

Articulation of Environmental Issues in Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower

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Abstract

Today science and technology has casted its drastic impact on every sphere of human life and made it luxurious but it has also induced enormous intimidating dangers for human civilization. Though environmental issues were thought to be trivial and unimportant yesterday, but they have loomed as a rigorous debate today in literary realms. The impetus of expeditiously growing industrialization and its subsequent hazardous effects on human beings foists literary think tanks to tackle this issue meticulously. Ecological scientists anticipate that if current annihilating trends and strategies of environmental disaster are not dealt assiduously, sooner or later, the present society will be in horrible trouble. Dystopian fiction acts as a gruesome reminder in this regard as it arouses environmental issues and its detrimental effects on human being in futuristic perspective.

Keywords: Environment, Annihilation, Religion, Pollution, Human Civilization.

Life is a web of interconnected concepts and phenomena rather than a hierarchy of divine creation. Hence, human life cannot be separated from non-human nature as human existence and subsistence exclusively depends on natural survival. Human beings abide in the vast kingdom of nature and have an incessant interaction with it at every phase and era of life. From the primitive stage of man, humans were living in congruous with nature, which in turn profusely showered its altruistic trait on human civilization. But with the passage of time man developed in intellectual and innovative realms and loomed as supreme creature with his innate intelligence and novel discoveries. However, he still remained dependent on nature for his progress and prosperity. So, man began to harness nature and its element to dominate it, and used it according to his malevolent will. To be rational means to harness the natural passions was the unique belief that prevailed during the Enlightenment period, started from Francis Bacon to John Locke in late eighteenth century. This is also the era when the framework of modern science came into being and everything was started to analyse through the scientific lens. It was the time when rationality overpowers other thoughts and beliefs and exploitation of nature transpired. After the second world war the extermination of mass population by atomic bombs and growing extremism cause the menacing belief in the human thought that the way human beings are using technological innovations has brought the all living organisms including mankind on the brink of apocalypse.

America being a supreme power of the world has transcended in the scientific and technological realms. Most often it discovers and invents incredible things by genetic engineering, human cloning, and mechanical engineering to generate most deadly and sophisticated weapons to maintain its dominance over the world. There are profound concerns that this interplay of discoveries and inventions has created a race of procuring as well as manufacturing deadly accuracy missiles and other artillery in the world. Additionally, expeditiously growing industrialisation has aggravated environment situation generally in the whole world particularly in America. There is severe entropy in American intellectual spheres and its adjoining countries about environmental destruction and its detrimental effects on future generation. So, an attempt is made to depict these issues in literary texts to create universal consciousness of ecological disaster in future through dystopian science fictions. According to M.H. Abrams:

The term dystopia ("bad place") has recently 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. (321)

Almost analogical tendencies are manifested by Octavia E Butler, an established first female Afro-American science fiction writer, in *Parable of the Sower* (1993). *Parable of the sower* is a dystopian science fiction with futuristic settings as it commences on 20 July, 2024 and ends on 10 Oct., 2027. It portrays a society where human beings as well as human values are trampled after environmental breakdown. Butler posits that human beings are destroying their life by devastating nature. In an interview with Randall Kenan, Butler vehemently criticises present society and states that "the greenhouse effect has intensified and there has been a certain amount of starvation and agricultural displacement. There are real problems. Some of our prime agricultural land won't be able to produce the crops that it's been producing.... These are big problems" (Kenan 502). In another interview with *Essence Magazine*, Butler says, "All she did was look around at the problems we're neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters" (qtd. in Vargas). Some issues, like water pollution which seem trivial and inconsequential today, are dealt so painstakingly that the importance of water, in the future, as a life determining factor is demonstrated.

The ecological disasters, anarchy and social crisis are on full bloom, when we are introduced with the protagonist Lauren Olamina who is celebrating her fifteenth birthday. We are told that there is hell outside her gated community. In fact, Lauren is living in a walled community beset by thieves, drug addicts, desperate and crazy people who often sneaked into the community and steal whatever they can, and kill those people who attempt to put obstruction in their way. Talking about the outside milieu she mentions “(it is) risky going outside where things are so dangerous and crazy” (Butler 7). In case of exigency to go outside, they go armed and in groups. Once when they had to go to church she says, “All adults were armed. That’s the rule. Go out in a bunch, and go armed” (8). Lauren recounts what might happen if they were not vigilant: “I think if there were only one or two of us, or if they could not see our guns, they might try to pull us down and steal our bikes, our clothes, our shoes whatever. Then what? Rape? Murder? (10). And it is not mere her hallucination, she narrates that once “my stepmother ... and my father stopped to help an injured women, and the guys who had injured her jumped out from behind a wall and almost kill them” (10). In addition, her heart fills with the feeling of despair and disgust when she sees rotten carcasses here and there.

