

A Brief History of a Feminist Future: A Feminist Analysis of Works by Dodd and Butler

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### Introduction

The image is striking: in the T.V. show *The Walking Dead*, a lone man mounted on a horse silently rides in the middle of an abandoned city street. A similar scene was captured recently in real-life, evoking the same sense of dread. During the height of the recent Covid 19 pandemic, a photograph circulated of a mounted cop patrolling the eerily quiet and crowd free Times Square. An empty Times Square also caused many to recall the opening scene in *I am Legend*, as actor Will Smith walks through the abandoned Crossroads, a dog his only companion. Films and shows such as these can be categorized as dystopias, fictionalized futures where something has gone terribly wrong. Dystopian themes revolve frequently around loss: loss of individual agency, loss of resources, loss of the security of civilization. Often, scenes from dystopias are evoked as commentary to current events. The writers, directors, artists involved in forming these worlds seem ever prescient to the human condition, tapping into our concerns and anxieties. This prescience is juxtaposed with, to put it kindly, the lack of imagination of our government officials as evidenced by their response to the Coronavirus pandemic. It is the artists who imagined the unimaginable, leading to fiction foreshadowing our current reality. The artists who construct these fictionalized worlds may see things to which most of us are impervious, perhaps as a “plea for a closer examination of our current imperfect societies” (Kim 2015 para 7). Going beyond entertainment, can we learn from dystopias? In what ways can they add to the discourse, alerting us to potential pitfalls as we navigate and cultivate our complex

intersecting lives? To what extent have past utopias been predictive of our current state? Are the themes found in them consistent throughout the decades or do they vary in the context of history, gender and race? Specifically, what can be learned about the fears and anxieties of being female in our ever-evolving American society? As for female-centric dystopias, Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is frequently cited. This novel portrays a society's reversion to an extreme form of patriarchy. Many make allusions to *The Handmaid's Tale* in today's political discourse. Some women even don the signature red gowns of the protagonists in protest. To further explore the female dystopian perspective, this paper will focus on a comparison between two dystopian depictions in literature: the 1887 novella by Anna Bowman Dodd, *A New Republic: or Socialism a Reality* and Octavia Butler's 1993 novel, *Parable of the Sower*. These are two American women writers, writing and living in the years before their respective century's turned: a time, anecdotally, of increased introspection of future and past. The content of the literary pieces will be explored for recurring themes and looking at how these writers viewed the future from their point of view. The impact of historical context will be considered, as well as the authors' history background. For example, Anna Bowman Dodd was born into a merchant class family in nineteenth century New York and Octavia Butler was an award-winning African American science-fiction writer born during segregation. Both wrote during times where women were critiquing the current power structure. Existing literature reviews and research tends to focus on more popular works of fiction, citing their influence and creativity. 1984, *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* are the most frequently analyzed. Their popularity affords them this deep analysis as well as numerous contemporary cultural

references. These well known dystopias are often used as research to explore larger themes such as: man's attempt to control his inner nature or nature at large; free will vs. the greater good; human resilience in the face of adversity. By choosing Dodd and Butler's less-referenced works and noting the influence of lapsed time along with the feminist perspective, this paper hopes to add to the to the insights gained by other researchers who evaluate the more well-known works. Ultimately, this capstone will examine if there is a consistency of themes between for two female writers in a male-dominated genre within a male dominated society, one hundred years apart. It is likely the dominant themes will be similar: the two worlds in which these women imagined their respective stories were, and still are, dualistic, Western, and paternal. However, the passage of time may lend a different view of exactly where they fit into this dominant social construct.

### **Literature Review**

Dystopian movies and literature are often used as clever references to contemporary news stories, acting as an metaphorical anchor as we try to understand how current events fit into the overarching narrative of human experience. Themes often center on the interplay between the individual and the collective roles within a society and the cost of an imbalance of either role. The two dystopian societies taking place in the imagined 21st century by the writers Anna Bowman Dodd and Octavia Butler explore this theme, though the stories could not be any more different. Dodd describes an egalitarian society whose inhabitants are a shell of their ancestral selves while Butler's is a quasi-apocalyptic survival tale. Both scenarios, Dodd's written in the late 1800's and Butler's written in the late 1900's, find parallels in today's world and both

sought to reveal the negative consequences of popular political and social discourse in their respective time periods. Again, while the focus of much research of dystopian literature studies how it acts as social commentary, emphasis has not been placed on how the passage of time can offer insight and how this may have affected gender roles. This literature review looks at two writings of the two authors above, analyses of their works and other articles on dystopian narratives to explore this topic further.

