The style and techniques of the select novels of Octavia E. Butler: A critical study

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ABSTRACT

The present study tries to establish the role of Octavia Butler in the genre of science fiction. Slavery was the most often recurring theme of her fiction. Science fiction gave her literary freedom to discuss the matters which she thought to be important. The study analyses how Butler handles the genre of science fiction in her own way and examines how Butler was attracted to the genre and how she made use of the infinite possibilities of the same. Four novels of Butler, Wild Seed, Kindred, Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents were taken for the critical assessment. Butler used effectively dystopia, a sub–genre of science fiction, to express her ideas of the future. Normally dystopias tell about a frightening future. Butler’s dystopian novels are different in one way from the dystopian works of other writers as she tries to bring in a ray of hope in her dystopian works. In the midst of a very frightening atmosphere, there are still seeds of hope in her novels and this approach makes her works very unique.

Through Wild Seed, a black science fiction that mirrors Africa’s past and present; Butler tries to present the idea of slavery as an alien abduction. In Kindred Butler vibrantly reminds how the
slave system both physically assaulted blacks and sensitively deformed whites. Butler’s dystopian novels Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents clearly depict the author’s idea of a dystopian world.

**Key words:** Wild Seed, Kindred, Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents, Dystopia, Afro American science fiction

**INTRODUCTION**

Octavia Butler is the first African American woman writer to gain popularity and significant commendation as a major science fiction writer. She wrote twelve dazzling novels and all of them are science fiction.

Butler prefers to write in a simple style using uncomplicated language and fine characterization. She believed that the reader should understand the message of the writer and Butler conveys her message vibrantly to her readers. One can see the traces of the intertextual theory in her writings, especially in Kindred 5, which can be called as a modern slave narrative; the reader is constantly reminded of many slave narratives of the olden times. Critics search for realism and melodrama in the Butler’s works, but Butler offers them horror, science fiction and fantasy. For her, the world of science fiction has always provided sanctuary and salvation.

Butler used science fiction to discuss any issues related to the African American community by the smart combination of utopia and dystopia and lead the way in bringing black people into the imagined future, the most common focus of science fiction. Butler voices out the inequalities and injustices existing in our society and succeeds in conveying significant and relevant messages through her novels.

The two noteworthy elements in Butler's work that sets her apart from other writers are the creation of supernatural intelligent black women characters who cross time & space and the ability to present incredible black diasporic storylines while contradicting the tenants of realism.

Butler was attracted to the genre of dystopian science fiction since it gave her freedom as a writer. She believed in feminism and considered that women should be given their due share of liberty. The present study includes four science fiction novels of Butler (Wild Seed, Kindred, Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents) for critical analysis.
THE STUDY OUTCOMES

Butler’s naturalistic, dystopian characters have overstressed powers and they survive through stories that amplify and alternate the continuous pain of Earth’s underprivileged loads. Wild Seed 4 tells the story of two immortals, Doro and Anyanwu. The novel is a combination of fantasy, horror and historical fiction. Biology plays a vital role in the novel. Like all her novels, the theme of slavery also has an important role in the novel. Wild Seed employs the convention of science fiction to explore the depths of human nature. The novel is an expressively perspective personality study and a thoughtful contemplation on clout and craving. Butler’s dreamy picture takes in such divisive topics such as, race, slavery, reproduction and gender. Wild Seed is a prequel in Butler’s Patternist series and covers a range of topics related to Black Women’s identities like US slavery, racism, sexism, physical trauma of women, reproduction etc.

Kindred 5 can be called as a historical science fiction, is the most popular novel of Butler. It is a novel which fits into many mythical functions. Butler employs the time travel technique of science fiction in it and slavery is the most important theme of this novel. It can be read like a travelogue. Butler’s heroine is Dana, a modern African woman who is being transported to the ante-bellum South to save her ancestor Rufus. Butler uses the first person narrative in the novel which gives the reader the first hand experience of being a slave. In this novel, Dana is transported to 1815 along with her husband Kevin, a white man. While they both fall easily into concubinage, the task they must take for granted to stay alive. The ease with which they fall into these roles brings about a greater perception of their civilization. But through this relationship Butler leaves a ray of hope to her readers. Many powerful themes like, sexual desire, Violence, race, literacy, language, law and education are merges radiantly into this gripping story by Butler. The story is colonized with well-developed characters with multifaceted organized relationships. The book resembles Toni Morrison’s Beloved 12 which also revisits the era of slavery. Butler’s ingenious use of a classic science fiction device (time travel) sets the book apart from all other literary explorations of slavery.

