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Emotional Intelligence as a Means of Survival and Leadership in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

ABSTRACT

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), presents a dystopian world marked by environmental collapse, social disorder, and moral decay. Amid this turmoil, Lauren Olamina emerges as a resilient leader with a visionary mindset. This study explores how emotional intelligence functions as a crucial survival tool in the novel, enabling Lauren to adapt, connect with others, and develop a transformative belief system known as Earthseed. Drawing on Daniel Goleman's theory, the research focuses on key components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, empathy, motivation, and social skills as expressed through Lauren's actions and decisions. The paper also demonstrates how emotional intelligence empowers individuals not only to survive but to transform adversity into growth. Through an analysis of Lauren's psychological depth and emotional responses, the study highlights Butler's depiction of inner strength as a foundation for community building and healing. Ultimately, the novel suggests that in the absence of traditional support systems, emotional intelligence becomes essential for human continuity and the creation of a hopeful, adaptive future. Additionally, recent Iraqi scholarship has emphasized the role of emotional intelligence in contemporary life.

الذكاء العاطفي كوسيلة للبقاء والقيادة في رواية "مثل الزارع" لأوكتافيا بتلر

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المُستخلص

تصوّر رواية " مثل الزارع " لأوكتافيا بتلر عالماً ديستوبياً تتفكك فيه البيئة والنظام الاجتماعي والقيم الأخلاقية. وسط هذا الانهيار، تبرز لورين أولامينا كقائدة صامدة ذات رؤية مستقبلية. يستكشف هذا البحث دور الذكاء العاطفي كأداة حيوية للبقاء في الرواية، إذ يمكن لورين من التكيف، وبناء علاقات مع الآخرين، وتطوير منظومة إيمانية تحويلية تُعرف بـ "بذور الأرض" (Earthseed) وبالاستناد إلى نظرية دانيال غولمان، يركّز البحث على مكونات الذكاء العاطفي الرئيسية مثل الوعي الذاتي، والتعاطف، والدافعية، والمهارات الاجتماعية كما تتجلى في أفعال لورين وقراراتها. كما يوضح البحث كيف يمنح الذكاء العاطفي الأفراد القدرة على تحويل الأزمات إلى فرص للنمو. ومن خلال تحليل العمق النفسي والانفعالات العاطفية للورين، يبرز البحث تصوير بتلر للقوة الداخلية كأساس لبناء المجتمعات والشفاء الجماعي. وتشير الرواية في النهاية إلى أن الذكاء العاطفي، في غياب أنظمة الدعم التقليدية، يصبح ضرورة لاستمرار الإنسانية وبناء مستقبل تكيفي مفعم بالأمل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذكاء العاطفي، البقاء، أدب الديستوبيا، أوكتافيا بتلر، رواية مثل الزارع، الإيمان، بذور الأرض، التعاطف

Introduction

In a time marked by global uncertainty, economic instability, and environmental decline, literature often mirrors the anxieties and aspirations of its era. Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) is a powerful dystopian novel that imagines a not-so-distant future where civilization has deteriorated under the pressure of climate change, wealth inequality, and social collapse. The narrative follows Lauren Olamina, a young African American woman with an unusual psychological condition known as "hyperempathy," which causes her to feel the pain and pleasure of others. Rather than being a weakn Lauren's heightened emotional awareness becomes her greatest strength. It is through her emotional intelligence that she does not only survives but also leads others toward hope and purpose through the belief system she develops called Earthseed. Emotional Intelligence (EI), as conceptualized by scholars like Daniel Goleman, refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's emotions and the emotions of others. It includes key components such as self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, motivation, and social skills. While EI has often been studied in the context of psychology, education, and leadership, its role in literature particularly dystopian fiction has received comparatively less attention. In *Parable of the Sower*, emotional intelligence is not only a character trait but a vital tool for survival, resistance, and community-building in an otherwise bleak and hostile environment. As Asd Abbas Ali Nasser argues, "Emotional intelligence plays a pivotal role in enhancing quality of life by enabling individuals to understand their own emotions and those of others, as well as improving their ability to

manage stress and social adaptation" (Nasser, 2025, p. 695). This local academic perspective aligns with the current study's emphasis on emotional awareness as a survival imperative.

