

Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*: A Dystopian Nightmare that turns into a Real Catastrophe



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Abstract

Set in 2024, Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) finds no better readership than today, when her vision of dreadful future is not a distant or unimaginable future, but the present i.e. 'Now'. This paper undertakes to compare and contrast the disturbing scenes of environmental crisis depicted by the novelist with the present day environmental catastrophe, the world is already facing. The analysis undertakes to bring forth how uncannily close the dystopian prophecies can be to the real future. Dystopian literature as a vehicle of prophecy, as a warning sign of impending calamity and also as a harbinger of hope is studied in this paper. A parallel study between the imagined future and the real present is negotiated in depth. Worst fears that turn real and the apprehensions that might turn true form the underlying argument of this paper. Nevertheless, the importance and popularity of dystopian fiction in the present day is at its zenith, when it is no more just a dire warning of the impending future but a translucent reflection of grim and alarming reality we witness around.

Keywords: Dystopia, Time, Fiction, Reality, Anarchy, Environmental Crisis.

Introduction

We live in a time when it is not only animal species that are disappearing; so too are the words, expressions, and gestures of human solidarity.

- Felix Guattari (135)

Today we are facing the most frightening times with respect to the environmental crisis and degradation of the human values. The prophecies of the dystopian science fictions ought to be taken seriously as red signals of the times to come and unfortunately the times that we are already living in. The accounts and the narratives that send shudders down the spine seem no distant a future now. The dystopian fictions are map to the real future in wake of the present day threats to the environment that the human interference is posing. In league of the contemporary dystopian writers, Octavia Butler is an impressive name, whose works in the most subtle way uncover the realities of the contemporary eco crisis and crisis in human values. Her writings forewarn the reader of the impending catastrophes that the mankind is running towards. Imagination and vision that Butler foregrounds in her fictions unveil the picture of a dark future which does not seem unreal or mere a fantasy. In this paper, through the dystopian novel, *Parable of the Sower*, a parallel is drawn between the present and future of changing and degrading natural ecosystem. *Parable of the Sower* by Butler is no less than a touch stone for measuring the damage that this continuous tempering with the Nature and extremely materialist human pursuits have caused, which no wonder can further aggravate the crisis to an irreversible breakdown of humanity in this world. The book points towards the twentieth century infrastructures which are crumbling at an alarming pace, "climate change brings regular droughts and floods; food, water, and energy are vastly more expensive; and surplus populations proliferate" (Bresnihan 1). In the novel, the latent and manifest tendencies (with regard to both utopia and dystopia) in the postmodern condition are explored. The protagonist Lauren sums up the condition in one of her Earthseed verses when she says,

Embrace diversity.

Unite—

Or be divided,

robbed,
ruled,
killed

By those who see you as prey.
Embrace diversity
Or be destroyed. (Sower 197)

Parable of the Sower explicitly represents the imagined near future as representative of all the sickness and disease of the world that the lower class people are actually living in today. The layered telling of the narrative by Butler is absolutely prophetic. The apocalyptic portrayal of America in the novel seems so very familiar. The similitude between Butler's created world and the one we live in makes the dystopian writers equivalent to the mystics and the seers that have ability to predict the future. She seeks to forewarn the readers of the impending dangers of the future, if we carelessly keep on heading toward the existent threats. The intention of Butler like other dystopian novelists is to throw light on the very near and fearful dystopian future. Hence, in the contemporary world, the dystopian sci-fi fictions hold an indispensable space which is hard to ignore. These dystopian texts serve as blueprint to the predictable yet evadable future. The critical examination of dystopian texts can lead to a productive solution or at least generation of conscious among the States.

