

Marxist Reading of Class Inequality in *Parable of the Sower*

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of social class inequality in Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower, with particular focus on the protagonist, Lauren. Employing Karl Marx's theory of class struggle, the analysis explores the socio-economic divide between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, as reflected in the novel's dystopian society. Through a qualitative literary approach, the research highlights how systemic inequality is embedded in the social and economic structures depicted in the narrative. Lauren's experiences exemplify the struggles of the working class, illustrating how poverty, exclusion, and exploitation manifest in everyday life. Her resilience and leadership in the face of social collapse serve as a critique of capitalist oppression and as a model of collective resistance. By examining key narrative elements—particularly characterization and plot—the study demonstrates how the protagonist navigates structural barriers and imagines alternative, more equitable futures. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader discussions on class and ideology in literature, emphasizing the enduring relevance of Butler's work in addressing contemporary socio-political issues such as inequality, marginalization, and survival. The findings underscore literature's potential to reflect and challenge social injustices through critical engagement with class structures and resistance narratives.

Keywords: bourgeoisie, proletariat, Marxist theory, social class inequality, literary analysis.

A. Introduction

In the contemporary era, social class inequality remains one of the most pressing and enduring global concerns, intersecting with virtually every aspect of human life—from education and employment to healthcare and housing. The widening economic divide between the privileged and the marginalized has not only exacerbated material disparities but has also generated significant cultural, ideological, and political consequences. Literature, as a reflection of and response to societal realities, plays a critical role in both representing and critiquing these inequalities. Dystopian fiction, in particular, has proven to be a compelling medium through which systemic oppression and class stratification are explored, allowing readers to interrogate present-day structures through speculative futures.

One such work that engages deeply with questions of class, power, and survival is *Parable of the Sower* (1993), a speculative novel by African American author Octavia E. Butler. Set in a near-future United States devastated by environmental collapse, economic decline, and institutional breakdown, the novel centers on Lauren Olamina, a young Black woman who develops a survivalist and spiritual philosophy called Earthseed in the face of widespread social disorder. In this imagined world, security and resources are hoarded by the few, while the majority struggle under conditions of poverty, violence, and displacement—conditions that mirror the dynamics of capitalist exploitation as described in classical Marxist theory.

Social class inequality refers to the structural division of society into hierarchical groups based on access to economic resources, political influence, and social privileges. Karl Marx conceptualized this stratification through the dialectical opposition between the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production, and the proletariat, whose labor is exploited under capitalism (Marx & Engels, 1848; Marx, 1867). For Marx, this antagonism is not only economic but ideological, with dominant classes perpetuating systems of control through institutions and cultural hegemony. As Blackburn (2008) notes, social inequality is not an incidental outcome but a fundamental feature of capitalism, continually reproduced through the systematic marginalization of the working class.

In literary studies, scholars have long applied Marxist theory to analyze how texts reflect and interrogate class dynamics. Blackburn (2008) highlights that the bourgeoisie's accumulation of wealth directly results from the proletariat's disenfranchisement. This concept is vividly realized in *Parable of the Sower*, where Lauren's gated community symbolizes a fragile boundary between the exploited masses and the protective privilege of the few. As Lipset (cited in the file) suggests, access to resources remains a key determinant in the persistence of class struggle, a theme Butler dramatizes through Lauren's journey from isolation to collective resistance.

Existing literature on *Parable of the Sower* has largely examined its ecological, feminist, and Afrofuturist dimensions. While some scholars have explored the socio-economic backdrop of Butler's dystopia, fewer have offered in-depth analyses of how class inequality is embedded in the narrative structure and character development of the novel. Even less attention has been paid to how Butler's portrayal of Lauren embodies Marxist critiques of capitalist decay, alienation, and ideological control. This reveals a critical gap in the scholarship that this study aims to address.

The present study investigates the representation of social class inequality in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, with particular focus on the protagonist, Lauren. By employing Karl Marx's theory of class struggle, this research explores the socio-economic divide between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and its impact on individual and communal life in the novel's dystopian world. Through a qualitative literary analysis, the study examines how Lauren's personal experiences reflect broader structural inequalities and how her strategies for survival critique and resist dominant capitalist ideologies.

The main contribution of this research lies in its application of classical Marxist theory to a contemporary African American speculative text. By doing so, it expands the theoretical lens through which Butler's novel is understood, while also demonstrating the continuing relevance of Marxist thought in examining literary representations of class oppression. Furthermore, the study highlights literature's capacity not only to depict social injustice but also to imagine alternative futures grounded in community, agency, and collective transformation.