Sower has been widely analyzed through political, ecological, and feminist lenses, there remains a significant gap in exploring the role of emotional intelligence as a psychological and thematic force within the narrative. The central problem this research addresses is: How does Butler portray emotional intelligence as a survival strategy in the dystopian world of *Parable of the Sower*? The study aims to examine how Lauren Olamina's emotional competencies allow her to navigate a disintegrating society, form meaningful relationships, and build a vision for a new human future.

This research contributes to the growing interdisciplinary conversation between literature and psychology by applying the framework of emotional intelligence to a literary text. It offers a fresh perspective on *Parable of the Sower* by highlighting the internal psychological mechanisms that support external action and leadership. Understanding Lauren's emotional intelligence deepens the appreciation of her resilience and vision in a chaotic world. Moreover, in today's reality where emotional regulation and social empathy are increasingly vital in facing global crises, this study underscores the timeless relevance of Butler's work.

2: Theoretical Background and Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The study discusses the theoretical and scholarly foundation for analyzing *Parable of the Sower* through the lens of emotional intelligence. It begins by discussing the origins and dimensions of emotional intelligence as a psychological framework, then moves on to review relevant literary scholarship on Butler's novel, with a particular focus on themes of survival, resilience, and emotion. The research also situates Butler's work within the broader context of dystopian fiction and explores how emotional insight functions as both a personal and political strategy in times of crisis. Furthermore, the chapter examines the intersection of emotional intelligence with the novel's central motif of change, emphasizing how Lauren Olamina's capacity for emotional self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal adaptability shapes her vision of Earthseed and her leadership within a fractured society. By drawing connections between psychological theories and literary narrative, the discussion highlights how Butler crafts emotional intelligence not merely as a trait but as a transformative force that enables agency, community-building, and ideological resilience in the face of systemic collapse.

2.2 Emotional Intelligence: Theoretical Background

Emotional intelligence (EI) emerged as a critical concept in the fields of psychology and education in the late 20th century. The term was first introduced by Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (1990), who defined EI as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions." This foundational definition was later expanded upon by Daniel Goleman (1995), who brought EI to public attention through his book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Goleman's model of emotional intelligence consists of five core components:

- 1- Self-awareness – understanding one's emotions
- 2- Self-regulation – managing emotions appropriately
- 3- Motivation – directing emotions toward goals
- 4- Empathy – recognizing emotions in others
- 5- Social skills – managing relationships effectively

These competencies are essential not only for personal development but also for leadership, teamwork, and crisis management (Goleman, 1998). Lauren Olamina, the protagonist in *Parable of the Sower*, exemplifies all five components, particularly in her capacity for empathy and leadership under extreme duress.

2.3 Literature Review on *Parable of the Sower*

Butler's *Parable of the Sower* has sparked diverse critical engagement, particularly through political, environmental, racial, and feminist lenses. However, the psychological dimension of Lauren Olamina's development specifically her emotional intelligence and moral leadership remains comparatively underexplored. This paper argues that Lauren's hyperempathy syndrome, often labeled as a weakness or disability, is in fact a powerful cognitive and emotional tool that enhances her capacity for survival and ethical leadership in a dystopian society.

While Gerry Canavan's comprehensive work, Octavia E. Butler (2016), offers a foundational reading of the novel through themes such as ecological collapse, social instability, and privatized violence, it only briefly addresses the internal emotional structures that guide Lauren's decisions. Canavan's earlier article, "You Have to Make Your Own Gods Here", Religion and Artificial Intelligence in Octavia Butler's Parables Series" (2014), foregrounds the significance of Earthseed as a spiritual and adaptive philosophy. Yet, even within this theological frame, the emotional and psychological evolution of Lauren receives limited attention (Canavan, Octavia E. Butler; Canavan, "You Have to Make").

