



Understanding Diaspora through Dystopia: A Study of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Talents*

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Abstract

Octavia E. Butler's writings are known for presenting a unique perspective on the human civilisation in all its beauty and limitations. Most of these works belong to the science fiction genre and the stories are set in a futuristic world while including the narratives of the African American experiences and imperfect societies. Her critically acclaimed *Earthseed* series which include two books, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, have become seminal works in her oeuvre. These books follow the journey of the protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina and her family as they struggle to stay alive and protect their loved ones in a post-apocalyptic America. This paper attempts to observe the book *Parable of the Talents* as a narrative of the diaspora. The story follows the trials of the Olamina family as they are forced to leave their homes but manage to carve a semblance of a community to help them retain their beliefs and their humanity. Many friends and relatives are lost to them; some perish while

some end up meeting each other after a long time and having been much changed. Change is the only constant in life according to Lauren and this fact applies the most to the diaspora, a people who have to strive against all odds to make a new home in a foreign and often unforgiving land.

Keywords: diaspora, imperfect society, family, change, identity.

The study of the diaspora and the effects of migration or movement on the diaspora has been a topic of increasing interest in the current literary climate. An article, *Diasporic Literature---An Overview*, defines Diaspora as the spreading of a group of people from their native country to another foreign land. The loss of one's roots and the family home are the most prominent topics of discussion in these studies, another one being the identity crisis caused by such a situation. Both of these aspects can be seen in Octavia E. Butler's novel *Parable of the Talents*. This book is the sequel to the critically acclaimed *Parable of the Sower* which follows the protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina as she tries to create an authentic and meaningful life for herself in a post-apocalyptic world. Lauren invents a new belief system she names "Earthseed" which she hopes can help the people in her dystopian society. According to the book *A Glossary of Literary Terms*:

"The term dystopia ("bad place") has come to be applied to works of fiction, including science fiction, that represent a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination." (Abrams and Harpham 414)

While *Parable of the Sower* is narrated by Lauren herself, *Parable of the Talents* is narrated partially by her daughter Asha. In the first book Lauren managed to form a safe haven for her growing Earthseed community, but the second book chronicles the loss of this home, her people and her child. Earthseed are a small and peaceful group but they seem like a threat to the Christian Americans, a dominating and powerful sect which was becoming increasingly violent towards anyone who refused to follow their edicts.

Lauren's small family is vulnerable and ends up being attacked and torn apart, its members either killed or imprisoned, including herself. One such displaced member is her infant daughter Larkin, who can be seen as an epitome of a diaspora who has lost all connection and memory of their roots. She was taken away and given to a Christian American family so she could be raised as a model citizen and not a "heathen" like her mother. As Larkin is spirited away from her family home, her mother taken prisoner and her father killed in the violent attack

by the religious law enforcement, she is ripped apart from her heritage and origins. Even her identity is erased as her name is changed to Asha and she is adopted by an orthodox couple to be brought up in their “righteous community”.

Growing up with her adoptive parents was not a happy experience for Asha, she had been told that she was born of non-religious parents and she remained unloved by her new ones. This situation leads to her making up an imaginary family in her mind; a devoted mother who lives by the traditional Christian codes and loves her unconditionally. Asha’s experiences in her childhood leaves her unsatisfied by the adoptive parents she was given to and as an adult she begins her journey to find her roots, her real mother. “In order for me to understand who I am, I must begin to understand who she was.” (Butler, *Talents 2*) The search ends up with her meeting her uncle, Marc, her mother’s brother who eventually becomes her guardian. Marc did not condone Lauren’s creation of Earthseed, so he holds back the knowledge of this part of Asha’s past from her. Marc too has lost his childhood home and in Asha he sees a bit of what had been taken from him.

Asha does get to meet her real mother much later in life, by this time Lauren’s Earthseed community has grown to become an incredibly powerful force in the country. They finance most of the technological advancements and their space exploration program is their most ambitious project. The meeting between Lauren and Asha however, does not end up to be a happy one. Due to Asha’s continued adherence to the Christian American beliefs, she has been conditioned to view Earthseed and Lauren as a disruptive element in the society. Furthermore, Lauren is nothing like the imaginary mother of Asha’s childhood fantasies. This revelation is jarring to Asha and she cannot trace her way back to her mother.

Lauren welcomes her long lost daughter wholeheartedly but it is Asha who cannot get accustomed to the idea of her origins. It is painful for Lauren too as she recounts her hopes as a young mother who wanted to raise her child in the community that she created, with the values that she deemed relevant. The distance between the mother and the daughter cannot be reconciled even till the end of the story as Asha does not feel any affinity to Earthseed. She also feels betrayed and unloved by Lauren as according to her, Lauren chose Earthseed over her child, and that she did not try hard enough to find Asha when she could. This sense of abandonment felt by Asha leads her to refuse to acknowledge her connection with Lauren publicly. She does not wish to be part of Lauren’s community no matter how much Lauren tries to be welcoming and accepting of her child.