Review of Literature

A thorough literature review has been done with respect to the contemporary dystopian fictions. These fictions predict the dark and sinister future for the mankind. The gloomy future is mainly the result of careless and detrimental actions of human beings. From George Orwell to Margaret Atwood, all the dystopian novelists appear as seers and mystics who forewarn the humanity of the catastrophic future. Given to the environmental crisis and wars all over the globe, this age is golden age of dystopian fictions, though ironically so. M.T Anderson's novel *Feed* which appeared in 2008 has challenged the authority. *Unwind* (2007) by Neal Shusterman unveils the horrific realities of Civil War. Similarly *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily St John Mandel predicts horrific future when mysterious flu wipes out the entire human population. It delves into an apocalyptic world. *Children of Eden* (2016) by Joey Graceffa pictures Environmental Crisis of the future. In this league Octavia E Butler's *Parable of the Sower* stands out and it gives a hope though of temporary kind in the end.

Aim of the Study

The Aim of the study is bring forth the importance and prophetic elements in Dystopian fictions. And to bring out stark realities of environmental crisis that the contemporary world is facing today.

An Overview of the *Parable of the Sower*

Set in 2024, story of *Parable of the Sower* takes place in Robledo, California. The chaotic and gloomy Robledo has no jobs, no security and is a city in an absolute ramshackle. The plot unfolds in the form of a journal maintained by a fifteen year old Afro American girl, Lauren Olamina. The protagonist of the novel, Lauren Olamina, a teenager, is living a life of a

prisoner. She cannot go out or interact with her neighbours. The conditions outside the four walls of the house are notorious and dangerous. The life of the protagonist and her family is confined to the four walls of the house. This is the only secure place for herself and her siblings. Outside, on the streets and in the city, the scavengers are on the lookout to steal money, kill people and harm them. Lauren though considers herself privileged as she at least has the security inside her house, but there are unfortunate ones who are constantly under the threat and are subjugated to atrocities of an unimaginable kind. Thieves, smugglers and dacoits roam freely on the streets. Law and order has totally crumbled down in Robledo.

Lauren is emotionally disturbed by the horrendous conditions and is sensitive enough to understand the anarchy that is prevailing around. As an empathetic individual Lauren is broken by the collapse of her community. She experiences emotional pain during the violent siege on Robledo, but feels the turmoil of her neighbours and unknown people too she sees the dying bodies on her way to escape and run away from Robledo. This heightened understanding of the prevailing disorder and vision to see the inability of mankind to escape the huge repercussions of the impending danger, make her undertake a spiritual path. Her increased sense of feeling pain is attributed to hyper empathy syndrome, a genetic disorder where she feels others' pain and pleasure to an exalted level. However, this helps her to have hope though, "twentieth century infrastructures are failing; climate change brings regular droughts and floods; food, water, and energy are vastly more expensive; and surplus populations proliferate" (Bresnihan 1). Hope that Lauren tries keep as a person is not of optimistic kind but that the conditions can be made liveable by adapting a personal space. She for herself chooses a spiritual path which is defined by her own self. A new belief system is propagated by her that she names as 'Earthseed'. People start following her ideology and eventually she settles the first Earthseed community in Acorn, North California, along with her allies, Harry and Zahra.

Lauren believes that mankind will travel beyond the Earth and will find new living space on the other planets, as it has been destroyed by us completely or beyond repair. The path that Lauren takes is also a very different one. She believes that 'God is a change', which is totally opposite to Christian doctrine. Lauren never believed in the Christian doctrines even as a child when she was being taken for baptism to the Church, she opposed it. Through her religion Earthseed she motivates people that change is the only reality in front of human beings in such conditions of disaster. Lauren through her belief system tries to advice people to achieve temporary comfort on their individual and personal levels as short term goal and suggests that as a long term goal mankind has to explore the spaces outside the globe for propagating life. Lauren, Zahra and Harry are joined by the other people in their belief system, when they help them and save them from