Melissa M. Melzer's dissertation, "We Sinners Continue to Sin": Religion and the Human in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler" (2006), further reinforces the centrality of faith and transformation in Butler's work. However, Melzer's focus remains largely theological and ethical, missing an opportunity to explore how Lauren's inner emotional resilience particularly her ability to empathize and lead through compassion functions as a response to trauma (Melzer, 2006).

In contrast, Jerry Phillips, in his article "The Institution of the 'Post-Apocalyptic': Race, Ethics, and the Politics of Survival in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*" (2002), offers a critical perspective that intersects ethics and survival. He argues that Lauren's distinction lies in her capacity to reconstruct community amid chaos. Though Phillips hints at Lauren's psychological depth, his analysis does not directly align it with theories of emotional intelligence (Phillips, 299–311).

Jean Retzinger's study, "Negotiating the Borders of Dystopia: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and the Ethics of Adaptation" (2007), comes closest to acknowledging Lauren's psychological adaptability. Retzinger asserts that Lauren's power lies not only in her prophetic foresight but in her "ethical responsiveness and cognitive flexibility," both of which are essential for reimagining community in dystopian space (Retzinger, 425–446). This insight aligns with Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (1995), which emphasizes empathy, self-awareness, and relationship-building as pillars of effective leadership (Goleman, 43–45).

By linking Lauren's hyperempathy to Goleman's framework, this study reframes her condition not as a biological liability but as an evolved psychological trait. Her leadership is not founded on dominance or coercion, but on emotional perception, care, and the ability to form moral coalitions. As Canavan notes, Butler's narrative embeds "an ethics of care" at the heart of Lauren's actions an ethics that stems from emotional intelligence rather than physical power (Canavan, Butler, 178).

Thus, while previous scholarship has deeply enriched the sociopolitical and religious readings of *Parable of the Sower*, this paper contends that Lauren's emotional intelligence is a key, though underexamined, dimension of her success. It is through her empathic insight and psychological resilience that she transcends the ruins of a failed society and plants the seeds of a new moral order (Goleman 106, Retzinger, 430).

2.4 Emotional Intelligence in Dystopian and Feminist Literature

The application of emotional intelligence to literary analysis is still emerging, though some scholars have begun to explore how EI influences character behavior in crisis narratives. According to Joanna Bourke (2014), emotions in literature often reflect larger societal anxieties and survival strategies. In dystopian literature, characters must navigate extreme environments not just with physical skills, but with emotional resilience.

Butler's fiction, particularly *Parable of the Sower*, fits within the lineage of Afrofuturist and feminist dystopian writing, where emotional experience is inseparable from political action (Barr, 2008). Lauren's leadership is fundamentally emotional it stems from understanding others, managing trauma, and building meaningful connections. As Ward (2005) notes, Butler often presents emotion not as weakness but as revolutionary strength. Furthermore, feminist scholars such as hooks (2000) and Lorde (1984) have long advocated for the power of emotional self-awareness and community empathy as tools for liberation. Butler's work aligns with these traditions, showing that survival in hostile environments often depends on the ability to feel, connect, and transform through emotion.

This research explores how emotional intelligence functions as a survival tool for Lauren Olamina, the protagonist of *Parable of the Sower*. By analyzing key moments in the narrative, also highlights how Lauren applies the five components of emotional intelligence self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills to navigate a collapsing world. Each section includes extended passages from the novel to illustrate how Octavia Butler constructs Lauren's emotional landscape and demonstrates its significance for survival and leadership.