Parable of the Sower depicts a society where barbarism, anarchy, chaos and bloodshed have become widespread because of environmental disaster. Due to global warming and famines, there is scarcity of basic necessities of life like water and food. In such a society food is considered as gold and water as money. Water has been commercialised and its price has escalated several times more than gasoline; hence becomes unaffordable for common people. As Lauren narrates, “Dad says water now costs several times as much as gasoline” (18). Even the water sold at overcharged rates is not safe to drink. It contains enormous contaminations. Taking a serious note of water pollution and its detrimental effect on human beings Lauren says:

Anything you buy from a water peddler on the freeway ought to be boiled, and still might not be safe. Boiling kills disease organisms, but may do nothing to get rid of chemical residue--- fuel, pesticides, herbicides, whatever has been in the bottles that peddlers use. The fact that most peddlers cannot read makes the situation worse. They sometimes poison themselves. (201)

So, people become desperate and crazy resorted to drugs and theft to survive. Consequently, there is civil war in the country. People are killing one another and steal each other’s belongings to buy water and food even some of them have changed into cannibals. At another place describing the preciousness of water Lauren states: “Water stations are dangerous places. People going in have money. People coming out have water, which is as good as money. Beggars and thieves hung around such places” (201). All these references conspicuously demonstrate the environmental degradation and its subsequent vitriolic effects on mankind. This environmental devastation also triggers other attendant issues like scarcity of food as Lauren avers: “Food is gold these days...” and any person who has a lot of food to sell can earn a huge amount from it (320). Though, environmental devastation wreaks its impinge on everyone but the poor and marginalised people are being affected disproportionately. Talking about the plight of these people she says:

They often have things wrong with them. They cut off each other’s ears, arms; legs....They carry untreated diseases and festering wounds. 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’re malnourished—or they eat bad food and poison themselves (10-11).

In Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* it is food and water that are the determining factors of the survival. So, environmental spoliation and its subsequent perilous effects on human beings are demonstrated by Butler in its culmination in *Parable of the Sower*. Ecological scientists are cautioning that due to global warming glaciers are melting swiftly that can flood the coastal areas throughout the world and wipe out millions of people dwelling in these areas. Though, today there is abundance of water around us but it is not imbibable due to water pollution. It is estimates that “25 million deaths a year” are due to water-related illnesses and “15 million children die every year before they are five; half of them could be saved if they had access to safe drinking water” (The World’s 49). So, water pollution which was an insignificant issue yesterday has become heated debate today in literary spheres.

Lauren, the protagonist of the novel, is monitoring the situation intimately. She knows that her society is sick and it needs a new soul to recuperate it. She is a literate girl invested with the knowledge of religion, philosophy and history. She is disillusioned by the Christian faith as it doesn’t proffer any felicitous solution to the problems prevalent in the society. It merely teaches people to do lip service rather than to galvanise them to take action because Lauren believes that “Belief initiates and guides action or does nothing” (46). After the vandalisation of her community and assassination of her whole family by drug addicts and thieves, Lauren embarks her voyage to the north to lay down the foundation of a new religion called Earthseed that spurs people to take action and bring change. For Lauren God is change. She posits that God will not himself come down on the surface of the earth to change unavoidable circumstances. It is the people who should make nerve to take action. Hence, Earthseed is a religion of action which refutes church for its passive role and the concept of God in Earthseed is not any supernatural being but change. The incentive behind it is that people should make efforts to alter any unfavourable condition into favourable one to consider it a divine decree. Talking about religious

belief and it's impinge on our body Foucault argues that "the religious body is shaped by, and shapes, belief in a non-binary social operation.... by locating theological belief in the body the social organization of religion becomes more directly a manifestation of theology; theological ideas cover the surface of the body" (Carrette 112-13). Consequently, initially this new doctrine is not approved by people as it goes against their ingrained notion. So, there are discussions, debates and dialectical arguments about this new thought. When she is asked by her group-mates that "Why personify change by calling it God? Since change is just an idea, why not call it that? Just say change is important" (221). Responding to their question Lauren says, "Because after a while, it would not be important! People forget ideas. They are more likely to remember God—especially when they are scared or desperate" (221). Earthseed is a religion that effectuates its believers with the responsibility to take action to construct a better world. It is in fact a reformation against Christianity that has lost its power to stimulate people to bring transformation in the society. It is a religion that occludes the annihilation of the earth and human progeny, and conflates them with love, respect, brotherhood and care. Thus, eventually people espoused this new religion because of its feasibility and solutions that it was rendering to their problems.

While concluding it can be said that by underestimating environment pollution as trivial and inconsequential issue would be an inexcusable blunder as it jeopardises the whole human progeny. The indiscriminate use of pesticides, insecticides and herbicides are inducing innumerable diseases like asthma, autism, learning disabilities, birth defects and sterility in human beings. Some of the organic compounds like DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) have persistent as well as accumulative property which has proved fatal for human health Medical Science has proved that its existence in human body can cause diabetes, breast cancer, headache and many other psychological disorders. Furthermore, Butler through her insightful vision demonstrates that religion can also act as a tool for the welfare and betterment of the society. She transcends herself from the traditional ideas of religion which bound people to stereotype thoughts and practices. She creates an innovative idea of planting a tree on the name of deceased one instead of putting the stones on the graves which supersedes the conventional practice prevalent in the society. She posits that "I would like to give them grove of oak tree.... Trees are better than stones—life commemorating life" (326). Actually Butler wants to convey this message to the whole world that instead of putting grave-stone on grave, if people plant a tree on the name of deceased, it can help to mitigate environmental pollution to a great extent, because every year millions of people die, and every year millions of plants can be planted to save the world from environmental disaster.

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