Gender in Dystopia: The Persistence of Essentialist Ideologies in Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower

Elijah Drzata
University of Central Florida

Gender in Dystopia: The Persistence of Essentialist Ideologies in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

By: Elijah Drzata

Faculty Mentor: Farrah Cato

UCF Department of English

....

ABSTRACT: If we were living in a dystopian society, we might view gender, sexuality, and race differently. When survival is on the line, it would be a privilege to fight back against any remaining bigotry. Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* provides us with possible answers to these situations, as well as a look into the future of society if we do not change. In this essay, I situate Octavia Butler's dystopic novel in the context of gender. Laura Olamina, the protagonist, is seemingly forced to perform a new gender and sexual identity. My goal is to queer the straightness presented in the novel in order to argue Lauren's perpetuation of dominate ideologies, such as the essentialization of heterosexuality, compulsory sexuality, and essentialized ideas about masculinity and femininity. While others have argued that Lauren overcomes these ideologies, I argue the opposite. Lauren must conform to these ideologies in order to ensure her safety, yet her conformance to these ideologies is part of a wider institutional problem. Lauren herself does not necessarily challenge these ideologies; rather, other characters in the novel challenge the paradigm. I explore the ways that these ideologies affect behavior, especially when survival is on the line. These resulting behaviors include the performance of gender, which I relate back to Judith Butler's theories on the matter, situating the novel through the lens of queer theory.

....   *Republication not permitted without written consent of the author.*   ....

Parable of the Sower by Octavia Butler explores the ways that protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina, her family, and community navigate the realities of living in a dystopian society. Imprisoned by a gated community and surrounded by walls to protect her from outside threats, Lauren's world collapses when the lower class, drug-addicted pyromaniacs of the society burn down her community and murder Lauren's family. Set in Los Angeles, California, *Parable of the Sower* follows Lauren's decision to embark on a journey north where she has heard that it is safer and easier to survive. For her own safety, Lauren decides to disguise herself as a man on this quest. While making her way north, Lauren works on developing a religion she creates called "Earthseed." Along her journey, which began with two neighbors from her old community, Lauren becomes a magnetic leader and inspires others to follow her not only physically but also philosophically. These neighbors include Zahra and Harry, as well as a new member of the group, Bankole, who convinces them to form a community on land he has acquired and to live under the guidelines of Earthseed, whose central idea is that "God is change" (O. Butler 3).

Jim Miller, in his essay "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision," discusses how Lauren overcomes "racial and gender divisions," but he does not mention the ways that Lauren and other characters play into essentialist ideologies, which I argue are perpetuated throughout the novel (355). Similarly, Mathias Nilges, in his essay "WE NEED the STARS: Change, Community, and the Absent Father in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*," reveals the irony in the repressive-like outcome of Lauren's search for liberation. Although Nilges agrees that the father figure plays a central role in Lauren's and society's ideas about the future, he does not discuss the ways that Lauren's father contributes to the stagnancy involved in her pursuit for change, whether present or future. Likewise, Lauren J. Lacey, in her essay "Octavia E. Butler on Coping with Power in *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents, and Fledgling*," argues that "Butler's emphasis is on how her protagonists increase their power," arguing that Lauren does so by challenging dominant structures of masculinity (3). I agree that there are challenges to masculinity; however, most of these challenges come from characters other than Lauren, who I believe is largely conforming to essentialized notions rather than attempting to disrupt them. By exploring these concepts in Butler's work, one can see how the implementation of homophobic and sexist ideologies affect behavior and ideas about change. In addition,

one can question Judith Butler's theories of "identity as a performance," or as a "static essence," and take into account other factors that may contribute to this dichotomy, such as a dystopian society, the crumbling of a nation, and the role a father plays in a child's life. Many scholars, including Miller, Nilges, and Lacey, discuss how Octavia Butler's construction of Lauren challenges readers to question ideas about gender and concepts of change in the 1990's. However, a closer examination of Lauren's performance reveals a character who does not challenge gender roles in ways we may have previously thought, but instead complies with binary gender norms in order to survive. The novel does not fail to challenge gender norms and widely accepted concepts of change, but consciously develops a character who complies with these norms for her survival.