3.2 Self-Awareness and Emotional Insight

Lauren's journey begins with a remarkable degree of emotional and psychological self-awareness. She is aware not only of her feelings but also of her condition, hyperempathy, which both defines and complicates her experience of the world. In her early reflections, she states:

I'm supposed to be careful, avoid watching violence or getting too close to pain. But I can't. Not anymore. I feel every bit of pain I see. I can't help it. I don't have any defenses. I live in a world that I know is dangerous, and I can't afford to be so fragile. But I am. (Butler, 1993, p.12)

This passage reveals how deeply Lauren understands the implications of her emotional vulnerability. Instead of denying or resenting her condition, she recognizes it as a constant factor that she must account for. This conscious engagement with her emotional life reflects Goleman's (1995) definition of self-awareness: knowing one's internal states and preferences, intuitions, and feelings. Her journals frequent throughout the novel are themselves a tool of emotional insight. She records not only the events around her but also her inner emotional shifts, which helps her process fear, guilt, and grief. Through writing, Lauren maintains psychological clarity, even as her external world deteriorates.

3.3 Self-Regulation and Emotional Control

As Lauren navigates the dangers of a broken society, her survival often depends on emotional control. While others around her are overwhelmed by panic or despair, Lauren learns to regulate her responses. This is vividly demonstrated after the destruction of her neighborhood, when she finds herself alone and grieving but still clear-headed:

The world is full of painful stories. Sometimes it seems as though there aren't any other kind, and yet I found myself thinking how beautiful that glint of water was through the trees... I just sat and watched it. I could have cried, but I didn't. I was too tired. I'd cried enough already. (Butler, 1993,p.158)

Lauren does not deny the trauma she experiences on the contrary, she acknowledges it fully but she chooses when and how to express her pain. She holds herself together because survival depends on her ability to think clearly and act decisively. Another powerful example occurs when she has to kill in self-defense. Instead of becoming emotionally unstable, she reflects:

I don't like killing. I don't want to get used to it. But if that's what it takes to survive, I will kill, and I will remember. (Butler, 1993,p. 175)

This internal discipline is not emotional suppression but regulated awareness. Goleman (1998) describes self-regulation as the ability to manage disruptive emotions and impulses something Lauren consistently practices under extreme conditions.

3.4 Motivation and Vision: Earthseed

Lauren's internal motivation, rooted in her Earthseed philosophy, is one of the novel's most distinctive features. Her capacity to dream beyond her immediate reality and commit to a long-term purpose gives her strength and direction. Earthseed is born not just from intellect, but from emotional necessity the need to believe in change, growth, and human potential:

God is Change. And in the end, God prevails. But meanwhile... Adapt or die.

(Butler, 1993,p.3)

This belief becomes Lauren's anchor. Even as she faces violence, homelessness, and fear, her motivation is fueled by the idea that something better can be built. Her vision gives her life meaning, and this intrinsic

motivationmotivatioone of Goleman's five pillars of emotional intelligence drives her to lead and to endure. She further explains:

We can't afford to stay where we are. We can't afford to do nothing. The old ways are dead and dying. Time to shape a new world with new beliefs. (Butler, 1993,p. 221)

Lauren's desire to create Earthseed is both an emotional and spiritual act. It helps her transform suffering into hope, and trauma into a plan for the future.

3.5 Empathy and Connection

Lauren's hyperempathy is a literalized metaphor for emotional intelligence. While many characters see it as a weakness, it becomes her greatest strength. It compels her to consider others' pain, to avoid unnecessary harm, and to forge emotional connections that lead to trust and cooperation. For example, when she meets Zahra and Harry after the destruction of her community, she instinctively considers their emotional needs:

We had all lost so much. All we had now was each other. That was enough had to be. (Butler, 1993, p. 162)

Instead of treating them with suspicion or dominance, she approaches them as equals and helps them process their grief. Her ability to feel others' pain makes her cautious with power and attentive to suffering. Lauren even empathizes with those who challenge her, recognizing that fear often motivates their aggression. She says:

Fear can drive people to do terrible things. I know that now. I try to remember that when someone wants to hurt me. If I can reach the fear, sometimes I can stop the harm. (Butler, 1993,p. 190)

Empathy here becomes a tool not just for survival, but for conflict prevention and emotional leadership.

