


## Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* as the Pyro Epidemic Novel

S. Lavanya\* 

Assistant Professor of English  
Sri Sarada College for Women (A)  
Affiliated to Periyar University  
Salem, TN.

### ABSTRACT

Drug addiction is one of the major social evils. A large number of people, irrespective of their age are falling prey to drugs because of various factors. Many works have been written on the substance abuse and their resultant crimes. The Crack Epidemic of the United States remains one of the major incidents related to drug consumption and addiction in the nation's history. Octavia Estelle Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* deals with drug addiction as one of its sub-themes in the future Earth. *Parable of the Sower* is widely acknowledged because of its relevance in today's time. Butler presents a dystopic future where environmental and climactic changes wreak havoc in the lives of people. In addition to this, the humans butcher each other because of the addiction of pyro drug, which makes them enjoy fire literally. The aim of this paper is to analyze Butler's *Parable of the Sower* as the pyro epidemic novel, which highly resembles the crack epidemic of the United States in the later part of the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** Octavia Butler, Pyro, Crack Epidemic, *Parable of the Sower*, Drug addiction.

Dystopic writings have become the norm of the day, and Science Fiction writers are the forerunners in presenting an apocalyptic Earth where many factors contribute to the destruction of Earth and humanity. Several anthropogenic factors like overpopulation, deforestation, over consumption, pollution make life on Earth impossible. These ecological threats in turn create social threats, leading humans to harm each other to achieve their ends. Several anti-social behaviours are a menace to our society and they are being committed every day all around the world. "Most types of anti-social behaviour fit into one of three categories – street problems, nuisance neighbours or environmental crime. . . . Serious criminal behaviour includes criminal damage, vandalism, making threats of violence or behaving violent, graffiti, drug dealing, dangerous dogs, harassment, public disturbances" ("Types of antisocial behaviour"). It is not

---

\* Author: S. Lavanya

Email: [lavanayasekar89@gmail.com](mailto:lavanayasekar89@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9757-0496>

Received 17 Nov. 2023; Accepted 19 Nov. 2023. Available online: 25 Nov. 2023.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



surprising that many of these acts are committed by young people. Of these, substance abuse is highly dangerous and difficult to control.

Substance abuse refers to the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs. Psychoactive substance use can lead to dependence syndrome – a cluster of behavioural, cognitive, and physiological phenomena that develop after repeated substance use and that typically include a strong desire to take the drug, difficulties in controlling its use, persisting in its use despite harmful consequences, a higher priority given to drug use than to other activities and obligations, increased tolerance, and sometimes a physical withdrawal state. (“Substance abuse”) Many novels have been written on drug addiction and how it affects both the spaces – individual as well as social. Luke Davies’ *Candy: A Novel of Love and Addiction* (1998), Beatrice Sparks’ *Go Ask Alice* (1971), *The Lotus Crew* (1984), William S. Burroughs’ *Junkie* (1953) and Ellen Hopkins’ *Crank* (2004) are some of the novels based on drug addiction and its violence.

Drugs are a very common element in science and speculative fiction. Avid readers of science fiction cannot forget the drug ‘Melange’ in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*. Melange gives increased lifespan and heightened senses to its users. ‘Glitterstim’ of Star Wars gives telepathic abilities to its users. Famous ‘Red pill’ and ‘Blue Pill’ of Matrix cannot be easily forgotten by the movie buffs. ‘Serum 114’ is the drug used in *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess. It is given to the protagonist to make him intolerant towards the things he loves the most. The list goes on and it is only evident that drugs are used as a part of both utopias and dystopias in science and speculative fiction.

Octavia Estelle Butler was a prominent Black science fiction writer who is considered to be the third point of Afrofuturism along with artists Sun Ra and George Clinton. Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic that combines several elements together that present the future through the lens of Afrocentricity. Butler’s works are mostly afrofuturistic and have a black female protagonist on whose shoulders the fate of the survival of humanity rests – quite a subversion of the established conventions of science fiction. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* is a perfect example of a dystopian writing. The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines “dystopia” as follows: “A modern term invented as the opposite of utopia, and applied to any alarmingly unpleasant imaginary world, usually of the projected future. The term is also applied to fictional works depicting such worlds” (Baldick 100). Butler authored this novel in the year 1993 and

the plot is set in the future 2024. When one reads the novel, the likeness of the contemporary period is unmistakable.