While Miller suggests that Lauren "is put in a position that challenges the white male dominant power structure in place," he does not address the ways that Lauren unconsciously conforms to these structures, even when viewed from a survivalist perspective (77). Assumptions of who should desire whom reveal the conformity to these structures, such as the naturalization of heterosexuality and compulsory heterosexuality, and how "elements of race and gender oppression intersect with class realities" (Miller 349). This reality is seen in Lauren's suggestion to present herself as a potentially gay couple with Harry, but instead, chooses to present herself with Zahra as a black, straight couple (Lauren being the one to disguise herself as a man). As Zahra makes clear, "Mixed couples catch hell whether they're gay or straight" (O. Butler 171). Lauren's decision to play a straight couple with Zahra reveals the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality works on a societal level, which Judith Butler identifies as the "cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with 'natural' appearances and 'natural' heterosexual dispositions" (J. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender" 524). Nevertheless, Lauren is conforming to these ideologies in order to increase her best possible chance at survival, as she and her group "overcome racial and gender divisions in favor of interdependence as a long-term survival strategy" (Miller 355).

Outside of her performance as a man, Lauren does promote the naturalization of heterosexuality more blatantly as Zahra and Harry start to form a romantic and sexual relationship. Lauren goes on to say how Zahra's looks "grabbed male attention," and how this can be a threat against her (O. Butler 183). When she and Zahra go swimming fully clothed on the beach, she

says that Zahra is "enough to look at with her clothes on, as it is," yet Harry—having "a nice, strong-looking body"—is not considered a target and is the only one who goes swimming without clothes on (O. Butler 205, 206). Lauren is assuming that every man Zahra comes into contact with is a potential threat because he must be straight and that Zahra is the perfect bait, bound to bring trouble. Yet Harry cannot possibly be a threat in Lauren's heterosexual world. Ironically, when a woman hits on Lauren while she is performing as a man, she thinks of how strange it feels, but at the same time, when she thinks of Zahra as being hit on as a woman, she does not take into consideration how that must make Zahra feel. Instead, she sees it as trouble—almost as a nuisance.

Lauren's double standards towards Zahra reveal the toxicity that comes with the essentialization of masculinity and the dangers of policing expectations associated with the gender binary. As Lauren opens up to Harry and Zahra before their journey north, she tells them that she is "thinking of traveling as a man," when Harry replies, "that will be safer for you. You're at least tall enough to fool people…" (O. Butler 171). Seen throughout the novel are typical hyper-masculine traits associated with men, revealing how societal ideologies can be damaging and how easily people become interpellated into gender norms. These norms often hold unrealistic and uncontrollable expectations. In this future dystopian world, we also see the essentialization of femininity. We see that men have the upper hand and privilege in just about everything, while women are "good victims" and perceived as weak, as the predators in *Parable* "prey on old people, lone women or women with young kids, handicapped people…." (202). Octavia Butler also has us question if Lauren would have gotten as far as she had if not for her disguise as a man. For instance, Lauren trips a man who tried to steal water from a woman, her husband, and their baby. Appearing as a man and standing next to Harry, she says, "We looked more intimidating together" (O. Butler 202). If Lauren performed as a woman in that situation, would she still have tripped the predator, and if she had, would she still have been able to send him scampering away, or would she have been attacked herself?

Lauren's disguise as a man challenges us to question Judith Butler's theory of 'gender as a performance' versus 'gender as an essence'. Though Lauren has some fear and apprehension about disguising herself as a man, as she says, "It still feels strange to be called 'man.' I didn't like it, but that didn't matter," she must do so in order to

increase her chances at survival (O. Butler 202). Octavia Butler makes us all-knowing of Lauren's feelings about playing the role of a man, as Lauren says, "It's going to be strange for me, pretending to be a man" (O. Butler 180). From these remarks, the novel suggests that one can act and perform an identity, but that identity does not necessarily mean that it "feels right" or "part of one's essence." As Judith Butler argues, "Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (J. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender" 519). Lauren can only achieve what she considers a successful performance of a man by repeating actions and behaviors that she has seen other men in her life continuously participate in. As Lauren plays the role of a man, she does not continue her usual acts and behaviors as they come naturally; instead, she is very deliberate about changing her personality to mirror her views of what it means to be a man. This role play includes making her presence known through her body language and demeanor. "As a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences," and the consequences of Lauren presenting as anything other than a heterosexual man throughout her journey include the possibility of rape and death. (J. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender" 522).

