STATIC AND KINETIC UTOPIANISM IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *PARABLE OF THE SOWER*

UTOPIANISMO ESTÁTICO Y CINÉTICO EN *LA PARÁBOLA DEL SEMBRADOR* DE OCTAVIA BUTLER

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159

Abstract

Dystopian worlds are filled with inequalities, oppression and authoritarian regimes. They are cautionary tales that warn about potential dangers. And yet, it is also possible to find positive attitudes and insubordinate characters who fight back through the utopian wish, such as the case of Lauren Olamina. This utopianism yearns for better worlds, free of injustices. This paper focuses on Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and the confrontation of two utopianisms, static and kinetic, through religion. Kinetic utopianism, represented by Lauren and Earthseed, advocates for change and adaptability. In contrast, static utopianism, represented by Lauren's father and the Baptist religion, focuses on traditional values, and shows reticence towards change. This novel does not intend to condemn any belief system, but to explore the impact that these two utopianisms have on a particular society. The article concludes that the kinetic utopianism of Lauren and Earthseed makes possible the change that she wants in the world through adaptability and progress. On the other hand, the refusal of change and adaptation that characterises static utopianism ultimately leads to its own disappearance.

Keywords: utopianism, utopia, dystopia, *Parable of the Sower*, Earthseed.

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Resumen

Los mundos distópicos están llenos de injusticias, opresiones y gobiernos autoritarios. Estas historias avisan de posibles peligros futuros, pero también contienen positivismo y personajes rebeldes que luchan a través del deseo utópico, como en el caso de Lauren Olamina. Este utopianismo les permite soñar con mundos mejores, libres de injusticias. El objetivo principal de este artículo es el análisis de la confrontación de dos tipos de utopianismo, estático y cinético, mediante la religión en *La parábola del sembrador* (1993), de Octavia Butler. El utopianismo cinético, representado por Lauren y Earthseed, defiende la adaptabilidad. En cambio, el utopianismo estático, representado por su padre y la religión Bautista, preserva los valores tradicionales y muestra reticencia hacia los cambios. La intención de esta obra no es la de criticar ningún sistema de creencias, sino analizar el impacto que estos dos tipos de utopianismo tienen en la misma sociedad. El artículo concluye que el utopianismo cinético de Lauren y Earthseed permite el cambio que ella quiere en el mundo mediante adaptabilidad y progreso. Por otro lado, el rechazo al cambio y a la adaptabilidad que caracterizan al utopianismo estático, a la larga, les conduce a su propia desaparición.

Palabras clave: utopianismo, utopía, distopía, *La parábola del sembrador*, Earthseed.

1. Introduction

Dystopian novels are cautionary tales which represent negative outcomes of undesirable situations, such as the rise of totalitarian governments or a subversive use of technology. They are usually inspired by major historical events and became especially relevant during the twentieth century because of the unprecedented global wars and the subsequent crises that took hold. The aim of this article is to discuss the utopian wish in the dystopian novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993) by Octavia E. Butler. This study will delve into the representation of two different types of utopianism: a kinetic model that favours evolution and a static model that prevents it, and the effect that each of them have on the society depicted in the novel.

Lauren Olamina is an African American adolescent who lives in a post-apocalyptic United States that has succumbed to climate change and social mayhem. The author highlights the existence of class division and hierarchies of power that are clearly motivated by race; a few neighbourhoods lead comfortable lives at the expense of the rest. The majority of the population suffer from poverty, misery and drug addiction. Lauren and her family live in a gated neighbourhood, where they are mostly safe from the barbaric world outside and where the majority of

citizens are adamant about following Protestant doctrine. However, Lauren renounces this religion and focuses on Earthseed instead, a religion that she has founded. Through Earthseed, she plans to introduce a set of improvements and create a future without violence. Lauren's objective is to start a new community based on critical thinking, participation in society and the capacity to adapt to new situations.

The two aforementioned models of utopianism appear within the two religions depicted in the novel: Baptist Protestantism and Earthseed. The first is an embodiment of static utopianism, which defends tradition and fixed ideas. The second is a fictional religion that embodies kinetic utopianism, which promotes change, adaptability and multiplicity. The two appear as opposites, yet they also share common traits. They both intend to create a sense of community, provide solace and comfort and improve overall life conditions. Octavia Butler addresses the importance of change for survival, and she adds an Afrofuturistic perspective to the "classical" dystopian story. In a world filled with negativity and pessimism, the utopian wish represents a beacon of light and people's initiative to fight for a better life.

