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## Utopia While They Sleep: Consent, Benevolent Power, and the Politics of Private Dreams in Octavia E. Butler's *The Book of Martha*

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**Abstract:**

Octavia E. Butler's *The Book of Martha* asks a quiet but unsettling question: may one person improve the world on behalf of everyone else? God summons Martha Bes, a Black novelist raised in poverty, and charges her with making a single change that will help humanity survive its own destructiveness. She sets aside rules and blueprints and chooses dreams; every night, each person will live a private, perfect utopia. Existing criticism has read the story through theology, female agency, and dream-based utopianism. This paper turns to a question those readings touch but do not centre: consent. Drawing on Gerald Dworkin's theory of paternalism, Onora O'Neill's work on autonomy and trust, and the utopian thought of Ruth Levitas, Lyman Tower Sargent, and Douglas Mao, it reads Martha's appointment, her choice, and its costs as a study in benevolent power. The paper argues that the dream solution is ethically distinctive because it refuses to impose a single vision of the good life; its content belongs to each sleeper. Its delivery, however, is universal and unchosen. Butler thus separates two claims that utopian thought often merges: the value of an outcome and the legitimacy of its means. Neither condemning nor absolving Martha, the story suggests that freedom granted without consent may enlarge the imagination while narrowing people's authority over their own lives.

**Keywords:** Utopia; consent; paternalism; agency; dreams; autonomy

## Introduction

Octavia E. Butler never trusted easy hope. Her fiction returns, again and again, to people who must survive inside systems of power they did not design. She wrote honestly about how human beings wound one another, and about how hard it is to imagine a world in which they stop. *The Book of Martha* first published online in 2003 and later collected in the

second edition of *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (2005), places that difficulty at the centre of a short and almost quiet narrative. There are no battles in it. There is only a conversation. Martha Bes, a Black novelist who grew up in poverty, suddenly finds herself in the presence of God. She is given a task that sounds like a blessing and feels like a sentence. She must choose one change that will help humanity outlive its own destructive habits. Afterwards she must return to ordinary life and live with what she has done.

Martha is not invited to design a perfect world for her own pleasure. She is handed real power over real people, and every option she considers carries a price that strangers would have to pay. After long hesitation, Martha settles on something softer. Every person will receive vivid, realistic dreams in which their own idea of a good life comes true. No single design is forced on anyone.

The solution is generous and clever. It is also troubling. Humanity is never asked. The people whose nights will be rewritten have no voice in the decision, no chance to object, and no way to undo it. The contradiction is easy to miss, but it is sharp: Martha tries to widen human freedom through a change that humanity did not choose.

Critics have not ignored the ethical side of the story. Elham Mohammadi Achachelooei and Carol Elizabeth Leon have read it as a reworking of the relationship between God and humanity and as a study of female agency. Matilde Ribeiro Cameira has examined its dreams, its doubts about utopia, and the guilt that accompanies power. Writing more broadly, Douglas Mao and Joe Hoover have asked what is lost when better worlds are built on behalf of others. This paper does not claim that consent has been overlooked. Its claim is more modest: consent can serve as the thread that ties these debates together, because the central puzzle of the story is not whether Martha means well. It is whether meaning well is enough.

The study has four objectives: to examine the authority under which Martha is asked to reshape human life, to analyse the dreams as an indirect way of guiding behaviour, to weigh individual freedom against a universal intervention, and to ask whether private fulfilment can serve public justice. Its central argument is that the story presents utopian intervention as an ethical paradox, because the effort to expand human agency begins with a change that humanity never collectively authorised. Butler imagines a form of help that refuses to impose one vision of perfection, yet she leaves open whether such help can be legitimate without consent, and whether private dreams can repair a shared and damaged world.

**Literature Review**

The scholarship on *The Book of Martha* is small but serious, and it gathers around three conversations.

