

A novel wild seed by octavia butler

Literature



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Question Octavia Butler sets her novel, *Wild Seed* in the context of the transatlantic slave trade and US slavery. In the story, Doro gathers “ his people” on farms and plantations along the eastern seaboard. In what ways are Doro’s fictional communities similar to the real plantations described by historian Lerone Bennett (chapter 4 of *Before the Mayflower “ Behind the Cotton Curtain”*) and the ones Frederick Douglass discusses in his autobiography? In what ways are they different? Give specific examples.

The novel *Wild Seed* written by Octavia Butler is set at a period when the peoples of the world are not yet completely civilized and people strongly believed in mysticism and magic. One of the protagonists of the story, Doro; has telepathic and special powers that starts him off in a path of adventure and leads him to the old lady Anyanwu, whose age is stupendous by modern standards. One could see such primitivism in the lives of black slaves in America as documented by Lerone Bennett and Frederick Douglass.

In the case of *Wild Seed*, beyond the science fiction genre being adopted by the author, there are strong allusions to real and present problems created by the colonization of the Americas. The genocidal elimination of a majority of Native Americans is one such issue and the importation of black slaves from Africa is another example. She describes life in the plantations as full of idiocy and rurality, similar to Bennetts description of slave life. Without being a direct condemnation of the atrocities meted out to these groups, Octavia Butler indirectly alludes to these historical injustices through the characters and situations we find in the book. This sense of outrage and indignation can also be seen in Lerone Bennetts book titled *Before the Mayflower*, in which he notes that “ Behind the Cotton Curtains, four million human beings were systematically deprived of every right of personality. Vice, immorality and

brutality were institutionalized.” (Bennett, chapter 4 , p. 70)

Through the characters of Doro and Anyanwu, Butler plays out other moral conundrums facing modern societies. For example, at certain passages in the book, Butler likens the dangers posed by unfettered capitalism to that of Doro and Anyanwus greedy behavior. This greed can also be seen in the economic exploitation perpetrated by the system of chattel slavery. Hence there are many similarities between the real and fictional accounts of slavery and plantation life depicted in these three books.

Question 2: In chapter 4 of *Before the Mayflower*, (“ Behind the Cotton Curtain”), Lerone Bennett describes three axial forces of African American life that enabled Black people to survive slavery. What were these three forces and how did they function in the life of the enslaved community? How and where do we see these forces at work in other texts?

One constant source of hope for the enslaved African Americans is the prospect of a blissful afterlife that the Christian doctrine offered. While the first generation of black slaves in America brought with them their native religious beliefs and practices, they were soon replaced by Christianity. The white slave owners instilled in their slaves the virtues and values given in the Holy Bible. When subject to hard physical labor, confinement in their dingy housing quarters and humiliated by their masters, the slaves would console themselves by reiterating the Christian notion of salvation and the hope of a favorable after-life. There was also considerable solidarity within the slave community, which helped them overcome alienation and feelings of loneliness to a degree. For example, slaves would distinguish between stealing and taking. While they considered it fair to taking food and clothing from their white masters, the forbade stealing the same from another fellow

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slave. These kinds of small moral codes added up to give them a sense of dignity even in such hostile conditions.

One can find parallels between the perennial conflict between the slaves and their masters and the central plot of Octavia Butlers Wild Seed. In the novel, the confrontation between Doro and Anyanwu can be read as an allegory to the struggle of the slaves. Hinting that Anyanwus character is one of the underdog, the author attributes great powers of patience and perseverance to the former, which are qualities that the slaves also showed. In a very broad way, the author is hinting at the universality of challenges confronted by human beings. This is a valid point, for what gives value to a novel is its transcendent quality beyond the here and now. In other words, although the novel is science fiction, it embodies in it enduring literary qualities that can appeal to generations of readers in the future. The novel also finds a resonance with the struggles underwent by black Americans in their path to emancipation.