2. Utopia, Dystopia and Utopianism: The Creation of New Societies

Throughout history, utopianism has received multiple names, including utopian wish, thought, spirit, impulse or vision. Literary critics use these terms interchangeably to represent the same idea: an undefined wish for social improvement and an attempt not to succumb to the pessimism of societies. Frederic Jameson defined it as "something like a utopian impulse detectable in daily life" (2005: 1). This concept should not be confused with the utopian genre, which is solely concerned with the literary world. Nonetheless, the utopian wish appears within utopian novels. The utopian wish is a literary device to imagine better societies, explore different alternatives and even criticise politics and inequalities. According to Fatima Vieira, utopianism "has at its core the desire for a better life" (2010: 6). Vieira further argues that the utopian literary genre is one of the many representations of this utopianism, implying that one is contained within the other. Utopianism is an intrinsic part of the human experience, and it is informed by specific times and places. Each society has their own dreams and aspirations, and thus, their utopian content will vary.

Literary utopias are based on this utopianism, a trend initiated by Sir Thomas More in *Utopia* (1516). Regarded as the first proper utopia, More did not create utopianism, but he reinvented the way it applied to fiction: "It is thus

certain that although he invented the word utopia, More did not invent utopianism […] but he certainly changed the way this desire was to be expressed" (Vieira 2010: 6). Previous works were more speculative in nature and focused on allegories or the afterlife. More drew from what already existed and moulded it to fit his own needs.

The origin of this wish is uncertain, but it can be traced back to the times of the Bible or Ancient Greece. The utopian wish is the basis of many religions, real and fictional, including Butler's Earthseed. Utopianism draws on the traditions of mythical lands and visions of paradise: "It is widely recognized that four major mythical models of felicity contribute to the genesis of the utopian genre: the Golden Age, the Land of Cockaigne, the Millennium and the Ideal City" (Dutton 2010: 224). Even though the works of the Golden Age are not usually considered utopian works *per se*, the influence that these had over later texts is undeniable since they provided a foundation for the genre.

Utopianism also occupies a significant place within dystopias, or negative utopias: "It is generally conceded that in the twentieth century, dystopia becomes the predominant expression of the utopian ideal, mirroring the colossal failures of totalitarian collectivism" (Claeys 2010: 108). The dystopian genre completely dominated the twentieth century following a series of notorious events, including the World Wars and other incidents such as the Great Depression and the rise of totalitarianism. Thus, it is no wonder that this historical context had a huge impact on authors, who deemed it necessary to denounce recent developments in their fiction. In these novels, the utopian wish appears as a force of positivity intended to eradicate oppression, manipulation and overcontrol. Dystopian fiction projects cautionary tales of potential dangers, but it also provides a flicker of hope for characters and readers. The utopian wish illustrates how humans find the strength to fight for a better future, even in the darkest of times.

In Butler's fictional work, Lauren embodies the utopian wish because she fights to improve the world, and she includes this utopianism in Earthseed. Lauren has something special that differentiates her from the rest: her hyperempathy, which allows her to feel others' pleasure and pain. The way in which she experiences the world inspired her to create her religious manifesto, where she documents her religious doctrines, titled *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*: "Lauren uses her hyperempathy to imagine a new world and mother the birth of a new religion" (Hinton 2018: 450). She shares various traits with the archetype of the rebellious leader, such as her interest in denouncing injustices, advocating for change and giving a voice to the marginalised. Many might oppose the government or other world injustices, but only a few have the courage to act. Lauren is willing to take risks and to put herself on the line.

The utopianism that appeared in the late twentieth century differs from the classical dystopias of the middle of the century, because it incorporates an element of hope in the ending: "by resisting closure, [recent novels] allow readers and protagonists to hope: the ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse within the work" (Baccolini 2004: 520). Lauren's fate differs from the characters of the earlier dystopias, which tended to end on a negative note and with futile attempts to overthrow dictatorships. In those novels, the utopian impulse was external, reserved for readers to avoid the dystopian scenarios that they presented. Lauren undergoes tremendous pain and suffering throughout the novel, but by the end she has escaped the dystopian setting and is founding her own community.

Although predominantly dystopian, the end of the twentieth century saw a groundswell of positivity thanks to several popular movements, including the civil rights movement, the second wave of feminism and the environmentalists. This novel uses race in its exploration of some of the contemporary issues intrinsically connected to the author's context, which makes this novel a candidate for the field of Afrofuturism. In Mark Dery's words, "Speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture […] might, for want of a better term, be called Afro-Futurism" (2008: 8). Octavia Butler adds a much-needed perspective of race to the traditional white-dominating dystopias, as has been claimed by Garnter: "The Afrofuturist elements in both *Parable of the Sower* and *Brown Girl in the Ring* demonstrate how Butler and Hopkinson create literary worlds that challenge traditionally exclusive white feminist narratives" (2021: 1). As a part of the black community, Octavia Butler vindicates her own right to create imagined futures; in fact, in Womack's words, "As feminist dystopian literature imagines possible futures through a feminist lens, Afrofuturism imagines possible futures through a black cultural lens" (2013: 9). The gender barrier had been somewhat broken, but there was still a lot to be done about racial issues.

