

Cli-Fi in the Classroom: Climate Justice and Environmental Citizenship in *Parable of the Sower*

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ABSTRACT

Parable of the Sower is a significant work of climate fiction that presents a dystopian society shaped by ecological collapse, economic instability, violence, and social fragmentation. Octavia Butler explores the interrelated issues of the climate crisis, migration, racism, class, and survival in a rapidly changing world through the experiences of the protagonist, Lauren Olamina. This study investigates how the novel might be taught as a pedagogical instrument for climate justice and environmental citizenship in high school and undergraduate courses, drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence and Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory. It examines how Butler depicts environmental injustice and community resiliency while highlighting how speculative fiction may foster students' critical thinking, ethical consciousness, and sense of social duty. The study further argues that cli-fi creates imaginative spaces through which readers can engage with the human dimensions of ecological crisis and rethink their relationship with society and the environment.

Keywords: Cli-fi, Environmental Citizenship, Climate Justice, Transformative Learning, Slow Violence

INTRODUCTION

The perception around climate change has evolved rapidly from being merely an environmental issue to being seen as a social and political disaster influenced by violence, displacement, and inequality. In response to these worries, contemporary literature—particularly climate fiction, or cli-fi—has increasingly imagined societies impacted by social instability and ecological collapse. Cli-fi invites readers to consider issues of justice, survival, and accountability while examining the human effects of environmental degradation through speculative scenarios. Cli-fi is rapidly gaining importance in environmental humanities discussions as a pedagogical approach that might promote ecological consciousness and environmental citizenship (Hayward & Kannemeyer, 2021).

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* presents a picture of a dystopian America plagued by social violence, economic collapse, ecological ruin, and privatization. Butler depicts a civilization in which public insecurity, gated neighbourhoods, water scarcity, and displacement are commonplace. The story frequently emphasizes how precarious survival is, especially for underprivileged groups living outside of privileged and protected systems. Lauren Olamina's journey through collapsing social spaces demonstrates how the environmental catastrophe exacerbates gender, racial, and economic inequality while simultaneously necessitating new forms of community and collective resistance. Lauren's observation that "water is expensive" (Butler, 1993, p. 18) immediately establishes a society where even basic human necessities have become inaccessible commodities. Butler depicts corporate exploitation, mass homelessness, gated enclaves, and climatic migration as commonplace occurrences in a disintegrating society. Lauren suggests that environmental instability has already changed daily living by describing the outer world as being full of "homeless squatters, beggars, and thieves" (Butler, 1993, p. 9).

Rob Nixon refers to this delayed and undetectable environmental degradation as "slow violence," a type of violence that over time disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups. As a result, climate fiction becomes a crucial literary genre for depicting the unequal social repercussions of ecological collapse and its experienced realities. The transformative learning theory proposed by Jack Mezirow, which emphasizes critical reflection and the transformation of perspectives through learning experiences, is also incorporated into the paper. Butler

challenges readers' preconceived notions about social fairness, environmental responsibility, and human interdependence. The novel becomes an important teaching tool for raising awareness of an individual's and the community's role in environmental citizenship and climate justice in high school and college courses by portraying the climate problem as a real social condition rather than an abstract, far-off issue.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Climate Justice and Slow Violence

Rob Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Slow violence, in contrast to acute forms of devastation, develops gradually through institutional neglect, poverty, displacement, and environmental degradation. Nixon contends that since they lack social and economic protection, underprivileged people suffer the most from the ecological disaster. This state is reflected in Butler's dystopian America through recurrent themes of institutional breakdown, migration, homelessness, and water scarcity. According to Lauren (Butler, 1993, p. 9), her neighbourhood wall is “more threatening than protective,” implying that even contained communities are unable to completely avoid ecological breakdown. “Filthy, gaunt, half-naked children” live in “trashed—burned, vandalized” houses beyond the walls (Butler, 1993, p. 29). These scenes demonstrate how vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected by environmental collapse. In the book, water scarcity exacerbates inequality even further. Despite the fact that “he couldn't afford it,” Lauren observes that her father insisted on using “fresh, clean, potable water” for the baptism (Butler, 1993, p. 33). Wealth increasingly determines access to safety, water, and even religion. Butler's portrayal of privatized survival demonstrates Nixon's contention that systems of inequality are intimately linked to environmental deterioration.