In this context, *Parable of the Sower* becomes more than a cautionary tale—it emerges as a vital critique of socio-economic hierarchies that shape both fictional and real-world landscapes. By analyzing the intersections between narrative, ideology, and class, this research

aims to contribute to broader discussions within literary studies about the political function of fiction in an era of growing inequality.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative method to examine the representation of social class inequality in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), with a focus on the socio-economic tensions portrayed through the protagonist, Lauren. The data for this study consisted of selected textual evidence from the novel that illustrates class conflict, power dynamics, and the lived experiences of oppression under capitalist conditions.

The primary data source was the novel *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler, chosen for its dystopian vision of future American society where class stratification and systemic inequality are central themes. The text offers rich narrative content for the exploration of Marxist literary concerns, especially through its depiction of a collapsing society marked by gated communities, resource scarcity, and resistance to exploitation.

Data collection was conducted through multiple close readings of the novel. The researcher identified and highlighted narrative segments—dialogues, character development, settings, and plot events—that reflect the tension between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Particular attention was given to passages that reveal Lauren's responses to economic disparity and social injustice. These passages were categorized and thematically grouped according to Marxist concepts such as class struggle, alienation, ideology, and revolution.

The data were then analyzed using the framework of Karl Marx's theory of class struggle. Each selected textual element was critically interpreted to uncover how Butler constructs and critiques social class hierarchies. This analytical process aimed to reveal not only the depiction of inequality but also the ideological mechanisms and potential pathways of resistance represented in the novel.

C. Findings and discussion

Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) is a dystopian science fiction novel that explores themes of survival, social collapse, and systemic inequality. At the center of this narrative is Lauren Olamina, a young African American woman who exhibits remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. Lauren not only endures personal hardship, but also takes on the responsibility of leading others toward a more just and sustainable future. Through her Earthseed philosophy, she envisions a transformative community built on inclusivity and mutual support. Her belief that changing one's perspective and actions can overcome entrenched inequalities lies at the heart of the novel's social critique.

This section analyzes the class dynamics depicted in the novel, with particular attention to Lauren as a member of the proletariat class who experiences systemic social inequality. Lauren's struggle is emblematic of the broader challenges faced by the working class under capitalism. Her life is shaped by limited access to resources, lack of institutional support, and constant threats from both social collapse and class-based exploitation. According to Marx (1938), analyzing class distinctions is crucial to understanding social relationships and the forces that drive societal transformation.

Proletariat Class Lifestyle Lived by Main Character

One passage from the novel illustrates this struggle: “I’m learning to fly, to levitate myself. No one is teaching me. I’m just learning on my own, little by little, dream lesson by dream lesson. Not a very subtle image, but a persistent one. I’ve had many lessons, and I’m better at flying than I used to be. I trust my ability more now, but I’m still afraid. I can’t quite control my directions yet.” (Butler, 1993, p. 4)

This quotation symbolizes Lauren’s pursuit of autonomy and upward mobility. Her metaphorical desire to “fly” represents the aspiration to rise above her socio-economic limitations. The fact that she is “learning on her own” reflects the absence of structural support—an experience typical of individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Marx (1867) argued that the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, exploit the proletariat, who have only their labor to offer. This power imbalance limits opportunities for the working class to exercise agency or achieve mobility.

The phrase “not a very subtle image, but a persistent one” reveals the enduring nature of this struggle. Lauren’s determination to “fly” despite fear and lack of direction reflects the psychological burden placed on individuals navigating systemic inequality. Marx (1938) attributed such feelings of fear and disempowerment to capitalism’s alienating effects, which disconnect individuals from their labor, their community, and their sense of purpose.

Moreover, Lauren’s dream-based learning process can be interpreted as a reflection of false consciousness—a condition in which individuals internalize their oppression as personal failure rather than recognizing its structural causes. Her solitary efforts mirror the dominant ideology of individualism, which obscures collective struggle and masks the real sources of inequality. As Marxist theory posits, this ideological control is essential to maintaining the capitalist order, preventing the proletariat from realizing their shared interests and challenging the status quo.

Lauren’s admission that she “can’t quite control [her] directions yet” underscores the limited agency available to those constrained by systemic barriers. Her uncertainty and fear are not merely personal insecurities but rather manifestations of a socio-economic system designed to perpetuate powerlessness among the working class. According to Marx (1938), such alienation reinforces the dominance of the bourgeoisie by undermining the capacity of the proletariat to unite and resist exploitation.