3. Static and Kinetic Utopianism

The utopian wish, or the intrinsic desire for better worlds, can be understood under different lights depending on its creator's ideology and beliefs. There is one type of utopianism that advocates for multiplicity, multiculturalism and change. This utopianism appears in several time periods, but it is especially representative of modern societies and postcolonial and postmodern studies. On the contrary, there is another utopianism that aims towards universalism, which is likely to ignore and disregard smaller or marginal cultures and civilisations. This utopianism was more common in older times, such as the Renaissance or other classical periods.

This latter utopianism is likely to lead to imposition, totalitarianism and violence. Plus, the idea that a state of perfection can be attained seems inconceivable: "The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable —that is a truism— but conceptually incoherent" (Berlin 2013: 14). The static type of utopianism can present difficulties such as the suppression of diversity, lack of multiculturalism and unrealistic expectations about life in community. Utopian visions are not infallible, and they should be conceived within realistic limits. These two types of utopianism can be regarded as kinetic and static because of their changing and fixed nature, respectively. Kinetic utopianism supports constant change and evolution, and it encourages multiplicity. It assumes that problems and conflict will arise, but it also offers potential solutions. Static utopianism strives to achieve perfection, understood as a state in which all of humanity is satisfied. According to Berlin, "Nothing in [static utopias] alters, for they have reached perfection: there is no need for novelty or change; no one can wish to alter a condition in which all natural human wishes are fulfilled" (2013: 21). This utopianism assumes that once everyone's wishes and needs are met, change will not be necessary.

In *Parable of the Sower*, each of these utopianisms is reflected in the credo of the two religions. The Baptist religion can be equated with static utopianism, as it relies on conventional rituals and practices. With a well-established foundation, its followers adhere to traditional values and are reticent to change. Conversely, Earthseed relates to kinetic utopianism in the sense that it embraces change and adaptability over other values. Lauren's vision is centred on creating a better version of the world and promotes resilience and proactivity. This will be the religion of the new generations.

In 1945, Karl Popper developed the theory of the open society, which can partly be applied to these two notions of utopianism. Popper's theory comments on different types of social and political systems. Open societies advocate in favour of pluralism and diversity. They encourage freedom of expression and participation in the government's decisions and envision "the society in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions" (1947: 152). In a few words, they embody the same values as kinetic utopianism.

Alternatively, closed societies identify with static utopianism. They defend traditional and fixed values, are prone to resist change, and the participation of the citizens tends to be limited. In the worst cases, they lead to totalitarianism and violence. Popper defends that these societies deem certain laws and customs as inevitable as natural phenomena: "It is one of the characteristics of the magical attitude of a primitive tribal or 'closed' society that it lives in a charmed circle of

unchanging taboos, of laws and customs which are felt to be as inevitable as the rising of the sun" (1947: 49). Popper links the term 'tribal society' to the societies ruled by hierarchies and which adhere to traditional values and are averse to change. In religions, this attitude can be connected to spiritual and mystical aspects.

Earthseed relates to kinetic utopianism and open societies because it highlights the importance of adaptability and change in humans; as Wanzo has argued in relation to this text, "The essentials of the text and religion are that human beings can shape Change" (2005: 81). Lauren creates Earthseed because she disagrees with all other religions, which is supported by Choudhury and Mukherjee when they say that "Lauren Oya Olamina rejects dominant white Christianity and also her black father's black church to invent a new religion which gives hope to the suffering masses and is inclusive of the rejects of society" (2023: 3). Lauren's wilful personality leads her to confront the traditionalism and static nature that characterise conventional religions.

Conversely, Lauren's father and Protestantism represent the static tradition and closed societies. The Baptist religion is rooted in age-old beliefs; it supports the traditional idea of God as a force of the universe that sees and controls everything. Apart from the religious aspect, the closed society is also representative of the overall fictional world of the novel. The established power hierarchy perpetuates the state of constant violence and control because it benefits a small minority. Lauren's father is a Baptist minister and he is regarded as a positive figure in the neighbourhood. He is very protective of his family, and he is one of the most proactive members of the community. Because he is aware that he will not be able to keep his children safe indefinitely, he tries to teach them to protect themselves, as can be read in the following fragment: "Dad tries to shield us from what goes on in the world, but he can't. Knowing that, he also tries to teach us to shield ourselves" (Butler 2019: 35). He actively defends the neighbourhood and fights for its survival, but ultimately, he trusts that God will provide salvation. When he disappears, the static utopianism and the chances of resistance and survival leave with him.