Performing an identity out of force reveals who has the power and who has the privilege. In Lauren's society, rich, white, heterosexual men often have the privilege. We see this early on in the novel, as Lauren's role model is a woman astronaut who dies on Mars, to which Lauren says, "She had no business going to Mars" (15). Early on, we see how society has made Lauren believe that woman cannot obtain power. Lauren believes that changing her gender expression will give her power. Yet, paradoxically, her performance of gender ultimately transforms her identity—whether she knows it or not, and whether she wants it to or not—as her "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance… this essence is a fabrication" (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 173). It is after her change in her gender expression that she starts to thrive. "Gender is a constant production," and although the perception can be that Lauren's identity as a man is nothing more than a performance to survive, the novel reveals that it is ultimately shaping her identity (Parker 191). This identity includes essentialized notions of gender, such as the belief that only men can obtain and maintain power. While Lacey argues that Lauren challenges expectations of femininity and female

masculinity, this conclusion can ultimately not be true, as Lauren is disguised and living as a man. While this disguise, at times, challenges expectations associated with masculinity, it ultimately reveals how we have been interpellated into essentialized gender expectations, and J. Butler's theory reveals that this interpellation, which influences a performance of what is "right" undoubtedly shapes our identity.

Something that Lauren cannot change is being black, which makes her a target to begin with, but coming out as openly gay would make her an even bigger target. Though, as Nilges suggests, Lauren and her traveling group promote a vision of inclusivity, the only reason they are doing so is to survive, and though these people are coming together to survive, paradoxically, they must conform to society's expectations in order to continue surviving. Deciding not to present as a gay couple conforms to "the white male dominant power structures" that Miller claims Lauren is challenging. Lauren's need for survival puts her in a position where she, arguably, has the choice to challenge these structures, but ultimately the need for survival outweighs the choice to push back against societal decorum, as doing so could leave her and her group dead. For instance, Harry accidently refers to Lauren as a woman in front of new members who have joined the traveling group. Lauren reflects that, "We believed two men and a woman would be more likely to survive than two women and a man… Out here, the trick is to avoid confrontation by looking strong" (O. Butler 212). "Looking strong" is a literal form of change for Lauren, a change in the sense that she is accommodating to current conditions. Lauren's views on the concept of change are blurry. Lauren believes that adapting to societal ideologies in order to survive is change, no matter how stifling these ideologies are. By contrast, she also preaches that change is going against the current conditions she is facing by forming a community. Ironically, the avoidance of confrontation makes the latter idea of change that much further out of reach for Lauren.

Lauren's need for survival complicates the idea of change, especially since Lauren does not have freedom of choice. Nilges suggests that Octavia Butler represents change "as society's central problem" and not a solution, but this is too simple of an answer, especially for Butler. On one hand, Lauren desires to change in a way that returns "to a social situation… marked by stability and order," as Nilges suggests. On the other hand, Lauren participates in a kind of "temporary change" in order

to achieve her ideal vision of change. Lauren wants to achieve this ideal change by escaping from society and starting anew. Change is working on many levels here, but the type of change that Lauren longs for is not a current option, therefore it must be an ideal. Regardless, change is not a solution, but it is not the problem either. Lauren believes that change can be controlled and used to one's advantage, such as performing as a man in order to avoid confrontation, but what the novel eventually reveals is that change is a force that happens naturally and cannot be controlled. While Lauren thinks she is embracing change, the truth is that change is acting on her. While Lauren thinks she is consciously changing in order to achieve "the ultimate change" through her performance as a man, she is changing in ways she would have never expected. While Nilges views change in *Parable* as an intentional endeavor, the novel suggests change as a process that happens automatically, outside of our control. Change is not a choice but an uncontrollable force that Lauren believes she is acting upon and has control over, as she urges others to "Shape God," i.e., change (O. Butler 220). While Lauren believes that accommodating to change is the solution, *Parable* reveals through Lauren's journey that change has a mind of its own and happens in ways never expected, a process largely influenced by dominant ideologies. As an Earthseed verse suggests, "God is neither good nor evil, neither loving nor hating" (O. Butler 245). To Lauren, God is change, and she herself says that God is "not punishing or jealous, but infinitely malleable," "show me a more pervasive power than change," "a power that could not be defied by anyone or anything" (O. Butler 217, 219, 220). While Lauren's attempt to accommodate to change is successful, this survival mechanism changes her in unexpected ways.