The selected passage offers a poignant metaphor for the lived experience of class struggle. Viewed through a Marxist lens, Lauren’s internal conflict reflects the broader dynamics of capitalist oppression, alienation, and ideological control. Her desire for autonomy and transformation highlights both the resilience of the marginalized and the limitations of individual action in the face of structural inequality. The narrative calls for a deeper, collective engagement with the forces that sustain class divisions and urges a critical reimagining of society based on equity and solidarity.

Social inequality is sharply illustrated in the following quotation from *Parable of the Sower*: “Bread and circuses,” my father says when there’s space news on the radio. “Politicians and big corporations get the bread, and we get the circuses.” (Butler, 1993, p. 12). This statement is a powerful critique of the socio-political strategies used by the ruling class to maintain dominance over the working class. The phrase “bread and circuses” originates from

ancient Rome, where the state offered food and entertainment to pacify the population and divert attention from political and economic instability. In Butler's dystopian narrative, Lauren's father invokes this phrase to highlight how contemporary institutions—politicians and corporations—deploy similar tactics to suppress dissent and sustain ideological control.

According to Marx (1938), the ruling class maintains its dominance not only through economic exploitation but also by shaping ideology via cultural institutions. The “bread” symbolizes material wealth and privilege reserved for the elite, while the “circuses” represent superficial distractions aimed at the working class. Space news, in this context, becomes a metaphor for grand spectacles that mask systemic inequality and prevent the proletariat from engaging in critical political consciousness.

This dichotomy reflects Marx's (1983) theory of the base and superstructure. The economic base—controlled by the bourgeoisie—produces wealth and power, while the superstructure (media, ideology, culture) serves to reinforce and legitimize that control. The father's observation thus exposes how entertainment and mass media operate as tools of distraction, pacifying the working class and sustaining the illusion of stability amidst economic decline.

The quotation also exemplifies Marx's concept of alienation, whereby the working class is separated from the fruits of its labor, and in this case, from political awareness. The labor that generates wealth for corporations leaves the laborers themselves impoverished and disengaged. The “circuses” become a form of ideological control that reinforces passivity and discourages collective resistance. Even as Lauren's father articulates this critique, the fact that he is still exposed to such distractions demonstrates the pervasive reach of ideological domination.

This passage provides a poignant illustration of class exploitation and ideological control. As Marx (1983) argues, understanding the mechanisms through which ideology obscures structural oppression is key to initiating social change. The quote calls for a heightened critical awareness of how media and cultural narratives are employed to maintain power imbalances and suppress dissent.

Another passage from the novel further emphasizes the harsh realities of poverty and exclusion under capitalism: “Crazy to live without a wall to protect you. Even in Robledo, most of the street poor—squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general—are dangerous. They're desperate or crazy or both. That's enough to make anyone dangerous (Butler, 1993, p. 6).

The quote, “*Crazy to live without a wall to protect you... They're desperate or crazy or both. That's enough to make anyone dangerous*” (Butler, 1993, p. 6), underscores the harsh realities of poverty and marginalization in a capitalist society. It reflects the deep social divide between those with security and resources and those excluded from the system. The reference to the “street poor—squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general” positions society's most vulnerable not only as marginalized but as perceived threats to social order. The “wall” functions as both a literal and metaphorical barrier, symbolizing the structures—economic, physical, and ideological—that separate the privileged from the disenfranchised. This fear-based division reinforces social alienation and class hostility.

Within a Marxist framework, this aligns closely with the concept of the *lumpenproletariat*, a term Marx (1938) uses to describe the most marginalized segment of the working class—those who live outside the traditional labor structure and are often criminalized or pathologized. In Butler’s narrative, this group is depicted as a threat, not because of inherent danger, but because of the desperation created by systemic neglect and exploitation. By characterizing the poor as “crazy” or “dangerous,” the dominant ideology blames individuals for their conditions, thereby obscuring the structural roots of poverty.

The quotation further exposes how capitalism generates and sustains stereotypes around poverty. Descriptions of the marginalized as unstable or irrational serve to dehumanize them and reinforce the belief that poverty results from moral or personal failure, rather than from institutionalized inequality. Such narratives legitimize the privileges of the ruling class and justify their continued dominance over both economic and ideological structures.