Butler creates a strong comparison between these religions to illustrate the contrast between two opposing forces: the old and the new, the immutable and the mutable, universalism and multiculturalism. Butler denounces the limitations of static utopia as, in Wanzo's words, she depicts "a dystopia aimed at critiquing contemporary social problems, particularly in examining how destruction of the environment and religious conservatism could result in a fascist state leaving women and people of color particularly vulnerable" (2005: 75). Nonetheless, rather than condemning religion as a whole, *Parable of the Sower* criticises the aspects of religion that need

improving, according to Butler's opinion. She criticises the justifications of violence and oppression made in the name of religion and the blind submission to religious authority.

4. Utopianism and Religion in *Parable of the Sower*

Parable of the Sower is a compilation of diary entries by Lauren Olamina, an African American teenager who lives in a post-apocalyptic United States ravaged by climate change and social inequality. This diary represents the backbone of the story, Lauren's unfiltered perspective, which she writes from July of 2024 to October of 2027. During the course of the novel, Lauren's character evolves as she matures and acquires new knowledge. Still, her diary always remains a subjective work that contains only her perception of the world.

Apart from the diary, the novel is composed of fragments from *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. This is a religious text that contains the Earthseed doctrines, which Lauren writes down throughout the years as she comes up with them. Lauren starts this religion as a response to the dystopian atmosphere that surrounds her and in a utopian attempt to create a better version of the world. This argument is supported by Stillman when he says: "Earthseed is a religion, a belief system, and a world view. It begins as Olamina's responses to the problems in Robledo" (2003: 25). Earthseed revolves around the tenet that 'God is change'; it defends that change is inevitable and that it is in the hands of humans to shape it. Lauren's ideals and the religion she has founded, Earthseed, are representations of kinetic utopianism because they argue in favour of the need for adaptability and resilience for survival. In Lauren's words: "Out here, you adapt to your surroundings or you get killed" (Butler 2019: 172). This is exemplified by the members of the neighbourhood who perished because they were unable to adapt to the dystopian circumstances.

Lauren's dream for a better life and her yearning to start a new community propel her and help her to survive in such a pessimistic and corrupt world, and she finds comfort in her own writings: "We'll adapt. We'll have to. God is Change. Strange how much it helps me to remember that" (Butler 2019: 138). As Choudhury and Mukherjee have explained, "as a female protagonist who creates a new religion, Lauren exemplifies qualities of critical dystopia and Afrofuturism. In her refusal to accept a violent society as the norm, Lauren performs as a protagonist of critical dystopia who does not bow down to hegemony" (2023: 8). Lauren has faith in the future, and believes that it is in her hands, and the hands of her future community, to shape it when she says, "There's no power in having strength and brains, and yet waiting for God to fix things for you or take revenge for you […] God will

shape us all every day of our lives. Best to understand that and return the effort: Shape God" (Butler 2019: 206). In juxtaposition to this, there is a book that embodies the opposite values and represents static utopianism: the Bible. As a representative of static utopianism, the Bible is an embodiment of old values and traditions. The Bible is particularly relevant while Lauren lives with her family and attends mass, because the neighbourhood is structured according to the principles set forth in the book. Lauren rejects her father's religion, as can be read in the following passage: "'We were Baptists', I said. 'I couldn't make myself believe either, and I couldn't tell anyone'" (Butler 2019: 246). She refuses this religion because it does not align with her own views, and she is especially critical of the image of God and divine lack of action. She perceives this God as an almost cruel figure who does not care whether humans live or die: "That God sounds a lot like Zeus —a super-powerful man, playing with his toys the way my youngest brothers play with toy soldiers. Bang, bang! Seven toys fall dead. If they're yours, you make the rules. Who cares what the toys think" (Butler 2019: 15). Therefore, it can be observed that Lauren's views sharply contrast with the Protestants who pray to God in exchange for salvation.

4.1. 2024: The Birth of Kinetic Utopianism

The first part of the novel is an introduction to Lauren Olamina and her gated community. Through diary entries, the reader gets to know the laws and traditions, Lauren's dreams and desires, and the religion that she has founded: Earthseed. The vast majority of community inhabitants are practicing Baptists; they go to church and find solace in the traditional image of God and the Bible. The adult characters exude a nostalgia for a long-lost past and a yet non-existent future: "They never miss a chance to relive the good old days or to tell kids how great it's going to be when the country gets back on its feet and good times come back" (Butler 2019: 8). They are torn between having lost faith in the future and the hope that God will protect and save them.