### *Theology and government*

*Parable of the Sower*'s title refers to a passage in the Bible and the story follows young Lauren, who has a calling to create a new theology. Early in the story, Lauren and members of her community go on a rare group outing outside of their protective community gates to perform a communal Baptism. The drive to continue this ritual despite danger revealed its importance. However, we learn Lauren is secretly rejecting her Baptist background. Butler feels the dichotomy of the traditional all-knowing god and his humble followers was recreated in other aspects of the capitalist society (Miller 1998). Butler, as Lauren, surmised: we "create super people--super-parent, super-kings and queens, super-cops--to be our gods and look after us" (1993 p.24) Lauren developed a new religion that consciously rejects the traditional master/subject paradigm and embraced change and adaptability. Practical over dogmatic, this religion seemed to parallel Butler's personal belief that individual and collective perfection is impossible to obtain (Zaki 1990).

In Dodd's socialistic society, religion was deemed "immoral" due to its propensity to trigger "discussion" however some traditions persisted. Christmas day was the one day children who were raised by the state were allowed to visit the home of their

biological parents. They were given toys and learned about Santa. Again, the community felt compelled to recognize this day. Churches were banned as well. However, a temple and a large statue was dedicated to Henry George, an author and contemporary of Dodd (*American... .n.d.*). His book *Poverty and Progress* is a “sacred text” read to Dodd’s imagined socialist community every year.

### *Use of Hyperbole vs. Nuance*

Hughes and Wheeler argue dystopian narratives serve to “shock” their audiences out of “apathy”(2013 p.2). Kim feels they serve to expose society's flaws so they could be avoided (2014). Dodd uses the techniques of parody and satire to counter popular thinking of her day, namely socialism and feminism (Pfaelzer 1980). For instance, at the start of the book Dodd’s narrator learns of the multiple futile attempts by the “Societies Prevention of Cruelty among Cetacea and Crustacea” to prevent “cannibalism” amongst fish species. The world she imagines is almost entirely unrecognizable: people dress the same and evolved to have similar features, houses look the same, nutrition is obtained via pill, and most tasks are mechanized.

Butler uses a more nuanced approach. Isen, in her critique of modern feminist dystopia, argues this approach is more effective as it helps expose society’s existing ills (2019). Butler wrote in her story in post-Reagan America where Miller argues the conservative movement gave capitalism an almost religious reverence (1998). Butler’s vision of 2020 American was recognizable: there is a president, law enforcement, universities and stores. However, they are set in deteriorating, increasingly lawless society. Corporations offer low wage jobs in exchange for protection. Law enforcement

and firefighters will come to your aid for a fee. The fundamentals of society, including the government, exist but in a corrupted form.

### *The purpose of agency*

While these two works seem so different, they both really explore ideas about human agency. In describing her new theology, *Earthseed*, Lauren emphasizes how adherents “shape” their god and heaven through purposeful “action” that “focuses” and “steadies” the mind (Butler 1993 p.202). Lauren writes :”The Self must create its own reasons for being” (Butler 1993 p.237) This is in contrast to being at the mercy of political, religious or corporate authorities. Dodd argues that the process of making an equal society extinguished drive, ingenuity and the development of inherent talent. Her narrator, who is a visitor to the socialist community, yearns to go back to her “barbaric” and “chaotic” country (Dodd 1887 p.85) Imperfection and inequality foster competition, struggle, the need to “fight like demons” to survive, which Dodd feels is the essence of being “alive” (1887 p.85). In Miller’s analysis of Butler and Pfaelzer’s analysis of Dodd, they both mention yearning for something better as a source for purpose (1998 & 1980). The differences in the ways both authors seek to achieve something “better” highlight Imani Kasai's argument that utopia/dystopias can be subjective based on the writer's/reader's perspective (2018).

This literature review focused on a few recurrent themes found in two dystopian works and how the author's communicated these themes. Butler and Dodd showed the perils of too much and too little order in their respective societies, extremes in the continuum of individual and the collective. The research above also looked at the purpose of studying dystopian worlds and recurring themes representing the grand



human experience. However, they did not offer discuss how the feminist perspective changes or persists through out time. To fill this gap, this capstone will offer a feminist critique of both worlds, exploring relevant feminist themes found in both imagined worlds.