Moreover, the quote illustrates how fear becomes a mechanism of social control. The desire for a “wall” to protect against the impoverished reflects how fear and mistrust are weaponized to justify social exclusion, surveillance, and segregation. This tactic fractures the working class, discouraging solidarity and preventing the emergence of collective resistance. Marxist theory identifies such divisions as essential to the maintenance of capitalist power structures, which thrive on the fragmentation of class consciousness.

The Main Character’s Response to Social Class Inequality

Lauren, the protagonist in *Parable of the Sower*, emerges as a figure who actively confronts and navigates the realities of social class inequality. Living within a fractured, dystopian society marked by extreme disparities in wealth and access to basic resources, Lauren is positioned as part of the struggling middle class—neither fully secure nor completely destitute. Despite limited means, she exhibits remarkable agency, adaptability, and vision, positioning her as a transformative force within the narrative.

Lauren’s role as a central character is not passive; she does not simply endure the inequalities that shape her world but instead seeks to understand and challenge them. Through her actions and philosophical convictions, she attempts to build a more just and sustainable future. One of the key moments that reflects her resilience and commitment to collective survival is captured in the following line: “This is how we will survive and hold together. It will work. I don’t know how long it will last, but for now, it will work.” (Butler, 1993, p. 51)

This quotation encapsulates Lauren’s pragmatic optimism and strategic mindset. Her acknowledgment that “it will work” underscores a deliberate effort to construct systems of support and solidarity in a world that offers little institutional protection. It reflects her understanding that survival in a class-stratified society depends not on isolation but on interdependence, cooperation, and the pooling of resources and knowledge.

Lauren’s response to inequality is characterized by several key strategies: critical awareness of her environment, adaptability, and the creation of inclusive communities. Her acute perception of social disparities does not paralyze her; instead, it informs her choices and compels her to act. Her philosophical framework, Earthseed, is itself a revolutionary project aimed at reimagining human relationships beyond the constraints of capitalist individualism. It is within this context that her determination—“it will work”—functions not as naive hope, but as a political commitment to solidarity and shared survival.

Moreover, her leadership is deeply rooted in the ethos of mutual aid. In contrast to the dominant society's emphasis on hierarchy and control, Lauren's vision is grounded in equality and cooperation. Her commitment to building community across lines of difference—including class, race, and gender—represents a radical act of resistance to the fragmentation fostered by systemic inequality.

The phrase “hold together” signifies the essential role of community in Lauren’s strategy. In a society where class divisions breed isolation and fear, her insistence on togetherness becomes a powerful counterforce. It emphasizes the importance of collective identity and the emotional, social, and material bonds that enable resistance. Her actions demonstrate that transformation does not require grand revolution alone but can emerge from everyday practices of care, connection, and shared struggle.

However, the uncertainty expressed in the phrase “*I don’t know how long it will last*” underscores the precariousness of Lauren’s situation. While the protagonist is deeply committed to survival and the creation of community, she is also painfully aware of the fragility of these efforts. This acknowledgment of impermanence reflects the broader reality of social class inequality, where progress can be tenuous and easily reversed. Lauren’s journey is marked by a continuous struggle against external forces that threaten to undermine her progress, illustrating the persistent and cyclical nature of inequality. Ultimately, this uncertainty serves as a reminder that while short-term survival strategies may be effective, long-term change demands sustained effort, adaptability, and vigilance.

The main character’s navigation of social class inequality is a multifaceted process shaped by resilience, innovation, and a profound commitment to collective welfare. The quote encapsulates the emotional tension of her struggle, reflecting both her hope and her awareness of the unpredictable realities of a stratified world. Through Lauren’s experiences, Butler powerfully illustrates the complexities of class dynamics and emphasizes the critical role of solidarity in resisting systemic oppression. Lauren’s story stands as a testament to the enduring human spirit and the transformative potential of community-driven action, even in the face of overwhelming adversity.

This perspective is reinforced in another significant passage from the novel: “There are a lot of people in the area—people who have set up permanent camps in everything from rag-and-plastic tents to wooden shacks that look almost fit for human habitation. Where are so many people going to the bathroom? How clean is the water in the reservoir? No doubt cities that use it purify the water when it reaches them. Whether they do or not, I think it’s time for us to break out the water purification tablets.” (Butler, 1993, p. 89)

Lauren’s observations here expose the stark material conditions of marginalized communities and vividly portray the tangible impacts of social class inequality. The reference to makeshift housing—constructed from rags, plastic, and deteriorating wood—highlights the severe lack of access to stable shelter. Her internal questioning about sanitation and clean water points to the absence of basic public infrastructure, a common reality in environments shaped by systemic neglect. These reflections underscore that the issues faced by the poor are not isolated misfortunes but are rooted in broader structural failures.