attackers en route to the north of California. Significantly to the plot, they meet an old guy named Bankole, who helps them to rescue pair of sisters, Jill and Allie Gilchrist, from earthquake rubble. Bankole and Lauren develop feelings for each other despite of the big age gap and it turns out that he has three hundred acres of land in northern California. On their way, the Earthseed group picks up some more people: Emery Solis and her daughter Tori join desperate for any help they can get. Emery is basically a runaway debt slave from an agribusiness conglomerate. Grayson Mora and his daughter Doe join up soon, as well. Thus, the group of people develops a community which is based on mutual empathy and decides to build the microcosmic world which is kind and has a purpose of helping the people who are attacked by the thieves and dacoits every now and then. "Butler's protagonist, Lauren Olamina, works at imagining and developing new strategies in response to the dystopias in which she lives. She founds a utopian community, Acorn, a small community of trust and close personal ties, guided by Olamina's new religion, Earthseed. When *Sower* ends, in 2027, Acorn seems a small but viable community" (Stillman 3). The novel ends with Earthseed group trying to find a meaning to their lives and helping others from hostile outside conditions, as a short term survival attempt. A careful look at Butler's work shows how literature can be of utmost vitality to our understanding of environmental and social justice issues.

An Analysis, *Parable of the Sower* and the truth of today

In the contemporary times, *the Parable of the Sower* can be discussed and analyzed at various levels. Butler depicts environmental, economic and social crises in the novel that exemplify environmental justice criticism within a literary text. The layered narrative of the novel, unveils the harsh realities and blunders of mankind that are neglected today knowingly. "Like other dystopian writers, Octavia Butler perceives dangerous tendencies in contemporary society and intensifies them in her imagined futures in order to forewarn of the perils latent in the present and to encourage readers to think and act to prevent possible dystopian futures" (Stillman 1). The first half of the novel brings out the insecurities of the people. Despite of being a wealthy state, the people of the America are physically tortured, mentally exhausted and emotionally exasperated. The wealth is not in circulation for providing basic amenities to the poor children but is used for space programs. This anarchy is loosened upon the social fabric. Every dacoit has its own way on the streets. Read as Butler's critique of the real-world status quo, *Parable of the Sower* can help the governments to understand the various paradigms affecting environmental injustice.

Butler's *Parable of the Sower* lays bare the fragile future of human existence, as it can be related when one goes through the things that are already happening in the novel. Protagonist's assertion that, "One of the astronauts on the latest Mars mission has been killed. Something went wrong with her protective

suit. . . People here in the neighbourhood are saying that she has no business going to Mars, anyway. All the money wasted on another crazy space trip when so many people here on earth can't afford water, food or shelter. (Butler 17), seems so real and near. "Survival in this context is a brute, bare thing, a permanent state of strategizing, scrimping, and competing, which leaves very little room for joy or intimacy. Though we encounter material poverty, the lasting impression is one of affective poverty" (Bresnihan 2).

The insecurities lead to mistrust and mistrust leads to hateful crimes, which is the norm today. People have become less tolerable to the 'different'. The coming together of variegated people to live in a harmonious environment is the thing of the past. The money is the only norm. Butler has presented the picture of a future where despite of having money and richness the squalor and pestilence are on the rise. Like Butler, environmental justice critics understand that because racial minorities, women, the poor do not have the political and economic power to make or influence the decisions of those in power these are most vulnerable to the exposure to hostile conditions. "She sketches individuals' lives and relationships at the local, state, and (to some extent) international levels. Butler links dreams and nightmares, showing how future dystopias result from current utopian dreams (and political power) of certain segments of American society; and she then shows how the dystopias limit the lives and twist the dreams of the many: their everyday life is tenuous and insecure, their possibilities for a better way of life are constricted, and their alternatives in dystopia are grim, doomed, or self-destructive. Butler's dystopian images or maps serve as a warning to the present because she ties her images to existing problems and ideologies" (Stillman 1).