### ***Analysis***

Literary thematic analyses are methods to break down written works to explore recurring ideas and narratives, giving the reader more insight into human experience as expressed in the literary medium. Feminist literary analysis is one such method, a way to deeply assess womens' "minds, art, body and ideas" (Plain and Seller 2007 p.2) According to Plain and Seller in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, women's lives in text have been the "subject of innumerable reconfigurations...both defamed and defended" (2007 p.2). Literature and text are vehicles where "most pervasive possibilities can be found for imagining the future of the female subject" (Plain & Seller 2017 p.2). As an area of study, Feminist Literary Criticism emerged in the period of what was considered the 'second wave' of feminism, corresponding with the Civil rights movement in the American 1960s. While the first wave of feminism focused on advancing women suffrage in the late 19th/early 20th centuries, the second wave focused on women achieving equality in the professional and social spheres, such as academia, politics and business (Ohio Humanities 2018). Feminist literary criticism at this point in history sought to "uncover origins" and "establish traditions" of writing by and about women (Plain & Seller 2007 p.2). Elevating the feminist literary critiques alongside traditional areas of study was emphasized and encouraged (Plain & Seller 2007). The third wave of feminism went even further by overriding patriarchal

assumptions, consciously including economically and racially marginalized women in the movement (Ohio Humanities 2018). Using the analytical method with origins in the second wave i.e. the feminist critique, this analysis will look at two different works from the first wave and third wave of feminism: respectively, Dodd's novella *Republic of the Future, or, Socialism : A Reality* (1887) and Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993). These two works imagined two drastically different dystopias and this analysis will focus on feminist themes that have persisted over the hundred year span of the writings.

### *Motherhood*

Lauren, the main character and narrator in Butler's, saw motherhood as a burden. She could not decide if having a baby in an environment "with no hope of anything better and every reason to expect things to get worse" was "brave or stupid" (Butler 1993 p. 80). This perspective was at odds with what was expected of her: marriage, then children. Lauren, spiritual yet pragmatic, reached womanhood just as her area of California had not had rain in six years. Coming of age in the time of climate change affected her outlook. She saw the reality of the scarcity of social and natural resources. The further breakdown of society, she feared, was inevitable. Whereas, others held out hope that things would improve.

Lauren's suspicions about the degradation of society are proved to be true as she learns the stories of other people and families as they join her on her migration north. Although Lauren is reluctant to have children of her own, she sympathizes with the small families she encounters. She meets: two sisters, running away from an abusive father after he murders the elders crying baby; a woman held in indentured servitude escaping with her last remaining child after her two sons were taken from from

her, presumably to be sold; and a young wife and new mother, a servant in a wealthy household, who flees once the head of household made it clear he wanted her for himself. The backdrop of these tragedies is a failed state, where wealth is concentrated and resources are privatized. Unfortunately, in the most corrupt forms of capitalism the most vulnerable seem to suffer most; children and their mothers. Butler wrote this in the beginning of third wave feminism, and her multiethnic characters reflected the wave's ideals. Perhaps Butler's envisioned world was an argument that female equality was not just about getting to the top of the patriarchal society, but rejecting the worst of the patriarchal structure.

In Dodd's socialist *Republic*, the society agreed as a whole that motherhood was not a burden on the societal resources, as they were distributed equally. Yet, it was seen as a detriment to true equality between men and women. Thus, children were given to the state shortly after birth, and then raised until adulthood. In striving for an equal society all 'women's' work was eliminated: child rearing, household chores, cooking. With resources and time evenly allocated, women thrived. They became "head of departments..engineers, machinists, aeronauts, tax collectors, firemen.." (Dodd p 37). Their influence on political life even led to the declaring of wars as illegal. Dodd describes the women as energetic, vigorous, and ambitious; unencumbered by the 'degradation' of motherhood (p.39). Dodd's narrator, a visitor from a more traditional society, laments the loss of the family dynamic. In Dodd's society, the words "home" and "wife" are meaningless due to this gender parity. Men and women are merely cohabitants and spend the majority of time apart. For Dodd writing this in the height of the women's suffrage movement, this served as a warning: advancement in society can

have repercussions on the traditional family structure. Both Dodd and Butler featured childhood separations as a sign of a society gone wrong, along with the idea of women's pre-eminent role in the domestic sphere over time and different social perspectives.

