



Olamina's Hyperempathy Syndrome: Gender, Sexuality, Religion, Politics and Afrofuturism in Octavia Butler's *Parables*

Samragngi Roy.

Jadavpur University,
Department of English.

Abstract: Octavia E. Butler is renowned for her three-volume work the *Lilith's Brood* which charts out the life of a nuclear war survivor, Lilith and how she negotiates with extraterrestrial beings who are out to take over the entire world. However, this paper shall aim to focus on two of Butler's groundbreaking afrofuturistic novels, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), which depict the world as grappling with ravages of the 'Pox', a state of utter political, economic and social devastation, and how a farsighted teenager Lauren Oya Olamina picks up survivors on the run and goes on to create her own utopian community and religion known as the Earthseed. Furthermore, Lauren is born with a peculiar ability 'the hyperempathy syndrome' which is a side effect of the drug Paraceto that her mother regularly abused while she was pregnant with Lauren. As a result she can feel both the pain and pleasure of the people who are in her direct line of vision. But "sharers" like Lauren are condemned by the society at large. This ability was deemed more as a curse than a blessing by Lauren's family because it was considered to be an abnormality which made Lauren more vulnerable to the enemies. This paper will explore the discourse around Lauren's hyperempathy syndrome, how it directly contributes to the anti-war rhetoric and how it helps her unite people from diverse races and cultures into one self-sustaining community. Some important instances which directly refer to the hyperempathy syndrome shall be analyzed within their contexts and how the characters who possess the ability are tortured and exploited by the people in power- the religious fundamentalists who called themselves the 'Crusaders' and wanted to "Make America Great Again" under their fascist leader Andrew Steele Jarrett- shall be investigated. The question of empathy, how it helps and hinders the survivors in various circumstances, shall be analyzed focusing specifically on the message the novels want to convey about gender, sexuality, religious beliefs, politics and war within the framework of afrofuturistic science-fiction.

Keywords: afrofuturism, science fiction, post world war literature, Octavia Butler.

Introduction:

Octavia Estelle Butler's groundbreaking afrofuturistic novels, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), depict the world as grappling with ravages of the 'Pox', a state of utter political, economic and social devastation, and how a farsighted, hyper-empathetic teenager, Lauren Oya Olamina picks up survivors on the run and goes on to create her own utopian community known as Acorn and religion known as the Earthseed. The major themes of the two *Parables* are racial and sexual discrimination, colonialism, class oppression, religious fundamentalism, ecological dangers, slavery, end of several modern innovations in technology and apocalyptic circumstances. Butler, in the *Parable of the Sower* (1993) famously writes, "If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things. They could

kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it. But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people. Failing that, I wish I could find other people who have it, and live among them. A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all." (Butler, 1993) This particular quote becomes extremely important because what this paper aspires to explain is how "hyperempathy" which has been depicted as a debilitating weakness ultimately becomes a tool of resistance in an apocalyptic society inhabited by the protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, her family, friends and ultimately her community, Earthseed.

The Hyperempathy Syndrome:

Lauren Oya Olamina is born with a peculiar ability, which she calls 'the hyperempathy syndrome' (ibid). It is a strange ability that allows a person possessing the ability to involuntarily share the pain and pleasure of others in their field of vision. People with the syndrome are usually referred to as 'sharers'. It is a side effect of a drug called Paraceto. It usually shows up in the children of the people who abused the drug when they were pregnant. Though it helps the sharers know the intensity of the pain other people around them are going through and thus in a way endowed them with a telepathic insight, in some cases it also incapacitates the sharers when the suffering they have witnessed is too intense. As a result, this syndrome, in Olamina's world, was perceived as a weakness more than a strength, something that hindered more than it helped the sharers. While this might seem like a super power to most people, in the Parables it was deemed more as a curse than a blessing by Lauren's family who asked her to hide this fact at all cost because it was considered to be an abnormality or a disability that made Lauren more vulnerable to the enemies. This quote from the Parable of the Sower helps illustrate this mentality, "My father glanced back at me every now and then. He tells me you can beat this thing. You don't have to give in to it." He has always pretended or perhaps believed, that my hyperempathy syndrome was something I could shake off and forget about" (Butler, 1993, pp 14). Olamina also tells us that according to her father, "the whole business" (ibid) which refers to her syndrome is "shameful" (ibid). That's because he is a preacher, a professor as well as a dean. His first wife, Olamina's mother, was a drug addict, so a drug-damaged daughter is nothing he could boast about. For Olamina too, being so vulnerable to pain was not something she could be proud of either. We also find Olamina typecasting her ability as something that is not wholly real, "The sharing isn't real, after all. It isn't some magic or ESP that allows me to share the pain and pleasure of others. It's delusional. Even I admit that" (pp 14). But even though Butler says this here, right at the beginning of her first novel in the Parable series, that the sharing wasn't real, we can see her later refuting this through her portrayals of how the sharers get affected when they see people in pain. These descriptions are physiological to the bone, and not something that could be passed off as mere delusion. This next quote bears testimony to that fact, "I can't do a thing about my hyperempathy, no matter what dad thinks, wants or wishes. I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel. Hyperempathy is what doctors call an "organic delusional syndrome". Big shit. It hurts, that's all I know" (pp 15).