Using the techniques of science fiction, Butler in Kindred twists in an astonishingly distinctive and inventive way with some of the basics of slavery. By transporting a modern day African American woman into slavery, Butler clearly brings to the life of slaves with hardship tolerance. Butler’s heroines Dana and Anyanwu in these two novels are very powerful, strong willed women, can able to face any obstacles. We have no fiction quite like Kindred in joining so terrible an unforeseen event
to the norms of the paranormal Kindred is also rare in its denial of a unidirectional concept of time and the predictability of progress.

The vocabulary that Butler uses is very unique and does an excellent job of letting the reader feel Danas’ confusion as she travels back and forth through time. Apart from Butler’s explicit writing, it is very interesting when the reader follows Dana back in the time to the 1800s and the characters’ speeches are a resemblance of old Southern English.

Butler’s dystopian novels Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents are set in the near future, Los Angeles. Lauren Olamina, who is the heroine of the novel, Parable of the Sower which is written in the form of a memoir. Lauren lives in a nightmarish world. Lauren loses her family and she faces the world outside for survival. She is in a journey and gets companions on her way. She is a very optimistic character who tries to install seeds of hope in her companions. The novel is about how Lauren creates a new religion Earthseed. Jerry Philips noted, Lauren’s success in her conflicts is possible because she recognizes that one can overtake the hurdles only by working through the challenges of the world.

Parable of the Talents is a continuation to Parable of the Sower. It is told by Lauren’s daughter, Larkin who was taken away from Lauren as an infant. Both the novels portray the future in a very disappointing way, which is the characteristic feature of dystopian fiction. Even though the novels are dystopian in outlook, Butler gives a hope for a better future or utopian idea through Lauren’s Earthseed community.

Set in a dystopian future, Parable of the Sower centres on a young woman who possess what Butler named as 'hyper empathy' present in the leftovers of a gated community in Los Angeles in which the civil society close to crumble to resource insufficiency and famine. She voyages through north with survivors and attempts to start a community and religion called Earthseed when her home is destroyed and her relatives murdered. The dystopian future of United States with walled cities, disease, blaze and insanity are narrated well in Parables of the sower. The fear of crime, illiteracy, drug addiction, and a rising gap between rich and poor which were apparent in the late 1980s and early 1990s American life are exaggerated in her novel. The after effects of global warming are also a subject matter in the novel.

Both the novels, Parable of the Talents and Parable of the Sower have deep spiritual overtones. The letters of these novels are taken from Bible. Butler’s imagination is tremendous and she has an interesting style of writing. Butler was able to handle all sorts of themes in her novels and uses her
tales to teach readers, the important lessons about life, human history and about the many pitfalls that seem to ensnare the human species continuously. Butler’s troubling dystopia, written in the form of Laurens’ memoir entries, is at once an adventure story and a challenging exploration of some pessimistic trends in American society. Madhu Dubey writes9 that the dystopia presented in the Parable of the Sower is a close extrapolation of current trends, that it produces an alarming familiarity rather than rupture.

McCarthy's novel The Road10 is often compared with the Parable of the Sower. Butler’s novel manages to weave a thread of hope, whereas the other to travel is totally bleak. The parable of the Sower is a cross between Faulkner’s Grapes of Wrath and Susanne Collins’ Hunger Games. Even many critics compare Parable of Sower to Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake13 as both the novels concerned about dystopias rooted by global warming and involved appraisals of private endeavor.

Dystopian fiction is regularly classified broadly as science fiction and a sub-genre of speculative fiction because dystopian fictions are frequently set in a future projected virtual time and space involving technological novelties. The results of the innovations of advanced technology are controlled completely by the powered groups in society, while the subjugated population is limited to technology in dystopian literature. The standard of living among the lower and middle classes is generally poorer than in contemporary society so as to accentuate the de-generation of society.