The book is narrated by Asha but it also contains bits of Lauren’s personal diary in which she has written accounts of her journey of creating and establishing a community that was based on her Earthseed ideals. It also follows her trials as she spent years searching for her daughter after escaping her captors. It is evident from these accounts that she did all that she could to find Asha again. But Asha had been a baby when she was stolen, her records were destroyed and this made finding her almost impossible. Lauren’s journals provide a different, more radical direction she took as a diaspora. The goal of her life had been to create a better future for herself and her people, and to accomplish this, she did not hesitate to leave her birth place behind. In *Parable of the Sower*, as a teenager, she had been planning to leave home as she had no intention to live under her father’s shadow, who was a pastor. Earthseed had already been born in her mind by this time as she found the rigid teachings of her father’s church limiting and unsatisfactory. Asha recounts about Lauren as her being always looking outward into the world. “When my mother was a child, protected and imprisoned by the walls of her neighborhood, she dreamed of the stars.” (Butler, *Talents* 45).

As seen in *Parable of the Sower*, the basic idea behind Lauren’s Earthseed was:

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

Is Change.

God is Change.

(Butler, *Sower* 3)

Earthseed was Lauren’s future and she willingly embraced change and put roots in a foreign land so that it may grow into fruition.

In *Parable of the Talents* Lauren has succeeded in creating a community that she had dreamt of. In the initial part of the book, she is shown to be struggling with a handful of people who had decided to follow her and Earthseed. This was the first settlement she created on her new husband’s land which they named Acorn. To begin a new life in a new land is the prominent aim of a diaspora and in this case, this was literally the characters’

struggle. Fresh, new roots are delicate and vulnerable, like Lauren's little daughter had been. Another turning point came in Lauren's life when this young community was attacked by the violent religious extremists who viewed Lauren and her new family as dangerous deviants. Another home was lost to her and many more family members killed or scattered, and the survivors had to fend for a new safe haven. But through this trial as well, Lauren emerged victorious as she managed to survive and recreate Earthseed with a different group of followers. By the end of the book, Lauren is shown in her old age, surrounded by the people whom she had formed connections with all through her long life. Coming to the end of her days, she saw her dream of finding a new home for humanity fulfilled as she sees the space shuttles leave for distant planets yet to be discovered.

“We can go on building and destroying until we either destroy ourselves or destroy the ability of our world to sustain us. Or we can make something more of ourselves. We can grow up. We can leave the nest.” (Butler, *Talents* 342)

Another important character who embarked on the journey of a diaspora is Marc, Lauren's younger brother. Marc had been separated from her in *The Parable of the Sower*, when their childhood home was burned down by vandals. For a long time, Lauren had believed him to be dead but in *Parable of the Talents*, she finds him to be alive. Marc's journey to the outside world had not been as favorable as Lauren's. He had been captured by human traffickers and been forced onto slavery and prostitution. His refusal to follow their orders would lead to his torture or death. Upon his reunion with Lauren, Marc is shocked by her newfound community and her Earthseed teachings. He does not agree with the messages she wants to spread and openly contradicts her. Marc has no interest in looking for a new way of life, he wants to remain true to their origins and their father's beliefs. Thus, Marc is a character who is driven by nostalgia. His birth place has a powerful hold on him and the mistreatment he received outside his home has strengthened his idea that to live as they did before is the only correct path. Furthermore, he finds comfort in teaching Christianity as they had learned from their father. This act of returning to the “good old days” by becoming a pastor himself gives him a sense of safety, and unlike Lauren who proposes the idea of adapting to the changing conditions, Marc stands firm in his resolve to live again as they had been taught in their childhood.

Marc and Lauren's ideological clashes become extreme with time and eventually they part ways again. After the loss of Acorn and her daughter, when Lauren comes begging for his help to find her daughter, Marc

refuses to give any aid. He also refuses to believe Lauren when she claims it was the “Good” Christian Americans whom he associated with now, who killed her friends and stole her child. Marc’s adherence to not seeing the error of his own people shows his refusal to see the wrongs of the old ideologies. He chose to keep living in ignorance of the violence perpetrated by his sect on the more vulnerable people like Lauren and the people living in Acorn, as it went against his idyllic view of the perfect past. He commits further crimes against his sister as he holds back the information of her daughter from her. Marc meets Asha when she joined his church and upon realizing who she was as she resembled Lauren in appearance, he extends all the help he can to his niece, except the identity of her mother. Marc’s deliberate withholding of knowledge from the mother and daughter is again an act of his reclaiming what he had lost. Since Lauren refused to bend to his will, he tries and succeeds in bringing Asha to his side. Asha, to him, represented a memory of a sister he had once loved and his selfishness and possessiveness over both these women come from his need to stay forever in the security of his origins, even though those roots have been rendered lifeless long ago.

Octavia E. Butler’s works have acquired a prominent place in the field of the African American narrative and experiences, but *Parable of the Talents* can be viewed through the lens of the diaspora of any community. The path to find one’s own identity, a new home or coming to terms with the extermination of a once beloved past is the struggle of the diaspora of any community or country. The remarkable quality of Butler’s storytelling is that she manages to make the unique experience of every diaspora sympathetic. While Lauren remains the protagonist of the story, characters like Asha and Marc are given the benefit of the doubt for their choices, even if their choices brought immeasurable pain to their loved ones and at times even themselves. Aside from anything else, the narrative of a diaspora is that of hope and its triumph against impossible odds and through these characters, Butler has managed to present a familial saga of varying journeys, all of them leading towards a new life.

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