The members of the community rely upon the idea that God will provide salvation and they lack the confidence necessary to shape their own future. The Baptist religion is shown as static because it is centred around fixed dogmas and beliefs, and believers follow the Bible word for word: "[Mrs. Sims] believed, like Dad, that if you kill yourself, you go to hell and burn forever. She believed in a literal acceptance of everything in the Bible" (Butler 2019: 23). While Baptists are not inherently opposed to change, they show scepticism and reticence. However, not all neighbourhood residents are religious devotees, especially the younger citizens. Most children get baptised merely to fulfil their parents' desire and they show a certain indifference towards religious rituals: "We would be baptized out of duty

or as a kind of insurance, but most of us aren't that much concerned with religion. I am, but then I have a different religion" (Butler 2019: 8), especially the younger members. In fact, the secularisation of religion was a growing topic of interest in the 20th century, and Octavia Butler manages to emphasise both the importance of religious pluralism and the loss of faith in traditional institutions. In her novel, the static model of utopianism is starting to lose followers because of the hostile environment and growing scepticism of the members of the closed society. On the other hand, the popularity of kinetic utopianism increases as Lauren spreads the word of Earthseed.

The idea of God reflected in the Baptist and Earthseed religions is very representative of the statuses of these religions as examples of static and kinetic utopianism, respectively. Lauren questions the idea of God in traditional religions and wonders why he allows such barbarism, injustice and violence: "Is there a God? If there is, does he (she? it?) care about us?" (Butler 2019: 15). She argues against the idea of a God who determines the fate of humanity and against the idea that it is futile to propose alternatives. Instead, Lauren's idea of God is change, which vastly differs from the traditional image, as she says, "My God doesn't love me or hate me or watch over me or know me at all, and I feel no love for or loyalty to my God. My God just is" (Butler 2019: 25). Lauren refuses to worship a God whom she deems unfair and unjust, and instead avers that change can come from humans. In the dystopian world, change, resilience and adaptability are essential for survival, and these are the pillars of Earthseed.

Earthseed: The Books of the Living opens with the claims that "without persistence, what remains is an enthusiasm of the moment. Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism. Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all" (Butler 2019: 1). Throughout the novel, Lauren demonstrates how all of these abilities allowed her to successfully start the community she had dreamed of. She faces constant dangers and unexpected incidents, but she perseveres. Lauren's interest in developing Earthseed starts from an impulse that assimilates to the utopian wish, because this impulse comes from a desire for a better future without violence and poverty. It could even be argued that Earthseed is born from a yearning that Protestantism is unable to fulfil. Some critics such as Choudhury and Mukherjee have connected Lauren's hyperempathy syndrome and the constant suffering that it entails with the creation of Earthseed: "Lauren emerges as a protagonist who can share others' pain —a dystopian condition— which leads her to contemplate the need for a new religion and a communal social order invested in people's happiness" (2023: 7). In fact, the analysis exposed in this article agrees with the theory that it is Lauren's ability to feel others' suffering that motivated her to create this religion. It seems that she conceives Earthseed in

a desperate need to pursue a future without such violence and in an attempt to establish an order of peace.

4.2. 2025: The Victims of the Closed Society

In the second part, Lauren helps her stepmother with her kindergarten classes. She plans to use her influence for good and to prepare children for the difficulties ahead. Even though she draws from some of Earthseed's doctrines, she does not teach directly from the book. Additionally, there are various altercations in the neighbourhood, including incidents of theft, arson and assault. Lauren's neighbours have experienced such sorrows that they can barely dare to dream of better worlds: "We are coming apart. The community, the families, individual family members. … We're a rope, breaking, a single strand at a time" (Butler 2019: 109). Thinking of alternatives seems like a faraway fantasy. Within the neighbourhood, people are anxious about surviving the present and they are not as concerned with a utopian future that might never come, as Stillman has explained: "People are so involved in hierarchy and domination, so convinced of their own rightness, so scared, or so committed to maintaining their own arbitrary power that it can be disheartening to attempt to hope, think, and act in utopian, promising, or novel ways" (Stillman 2003: 16). But Lauren is determined to fight.

169

These citizens are victims of the closed society; the members of the neighbourhood have been indoctrinated to stay within a certain narrative. They see the mayhem and dangers of the outside world and are content with their small, civilised neighbourhood where they have stability, protection and resources to a certain extent. Their reliance on static utopianism has led them to complacency; they are resigned to their circumstances and seek comfort in what is familiar. They are passive characters in the sense that they are waiting for a divine intervention, as Lauren says: "Things are always changing. This is just one of the big jumps instead of the little step-by step changes that are easier to take. People have changed the climate of the world. Now they're waiting for the old days to come back" (Butler 2019: 52). They view destiny as a force that cannot be meddled with.