While change can be seen as a problem, the message of *Parable* seems to be that the solution is in becoming conscious of interpellation in order not to be obliterated by it. The introduction of other characters gradually reveals to Lauren her submission to dominant ideologies and her conformance to accepted behaviors. In the beginning of the novel, Lauren's relationship with her father is deeply explored, and Lauren comes to understand that "the father represents control and a protective structure people long for" (Nilges 1341). Nilges suggests that this "longing for" is the type of change that Butler is exploring, and this realization undoubtedly affects Lauren's performance as a man and her role as a leader. Lauren's gender performance is not only used as a survival mechanism, but as a tool to make her father proud, as she

says early on that "I'll try to please him" (O. Butler 3). Judith Butler argues, "The body is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation," and in *Parable*, it is Lauren who is "reproducing" her father's role as a leader ("Performative Acts and Gender" 521). In addition, Butler argues that "gender norms originate within the family and are enforced through certain familial modes of punishment and reward," and Lauren's father's role as a Baptist minister reflects norms that Lauren attempts to perpetuate (J. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender" 526). Expanding Gregory J. Hampton's argument in his essay "Migration and Capital of the Body: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*," Lauren's father's influences on her character includes the observation of how he influences her character, which is most obviously seen through her performance as a man. These influences perpetuate dominant ideologies, such as the naturalization of heterosexuality and essentialized beliefs of masculinity. Examples of this essentialism are seen in Lauren's comments on "adults" being "set in the past," which the current president, President Donner, represents (O. Butler 57). Additionally, Lauren's father views her hyperempathy as a weakness and something she should hide, as she says, "Sharing the pain or pleasure is delusional" (O. Butler 13).

Octavia Butler plays with societal ideologies by throwing characters, such as Bankole, into the mix, a character who challenges stereotypes associated with attraction and masculinity. In North American society, including the time that O. Butler wrote *Parable*, heterosexual norms were dominant: the masculine should be attracted to the feminine and vice versa. We have seen this in previous comments made by Lauren about Zahra and Harry, but the appearance of Bankole is what challenges these norms. Presenting as masculine himself, he is attracted to Lauren, even though she also presents as masculine. His attraction to Lauren is present regardless of whether he knows her to be a woman or not yet, which is hinted at by his smiling at Lauren when he sees her help an old man. Bankole resists patterns of masculinity and femininity. He even challenges the macho representation of masculinity in the novel. Even though he is described as heavily masculine, "barrel-chested and tall," Lauren reveals feminine traits that he possesses, and even embraces, such as his care in brushing and maintaining his beard, as "he combed it more carefully than the hair on his head" (O. Butler 253, 266). Even by smiling at Lauren first, he is crushing these "essentialized notions" that are shaping Lauren's identity, as she says, "I smiled back [at him]. Then I remembered that I was supposed

to be a man, and wondered whether he had seen through my disguise" (O. Butler 226). The question arises, would Bankole would still be so willing to resist patterns of sexual desire if Lauren's performance as a man was not a disguise? In this instance, identity as a performance is a matter of survival, though it ultimately shapes the one doing the performing and what may seem like resistance to societal patterns could be submission to them. Lauren is submissive to the fact that men have privilege in society, and Bankole adheres to this thinking. Yet, even when members from the traveling group find out that Lauren is a woman, they continue to view her as their leader. Her performance as a man shapes her role as a leader, which is a role she continues to carry on even after her gender is revealed. Without Lauren's performance as a man, the group may have never looked up to her, and Bankole's attraction to Lauren may have never developed. Her performance as a man thus shapes her identity in a way that draws these people towards her, yet her performance still reveals the ways in which "we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctiveness and dramatizes the cultural mechanisms of their fabricated unity" (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 175). Against Lacey's claim that Lauren is the main character used to challenge masculine stereotypes are observations made about Bankole, who is the one who seemingly challenges masculine stereotypes the most and makes Lauren's submission to essentialized stereotypes even more visible, regardless of her intentions.