The major themes of *the Parable of the Sower* include constant struggle for freedom, climatic change, social criticisms and living in the world devoid of basic amenities. The protagonist of novel Lauren is forced to live inside her house only. There is no interaction with other people and no social life. Lauren makes attempts to escape from the walled existence to escape the stereotyped neighborhood described as "outside where things are so dangerous and crazy" (Butler 7). Whatever she has seen of the outside world, while going for the church service with her father occasionally, makes her sensitive towards the vulnerable people on the streets. Lauren's concerns in the *Parable of the Sower* are very true and real; she gives this warning of what would transpire if they happen not to curb this disorder timely. Lauren asserts, "I think if there were only one of us, or if they couldn't see our guns, they might try to pull us down and steal our bikes, our clothes, and our shoes, whatever. Then what...Rape...Murder?" (Butler 10). It is very clearly felt while reading *Parable of the Sower* that, "the ugly things in the novels happen because today's dangers-drug use, illiteracy, the popularity of building prisons coupled with the unpopularity of building and maintaining schools and libraries, the yawning rich-poor gaps and global warming-grow up

to be tomorrow's disasters" (Stillman 2). Nevertheless these warning signs are becoming the new reality with each passing day in this world. Butler's imagined future has started to transform into the blighted present. The early symptoms of crumbling down of ecosystems and degradation of human values are very much evident only if States and governments dare to introspect. The problems cited in the novel are not confined to America only but are in full expression in almost every country.

Today all the doctrines and the religious teachings seem redundant and useless. The human values are degrading and fast pace and God remains as a mere one concept. Octavia in the *Parable of the Sower* challenges the definition of God itself. The main character of the novel Lauren looks for a new meaning, which is 'God changes'. It is quite startling a concept, which can shatter all the hypocritical and double standard theories of the orthodoxy. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren is highly critical of the American Christian tradition. The daughter of a Baptist preacher, Lauren has lost her faith in her father's God, the God of Christianity, even before *Sower's* first journal entry, and her feelings are clear early in *Sower* when she writes, "At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church" (*Sower* 7). The Christian God is nonsensical to Lauren in the face of environmental and social crises. Her point is that the Christian God has been used as an excuse to justify the poverty of some while others prosper. The responsibility for poverty and suffering is delegated to God so that those who are in power do not have to take responsibility. She conceives a new thought and names it Earth seed Religion. "Earthseed is a religion, a belief system, and a world view. It begins as Olamina's responses to the problems in Robledo. Many in her father's generation (and hers) wish to restore what had been or to hang on to what they have, but Olamina sees that her neighborhood, city, and country are in the midst of a long-term, irreversible transformation. Her father's Christian God does not speak to her in this changing world, where people's prayers go unanswered, God's mercy seems absent from a heartless world, and God's power is mocked by private power and ecological decay. In contrast to the spiritual sung at her father's funeral, "We shall not be moved," she thinks, "we'll be moved, all right. It's just a matter of when, by whom, and in how many pieces" (*Sower* 121). Change seems the one constant in her life and the lives of those she knows in Robledo" (Stillman 11).

Conclusion

To conclude, it may be asserted that Octavia predicts a fictional future but it would be careless of us

not to take it seriously. Environmental degradation is real. Social inequality is real. Environmental injustice is real, "For the writer is still a maker, a creator, not merely a recorder of fact, but above all an interpreter of possibilities. His intuitions of the future may still give body to a better world and help start our civilization on a fresh cycle of adventure and effort" (Mumford 10). It is high time we stop merely relying on supernatural forces to take us out of crisis but make ground level changes in our efforts to save earth and humanity. "God cannot be relied upon to make or enforce moral judgments; God will not necessarily reward those who neither are good nor punish those who are evil. God as Change is "infinite potential" (*Sower* 242) and many possibilities. Knowing that change will occur, human beings can act to try to bring about the results they desire; God is "infinitely malleable" (*Sower* 103). While the Christian God acts in history, dispensing judgments, rewards, or penalties, Earthseed's God encourages people to act, "to shape God," to try to mold change to fit our purposes and our needs" (Stillman 26). Octavia E. Butler in her novel attempts to expose environmental degradation, oppressive social hierarchies, and a spiritual crisis that has led us to forget our connection to other people and the planet on which we thrive.

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