The harsh realities of gradual violence are also reflected in forced migration. Lauren goes through hazardous areas teeming with displaced people following the devastation of her community. “People were desperate and hungry and willing to do anything,” she notes (Butler, 1993, p. 115). Migration becomes the aftereffect of a rapidly worsening ecological and economic catastrophe. Nixon and Christensen (2017) contend in the interview “Slow Violence in the Anthropocene” that environmental catastrophes frequently become accepted because they develop gradually and become ingrained in daily life. In a similar vein, Butler depicts starvation, violence, and relocation as commonplace aspects of ecological collapse. Institutional breakdown further intensifies this condition of precarity. Churches, police departments, and schools are no longer places of safety. Lauren illustrates how fear and privatized protection rule social life by describing churches guarded by “security bars and Lazor wire” (Butler, 1993, p. 35). Nixon's approach aids in explaining how environmental crises progressively undermine social and political stability in addition to ecosystems.

Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow's transformative learning theory, which stresses critical reflection and viewpoint transformation, is also incorporated into the study. Mezirow claims that learning frequently happens as a result of “disorienting dilemmas” that contradict preconceived notions and worldviews. Similar to this, climate fiction challenges readers with hypothetical futures that call for moral and social introspection. Lauren's experiences with instability and collapse are the direct source of her Earthseed worldview. The recurrent idea “God is Change” (Butler, 1993, p. 3) places more emphasis on group survival and adaptation than on rigid belief systems. Readers are prompted to reconsider presumptions about community, resilience, and climate responsibility through Lauren's journey. Climate fiction serves as a kind of environmental education in addition to being a speculative narrative. Cli-fi challenges readers to consider societal injustice, ecological collapse, and moral obligation. Literary narratives, in contrast to scientific reports, make the climate problem socially and emotionally accessible. Butler uses commonplace experiences of violence, starvation, fear, and migration to illustrate environmental collapse in *Parable of the Sower*. Outside the neighbourhood walls, Lauren sees injured and nude people, such as “a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old with blood running down her bare thighs” (Butler, 1993, p. 31). Butler's dystopian, harsh setting frequently disrupts both Lauren and the reader. Lauren is forced to give up preconceived notions about safety, stability, faith, and institutional protection as a result of Robledo's devastation, which becomes a significant and challenging dilemma in the book. Traditional frameworks can no longer ensure survival, as seen by the disintegration of social systems. Lauren gradually comes to understand that in a world influenced by ecological instability, adaptation is essential. Butler challenges preconceived

notions about environmental crises as remote or abstract by depicting water scarcity, homelessness, climate migration, and institutional collapse.

Readers are forced to consider the social ramifications of ecological collapse by scenes including displaced families, burning neighbourhoods, and privatized security services. Instead of perceiving the effects of ecological breakdown as a distant concept, the reader is forced to immerse themselves in the perspective of the characters. This approach is further supported by recent research on cli-fi as climate pedagogy. According to Hayward and Kannemeyer (2021), by relating ecological problems to actual human experiences, climate fiction fosters moral and emotional engagement with environmental crises. Corporate communities like *Olivar* show how vulnerable populations are exploited by privatization during ecological crises. In return for labour regulation and limited independence, residents are guaranteed jobs and protection. Lauren acknowledges that "people will be treated like company slaves" (Butler, 1993, p.91), demonstrating how economic exploitation is exacerbated by environmental collapse. Thus, teaching cli-fi in the classroom helps foster critical literacy and environmental citizenship. Students are able to make connections between literary analysis and modern ecological realities through discussions on migration, resource inequality, privatization, and survival ethics. Butler's story promotes systems thinking by showing how environmental collapse impacts all facets of societal existence. In a similar vein, transformative learning theory prioritizes ethical thought and critical consciousness above passive knowledge consumption. As it inspires readers to reconsider environmental responsibility, social survival, and civic involvement through imaginative engagement with climate collapse, Butler's speculative story serves as an important teaching tool.

DISCUSSION

Climate Collapse and Social Fragmentation

Environmental instability and institutional failure shape Butler's dystopia. Schools, transit, and law enforcement are examples of public systems that are efficient. Churches themselves are like "fortress churches," encircled by "security bars and Lazor wire" (Butler, 1993, p. 35). A society ruled by fear and privatized protection results from the breakdown of institutions. Fire is frequently used in the book as a metaphor for ecological and social devastation. The fictional drug *Pyro*, which makes users derive extreme pleasure from seeing fire, is a reflection of how violence has become more commonplace in a society that is rapidly disintegrating. The uncontrollably spreading devastation throughout the book is reflected in Lauren's recurrent dream of drifting into flames. Lauren sees "houses burning, people shooting and screaming" during the attack on *Robledo* (Butler, 1993, p. 154). These scenarios demonstrate how violence and societal disintegration are exacerbated by ecological decline.

