 37).

This, according to her is an example of sexual slavery and Zahra Moss, a woman in the community is an example of this. Sold to Richard, her future husband, at the age of fifteen; Zahra is a victim of gender oppression in the society. The truth that existence outside the community is all the more difficult is not lost on Lauren. A girl's future outside is bleak. She knows that, “I could get killed as soon as I leave here. I could starve. The cops could pick me up. Dogs could get me. I could catch a disease. Anything could happen to me; I have thought about it. I haven't named half the bad possibilities” (Sower 14).All this because of her gender. For this reason she decides to travel with Zahra Moss and Harry Balter, disguised as a man.

On her journey she encounters a wide variety of people and learns about the resurgence of slavery from Travis, an African American man, his wife Natividad and their son Domingo who is six month old. They managed to escape from their masters clutches with the help of their mistress. Lauren understands their situation and writes about them sympathetically in her journal, “How many other people were less lucky- unable to escape the master's attention or gain the mistress's sympathies? How far did masters and mistresses go these days toward putting less than submissive servants in their places?”(Sower 219)

An answer to this rhetorical question is provided by Emery Solis and her daughter Tori, who is nine. Emery, her husband and three children could never leave their employer because their wages were never enough to pay the bills. Her husband died but they could not leave; rather kept on working harder than ever to pay the debt. Her sons were taken away and when they threatened to take her daughter away, Emery ran from there with her daughter.

From this story, Lauren infers that the social injustice on the basis of gender, race and class is in fact reinstating slavery. Slavery in modern times would include everyone; irrespective of

their race and colour. The world will have debt slaves; people who will bring this condition on themselves by incurring debt.

Environmental justice activists analyse just as Lauren analyses her society. In this status quo, any form of different behaviour is seen as a reason to oppress. Environmental justice activists are aware of the fact that if drastic changes are not made in our treatment of Earth and the oppressed social groups, their plight will keep worsening in the wake of further environmental deterioration. Lauren shows a connection between environmental justice problems of the present times and the problems of her own world. According to Madhu Dubey, “The dystopia presented in *Parable of the Sower* is so closely extrapolated from current trends, as Stephen Potts observes,[...] that it produces a shock of familiarity rather than estrangement”(106).

The novel helps us empathize with Lauren’s situation, to feel the experiences the way she feels them .Due to her hyperempathy she experiences the pain of others and so do we. It can easily be said that *Parable of the Sower* presents an exact picture of the people who are doubly burdened- by social injustice and environmental degradation. It is thus, a powerful work of environment justice literature.

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