In addition to depicting poor living conditions, this passage draws attention to public health concerns, particularly in communities that lack governmental support. Lauren’s awareness of the potential contamination of water and the risks of unsanitary conditions

illustrates her broader understanding of the link between class and health vulnerability. Her decision to use water purification tablets is an act of practical resistance, demonstrating resourcefulness and an acute sense of responsibility not only for her own well-being but also for that of the community she is trying to support.

The act of preparing to purify water is emblematic of a broader theme of self-sufficiency within the novel. In a world where basic necessities are no longer guaranteed, particularly for the underprivileged, Lauren's choice to take proactive measures reflects a refusal to remain passive in the face of institutional abandonment. It affirms the resilience and ingenuity of marginalized individuals who must find creative and immediate solutions to systemic issues. Her response is not merely an individual survival tactic but also a symbol of leadership and care in a society where collective resilience becomes a necessary tool for survival.

Lauren's critical engagement with the living conditions around her reveals a deep awareness of how systemic inequality manifests in the most basic aspects of life—shelter, health, and safety. Through her actions and reflections, Butler provides a compelling critique of class-based neglect and the human cost of economic stratification. Lauren's adaptability, self-reliance, and community-oriented mindset underscore the capacity of those most affected by inequality to enact resistance, even when operating within profoundly unjust systems.

Moreover, the quotation underscores the broader societal neglect that sustains and exacerbates social class inequality. Lauren's concerns about water quality and sanitation reflect a critical awareness of the structural failures that disproportionately affect marginalized communities. The absence of adequate infrastructure and essential resources for those living in poverty illustrates a systemic prioritization of the privileged, while the most vulnerable are left to contend with conditions that jeopardize their health and dignity. This observation operates as a critique of institutional apathy and a subtle yet urgent call to action, encouraging readers to confront the entrenched injustices that shape the lives of the economically disenfranchised. Lauren's experiences function as a microcosm of the broader struggle for equity and justice in a society where even basic human rights—such as clean water, shelter, and sanitation—are often denied to those at the lower end of the social hierarchy.

Lauren's reflections on the conditions of the marginalized reveal the multifaceted nature of social class inequality and the precariousness of survival in a deeply stratified society. Through her observations, Butler draws attention to the inextricable links between health, environmental conditions, and social justice, emphasizing the necessity of resilience and innovation in the face of institutional failure. Lauren's proactive response to these challenges highlights the significance of self-sufficiency and communal solidarity as means of resistance. Ultimately, the narrative advocates for a more nuanced understanding of the systemic roots of poverty and calls for a collective commitment to dismantling the structures that perpetuate inequality and exclusion.

D. Conclusion

This study has examined the issue of social class inequality in *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler through the lens of Karl Marx's theory of class struggle. The analysis reveals that the novel powerfully portrays the socio-economic divide between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, emphasizing how systemic inequality affects the lives of the marginalized—particularly through the experiences of the protagonist, Lauren.

Lauren emerges as a compelling representation of the middle class, navigating a dystopian society where the state has abdicated its responsibility to protect its citizens, and where the concentration of power and resources in the hands of the elite intensifies the suffering of the lower classes. As a member of the oppressed, Lauren not only endures the effects of class-based marginalization but also actively resists it. Her journey is marked by resilience, leadership, and the creation of alternative social structures rooted in community, solidarity, and mutual aid.

The findings suggest that the government's failure to support the middle and lower classes results in deepening social stratification, making it nearly impossible for those outside the elite to access opportunity or build a stable future. In response, Lauren rejects passive acceptance and instead initiates meaningful change, symbolizing a revolutionary consciousness aligned with Marx's vision of class emancipation. Her efforts inspire collective resistance and affirm the possibility of transformation—even in the most hostile conditions.

Ultimately, this study concludes that Butler's novel critiques capitalist structures and champions human values through Lauren's resistance to class oppression. The narrative underscores the urgent need for social justice and portrays the protagonist's struggle as a call to confront the mechanisms that perpetuate inequality. By emphasizing agency, community, and ideological awakening, *Parable of the Sower* offers a powerful literary exploration of class conflict and the pursuit of equity in a fractured world.

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