Dystopian literature has been demonstrated often as fiction that presents a negative scrutiny of the hope of society and mankind. Some common themes found in dystopian fiction included mastery of nature to the point that it becomes infertile, or turns against humankind; technological advances that enslave humans or regiment their lives; The process of dehumanization articulated by the compulsory division of communities into castes or groups with out-and-out functions, and a forced amnesia leads to easier manipulation of mankind sensitively. As per detractors, quite a few of the severe chronological circumstances that took place during the 20th century have been encouraging to the flourishing of dystopian fiction. The distinctive characteristics of dystopian fiction include the dialogue regarding the role of independence, the value of individual resistance to tyranny, and transformation of people's lives by the technology power.

In fact the science fiction is a literary genre which has given infinite literary freedom especially to the black writers. This literary genre provided them the utmost freedom to voice their issues. Butler was free to bounce back and forth between African-American topics and topics affecting the American of all races. Butler used her writing to discuss not only issues of race, but broadens her topics to include class and politics.
Butler used dystopia efficiently to express her ideas of a frightening future in all her novels. Butler’s dystopian novels are different in one way from the dystopian works of other writers as she tries to bring in a ray of hope in all her works. They are a combination of utopia and dystopia. In the midst of the narration, there exists a very frightening atmosphere; still the seeds of hope at the same time. This outfit makes her works so distinctive from other writers. She crams her novels with violent episodes not to shock but to bring to life the omnipresent terror that African American lived within the 1800s.

CONCLUSION

Dystopia is a sub-genre of science fiction and an emerging new branch of literature. Several authors are attracted to this particular genre. The present study examines how Butler presents a frightening future in her dystopian fictions.

Huxley’s Brave New World 14, Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty Four 16, Wells ’Time machine’11 and Zamyatyn ’we’15 are regarded as some of the major works of twentieth century dystopian literature. It has been acknowledged that several modern dystopian writers like Margaret Atwood, Chinua Achebe, Ursula K. Leguin, Isaac Asimov, Anthony Burgess, Kurt Vonnegut and Ray Bradbury have influenced on the writings of Butler.

Dystopian literature addresses the most horrific systems of society. It also broadens the readers' scope of awareness, accepted values and principles. However, though so much literature is based on these thematic questions and solution, the itinerary of real humanity has not changed. This calls into question the role of literature within people. Perhaps literature is considered just an entertainment. The society is unresponsive to the driving force of the dystopian sort of writers. The popularity of dystopian literature can be interpreted in another way also. This shows that people are eager to read these novels and learn from dystopian fiction.

In Butler's novels the race is not the entire focus even though her heroes turn out to be black, but she utilized life sciences to answer what makes us alike and what makes us different among human beings. Difference, adaptability, change, and survival are thematic threads connecting Butler's books as tightly as a pattern. One can see Butler as an incomparable writer, a strong black voice in helping to build a black presence in science fiction, and as a woman determined to weave from spangled fabric new patterns of her own design.
Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower and Earthseed are not according utopias, but understand human nature’s needs to be complex and changing. The white characters believe it is their right and even their duty, to inflict bodily harm and they are coarsened as a result of this belief. The black characters know that any spark of rebelliousness, independence or cleverness may be rewarded with a whipping or worse. Butler argues that violence warps victim and perpetrator alike.

Octavia Butler is considered as the most prominent science fiction writer of her times. She was attracted to the dystopian genre since it gave her freedom as a writer. She believed in feminism and always considered that women should be given their due share of freedom. Butler presents the female as body, healer, savior, settler, nurturer, victim, mother, liberator, rebel, builder, defendant, noble and inherently virtuous. She was also an advocate of black people who were deprived of their liberty.

Through her novels, she voices out the inequalities and injustices existing in our society and succeeds in conveying significant and relevant messages through her novels. The contribution of Octavia Butler usually recognized as the first black woman to gain widespread compliments and appreciation as an exploratory fiction writer have influenced the works of new generations of science fiction writers of colour. Butler links dreams and nightmares in her novels, showing how future dystopias result from current utopian dreams and political power of certain segments of American Society.

Butler was certainly not a black author in any limiting sense at all. Butler’s fiction was definitely in the social science fiction vein. In order to explore modern and ancient social subjects, Butler utilised the exaggerated reach of tentative fiction. She often represented concepts like, gender, religion; social status in symbolic language and wretched open the science fiction gates of gender and colour with her extraordinary vision, imagination and courage.
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