Butler's future year 2024 is full of chaos because of both the environmental and economic crises that were not taken care of. Politics has turned into a gutter for real and it was battling religion on one side and science on the other side. Poverty, exploitation, slavery and diseases are rampant. People are butchering each other either with or without a cause. With the spread of a new illegal drug that begins a kind of epidemic, no one is safe in Butler's world. Butler captures the essence of humanity – how they work with each other and how they work against each other in her novels. The aim of this paper is to explore the condition of the drug-induced epidemic in the novel *Parable of the Sower*; to analyze the actions of the drug addicts and their consequences in the already dystopic world.

Drug addiction remains one of the major global problems. Teenagers fall easy prey to drugs and it is even used by people of varying ages to overcome their presumed problems and for the sake of the pleasure they receive through the oblivious state. Drug usage is high in many countries of the world, and the United States almost tops the list. And they have already experienced the drug-induced epidemic in the late 90s. “The biggest surge in the use of drug occurred during the “crack epidemic,” between 1984 and 1990, when the drug spread across American cities. The crack epidemic dramatically increased the number of Americans addicted to cocaine. . . . Crack is a solid form of cocaine that was widely used in the late 90's in the United States. Even the United Kingdom experienced their own crack epidemic in 2002” (“Crack Cocaine: A Short History”). Several non-fictional works documented the devastation of the crack usage during the time: *Dark Alliance* (1998) by Gary Webb, *Cocaine True*, *Cocaine Blue* (1994) by Eugene Richards, *The Big White Lie* (1993) by Michael Levine, *Another Day in Paradise* (1997) by Eddie Little. Octavia Butler seemed to have developed interest in this area and much of the occurrences in the novel *Parable of the Sower* reflect the real happenings of the time as the novel was published in the year 1993.

The plot of the novel unfolds through the journal entries of the black female protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina, who is just fifteen years old and has hyperempathy - she is able to feel the pain and pleasure of others. She lives with her family in a walled enclave in Los Angeles, which is protected together by the community. Lauren forms her own religion, a belief structure that is based on science and facts and names the belief system as “Earthseed”. She equips herself to survive the harsh world outside the walls by reading everything she could get her hands on –

survival books, farming and gardening, books on travel, histories and science books. She learns shooting during her hunting trips, learns to keep her hyperempathy in check and packs an emergency pack that is always ready to grab and run. When her walled community is destroyed by the drug addicts, she sets on a journey towards north, in the guise of a man and she forms her very own community in the end of the novel. The sequel of this novel, *Parable of the Talents* was published in 1998. It traces the growth of Lauren and her Earthseed as one of the global belief systems.

The readers come to know of the drug first through Keith, Lauren's brother. He is the trouble kid of the family. When he is only thirteen, he feels he should prove himself as a man and so slips out of the neighborhood much to the chagrin of his family. After the first two times of his disappearance, Lauren's father stops reacting to his absence and resigns himself from Keith's business. On one occasion, when Keith comes home, he opens up to Lauren. As Lauren herself plans to leave the community one day, she absorbs all the information he gives her. It is then he tells her about the new kind of a drug, the drug addicts and their behaviours. When Lauren asserts that she can survive the real world out there, he bursts out:

“Hey, I saw a guy get both of his eyes gouged out. After that, they set him on fire and watched him run around and scream and burn. You think you could stand to see that? . . . Hell no! Crazies did that Paints. They shave off all their hair – even their eyebrows – and they paint their skin green or blue or red or yellow. They eat fire and kill rich people. (Butler 110)

The very phrase ‘they eat fire’ suggests that it is a kind of pyromania – the desire to set fire to things. The addicts are termed as ‘paints’ in the novel since they paint their faces with different colors for reasons only known to them. Soon, the drug usage becomes an epidemic; becoming more prevalent in the country.