### *Femininity and Androgyny*

Lauren Olamina is not traditionally beautiful. She is wise, persistent, and trustworthy. Being less attractive is not something she dwells upon. In fact, being less attractive works to her advantage as her group migrates north. She is tall enough to disguise herself as a man and therefore is more safe. Her fellow traveler, Zahra, is beautiful, petite and needs constant protection from marauders. Lauren originally knew Zahra as one of the wives of a former gated-community member. She was one of three wives, purchased from her drug addicted mother. Although Zara's husband did not allow her to interact much with others in the gated community before its demise, she remained grateful to him for giving her safety. Zahra's attractiveness gave her access to comfort and resources yet also made her vulnerable in a patriarchal society. This shows how a woman's attractiveness determines her destiny and safety in a patriarchal society, although not in entirely consistent ways.

In Dodd's work, women of this futuristic society downplay their attractiveness. They felt a woman's beauty was "their chief cause of their long-continued slavery" (1887 p.36.) Thus, they wore similar clothes as men to further de-emphasize the difference between the sexes. Again, Dodd's narrator laments this advancement as he feels women's strength was in their appeal; igniting men's passions, kindling sentiment and protective urges (1887 p.39-42). Although these two imagined worlds are so different,

both seem to imply that for women power, authority, and androgyny are linked. Both authors explored patriarchy's obsession with feminine ideals in their own ways: Butler choosing to elevate a character not known for her beauty but her strength and Dodd's society's outright rejection of femininity. Therefore, it can be implied that the increased blurring of lines between male and females is either indicative of or a necessity for societal shifts in thinking about gender.

### *Masculinity re-examined*

Interestingly, both Dodd and Butler chose to portray men in a mostly negative light. In Dodd's society, she feels men are listless and lack purpose due to lack of competition and the aforementioned lack of traditional home life. She says they look physically different from their ancestors with sloped brows and recessed chins. They wander, having no comforts usually associated with home. In a society with no "rewards of either fame or personal advancement...the spur of... achievement is found wanting" (p.67). Again, this is compared to the vivacity of the newly liberated women of the population, who seem to thrive despite the lack of competition or social recognition. Dodds narrator assesses the society as a failure due to the downgraded status of men, implying equality and sharing resources is against man's nature. However, the success of women in this society is downplayed.

In Butler's work, men are often portrayed as stubborn or contrarian, especially when presented with Lauren's emerging philosophy/theology of accepting and embracing life's tendency for change. Her beloved father's resistance to even her mature, common sense ideas prompted her to write: "A tree can not grow in its parents' shadows" (p.76). After the destruction of her gated community, which she foresaw and

planned for, she was mentally prepared for the danger of the outside world. A neighbor and fellow survivor, a young man named Harry, was startled by her survival skills including her distrust of strangers and willingness to steal. To Harry, Lauren pled “out here, you have to adapt to your surroundings or you get killed” (p. 168). Similarly to Harry, another traveler that joined them named Mora seemed threatened by Lauren. He commented on her physical and attitudinal masculine features. He questioned her morals as she took the supplies of a person they killed in self defense. ““Is that how you do it?.. Whoever kills, takes?”, Mora accused Lauren, not seeing the wisdom of utilizing every available resource. Ultimately she wins the respect and loyalty of her whole group. However, the men collectively present the most resistance to her leadership and foresight. Perhaps male resistance stemmed from Lauren's rejection of corporeal and spiritual norms.

### *State Suppression of Education*

In both *The Republic*.. and *The Parable*..the state plays a role in stifling education. Notably, in both stories, the states' suppression in education is not gender specific. In Butler's rich getting-richer-poor getting-poorer world, it is implied traditional education is only available to a select few. Thus, Butler's America saw an alarming amount of illiteracy. Ad hoc schools are created in small communities, however most do not even have this limited access due to unsafe neighborhoods and an increased cost of living. Children, according to an escapee of newly created 'company' towns, could even be forced to work off their parents' debt per a new government law. Lauren, a child of an educator, surmised she could survive earning money teaching others to read. The state's abdication when it came to education was quite profound in light of the effects of

climate change. However, as an African American, Butler was all too familiar with the concept of state-facilitated illiteracy. References to aspects of her imagined world as “modern day slavery” are made throughout the story.