2.1. *Theology, Female Agency, and the Authority to Transform Humanity*

The first conversation concerns theology and agency. Achachelooei and Leon read the story through Daphne Hampson's feminist post-Biblical theology and through posthumanist

thought. In their account, Butler replaces the passive, fallen human of traditional Christian doctrine with a more active and less hierarchical partner of the divine. Martha begins as a woman who expects to obey a masculine God. She ends as someone who must define herself beyond the role of an obedient servant. This reading rightly refuses to treat Martha as a mere instrument; she questions, argues, delays, and finally decides. Yet their focus remains her own empowerment, and her relation to the billions affected by her decision lies largely outside their frame. Martha's agency in choosing is one matter; humanity's agency in authorising that choice is another. The present paper takes up the second.

**Dreams, Utopian Imagination, and Ethical Consequences**

The second conversation concerns dreams and utopia. Cameira sets the story beside Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*, another narrative in which dreams remake the world. She argues that no utopia can satisfy everyone, that every perfect world harms or excludes someone, and that both writers treat utopia as an ongoing process rather than a finished plan. She also contrasts Martha's reluctance, and her willingness to accept personal loss, with the reckless confidence of Le Guin's Dr. Haber. Cameira's work shows that the dreams are already a recognised critical concern. What remains open is the dream as a method, and not only as a vision. Martha's solution is individual in its content, since each person dreams a different paradise. It is universal in its delivery, since everyone receives the dreams whether they wish to or not. A change that is privately experienced but collectively imposed deserves closer ethical attention.

**Utopia, Justice, and the Danger of World-Making**

The third conversation is wider and more political. In *Inventions of Nemesis*, Mao argues that the pursuit of justice, more than the promise of happiness, is the essential project of utopian thought (5). His study reads Butler alongside Le Guin and Chang-Rae Lee as writers who test the limits of utopian desire, and it invites us to ask whether a better order treats people as its beneficiaries or as its raw material. Hoover, writing in political theory, warns that building a new world often requires destroying existing ones. He finds in the fiction of Butler and Le Guin a dramatisation of the link between solipsism and this destructive side of world-building. Against it he proposes what his title calls "the careful practice of hope," a hope that cares for the whole shared world, including the parts we dislike. His warning is useful here, for Martha's dreams give each person a world that he or she controls alone, every single night.

**Consent as a Problem of Legitimacy**

Together, these studies show that the story questions divine power, human agency, and the design of better worlds. They do not yet bind these issues through the problem of legitimacy. The critical question is not simply whether Martha's decision leads to a good outcome. It is whether a good outcome is enough to justify the universal intervention that produces it. The story makes this harder, since the intervention is both imposed and potentially agency-enhancing: people receive dreams that might make them freer, more alert, and less cruel, yet the decision to alter their experience is made on their behalf. This study therefore examines the distance between the legitimacy of an intervention's intended outcome and the legitimacy of its means.

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**Theoretical Framework**

Three ideas carry the theoretical weight of this paper: paternalism, autonomy, and utopian imagination. A fourth term, coined for this study, links them to Butler's text.

**Dworkin and Paternalism**

Gerald Dworkin defines paternalism as "the interference with a person's liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests or values of the person being coerced" (65). The definition fits Martha's situation with uncomfortable precision. The stated aim of her work is human welfare. The decision is made within a very small circle, Martha and God, and not by humanity as a whole. The change touches the very conditions under which people think, imagine, and act. Dworkin does not claim that paternalism is always wrong. He allows that some interference may be justified, especially where those affected would later welcome it. Still, a kind motive does not close the case; the burden of justification stays with the one who interferes. This matters for a fair reading of Martha. She is not a tyrant. She weighs costs, fears harm, and doubts herself at every step. The concept of paternalism lets us hold her kindness and her overreach in the same hand.

**O'Neill, Autonomy, and Trust**

Onora O'Neill's *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics* adds a second lens. O'Neill is critical of thin, purely individualistic notions of autonomy that reduce freedom to the bare act of choosing. She argues that consent matters chiefly as a protection against deception and coercion, and that trust rests on accountable relationships rather than on good intentions. Two points follow for Butler's story. First, a change meant to sharpen human judgement does not automatically destroy autonomy, and Martha hopes that sleepers will wake more alert and less easily fooled. Second, the absence of consent still matters, because those changed by the dreams are excluded from the decision and cannot hold anyone to account for it. Consent is not the whole of autonomy, but its absence complicates any claim that a change truly empowers.