During the course of the novel, Lauren progressively becomes more proactive, and in 2025 she packs a bag to be kept for the imminent moment when she will have to flee. In her bag, along with seeds and survival tools, she includes her diary and the Earthseed notebook. The fact that she prioritises her book of Earthseed highlights the importance she gives to the implementation of this new religion. When she was younger, Lauren was a Protestant: "At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church" (Butler 2019: 7). Lauren's departure from Protestantism signifies a rupture with her father and the neighbourhood, at first spiritually but later also physically. It is

the change from Protestantism to Earthseed which transfers her from passive to active; she evolves from being a minor member of the Baptist church to becoming the leader of a religious movement.

The core idea of utopianism lies in the desire for improvement, equality and a sense of shared community. For Lauren, these qualities are intrinsically linked with the notions of change and adaptability. Earthseed's most important tenet, as written in the *Books of the Living*, states that "the only lasting truth/ Is Change./ God/ Is Change" (Butler 2019: 75). In the world, the only constant thing is change; change is inevitable and ever-present. Lauren's idea that 'God is change' and that humans can produce change is very representative of utopian ideals. Lauren's ideas are consistent with the notion that a true utopia should be kinetic and not static, as explored by H.G. Wells in *A Modern Utopia*: "the Modern Utopia must be not static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages" (2009: 13). Wells stresses the importance of adaptability and movement within the utopian society. Utopias ought to evolve along with humanity and adjust to their wants and needs. In Lauren's opinion, change is part of the human experience, but maybe they do not know how to deal with it yet.

Lauren refuses to leave her destiny in the hands of a God and would rather act of her own volition. She yearns for a faraway community, and dreams of taking Earthseed to space. The notion of finding a new place to start a community is a representative characteristic of utopian fiction and the utopian vision in general: "Is not this dreaming of life on another world, this desire for that which is not yet here, what marks utopian thinking?" (Miller 1998: 355). This allowed people to deal with issues such as overpopulation and space exploration. The conception of space as a place to locate new societies became popular in the utopian tradition after its blending with science fiction, and Octavia Butler further connects it with Afrofuturism through her portrayal of the racial perspective. Lauren's objective is space: "The Destiny of Earthseed/ Is to take root among the stars" (Butler 2019: 80), which represents the potential for a blank slate without violence and injustices.

4.3. 2026: The Disappearance of Static Utopianism

In the third part, Lauren suffers two tremendous losses: her brother's gruesome death and her father's mysterious disappearance. In the neighbourhood, incidents continue to happen, and some families decide to move to richer neighbourhoods. For her part, Lauren continues with her Earthseed plans, which are starting to take shape. It has been explained that Lauren repeatedly advocates for change and adaptability, but it is important to consider the extent to which she might try to impose her own convictions on other characters. She constantly employs

authoritative language and imperative verbs, which produce definite and categorical statements. Lauren claims that her statements are true: "I wrote that verse a few months ago. It's true like all the verses. It seems more true than ever now, more useful to me when I'm afraid" (Butler 2019: 117), but she shows no empirical proof. Instead, it seems that she writes to reassure herself. Paradoxically, Lauren's kinetic doctrines resemble static utopianism in the sense that she wants to establish a somewhat fixed vision that she tries to impose on her society.

After thoughtful consideration, Lauren takes a step further and decides that she will leave Robledo, which at this point she has been planning for some time. She wants to travel north, where there are better opportunities of finding a quiet place to start her community. This travelling is reminiscent of the journey to reach utopian islands in traditional utopias, such as More's *Utopia* (1516) or Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626). The travelling was a device used for locating utopias in time and space. In both traditional utopias and *Parable of the Sower*, there is a sharp contrast between the place of origin and the destination. In fact, the weaknesses of the place of origin stress the superior quality of the new place. The experiences and contents of the travels are complete opposites, but the destination in both cases is a land to start anew. Lauren is aware of the dangers ahead, but she is prepared to deal with the consequences.

It is also in this third part when Lauren decides the name for her book, which she names *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*. The naming of the book indicates that Earthseed has stopped being an abstract idea. Lauren continues to think about teaching directly from the book of Earthseed when she writes "Teaching is what I would choose to do. Even if I have to take other kinds of work to get enough to eat, I can teach. If I do it well, it will draw people to me —to Earthseed" (Butler 2019: 117). By doing this, she will become a sort of prophet.