Butler also links growing class divides to environmental instability. While impoverished populations continue to face starvation and violence, wealthier societies live behind walls guarded by firearms and private security. Outside the walls, Lauren observes, "people without money, without jobs, without hope" (Butler, 1993, p. 10) fight just to get by. *Robledo* thus becomes a good example of how environmental collapse affects different class populations disproportionately. Butler's portrayal of climatic collapse goes beyond environmental deterioration to highlight the disintegration of social structures and ties among communities. Prolonged drought, food shortages, rising unemployment, and escalating violence characterize the world of *Parable of the Sower*. These processes culminate in *Robledo's* destruction. The sense of protection completely crumbles when the village is attacked and set on fire. Lauren sees homes destroyed by fire and neighbours murdered without cause (Butler, 1993, pp. 154–156). The incident serves as an example of how social violence, economic inequality, and ecological instability can all reinforce one another. As a result, Butler presents climate breakdown as a crisis that radically alters social, political, and ethical life rather than just an environmental issue.

Migration and Community Formation

Lauren is forced to journey to the north along roads crowded with displaced people, robbers, addicts, and scavengers fighting for their lives after *Robledo* is destroyed. Butler frequently portrays migration as an inevitable byproduct of economic and ecological breakdown. Lauren notes that "the highways are dangerous because of thieves, carjackers, and people desperate enough to do anything" (Butler, 1993, p. 170). As a result, travel in the book is linked to fear and precarity rather than movement or opportunity. Since governmental

institutions and natural conditions are no longer able to support everyday living, entire communities are uprooted. The unequal realities of climate migration are clearly revealed by the travel north. Lauren sees people sleeping outside, families walking with their goods, and kids left at risk of assault and malnutrition. She highlights how ecological collapse turns migration into a state of collective misery by noting "whole families camping in the wastes along the roadsides" (Butler, 1993, p. 213). These scenes closely reflect Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence, where environmental destruction gradually produces poverty, insecurity, and displacement over time. Butler does not, however, present survival as wholly individualistic. Lauren progressively builds ties with Harry, Zahra, Bankole, and other people as she travels, sharing labour, food, and protection. Community becomes necessary for survival within collapsing systems. Lauren frequently acknowledges that being alone makes one more vulnerable, especially for women and other underprivileged people who are passing through violent areas. As a result, her expanding Earthseed community serves as a substitute for the failing establishments that surround them.

Dystopia as Civic Warning

Social disintegration and ecological fragility give rise to Earthseed itself. Lauren's idea that survival depends on adaptation rather than permanence is reflected in the core concept that "God is Change" (Butler, 1993, p. 3). In contrast to the inflexible systems that crumble throughout the book, Earthseed places a strong emphasis on change, collaboration, and group accountability. Lauren's efforts to create a new community at Acorn represent potential for resiliency in the face of environmental catastrophe. Survival is created through interconnectedness and mutual aid rather than replicating systems built on exclusion and private protection. The *Parable of the Sower* serves as a warning about the societal repercussions of environmental injustice and neglect in addition to being a work of dystopian fiction. Butler's hypothetical story compels readers to acknowledge the connections between the climate problem and issues of race, poverty, migration, labour exploitation, and institutional failure. Water shortages, mass displacement, gated communities, privatized security, and economic precarity are just a few of the conditions depicted in the book that are similar to current concerns about environmental injustice and climate change. Butler uses everyday human experiences rather than abstract scientific terminology to depict climatic collapse, which dramatically increases the book's impact in educational settings. Readers may relate to the environmental disaster on an emotional level in part due to Lauren's narration, which heavily emphasizes the anxiety, tiredness, loss, and uncertainty that occurs as a result of their precarious living conditions. For example, after witnessing widespread destruction, Lauren reflects that "people can be inhuman. Worse than inhuman" (Butler, 1993, p. 220). Such moments encourage students to think critically about how ecological instability reshapes ethics, social behaviour, and human relationships.

Classroom Application and Pedagogical Relevance of the Novel

The novel's relevance and application in teaching are found in its capacity to link literary study with ethical contemplation and ecological awareness. Butler's story has the potential to give students the chance to critically discuss issues like inequality, migration, climate justice, and group responsibility. Therefore, the book could serve as an effective teaching tool for environmental citizenship in high school and college courses. The promotion of ecological literacy is one of the main learning objectives of teaching the book. Butler's depictions of homelessness, water scarcity, and institutional breakdown could potentially help students comprehend the connections between racial, social, and economic precarity and environmental crises. Lauren's statement that "you can buy anything you can pay for" (Butler, 1993, p. 18) promotes conversation about capitalist systems' privatization, resource inequality, and exploitation.