**Utopian Imagination: Levitas, Sargent, and Jameson**

Ruth Levitas understands utopia broadly as the expression of a desire for a better way of being, rather than as a fixed portrait of a perfect state. Lyman Tower Sargent describes utopianism as "social dreaming" (3), a phrase that suits this story almost too well. Fredric Jameson distinguishes the utopian programme, which seeks to realise a complete system, from a scattered utopian impulse that surfaces in everyday wishes and fantasies (3). These ideas help separate two models. A fixed utopia is a single ideal arrangement imposed on everyone. Martha's utopia is a universal change intended to give each person a richer private imaginative life. The framework tests whether this difference truly solves the ethical problem or merely changes its form.

**From Paternalism to Affective Governance**

To name the kind of power at work in the dream solution, this paper uses the term "affective governance." It is this study's own interpretive term, not one drawn from any single theorist. It refers to influence exercised by altering the emotional and imaginative

conditions of human behaviour, rather than by issuing laws or commands. Martha tells no one what to do. She changes what people feel each night and hopes that their days will follow.

**The Authority to Improve Humanity: Delegated Power and Constrained Choice**

**The Appointment of a Reformer**

The story opens with a summons that Martha never sought. When she first looks at God, she sees a "twice-live-sized, bearded white man" (Butler 190), the God of church paintings and Michelangelo's marble. God's answer to her surprise is gentle and disquieting: "You see what your life has prepared you to see" (Butler 191). Authority, in other words, wears the face that culture has taught us to obey. Then comes the commission: "You will help humankind to survive its greedy, murderous, wasteful adolescence" (Butler 192). The sentence honours Martha by trusting her. It also isolates her, because it turns the fate of everyone into her private responsibility.

Why one woman, and why this woman? The story offers no election, no council, and no public debate. God even remarks that "there are millions of human beings who would give anything to do this work" (Butler 200). The comment is meant to steady her, but it reveals something uneasy: the task belongs not to humanity but to whoever happens to be chosen. One condition shows Butler's moral seriousness. When the work is finished, God says, "you'll go back and live among them again as one of their lowliest" (Butler 193). Whoever designs a society, the rule implies, should be willing to live at its bottom. Yet this check is one that Martha carries alone. No one else agreed to it, and no one else can enforce it.

**The Problem of Choosing for Others**

Martha's hesitation is the clearest sign of her conscience. "What if I say something wrong, make a mistake?" she asks. "You will," God replies, and he refuses to shield her: "I won't fix things for you" (Butler 195-96). When she protests that she knows nothing, God agrees. "Quite right," he says, and then, with a smile, "That's why" (Butler 196-97). Her uncertainty is part of her qualification. Someone sure that she knew best might remake the world with terrible confidence. But the same doubt proves that Martha cannot know whether her plan will serve everyone, however kind her purpose.

This is the paternalist bind in its purest form. Martha must act for others with no process through which those others can authorise her. Her caution is admirable, yet caution is not the same as permission.

**Race, Gender, and the Face of Authority**

Martha's response to her new role is fierce and personal. When God tells her she will return among the lowliest, she answers that she was "born poor, black, and female to a fourteen-year-old mother who could barely read" (Butler 193-94). The line is not self-pity. It is the memory of a childhood spent half the time without a home, a past she has worked her whole life to leave. Butler lets the pain show only for a moment, much as Martha herself has learned to do, yet it colours everything that follows. Martha knows from the inside what it means to have one's life arranged by forces one never chose.

Her history also shapes how she sees authority. As the conversation unfolds, God grows smaller and more ordinary, until Martha sees a "familiar woman's body beneath the blue jeans and black T-shirt" (Butler 212), a figure who could pass for her sister. Achachelooei and Leon read this change as a turn away from a masculine, hierarchical divinity. It also suggests that the power to design humanity has always worn a particular race and gender. The story asks not merely who has power, but how anyone can claim the right to use it for the good of everyone else.