In Dodd’s future, education was limited as part of an ongoing process to ensure equality. In the beginnings of the Republic, people used their ample leisure time to educate themselves. However, “learning being the sole channel for the exercise of individual capacity or individual ambition, the old baneful system of competition soon developed itself” (Dodd p. 65-66). Highly educated members of the republic were seen as a threat to the intended goal of equality, as not everyone had their educational capacity. In addition, they would be exposed to ideas that may lead to questioning the ‘founders’ chosen way of life. As such, a law was passed “forbidding mental or artistic development being carried beyond a certain strict standard “ (Dodd p.66). Ultimately, these two different authors who existed in two different time periods both considered education suppression dystopic. This could be linked to women's enduring role in the American education system and the sense of futility when education is suppressed. Comparing how the education system is represented in dystopian literature across gender lines and across time is also worthy of inquiry.

### *Iconography of Christmas*

In both stories, major plot twists occur around the Christmas Holiday. In *The Parable*.. Lauren's neighborhood is attacked and her family is killed on Christmas Eve. Christmas Day is the first day of her journey towards developing her new theology, Earthseed. Further along her journey, she meets a young woman named Natividad, the Spanish word for birth as well as referring to the Christian Nativity scene. In Butler’s

*Republic..*, her narrator notes the Christmas holiday is the only remaining ancestral tradition in this secular society. Christmas is also when the narrator asserts her belief in traditional , capitalist, patriarchal societies arguing it is against human nature to arrange society by any other means. Her narrator is emphatic about this. Janice C. Anderson explains aspects of the holiday's and the Virgin Birth's cultural significance: "it reveals the presence of their androcentric and patriarchal ideologies...Although gender does not disqualify women as models of faith, for the most part their roles remain in the context of the female private sphere, rather than the male official and public sphere" (1987 p.200). It is significant that both stories used the Christmas holiday as a plot change, as the Virgin Birth narrative helped establish and maintain patriarchal gender roles that all waves of feminism have been fighting against. The authors , consciously or unconsciously, used this holiday to note the shift in these established roles.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research**

Speaking to the aforementioned prescience of future-focused artists, Butler's follow up to *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents*, features a Christian zealot presidential candidate that vows to "Make America Great Again" as he hedges condemnation of vigilantism in his name, while never outright condoning it. Again, this speaks to the possibilities of tapping the imaginations of artists to anticipate potential realities instead of just reacting to them. Although the harsh realities of Butler's *Sower* world have not been realized, wildfires and drought do currently plague modern day California. In the privatization of natural resources and in mass human migration , we see many parallels to today's world as well. Dodd's world envisioned women as equals and predicted this resulting in societal shifts. Traditional family structure has long



since been abandoned as the standard for modern American life. This is correlated with increasing gender fluidity and expanded options for women, as Dodd predicted. Analyzing Butler's and Dodd's writings give us an opportunity to look at how certain themes sustained over time: the questioning of what drives us; the rituals we create; and how we communicate our narratives. Exploring these same works using feminist analysis can reveal both thematic similarities and how feminism itself has changed throughout the years. Dodd wrote her novella as a reaction to the first wave of the feminist movement and the social movements of her time. Based on her presenting progress on this front in a negative light, she sought to preserve the status quo. She celebrated tradition and the possibilities of capitalism. Butler, on the other hand, had her character trying to survive through the worst aspects of capitalism: greed and exploitation. She wrote during the transition from the second to third wave. While not pedantic about capitalism's flaws, Butler uses her diverse characters' cooperative community as an alternative to the existing power structure. Interestingly, despite differences in point of view, similar feminist themes emerge. Themes such as women's primary role in child rearing, the blurring of lines between the masculine and the feminine, educational injustice, and the technique of aligning narrative epiphanies with shared cultural ones. These offer insight in how we see our world: how much has changed, how much has stayed the same. Perhaps the biggest revelation is the degree to which gender roles are entrenched and are ingrained in our mindsets despite much progress and the passage of time. Could the continued cultural shifts when it comes to gender be contributing to the recent political upheaval in the United States? Could it be why we elect leaders that represent a return to orthodoxy? Future research can study

dystopian literature and film as a way to reveal society's collective inner struggle to process our feelings about the future. New research can examine the breadth of work that now exists to make comparisons over time. Additionally, enough work in the modern era now exists to compare the perspectives across different genders, races, countries, etc . Segments of society could, as well, be isolated and discussed. For example , how education or labor has been represented in dystopian literature from different perspectives. Often relegated to just entertainment, the creative minds behind dystopian writing and films could be helpful to other sectors. Their insight and ability to understand and express the subtleties of human natures are an underutilized resource.

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