Keith goes on to describe the effects that are caused by this drug. The addicts forget themselves and they go to any extent to feel the pleasure. It is evident that the drug is used extensively by the rich people in the beginning. Keith continues to live outside the walls, and soon he is killed. Lauren understands the real monstrosity of the drug and its effects once she gets to see Keith's body. “Someone had cut and burned away most of my brother's skin. Everywhere except his face. They burned out his eyes, but left the rest of his face intact – like they wanted him to be recognized. They cut and they cauterized and they cut and cauterized . . . Some of the wounds were days old. Someone had an endless hatred of my brother” (Butler 113).

Lauren gets to know the real situation after seeing his body; she finally gets that she has to be more careful in her journey out there. Lauren even thinks that her hyperempathy could be a solution to prevent one from killing others. “I would never wish anyone dead in that horrible way. I think he was killed by monsters much worse than himself. It’s beyond me how one human being could do that to another. If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn’t do such things” (Butler 115).

Much of the destruction in the novel happens because of arson. Not only the paints use fire to gain pleasure and wreak havoc to others; but the thieves and criminals also use fire as arson to loot things from people. They not only use it to steal from others but also to get rid of those they dislike with arson. “People are setting fires to do what our arsonist did last night – to get the neighbors of the arson victim to leave their own homes unguarded. People are setting fires to get rid of whomever they dislike from personal enemies to anyone who looks or sound foreign or racially different” (Butler 143). Butler here makes a subtle commentary on the human nature. No matter, how worse the situation they are in, the humans would still find reasons to fight with each other. Butler observes that humans are intelligent beings but they are destroyed by their sense of superiority. She has talked about this very nature in her other novel series *Xeno genesis*. The rage of the pyro drug is on the rise and Lauren gets to know more about the drug:

Then there’s that fire drug with it’s dozen or so names: Blaze, fuego, flash, sunfire . . . The most popular name is pyro – short for pyromania. It’s all the same drug, and it’s been around for a while. Form what Keith said, it’s becoming more popular. It makes watching the leaping, changing patterns of fire a better, more intense, longer-lasting than sex. Like Paracetco, my biological mother’s drug of choice, pyro screws around with people’s neurochemistry. But Paracetco began as a legitimate drug intended to help victims of Alzheimer’s disease. Pyro was an accident. It was a homebrew – a basement drug invented by someone who was trying to assemble one of the other higher-priced street drugs. The inventor made a very small chemical mistake, and wound up with pyro. That happened on the east coast and caused an immediate increase in the number of senseless arson fires, large and small. (Butler 143-44)

Butler’s pyro is highly similar to that of the crack that was widely used in the United States in several ways. Both the drugs make the consumers become violent and commit vandalism in excess. It is a well-known fact that a person under the influence of drugs is harmful to self and others.

Experts say the shift in patterns of drug use has directly affected the type of crimes being committed at street level. Heroin addicts, previously identified as being responsible for the vast majority of property-related crime, traditionally fund their habits through activities such as

burglary, breaking into parked cars, shoplifting and credit card fraud. Crack, however, leaves heavy users edgy, paranoid and dangerously desperate. Because of this they are more likely to get involved in violent, opportunist crimes such as mugging, mobile phone theft and carjacking. (“Crack ‘epidemic’ fuels rise in the violent crime”)

Butler’s pyro has a similar effect- it makes the addicts to commit arson and vandalism to a greater extent. Robledo is finally destroyed by the paints. In an unsuspected night, the drug addicts come and destroy the community completely: “I think they must have been pyro addicts – bald people with painted heads, faces, and hands. Red faces; blue faces; green faces; screaming mouths; avid, crazy eyes, glittering in the firelight. They shot us and shot us and shot us” (Butler 154). Lauren searches for her family but she is not able to find them. She begins to scavenge things amidst the destruction. Even a logical person as she could not fathom a valid reason for their actions. Some of the paints are also killed in the fight between them and the Robledo people.