Parable of Sower (1993)

Empathy as Weakness:

Olamina's world is a part of an apocalyptic society and there are several people, especially youngsters, who have taken to the streets to loot people, houses and even murder others in order to survive. Most of them are also addicted to a drug, Pyro, that makes them take pleasure in setting massive fires and watching everything around them burn. They are called the Pyromaniacs. Therefore the survivors like Olamina, her family and her neighbours, always have to be on guard against such thefts and murders. They have to take up weapons, conduct surveillance, learn how to use guns so that they can defend themselves when the worst befalls. At one point, Olamina can be found saying, "Most of us have practiced at home with BB guns on homemade targets or on squirrel or bird targets. I've done all that. My aim is good, but I don't like it with birds or squirrels. Dad was the one who insisted on my learning to shoot them. He said moving targets would be good for my aim. I think there was more to it than that. I think he wanted to see whether or not I could do it- whether shooting a bird or

a squirrel would trigger my hyperempathy” (pp 35). Furthermore, when she actually shot a dog who was almost dead to put it out of its suffering so that she could stop suffering, this is how it impacted her, “It moved. I saw its bloody wounds as it twisted. I bit my tongue as the pain I knew it must feel became my pain... One more step and I would fall and lie in the dirt, helpless against the pain... I thought I would throw up. My belly hurt more and more until I felt skewered through the middle. I leaned on my bike with my left arm. With my right hand, I drew the Smith & Wesson, aimed, and shot the beautiful dog through its head” (pp 42).

Dangers of Empathy:

Here it becomes extremely important to mention Keith who was one of Olamina's step brothers. As a person, Keith was extremely violent, had very few morals, took pleasure in hurting others and was quite the opposite of a hyper-empath. Which is why Olamina never shared an affectionate relationship with him. They were like enemies who were barely on speaking terms with each other. However, once when Keith got severely beaten by his father for leaving home without any explanation and not coming back for days, it was clear as daylight that Keith had joined the drug addicts and was involved in looting, perhaps even murder. But this is how Olamina reacted to the abuse, “I followed Marcus out the back door and stumbled and almost fell down the back steps. I didn’t know what I was doing. Marcus wasn’t around. I sat on the steps in the warm darkness and let my body shake and hurt and vomit in helpless empathy with Keith. Then I guess I passed out” (pp 87). One brief conversation that Keith has with Olamina before his gruesome death is when he tells her, “You better marry Curtis and make babies... Out there, outside, you wouldn’t last a day. That hyperempathy shit of yours would bring you down even if nobody touched you... I saw a guy get both of his eyes gouged out. After that they set him on fire and watched him run around and scream and burn. You think you could stand to see that?” (pp 96-97). In an ironic twist, Keith dies in a very similar way, his self-proclaimed strength and apparent toughness does nothing to save him from the wilderness that loomed large just outside the Olamina household.

This was how Olamina reacted to the brutalization that Keith, her so-called enemy, experienced. Now it becomes crucial to consider how Olamina responds to an actual enemy, an outsider, who tries to kill her friends Harry and Zahra. This happens after her house was looted and destroyed by the pyromaniacs and all her family members were killed. While they are sleeping one night with Harry on watch, a man tries to attack and kill Harry, and he gets severely injured too. The noises wake Olamina and she attacks the attacker with a heavy piece of stone that mutilates his head, and it was a near fatal impact that it had on Olamina, “I was worthless after delivering that one blow. I think I was unconscious for a while... I got up swaying from the residual shock of the blow. I felt sick and dizzy, and my head hurt” (ibid). Olamina continued to suffer until she had slit the throat of this man to put him out of his pain. So, when faced with an actual enemy, Olamina was placed in an extremely vulnerable situation. To her, hurting someone else physically was like hurting herself, the more intense the injury she inflicted, the more intense was the pain she experienced.

Empathy surely Disqualifies Resistance!

Even an ordinary empathetic person will be able to relate to Olamina's plight and they will also agree that usually empathy and resistance stand at two opposite ends of a spectrum which is why empathy is seen as a weakness rather than a strength. Empathetic people tend to absorb other people’s emotions like a sponge and tune in to their states of mind quite involuntarily. They struggle to resist unwanted energies and mostly fail at it because setting boundaries is extremely difficult for them. This is the belief that actually makes people resistant towards empathy, the reason why Olamina’s father tried to make her snap out of her ‘illness’.