Teaching the novel can help students effectively engage with questions surrounding the concepts of environmental citizenship and collective responsibility. Lauren's Earthseed philosophy challenges readers to reevaluate notions about stability, consumption, and social responsibility by emphasizing adaptability and change during multiple occasions. The book promotes transformative learning through active critical analysis and emotional involvement. Jack Mezirow contends that when people face situations that challenge their preconceived notions, transformative learning takes place. Students in this particular setting are prompted to challenge presumptions about privilege, stability, and environmental responsibility through unsettling and disturbing scenes that involve forms of violence such as systemic (as seen through the clear demarcation between the poor and rich), ambient and direct modes, ecological collapse, and displacement. Classroom engagement

with the work can be further enhanced through ecocritical close reading exercises. To comprehend how Butler metaphorically and socially depicts environmental breakdown, students should examine recurrent images like walls, fire, drought, and hyperempathy. For example, Lauren's hyperempathy syndrome can be used as a metaphor for ethical duty and ecological connection. Lauren exhibits extraordinary empathy by physically feeling other people's suffering, which stands in sharp contrast to the individualism that characterizes her society. Butler turns science fiction into a tool for civic involvement by portraying climate breakdown as a lived social experience rather than an abstract disaster. The book challenges readers to think critically about the social and environmental circumstances of the present as well as to envision healthy, stable ecological futures.

The novel can also support discussions on climate migration and environmental displacement. Students can follow Lauren's journey north and compare and contrast it with current instances of refugee crises and climate migration. By encouraging students to make connections between literary representation and current environmental issues, these exercises help them develop a critical ecological consciousness. Group discussions and debates may help promote ethical thinking and civic participation even more. Students can be encouraged to analyse conflicting reactions to ecological instability in *Parable of the Sower* since it portrays climatic breakdown as both an environmental and social problem. Discussions may focus on issues such how environmental degradation exacerbates already-existing disparities, whether privatized security provides true protection, or whether Butler presents community as the only workable solution to climatic disaster. These kinds of exercises push students to think critically about themes of power, fairness, and accountability rather than just summarizing the storyline. Students can analyze the political and ethical aspects of Butler's dystopian universe through classroom discussions. For example, students can also discuss if Earthseed is actually a useful and viable ideology for social survival or whether members of gated communities are justified in putting their own survival ahead of the welfare of the group. Through these conversations, students can assess various points of view while relating the situations in the book to current concerns surrounding resource distribution, environmental policy, and climate migration. While this study focuses primarily on *Parable of the Sower*, future research may compare Butler's work with other cli-fi narratives in order to further explore the pedagogical possibilities of climate fiction across diverse cultural and ecological contexts. Nevertheless, Butler's novel remains particularly significant because it transforms climate change from abstract discourse into lived human experience, making cli-fi an effective mode of environmental pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

Climate collapse is portrayed in *Parable of the Sower* as a continuous social reality affected by violence, injustice, relocation, and institutional failure rather than as a far-off apocalyptic event. Octavia Butler illustrates how vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected by environmental crises through recurrent themes of water scarcity, migration, homelessness, and privatized existence. By applying Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence, the work can be interpreted as a critique of the gradual and accepted forms of ecological damage that gradually worsen poverty, precarity, and social disintegration and through anticipating opportunities for resiliency and group survival, the book surpasses being merely dystopian warning. Lauren Olamina's Earthseed philosophy, which emphasizes community building, accountability, and adaptation in the face of collapse, arises from unstable circumstances. Butler emphasizes the value of collaboration and moral accountability in nations that have harmed the environment through Lauren's metamorphosis. The paper also incorporates the use of Jack Mezirow's transformational learning theory to illustrate the educational value of cli-fi. The confusing experiences created by Butler's speculative story inspire readers and students to think critically about civic involvement, social inequality, and environmental responsibility. The story humanizes the ecological problem by emphasizing fear, migration, survival, and fragility in daily life rather than only presenting climate change through abstract scientific language. *Parable of the Sower* is especially useful for discussing environmental citizenship and climate justice in the classroom. Literature classrooms thus become crucial places for fostering ecological awareness and ethical inquiry as climate change continues to influence modern social and political realities and implementing Butler's book holds the potential to challenge students to think critically about systems of injustice, environmental deterioration, and collective responsibility while also picturing different kinds of survival and community. In this way, cli-fi serves as both speculative literature and a type of environmental education that equips readers to face the social realities of the climate problem with increased empathy and critical awareness.

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