**Dreams as Affective Governance: Agency through Intervention**

**Why the Dream Solution Matters**

Martha reaches the dream solution only after turning away from harsher paths. Her early ideas, such as limiting the number of children each family may have, collapse once God traces their consequences. Each direct rule placed on human life turns out to be a cage of some kind. She also rejects the grand promise of a designed society. "What, exactly, do you want? A utopia?" she asks God. "Because I don't believe in them" (Butler 202). She cannot imagine a way "to arrange a society so that everyone is content" (Butler 202). Her doubt is not cynicism. It comes from a novelist's long acquaintance with how differently people desire.

Her answer is to move utopia indoors, into sleep. She proposes a single remedy: "Powerful, unavoidable, realistic dreams that come every time people sleep" (Butler 203-04). In her words, "Each person will have a private, perfect utopia every night" (Butler 203-04). The aim is not to give everyone the same paradise. It is to satisfy, in sleep, the hungers that make people cruel when awake. A person who craves conflict may find it there; a person who covets may possess. Martha hopes the satisfaction will drain away some of the energy behind greed and domination, and that people will wake more alert and less vulnerable to lies, peer pressure, and self-delusion. "I want them to have the only possible utopia," she says (Butler 203-04). The phrase is modest, and also a little sad. The only utopia that can belong to everyone, she implies, is one that no one has to share.

**Private Dreams and the Preservation of Difference**

This is the most hopeful dimension of her choice. A single ideal society always raises the question of whose values define perfection. Cameira observes that one person's eutopia can easily become another person's dystopia. Martha's dreams seem designed to avoid exactly that collision, because no one's paradise becomes another's prison. In Levitas's terms, the dreams honour the desire for a better way of being without fixing the shape that desire must take. In Jameson's terms, they give the scattered utopian impulse a nightly home instead of hardening it into a programme. The solution accommodates plurality rather than erasing it. A harder question remains, however. Can a private imaginative space truly respect difference when the terms of that space have been fixed for everyone?

**The Limits of Benevolent Intervention**

The dreams are also a technique of power. They do not command; they shape. This is what the present study calls affective governance. Martha alters the emotional climate in which people make choices, trusting that better days will grow out of more satisfying nights.

The method is indirect, and its indirectness is exactly what makes it both appealing and unsettling. A law can be read, debated, and resisted. A dream simply arrives.

Dworkin and O'Neill help to keep two truths in view at once. The dreams do not dictate any particular ideal of life, since their content belongs to each sleeper. At the same time, the decision to install them is universal and made without consent. Dworkin's account reminds us that interference justified by the welfare of those affected remains interference, however mild its form. O'Neill reminds us that trust depends on accountability, and the dreamers will not even know whom to question. God names the dangers plainly. Some people may become addicted, some may lose interest in waking life and real intimacy, and some parents may neglect their children. "None of this will make them perfect, Martha," God warns. She answers, "It will help more than it will hurt" (Butler 211). It is a hope, not a guarantee.Butler does not resolve this tension, and she seems careful not to. The dreams are neither simple instruments of control nor simple symbols of liberation. They open a space for private freedom while withdrawing from people the power to decide the conditions under which that freedom grows. That is the quiet paradox at the heart of Martha's gift.

**Private Utopia and Public Justice: What Can Dreams Change?**

**Individual Fulfilment versus Social Transformation**

Martha's purpose is to help humanity survive, yet her method works one sleeper at a time. The story never shows a world that has overcome poverty, racism, war, or environmental ruin. What changes, at least in hope, is the inner life of individuals. Can a change in private experience, then, transform the structures that produce suffering?

Sargent's phrase "social dreaming" (3) becomes useful here precisely because Martha's plan departs from it. Utopian thought has usually imagined how groups of people might arrange their lives together. Martha's dreams are private by design. Their great virtue, that no one must live inside another person's paradise, is also their great limit. A dream cannot reform a housing market, a prison, or a poisoned river. It can only change the person who wakes. Hoover's warning becomes pointed here: a utopian longing that turns inward risks becoming a world one rules alone, and it may weaken the slow, shared labour of improving a common one. Mao's emphasis on justice sharpens the worry. If justice is utopia's essential project, a utopia enjoyed in solitude may soothe injustice without ending it. Tom Moylan's work on critical utopias and dystopias points the same way, since it values fiction that ties hope to collective political agency.