The inhumanity of the paints is evident from the carnage they left behind in Robledo:

Richard Moss, stark naked, lying in a pool of his own blood. His house, closer to the gate than ours, had been burned to the ground. Only the chimney stuck up blackened and naked from the rubble. . . . Little Robin Balter, naked, filthy, bloody between her legs, cold, bony, barely pubescent. Yet she might have married my brother Marcus someday. . . . Russell Dory, Robin’s grandfather. Only his shoes had been taken. His body had been almost torn apart by automatic weapons fire. An old man and a child. What had the painted faces gotten for all their killing? (Butler162-63)

At last she finds Zahra Moss and Harry Balter, her neighbors. The three of them group together and plan to travel north for a better chance. The real horror of the incident is brought out when Zahra recounts how her daughter is killed:

Shehad seen her daughter killed, seen the blue face who shot Bibi as Zahra ran, carrying her. She believed the blue face was enjoying himself, shooting at all the moving targets. She said his expression reminded her of a man having sex. “I fell down,” she whispered. “I thought I was dead. I thought he had killed me. There was blood. Then I saw Bibi’s head drop to one side. A red face grabbed her from me. I didn’t see where he came from. He grabbed her and threw her into the Hsu house. The house was burning everywhere. He threw her into the fire.(Butler 168)

Such is the effect of the drug; it makes the addicts forget everything – about them and about everything else in the world. All that thing matters is only their high and pleasure. When it comes to killing, the pyro addicts do not differentiate between infants and adults. All they need is to have something to set fire on and watch it with ecstasy. The effects of the drug portrayed in the novel are very similar to the criminal crimes that were found in the consumers of crack in 1980s America.

Lauren's hyperempathy is the side effect of the drug Paracetco that was used by her mother during her pregnancy. Even Zahra's mother has taken drugs and she shares her experiences with Lauren:

My mama took drugs, too . . . Shit, where I was born, everybody's mama took drugs – and whored to pay for them. And had babies all the time, and threw them away like trash when they died. Most of the babies did die from the drugs or accidents or not having enough to eat or being left alone so much . . . or from being sick. They were always getting sick. Some of them were born sick. They had sores all over or big things on their eyes – tumors, you know – or no legs or fits or can't breathe right . . . all kinds of things. And some of the ones who lived were dumb as dirt. Can't think, can't learn, just sit around nine, ten years old, peeing in their pants, rocking back and forth, and dripping spit down their chins. There's a lot of them. (Butler 192)

This brings up the harsh reality of the consequences of drug usage. The condition is even worse for the pregnant mothers and their babies. Usage of street drugs (illegal drugs) can cause many health complications in women. Drug consumption before and after pregnancy might lead to infertility, placental problems, preterm labor, miscarriage and stillbirth. Babies that are born to drug addicts might have the following complications: premature birth, low birthweight, heart defects, birth defects, several infections, Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS), learning and behavior problems, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and much more. (Street Drugs and Pregnancy). Butler portrays the consequences of the drug addiction realistically through her characters.

Lauren and her group are travelling further up the north and their situation is not getting better any more. In addition to the drug addicts, severe climactic changes also play havoc in their lives. Earthquake seems to be a very common occurrence and the group struggle to survive. "This far north, the radio reporters shorten the name to "pro" or "ro" and they say there are plenty of addicts. Addicts are running wild, setting fires in areas that the earthquake didn't damage" (Butler 246). The pyro addicts try to kidnap the children of the group. They sneak in unnoticed and try to kidnap a little girl called Tori. But Lauren and her people put up a fight and manage to chase the addicts away but lose a member of the group – Jill Gilchrist. She is killed in the shootout, and this only makes the group more willful to survive and stay together.

Most of the characters in the novels do not have a first-hand experience with the pyro addicts, but every one of them has seen the carnage they leave behind. One of the members Emery is used to those, and she tells others, "They'll burn everything. . . They won't stop until they've used up all the 'ro they have. All night, they'll be burning things. Things and people" (Butler 304). Pyromania becomes a rage of the millennials. Emery herself escapes from debt slavery

and she tells that the Pyros would steal children to be sold in order to get more drugs. “They would have sold my Tori to get some more ‘ro’” (Butler 304). The group becomes more determined to safeguard themselves against anyone and anything. They buy more ammunition and guns and practice hard. One might wonder about the state of the government and law and order. Ever since the beginning of the novel, Butler portrays the government as an indifferent institution towards its citizens. All the government servants only care about their office and about their own survival. In the novel, the government makes no effort to control the usage of drugs or to mitigate the sufferings of the people. In reality, during the crack epidemic of the United States, the then President Ronald Reagan carried out several measures to wipe out the drugs in the country. The administration of U.S. President Ronald Reagan early on began to prioritize what came to be called the “War on Drugs,” which combatted drug trafficking and aimed to end the crack cocaine epidemic, destroying many lives. The efforts included the passing of federal anti-drug laws, increased federal anti-drug funding, the initiation and expansion of prison and police programs, and the establishment of private organizations, such as Partnership for a Drug-Free America, to campaign on its behalf. (Turner)

