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### Environment & Society– The Collective Downfall

A barren landscape riddled with fire; a child cries out for its mother, not knowing she has been killed, while clusters of pyromaniacs and passerby alike scavenge mercilessly through rubble and ash for any means of survival, giving no thought to the family who once called this place their home. In an environment as fast-paced, ruthless, and treacherous as this one, it's difficult to focus on a slow, festering, gradual violence behind the scenes. This landscape is that of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and this idea of a "slow violence" belongs to environmental theorist Rob Nixon. The topic of slow violence is prevalent throughout Butler's novel, and becomes increasingly evident when juxtaposed against the bursts of fast-paced violence that threaten the lives of the characters in this story every day. Among the slow violence infecting the entire landscape the protagonist finds herself in, therein lies a slow, festering resurgence of racism, sexism, and oppression as society itself perpetually regresses in this ever-growing wasteland, infecting this ultimately doomed environment in an entirely new way, one that transcends the mere physical and tangible reality before these characters.

In order to assess the resurgence of racism, sexism, and the regression of society in the way in which Butler's novel presents it, it is beneficial to first explore the associated historical context. American historian and environmental theorist Kimberly K. Smith writes on the subjective perception of the environment one may have due to influences of culture and background in her "African American Environmental Thought Foundations," particularly that of

“black families... and their families homeplaces” (Smith, 187). Smith notes that “Access to environmental amenities such as parks and beaches was of course a major source of racial conflict throughout the twentieth century,” (Smith 188) which is a fascinating quote to touch on in conjunction with *Parable of the Sower*, in that the beach presents itself as a communal safe space to rest for people of all genders, races, cultures, and backgrounds, while also being a crucial space for the main character, Lauren, and her evolution. There is a powerful metaphor to be found here, as Lauren has ventured beyond the confines of her walled community, under the heavy influence of her father, to come to this communal space. Up to this point in the novel, she has let strong opinions on interracial relationships and diversity influence a great deal of her thoughts, being quite harsh and judgmental in terms of cross-cultural interaction and attraction. As she comes to the beach with her newfound commune, she enters the ocean, something she had never even seen before. Here she has a cleansing of not only her body, but her spirit. Whereas she had been quite judgmental and distrusting before (granted, this nature of hers had improved slightly at this point in her journey), she at once becomes immensely more trusting and open, and exemplifies this immediately by trusting the water in the sand. Moreover, she refers to an interracial family on the beach as “the mixed couple” and her commune as “the mixed group,” and refers to them collectively as “natural allies” (Butler, 208). This lets the reader’s guard down, and creates an illusion of acceptance, trust, and inclusion in this world, concepts quite rare within the novel. Though it may be enticing here to see this as a turning point, Butler instead uses this beach to further push the reality of this environment. Sexism is quickly exemplified as the husband of the mixed couple, Travis, finds out Lauren is a woman, as she has disguised herself as a man to look stronger, to appear as less of a target in this environment (this in and of itself proves sexism to be a thriving concept in these times). Travis quickly begins to speak to

Lauren with “more pride than sense,” (Butler, 212) and insists he can take care of *his* family, that he doesn’t need her help. Immediately he oppresses and frankly disrespects this girl who he expressed gratitude for when he thought she was a man, as masculine stereotypes are no doubt amplified here in this environment where you have to fight for your family’s survival, as well as your own.

Butler introduces themes of racism and slavery to the story shortly after their arrival to the beach as well, further juxtaposing this short-lived sense of trust, inclusion, and open-mindedness. Travis and Natividad share their experiences with Lauren about learning to read as slaves, and running from their master to keep themselves safe, and Lauren marvels at their stories, noting that they are “something out of another era” (Butler, 219). This not only proves that humanity and society are regressing drastically alongside the crumbling wasteland of an environment around them, but this also proves the unawareness Lauren experiences to the slow violence happening around her, especially in her state of containment within the walls she grew up in. All she knew was her family, her father and his opinions, and people like her. This is an especially interesting concept in that Lauren herself is a woman of color, but retains a certain amount of privilege in her upbringing and circumstances, if one could go so far as to call it that.

Octavia Butler speaks to this society she creates in *Parable of the Sower* quite eloquently in an essay written for the UN Racism Conference in 2001. She states:

“Simple peck-order bullying is only the beginning of the kind of hierarchical behavior that can lead to racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, classism, and all the other “isms” that cause so much suffering in the world.”

It's incredibly enlightening to have such a concept so simply and eloquently put. Butler's use of the word "beginning" is also a crucial point to touch on, as what she follows up with is an example of slow violence, just as Rob Nixon portrays. While bullying is typically associated with fast violence, someone inflicting harm on another in an active moment, this bullying she speaks of transcends such a vision. Nixon describes slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight," (Nixon, 2) though repercussions of it may show itself through tangible means, such as blatant sexism (such as Travis' sudden resistance and aggression towards Lauren's help) and racism (such as slavery, or even Lauren's judgement towards interracial couples and families). The descent to such a primitive society in this treacherous, physically and emotionally taxing environment is undoubtedly a form of slow violence. The reader can easily see a reversion to antiquated, animalistic, primitive tendencies through this novel, tendencies that humankind had worked up to this point to abolish and evolve from (speaking broadly, for the most part. Modern society is *far* from perfect). Though the trained reader can identify this, the characters themselves are far from actively aware, for they are entirely more focused on the fast violence that can (and does) threaten their lives at a moment's notice. Though some of these heinous acts of fast violence may be attributed to delusion and drug abuse, others occur due to racism, classism, agism, and sexism as a result of the regressing society, where animalistic tendencies run rampant, and perception is everything.

The alignment of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and the struggle of oppression as perpetuated by the slow violence plaguing the landscape and society alike is undeniable. Alongside physical, tangible stressors as exemplified by the crumbling environment around Butler's characters, there exists a slow, festering, ever-worsening struggle. Not only are these people burdened with keeping themselves and their loved ones protected and alive, but they are

also—less obviously so, to themselves—burdened with the regressing society, and the gradual resurgence of oppression, racism, and sexism around them. As Kimberly K. Smith describes it, “Black Americans have seen the strange renderings of nature wrought by racial oppression” (Smith, 201). Not only must Lauren, a young black woman, face a wretched landscape physically speaking, but she has also been thrust into an entirely different world, one she did not know within the confines of her walled community, especially in her being taught to judge others unlike herself and her own family structure. She must now grapple with a landscape wrought with oppression, impacting her personally through sexism and racism, alongside the fast violence she works to defend her and her loved ones against. The world crumbles around her, not only through fire, robbery, and death, but through the resurgence of oppression, slavery, and a patriarchal society that afflicts her so much that she must disguise her own personal identity to remain safe.

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