Within her writings, Lauren finds solace in the notions of adaptability and change; the idea of living in a world where she is not in constant fear helps her to cope with reality. In her darkest moments, Lauren is able to return to Earthseed and regain her confidence in the future. Lauren intends to create a book that compiles Earthseed's prime principles and doctrines, which is how Earthseed resembles a religious text. Nonetheless, Lauren never completely abandons the Bible, and when her father disappears, she reads from it to the neighbourhood. Lauren might disagree with the conception of God, but she shares the same sense of community and wishes to lift people's spirits: "We have God and we have each other. We have our island community, fragile, and yet a fortress. Sometimes it seems too small and too weak to survive. […] But also like the widow, it persists. We persist. This is our place, no matter what" (Butler 2019: 127). Lauren preaches a sermon about persistence, and it can be extrapolated to two different issues. Firstly, to continue

the search for her missing father, who has disappeared in mysterious circumstances, but also to resist as a community against adversity. It is not enough to have faith in the future: it is necessary to act on it.

By the end of the third part, people's spirits are lower than ever: "People are setting fires because they're frustrated, angry, hopeless. They have no power to improve their lives, but they have the power to make others even more miserable. And the only way to prove to yourself that you have power is to use it" (Butler 2019: 135). The community is coming apart, and the death of Lauren's father represents a turning point, because he was the force that kept it together, in Ruffin's words: "Lauren associates the death of her father with the death of the community, and rightly so" (2005: 90). Because Lauren's father represented static utopianism, when he disappears, this variant of utopianism leaves with him. Eventually, the members of the neighbourhood determine that their attempts to change the world are futile and they are resigned to the lives they currently have.

4.4. 2027: The Utopian Journey

In the fourth part, the gate falls and the neighbourhood succumbs to violent outsiders. Lauren's family and the majority of the neighbourhood perish, but she escapes. Lauren starts her journey to find the perfect location in which to found her open society. Before this moment, the journey had only been a theoretical plan. During the journey, she progressively forms a group of unconventional people who decide to join her. Earthseed starts to become a reality.

Lauren survived the fall of the neighbourhood because instead of hoping for a miracle, she devised an escape plan. Butler creates a stark contrast between the followers of static and kinetic utopianism. The followers of static utopianism had faith not only in the protection of God, but also in the gate. When the gate falls, they are unprepared and ill-equipped; they are unable to adapt to the circumstances. Kinetic utopianism allows Lauren to adapt and to survive; she acts quickly and efficiently, and her utopian journey begins. During the journey, Lauren teaches Earthseed to some of her companions. She has carefully planned the order in which the doctrines ought to appear: "Last year, I chose these lines for the first page of the first book of *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. These lines say everything. Everything!" (2019: 184). The first lines of the book stress the importance of change and mention the mantra of the religion; God is Change. *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* is a book in progress, as opposed to the Bible, whose content has been set for centuries. The Bible does not present a linear narrative; it is a compilation of texts from different sources that can be read and interpreted in a variety of ways. Once again, the essence of static utopianism resides in stability and traditionalism, whereas the kinetic favours movement, because it is a work in progress.

The first verses of Earthseed are essential to attract new members. They are a presentation and summary of the whole religion. When Lauren reads aloud to one of her companions, she carefully chooses a fragment from the first page: "Would have given him money to read and digest some of the Earthseed portions of my journal. But he had to be eased into them. If he read the wrong thing, it would just increase the distance between us" (Butler 2019: 183). Lauren wants to sound convincing, and she is afraid of scaring away potential followers. She aims to dissipate the mistrust of the group and create a soothing atmosphere.

Unlike the book of Earthseed, the Bible does not need presentation. In the novel it is depicted as a well-established text with a clear objective: to offer solace and moral guidance. Lauren argues that people resort to religious texts when facing adversities as she states: "People do that all the time. They reach back to the Bible, the Talmud, the Koran, or some other religious book that helps them deal with the frightening changes that happen in life" (Butler 2019: 208). One of the most crucial differences between the two religions is the image of God, because Christian religion presents an all-seeing and powerful God that decides the destiny of humanity. In Earthseed, God is a spiritual force, and humans are in charge of shaping their own destiny. Once again, the difference is based on that which is stationary in contrast with movement.

173

Finally, Lauren gets some of her travelling companions to join Earthseed: "I think Travis Charles Douglas is my first convert. Zahra Moss is my second" (Butler 2019: 209). Lauren is confident in her ideas and thinks she can get more people to join Earthseed. Lauren's feelings towards creating a better future are genuine and she welcomes everyone into her group. When they first met, the members of Lauren's group showed reticence towards Earthseed and the open society because of the suffering they had undergone. They were sceptical and wondered whether Lauren's own project would likewise end in a closed society. Nonetheless, they eventually decide to join her and her project, abandoning their old religions along the way. In dark times, the joint sense of community is part of what draws people to Earthseed. Either purposefully or inadvertently, Earthseed incorporates ideas and beliefs that exist in other religions: "It sounds like some combination of Buddhism, existentialism, Sufism, and I don't know what else" (Butler 2019: 246). Earthseed contains elements such as the impermanence of things from the Buddhists, the importance of individual responsibility of existentialism, or the pursuit of spiritual development from Sufism. Needless to say, Lauren also subverts certain values from Christianism, such as the traditional image of God as an all-seeing figure: "But it's not a god. It's not a person or an intelligence or even a thing. It's just… I don't know. An idea" (Butler 2019: 204). In Earthseed, God is not a person, but an idea that Lauren personifies for other people to remember the

mantras more easily. Furthermore, she incorporates the sense of community and a desire for belonging that most religions exhibit.