3.6 Social Skills and Leadership

Lauren's leadership emerges through her ability to form relationships and build community. She listens actively, communicates clearly, and mediates conflict essential social skills identified by Goleman (1998). Her

group on the road includes people from different backgrounds, but Lauren unites them under a shared mission. Her inclusive, emotionally intelligent leadership becomes evident in moments like this:

We joined together because we had to, but we stayed together because we began to believe in each other. That belief was all we had and it worked. (Butler, 1993,p. 234)

Lauren also nurtures a space where emotional vulnerability is not punished but respected. She allows others to grieve, to express fears, and to ask questions. Her emotional intelligence allows her to balance authority with compassion. When she explains Earthseed to her followers, she doesn't demand obedience. Instead, she shares her thoughts and asks for dialogue:

I don't want blind followers. I want people who will learn, think, and question. Earthseed isn't a cage it's a way forward. (Butler, 1993,p. 256)

This style of leadership emotionally attuned, open, and collaborative is central to her success in building a new kind of community. In *Parable of the Sower*, emotional intelligence is not merely a character trait it is the core of Lauren Olamina's identity, the compass that guides her through chaos, and the engine that powers her revolutionary vision. In a society fractured by violence, scarcity, and moral decay, Lauren does not survive through brute strength or cold detachment; instead, she thrives by cultivating her inner world, tuning into the emotions of others, and forging deep interpersonal bonds.

Her journey from a teenage girl in a gated community to the spiritual founder of Earthseed is marked by the consistent and deliberate application of emotional intelligence through self-awareness, she understands her unique vulnerabilities and strengths; through self-regulation, she maintains clarity and restraint in life-threatening situations; through motivation, she envisions a radically different future; through empathy, she connects with the pain and hopes of others; and through social skill, she brings together broken people into a functioning and purposeful community. Lauren's leadership, deeply rooted in emotional sensitivity and spiritual vision, challenges traditional dystopian narratives that often glorify hyper-rationality, aggression, or individualism. Instead, Butler presents a new kind of hero one who leads through emotional depth, psychological resilience, and ethical clarity. Lauren does not simply react to the world; she reshapes it, offering a model of transformation that emerges not from domination, but from emotional connection and shared purpose. As she proclaims in one of her Earthseed verses:

To shape God with wisdom and forethought· To survive and shape the world with empathy and hope· (Butler, 1993,p·269)

Discussion

In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren Olamina survives and ultimately leads others not through force or conventional authority, but through an extraordinary application of emotional intelligence, which becomes her most effective survival tool in a disintegrating society. Drawing on Daniel Goleman's framework, Lauren demonstrates all five core competencies self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills as essential strategies for navigating collapse.

First, Lauren exhibits strong self-awareness, as she fully understands her hyperempathy syndrome, recognizing it not as a weakness but as a crucial part of her identity. She says, "I feel what others feel. Pain. Pleasure. It's real" (Butler 11). Unlike others who may suppress or deny emotion to survive, Lauren's awareness of her sensitivity enables her to remain grounded, preventing emotional overwhelm in the face of horror. This aligns with Goleman's view that self-awareness is foundational for emotional control and clarity (Goleman 1995, p.43).

Second, her self-regulation is evident in her disciplined emotional responses. Despite witnessing violence, death, and betrayal, Lauren rarely reacts impulsively. She channels her grief and rage into constructive action, such as planning escape routes or crafting Earthseed. As Jean Retzinger argues, Lauren possesses "cognitive flexibility and ethical responsiveness," which allows her to adapt without succumbing to despair (Retzinger 2007, 430). This restraint fosters internal stability amidst external chaos.