But no such help comes to Lauren and her people from the government’s side. Finally, the group settles down in a secluded area in Northern California which Lauren calls “Acorn” and begins to live, learn, work, and grow. Butler continues Lauren’s story in the sequel *Parable of the Talents* set in 2032. Pyro drug is still prevalent but not like before; many other agents take the place of pyro and the world is apocalyptic. Butler ends the novel with a message that one should have hope amidst everything and only that will help one survive.

The very relevance of Butler’s writings in today’s world make her a kind of prophetic and realistic writer. In all her writings, people are plagued by their very own actions. Though her novels are set in dystopia, Butler ends them with a hope for humanity – the choice to be better humans. The concept of drug induced epidemic is highly relevant today and there might be a possibility that fiction becomes real too. The people are now plagued by the COVID crisis but this does not stop the other plagues. The Executive Director of UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) Ghada Waly issued the following statement regarding drug usage amidst the COVID-19 crisis:

Vulnerable and marginalized groups, youth, women and the poor pay the price for the world drug problem. The COVID-19 crisis and economic downturn threaten to compound drug dangers further still, when our health and social systems have been brought to the brink and our societies are struggling to cope. We need all governments to show greater solidarity and provide support, to developing countries



most of all, to tackle illicit drug trafficking and offer evidence-based services for drug use disorders and related diseases, so we can achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, promote justice and leave no one behind. (“World Drug Report 2020”)

News of drug trafficking, illegal drug trade, drug induced vandalism, drug addiction among the emerging youth are all over the media on a daily basis. In addition to this, the party culture added to the availability and usage of drugs among people. Not everyone follows the same pattern but those who get addicted to them become irrevocable at times. Poverty, limited resources, marginalization remain some of the major factors that increase the drug consumption among people. At the same time, personal responsibility cannot be completely ruled out of the picture. As Butler proposes in her novels, the element of choice is available to all the humans and they should use it responsibly.

#### **Works Cited:**

Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford UP, 2008.

Butler, Octavia Estelle. *Parable of the Sower*. Grand Central Publishing, 2000.

“Crack Cocaine: A Short History.” *Drug-Free World*, [www.drugfreeworld.org/drugfacts/crackcocaine/a-short-history.html](http://www.drugfreeworld.org/drugfacts/crackcocaine/a-short-history.html).

“Crack ‘epidemic’ fuels rise in the violent crime.” *The Guardian*, 17 Feb 2002, [www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/feb/17/drugsandalcohol.tonythompson](http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/feb/17/drugsandalcohol.tonythompson).

“Street Drugs and Pregnancy.” *March of Dimes*, November 2016, [www.marchofdimes.org/pregnancy/street-drugs-and-pregnancy.aspx](http://www.marchofdimes.org/pregnancy/street-drugs-and-pregnancy.aspx).

“Substance abuse.” WHO, [www.who.int/topics/substance\\_abuse/en/](http://www.who.int/topics/substance_abuse/en/) Turner, Deonna S.  
“Crack epidemic.” *Britannica*, [www.britannica.com/topic/crack-epidemic](http://www.britannica.com/topic/crack-epidemic).

“Types of antisocial behaviour.” *Staffordshire Moorlands*, 2020, [www.staffsmoorlands.gov.uk/article/1245/Types-of-antisocial-behaviour](http://www.staffsmoorlands.gov.uk/article/1245/Types-of-antisocial-behaviour)

“WorldDrugReport2020.” UNODC, [wdr.unodc.org/wdr2020/field/UNODC\\_World\\_Drug\\_Report\\_2020\\_press\\_release.pdf](http://wdr.unodc.org/wdr2020/field/UNODC_World_Drug_Report_2020_press_release.pdf)