By the end of the novel, Butler introduces the notion of mutability within religion: "All religions change. Think about the big ones. What do you think Christ would be these days? A Baptist? A Methodist? A Catholic? And the Buddha —do you think he'd be a Buddhist now? What kind of Buddhism would he practice?" (Butler 2019: 247), and the idea that all religions change within certain parameters. Religions are never completely static, and it is natural that, as societies advance, new interpretations and offshoots appear. Yet, the old religions are regarded as static because of their reticence of change. At this point, Lauren has to accept that her own religion might change beyond her own control if it continues to expand. To Lauren, change is at the mercy of humans, and not a supernatural force. The concept of change as Lauren understands it relates to the utopian wish inasmuch as it recognises that change is necessary for progress. If a society refuses change, then it cannot properly evolve, and Robledo is the perfect example. In this sense, Butler successfully portrays "a narrative about the tragic consequences of rejecting change by means of restoring paternalistic structures" (Nilges 2009: 1333). The inhabitants of this neighbourhood did not survive because they relied on fixed and antiquated traditions; they were unprepared and unable to adapt to the hostility of the world.

Lauren wants to provide the same sense of calm and reassurance that religion provides for others. In the end, Earthseed is not starkly different from traditional religion; in a sense, it has a church, sacred texts and a preacher. Lauren does not mean to impose her religion or fix all of the world's problems, but she thinks the world would be a better place if they followed the Earthseed doctrines. Lauren's devised society is the representation of an open society in that it is based on communication, respect and, most of all, collaboration: "If we're a good pack, and we work together, we have a chance" (Butler 2019: 172). Individually, humans have little chance of surviving in the dystopian world, but as a group they can protect each other.

When the group reaches their destination, their first act as a community is to hold a funeral for their lost members and to plant a tree for each of the departed. The funeral provides a sense of closure, and the scene as a whole reflects the potential for a new beginning and the birth of Lauren's community. Finally, Earthseed becomes the reality that Lauren has dreamed of for so long. Now that Earthseed is not a mere theoretical proposition, it is inevitable to question whether Lauren will manage to stop it from becoming a static utopia. The novel closes with the *Parable of the Sower* from the King James Bible and the idea that seeds will die if they fall on barren ground, but they will bear fruit if they are planted in fertile

ground. The inclusion of this parable at the end of the text might be an indicator that Lauren's society will most likely flourish because she has found a location where it is fit to start it.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this article has explored the notion that utopianism yearns for the creation of alternative visions to current realities in order to improve them. This tenet forms the basis of utopian fiction, since utopias are born of a yearning for improvement and the creation of good places. But this aspect is also of paramount importance within dystopian fiction, where this spirit is embodied in the characters who fight to eradicate bad places. In the dystopian novel *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler juxtaposes two different religions, one real and one fictional, to represent a conflict between a static and a kinetic approach to the idea of utopia.

This article has aimed to analyse how each of these two models of utopianism and their respective religions affected the society that Butler depicted within her novel. *Parable of the Sower* does not mean to condemn any religion, but it clearly favours Earthseed over Baptist Protestantism. Lauren and Earthseed are able to evolve and persevere because she is a fervent supporter of the adaptability that characterises kinetic utopianism. Lauren's determination to shape her own future forges her resilient character, and in the end she manages to translate her utopian vision into the real world. On the other hand, the reticence of change that characterises static utopianism and the inability of the Protestants to adapt to the dystopian circumstances ultimately leads to its disappearance altogether.

In conclusion, Octavia Butler contrasts these two variants of utopianism to express the extent to which the conception of what a good place entails depends on time, place and, especially, on the beliefs of its creator. This article concludes by agreeing with the idea that change is necessary for the evolution and survival of any society. This message is especially relevant within the context of the novel, but it can be extrapolated to the real world. *Parable of the Sower* encourages readers to be proactive and to seek the change that they want to see in the world.

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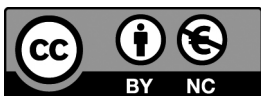
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