Lauren's intrinsic motivation further defines her strength. Even after the destruction of her home and family, she is not paralyzed by fear. Instead, she becomes driven by a spiritual and existential mission to spread Earthseed. "God is change," she declares, turning trauma into transformation (Butler 77). Her motivation is not self-serving but future-oriented, echoing Goleman's idea that emotionally intelligent individuals are driven by purpose beyond immediate gratification (Goleman 1995, p.85).

Most strikingly, empathy though literally painful for Lauren is her most vital gift. In a world where dehumanization prevails, Lauren's ability to feel others' suffering fosters moral clarity. As Gerry Canavan notes, the novel advances "an ethics of care" that is deeply embedded in Lauren's actions (Canavan 2014,p.48)

. Her empathetic leadership attracts and bonds a community of outcasts, refugees, and orphans, transforming emotional vulnerability into collective strength.

Finally, Lauren's social skills emerge through her inclusive and cooperative leadership. She gains trust not through dominance but by modeling honesty, humility, and shared purpose. As she gathers followers along her journey north, she does not impose authority but nurtures it through dialogue and mutual respect. This affirms Goleman's argument that successful leaders use emotional intelligence to foster strong, cooperative relationships (Goleman 1995,p. 149).

In sum, Lauren's emotional intelligence is not just a psychological trait it is her survival strategy. Unlike traditional heroes who rely on physical power, Lauren survives because she listens, feels, adapts, and connects. In a world ravaged by environmental and social collapse, emotional intelligence becomes the new currency of leadership and resilience, enabling Lauren not only to endure but to lead. Through her, Butler redefines survival as an emotional and ethical project, where empathy, adaptability, and vision outweigh brute strength

Conclusion

Butler's *Parable of the Sower* is a powerful literary work that merges speculative fiction with philosophical and psychological depth. Set in a dystopian America where institutions have crumbled and societal norms have collapsed, the novel asks urgent questions about what it takes not only to survive, but to lead, to rebuild, and to reimagine the future. This study has demonstrated that emotional intelligence, as defined by scholars like Daniel Goleman and Peter Salovey, is not just relevant to understanding interpersonal relationships or workplace dynamics it is also a powerful lens through which to analyze character development, leadership, and survival in literature. At the heart of the novel stands Lauren Olamina, a character who embodies the full range of emotional intelligence. Her self-awareness enables her to understand and manage the challenges of hyperempathy; her self-regulation helps her remain calm and focused in high-stress situations; her internal motivation leads her to create Earthseed, a belief system that envisions a better world; her empathy allows her to build trust and solidarity in a society driven by fear and mistrust; and her social skills enable her to lead and unify a diverse group of travelers into a functioning, cooperative community. Throughout *Parable of the Sower*, Butler redefines the archetype of the dystopian hero. Instead of emphasizing physical power or detached logic, she celebrates emotional depth, compassion, and resilience. Lauren does not ascend by overpowering others she rises through connection, care, and the courage to remain emotionally open even when doing so is painful.

She is, as Butler illustrates, a leader of a new kind: one who shapes belief, community, and survival through emotional insight. This study has shown that emotional intelligence, far from being a passive or secondary trait, is a primary means of navigating a fractured world. It enables Lauren to recognize danger without succumbing to paranoia, to experience loss without becoming hardened, and to extend trust and love even when the world around her has forgotten those values.

Lastly, Butler's novel offers more than a grim vision of the future. It presents a roadmap for emotional leadership in times of crisis, where empathy, emotional intelligence, and visionary thinking become the tools not only for survival, but for transformation. In Lauren Olamina, readers find a model of how emotional intelligence can be harnessed not only to endure the worst of times, but to plant the seeds of something better. In Butler's vision, emotional intelligence is not a luxury it is a survival imperative. It is what allows Lauren not only to endure loss and chaos, but to imagine new structures of meaning and belonging. It is through her emotional literacy that she builds Earthseed, a philosophy born from both suffering and compassion, from fear and faith. In a world stripped of order and certainty, Lauren's emotional intelligence becomes a source of strength that transcends personal survival it becomes a blueprint for rebuilding humanity itself.

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