Empathy as Hindrance:

Olamina is married in *Parable of Talents* (1998) and her husband Bankole is a doctor. She also had a baby, who is named Larkin. Bankole heals people and that is how he earns his bread and supports his family as well as his community. But Olamina writes, "Thanks to my hyperempathy syndrome, he can't have his clinic here at the house" (ibid, pp 20). This is because she would continue to absorb the pain of all his patients every day and almost all the time. That would make her seriously ill. Octavia Butler herself said in one of the interviews that a sharer couldn't possibly be a doctor or a nurse and for this exact reason. Anything that exposed them to copious amounts of pain would be calamitous, like it was the case with Emery, Gray and all their kids.

Thereafter Butler takes sharing to a whole other level with the introduction of shock collars. Their self-sustaining community Acorn, was soon invaded by Christian Fundamentalists under President Andrew Steele Jarret, and they made all the community members wear shock collars after taking their kids away from them. This is what the shock collars were capable of, "The whole business sounds a little like being a sharer—except that instead of sharing what other people feel, the wearer feels whatever the person holding the control unit wants him to feel. This could initiate a whole new level of slavery. After a while, needing the pleasure, fearing the pain, and always being desperate to please the master could become a person's whole life. I've heard that some collared people kill themselves" (pp 83). Just like some sharers could die after witnessing tremendous amounts of suffering, collared people killed themselves to be free from that suffering.

Empathy Facilitates Torture:

Camp Christian targeted the sharers and meted out to them more severe brands of torture. At one point of the narrative, Olamina writes, "Several of the new people are sharers. 'Bad seed if there ever was bad seed,' our 'teachers' say. 'The heathen children of drug addicts.' They treat known sharers as objects of suspicion, contempt, and ugly amusement. They're so easy to torment. No challenge at all" (pp 221). Then she mentions how two lonely and frightened ex-slaves met, fell in love and got married, and their daughters Doe and Tori became sisters. "And they're sisters now, orphaned and alone. I envy their closeness, and I fear for them. They're still kids, and they were abused almost past bearing at Camp Christian. They look starved and haunted. In a way that I can't quite describe, they look old. Our 'teachers' realized that they were sharers back during Day's rebellion, and abused them all the more for it, but the girls never gave any of the rest of us away" (pp 264).

Empathy as a Tool of Resistance:

It is Olamina's hyperempathy that instilled in her the desire to put an end to suffering. From her very childhood, she has wanted to create a religion, a society which would alleviate suffering and enable human beings to live in peace and harmony. Finding herself in an apocalyptic world, surrounded literally by walking zombies, Olamina, almost in an act of self preservation, picks up survivors on the run. She knows that in order to keep herself alive, she needs other people, and most importantly these other people around her need to be free from pain. That is exactly the kind of community she sets out to create. That is what gives birth to Acorn. Even after the destruction of Acorn, it's the sharers who, unable to bear the pain and suffering of their loved ones and friends, played an active role in putting an end to the exploitative Camp Christian, thus facilitating Earthseed to eventually develop into a large-scale movement.

The Politics of Hyperempathy in Butler's *Parables*:

Coming to Octavia E. Butler's works, Butler in her *Parables* completely demystifies religion with *Earthseed's* major tenet "The Only Lasting Truth is Change" (Butler, 2007). In her Parable series, she imagines a future where social chaos and political instability engenders renewed forms of militant Christian fundamentalism. All social and religious 'others' are ostracized. They become outcasts and aliens "whose freedom is threatened by futuristic forms of technologically enhanced slavery" (McCormack, 2016). Butler, through the character of Andrew Steele Jarret, a politician, and his extremist, ultra-fanatical Crusaders, offers a critique of the vicious intersectionality of religious intolerance and various forms of domination. In this way Butler describes the ways in which African Americans, people of colour, women and people who challenge the heteronorm become the ultimate scapegoats who are sacrificed at the altar of a God who is "racist, sexist, homophobic, and a misogynist" (Butler, 1998). Against this dystopian backdrop, Butler seeks to open up an alternate future called *Earthseed* whose destiny is "to take roots among the stars" (Butler, 2007) and an all-inclusive community called *Acorn*, where various forms of human difference can thrive. In her *Parables*, we don't just have racial and ethnic diversity but also diverse sexualities. There's a lesbian couple, Mary and Allie, who are very much a part of *Acorn* and one of whom (Mary) gets beaten to death by the Crusaders once they find out. Olamina herself masquerades as a man for almost the entire novel, *Parable of the Sower*. In *Parable of Talents*, she even kisses a woman. Butler says, "I think it's a writer's duty to write about human differences, all human differences, and help make them acceptable" (Butler, 2000).