Private imagination is not politically worthless; calmer, less deceived people may well build fairer institutions. But Butler leaves a real gap between reflective individuals and just structures, and she asks her reader to notice it rather than leap across it.

**The Cost of the Solution**

The cost of the dreams also falls close to home. Late in the story, Martha realises what her gift may do to books. "Reading will suffer, won't it—pleasure reading, anyway?" she asks. God answers honestly: "It will—for a while, anyway" (Butler 212). For a novelist, this is no small price. Writing is the only work she has ever truly cared about. God adds that she

will probably need another way to earn a living, and that starting again at her age will not be easy. Martha accepts the loss, though not without fear: "I'm afraid of the unintended damage that the dreams might do" (Butler 212). Her admission keeps the solution from looking free. The bitter irony is that the dreams may replace the very novels that once taught readers how to dream.

William James offers a thought experiment that sharpens these stakes. He imagines millions kept permanently happy on the single condition that "a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things" endures a life of lonely torture, and he suggests that most of us would find such a bargain hideous (188). Martha's sacrifice is far smaller, and she makes it freely. Still, the story asks us to separate accepting a cost oneself from imposing costs on others. Martha consents to her own loss. The readers who lose their pleasure in books, the parents who may drift from their children, and the dreamers who may sink into sleep never consent to theirs.

**Consent, Accountability, and the Unresolved Ending**

The ending deepens the problem of accountability. Near the close, God, now in the form of a woman, asks, "Do you want to remember being here?" (Butler 212). Martha's reply is simple and heavy: "I want to forget" (Butler 213). Then, standing alone, she wonders what it was she wanted so badly to forget. The wish is deeply human, for who could carry such knowledge without breaking? Yet forgetting also means that the one person responsible for the change will not remember choosing it. The intervention passes into the world without a witness, without public debate, and without anyone who can explain or revise it. Humanity is never asked to accept the dreams, to reject them, or to adjust them once their effects become clear.

Legitimate action does not always require unanimous agreement, for societies act every day without the consent of every member. Butler's story shows, however, what is lost when there is no shared process at all. Accountability disappears. The dreams avoid imposing a single vision of the good life, but they leave unanswered the question of who has the right to transform the conditions of human existence. The ethical tension of the story lies in the difference between creating possibilities for others and deciding, on their behalf, what those possibilities should be.

**Conclusion**

This reading of *The Book of Martha* yields three findings. First, Martha's appointment exposes the problem of concentrated authority. The power to improve humanity is given to one person, who must decide for everyone and has no means of asking them. Second, the dream solution offers a gentler and less prescriptive form of utopia. Instead of imposing one ideal, it gives each person a private space in which to imagine a good life. Third, the means remain ethically uncertain. The intention to expand freedom does not, by itself, settle whether the intervention is legitimate without collective consent.

The contribution of this paper is to show that Butler separates two things that utopian thinking often joins: the ethical value of an imagined outcome and the political legitimacy of the process that produces it. Martha is neither villain nor saint. She is a frightened, careful woman asked to carry a weight that no one should carry alone, and her decision is shaped by kindness as much as by doubt. That is why the story stays with its readers long after its last line. In *The Book of Martha* Butler suggests that a better future cannot be judged solely by the freedom it promises. It must also be judged by how that future is chosen, whose authority establishes it, and whether those expected to benefit from it retain a meaningful role in shaping their own lives.

**Further Research**

Future studies could compare Butler's treatment of imposed transformation with Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*, where the wish to improve the world raises similar questions of agency and unintended harm. A second line of inquiry might trace the difference between individual and collective change across Butler's fiction, especially *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. Such a comparison could show whether Butler increasingly imagines ethical change as a shared process rather than a solution handed down by one powerful agent. Further research might also examine how feminist speculative fiction more broadly represents consent, paternalism, and the distribution of authority in the long search for a more just future.

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