Most scholars agree that Lauren challenges dominant ideologies and gender stereotypes, but when examined more closely, what becomes visible is the fact that acting out accepted and repeated behaviors that Lauren has observed and unconsciously deemed "appropriate" makes Lauren's performance of gender possible. Lauren's performance is not disrupting these accepted roles, behaviors, and presentations, but submitting to them, as doing anything else would put her life in danger. Lauren's experiences have influenced what Lauren deems "appropriate." Repeated are the behaviors with a lack of consequence, and Lauren's father carries out these behaviors, which are often associated with gender. This imitation largely influences Lauren's behavior, and her father is the primary example of how Lauren will survive in society. Lauren realizes and accepts that the only way she will survive, to her greatest ability, is by being a man, or at least pretending to be one. The fact that Lauren accepts this conclusion undoubtedly reveals her submission to the patriarchal society she is living in. It

is all about survival, and contrary to her religious beliefs, she cannot afford to live what she preaches: change. Change for Lauren would mean traveling as a woman and demanding power despite the distribution of power based on inherited ideas on gender differences. Change is a risk that Lauren cannot afford, but only dream of—only write about in her daily musings. Change, in *Parable of the Sower*, is not as simple as performing a different gender in order to adapt to current conditions, it goes much deeper. True change, Butler seems to be saying, would be challenging the dominant structures in place without conforming to them, without running away. But at the same time, Lauren's survival is on the line. How can there be such change when your life is in danger?

Parable of the Sower is not a story about a woman protagonist who finds a way to cheat the system by mysteriously gaining access to power and putting it in the opposite hand. It is about a woman who is forced to submit to the patriarchy in order to survive—a submission that is often left unconscious—yet, is this unconscious process a deliberate plan carried out by those in power in the hopes of secretly influencing a community to adopt their (often oppressive) ideologies? Octavia Butler reveals a multitude of beliefs about heterosexuality and masculinity, as well as theories regarding gender as a performance. We see how Lauren's disguise as a man doesn't necessarily rebel against societal norms, but knowingly submits to them, yet her dire circumstances add another layer to this performance, as survival is key in the dystopian world that she is living in. Though Lauren's disguise is a conscious performance, it ultimately shapes her identity and influences those around her, such as Bankole, who sees Lauren as an equal due to her role as a leader, which her disguise as a man makes possible. Though "God is change" and "God prevails," those who remain in power time after time are the rich, which largely consists of white heterosexual men (O. Butler 3). We see societal norms, such as the naturalization of heterosexuality and essentialist beliefs associated with the gender binary prevail, regardless of this supposed "change."

WORKS CITED

1. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1999.

2. Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–531. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3207893.

3. Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Sower*. Grand Central Publishing ed., New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993.

4. Hampton, Gregory J. "Migration and Capital of the Body: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*." *CLA Journal*, vol. 49, no. 1, Sept. 2005, pp. 56-73. EBSCOhost, login.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login?auth=shibb&url=https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=19413184&cpidlogin.asp?custid=current&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

5. Lacey, Lauren J. "Octavia E. Butler on Coping with Power in *Parable of the Sower, Parable of the Talents, and Fledgling*." *Critique*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2008, pp. 379–394. EBSCOhost, login.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login?auth=shibb&url=https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=34217655&cpidlogin.asp?custid=current&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

6. Miller, Jim. "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1998, pp. 336–360. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4240705.

7. Nilges, Mathias. "WE NEED the STARS": Change, Community, and the Absent Father in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*." Callaloo, vol. 32, no. 4, Fall 2009, pp. 1332-1352. EBSCOhost, login.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login?auth=shibb&url=https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=47658920&cpidlogin.asp?custid=current&site=ehost-live&scope=site.