"The Destiny of *Earthseed*
Is to take root among the stars.
It is to live and to thrive
On new earths.
It is to become new beings
And to consider new questions.
It is to leap into the heavens
Again and again.
It is to explore the vastness
Of heaven.
It is to explore the vastness
Of ourselves" (Butler, 1998).

Octavia Butler's message comes across most clearly in her *Parable of the Talents* (1998) when we hear Lauren Oya Olamina saying, "I wanted us to understand what we could be, what we could do. I wanted to give us a focus, a goal, something big enough, complex enough, difficult enough, and in the end, radical enough to make us become more than we ever have been" (ibid). Lauren Oya Olamina here becomes the mouthpiece of Octavia Butler's afrofuturism. A little later in the novel, she goes on to say that *Earthseed* is about preparing to fulfil the Destiny, it's about learning to live in partnership with one another in small communities, and at the same time, working out a sustainable partnership with the environment. It's about treating education and adaptability as the absolute essentials that they are.

Lauren's hyperempathy is something that is viewed by others as a sickness, a weakness or a disease, a reason why she was always sequestered behind a wall back in *Robledo*, but it is her hyperempathy that liberates her ultimately. Lauren's hyperempathy is not just restricted to human beings. Even watching a rat or a squirrel squirming in pain makes her feel like "getting hit with a huge ball of air, but with no coolness, no feeling of wind" (Butler, 1993). She shares the pain of everyone she walks by on the streets, be it a dying dog or a rabbit. She cares for trees like she would care for living human beings. Even when she is pregnant, she continues to think of the well-being of the community, she is anxious about helping the world heal and *Earthseed*, though an ambitious enterprise, seems like the only feasible and long-term solution to whatever she aims to touch and heal. Butler, through the eyes of Olamina, shows a world which is unified under the tutelage of a woman of colour and the new world she represents. Thus, *Parable of the Sower* becomes a story of a collapsing world which is ultimately healed by an ecofeminist hand (Delia, 2016). Analysed from the perspective of ecofeminism, the dystopian world of *Parable of the Sower* becomes all the more visceral as readers can get a horrifying glimpse of the havoc that white capitalist patriarchy has wreaked on humankind and the planet.

Conclusion:

In *Parable of the Sower*, the first book in the series, Butler chronicles the life of a female narrator, Lauren Oya Olamina, growing up in a parochial male dominated community. We see her eventually creating her own path when this blinkered, inward-looking, male-run community collapses. Her father never comes back home and the family is left to fend for and protect themselves. Her husband Bankole who tries to protect Olamina and her baby by constantly insisting her to leave Acorn and settle with him somewhere safer, is killed when Camp Christian intrudes into Acorn. So, Olamina is once again left all alone, widowed as well as motherless, with only the surviving members of her community. Olamina's constant conflicts with and eventual rejection of her only surviving brother Marcus, signifies her greater struggle and rejection of President Andrew Steele Jarret's fascism and the Crusaders' Christian Fundamentalism. Olamina single-handedly leads and even after the destruction of Acorn, she does not give up. At the end of the sequel, we find her successful. She tries her best to look for her child but when she finds her and realizes that Asha Vere is irreconcilably different from her, she prioritizes her other child, Earthseed. Motherhood neither defines her nor hinders her from realizing her destiny, which is Earthseed.

Rebecca A Wanzo writes in the essay "Apocalyptic Empathy: A Parable of Postmodern Sentimentality" (2005) that the Parable texts are science fiction revisions of sentimentality's privileging of the role of feelings in political progress. "Lauren Olamina materially represents a liberal's bleeding heart- empathy causes her physical pain" (ibid). Olamina argues for the possibility that empathy can serve a political and moral good; as a "sharer" of other people's emotions, she recognizes the ethical possibilities of feeling pain. She never argues that her hyperempathy syndrome can ensure political progress. To accomplish her political goals, Olamina displaces the centrality of feelings in politics and develops a liberation theology that revolves around "change" instead of empathy or feeling. This brings one to the question, what if Olamina was not a sharer? In that case the story would have turned out to be extremely different. She would focus on survival and self-preservation. She would kill innocent people in order to survive instead of rescuing them. She would not think of creating a community because she would never know what collective suffering feels like. Her self-preservation wouldn't be tied up to preservation of the community. A new world order would not have come into being if Olamina only thought of her own safety and comfort, just like Bankole, her husband, who wasn't a sharer. It is her hyperempathy that allowed her to resist the fascism of Camp Christian, take down Andrew Steele Jarret and lead the mass through Earthseed. It is hyperempathy that creates, protects and preserves life, engenders a new world order, brings people together to care for the environment and each other and ultimately rejuvenates the planet.

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