

CONTINGENCY OF DYSTOPIAN SOCIAL REALITY: AN AFROFUTURISTIC STUDY OF OCTAVIA ESTELLE BUTLER'S *KINDRED*

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Abstract

This paper delineates Butler's postmodern technique of instilling hope for an Afrofuturistic vision from the state of dystopian social reality in Octavia Estelle Butler's *Kindred*. Butler is the poster child for establishing black female heroines in science fiction and Afrofuturism as viable identities. The novel, *Kindred*, describes a white supremacist society in which African Americans are treated as second-class citizens despite having darker skin than white people. Dana, the main character, only makes the difficult decision to travel to her ancestral home after learning about the connections between the freedom of plantation slaves from Rufus, her ancestor. Dana suffers from psychological problems related to heteroclit potential difference, slavery, and racial prejudice that are upheld by the societies of her ancestors' past and present.

Keywords: Black, Past, Slavery, Present, Identity, Afrofuturism.

Octavia Estelle Butler an accomplished African-American feminist science fiction author. As a fortunate Afrofuturistic writer, she seizes the opportunity to introduce black characters and people of colour with legitimate identities. She went one step further as a feminist science fiction author by developing novels with black female protagonists who were given intellectual empowerment. Butler uses the brave perseverance of her female heroines in the face of hardship as a preventative measure and a solution to much apocalyptic social annihilation. By describing a symbiotic relationship mixing of human and non-human characters situated in both earthly and non-earthly situations, she imagines a progressive utopian society.

Butler's *Kindred* (1979) is a work of science fiction told in the first person by Edana Franklin, the protagonist who is usually referred to as Dana. The story revolves around Dana, a black lady who frequently travels involuntarily back in time from the present (1976) to her ancestral past (1815). Dana is transferred to her own time only when she thinks that her own life is in danger, just as Rufus Weylin's time travel was triggered whenever he encountered life-threatening situations. The narrative describes Dana's struggle, as a black woman, to cope with the dual temporal reality. The narrative also explains how her 'kindred' to white men in the past and present, including her husband Kevin Franklin and ancestor Rufus, causes her physical and mental suffering. The novel illustrates how the past has an influence over the present because the present affects the future.

The novel, *Kindred*, features four distinct families from various cultural backgrounds, including one historic family from the nineteenth century and three contemporary families from the twentieth century. The collective home of Rufus Weylin, the fictional protagonist Dana's ancestor, is referred to as the nineteenth-century family. The home, known as the "Weylin plantation," belonged to Rufus's father, Master Tom Weylin, who shared a patriarchal home with his wife Margaret Weylin. Nearly thirty slave families were housed on the Weylin's plantation, apart from the home of the master Weylin. The Weylin family was ruled by the master-slave system that was prevalent in the Southern region of the early United States and was present in Maryland, which was part of the antebellum South.

First, the "nuclear patriarchal modern family" of the heroine Dana, a 26-year-old educated black woman living with her educated white husband Kevin Franklin in Altadena, California in 1976, is referred to in the novel. Second, in 1976 La Canada, Carol, the elderly sister of Kevin Franklin, a dental assistant, and her white husband, a dentist 20 years her senior, made up "the pure white family." The third is "a pure black family," consisting of Dana's maternal uncle and his black wife. They had no children other than Dana, whom they adopted as a baby soon after her parents' 1960 accident in La Canada. In 1976, they had a home and a few apartment buildings in Pasadena, which her Uncle preferred the Church inherit over Dana. This occurred as a result of her Uncle's opposition to Dana's engagement to a white man. In one of her chats with Kevin, Dana makes decisions concerning their marriage in defiance of social prejudice. The exchange is described as follows:

...they have a couple of apartment houses over in Pasadena – small places, but nice. The last thing my uncle said to me was that he'd rather will them to his church than leave them to me and see them fall into white hands. I think that was the worst thing he could think of to do to me. Or he thought it was the worst thing. (112)

The one cultural practise shared by all four families in the novel was the practise of giving the surname of the male head of the family to other family members. They kept it as their family's identity and used it to earn respect from people of all social classes. Dana only knows Rufus to be her ancestor thanks to this familial connection and an old bible that had the names of her ancestors scribbled on it by 'Hagar,' her great-great grandmother and the daughter of Rufus Weylin. Perhaps he was my many times great grandfather, but he was still vaguely remembered by my family because his daughter had purchased a sizable Bible, according to the novel.

...Had begun keeping family records in it. My uncle still had it. Grandmother Hagar. Hagar Weylin, born in 1831. Hers was the first name listed. And she had given her parents' names as Rufus Weylin and Alice Green-something Weylin. (28)

In *Kindred*, Edana Franklin imagines the existent master-slave plantation community in the antebellum South, Maryland, during the 19th century through the protagonist's frequent unconscious time trips. The family of a white master lived in the plantation community alongside other black families, either whole or fragmented, who had been kidnapped as slaves from various locations at various times to serve them both in their home and in the fields of the plantation they owned.

The Weylin Plantation is described in the novel as having 38 slaves in 1815, with Tom Weylin as its White Master, residing there with his wife Margaret Weylin and son Rufus Weylin. Among the slaves of Weylin's, some deserving of mention include Sarah, the cook, her dumb daughter Carrie, a slave and housemaid, Luke, a slave who served as the white master Tom Weylin's personal assistant more often than not, Nigel, Luke's son, Tess, the washerwoman, Liza, a seamstress, Jake Edwards at first, Sam James and Evan Fowler later as the field hands, etc.

The white family in the fictional 19th-century plantation village lived apart, but they collaborated with other white families on business ventures like trading slaves and harvest earnings. The homes of the black families, who lived in a small, remote community, were just a few yards away from those of their white owners. The black slaves were viewed as dependents since their entire way of life was constantly planned, watched over, and managed by their master's family. The white masters lived a free, independent life. Only the white master had the power to select whether or not black people would live with family members.

The tale contains horrible instances where the white masters chastise the slave families. They are forced to deal with negative outcomes when they are discovered trying to act autonomously and according to their own interests. Their typical punishments included brutal body lashing or selling the families separately to various plantation owners, greatly reducing the likelihood that they would ever meet. It is clear that the slaves are being whipped, and Rufus describes it. With reference to the whipping of his father, Rufus expresses it to Dana as, "...The kind he whips niggers and horses with ...But ...your father whips black people? When they need it..." (26).

Even if the unexpected removal of its members by either the deliberate plan or the arbitrary whim of their white overlords repeatedly tears apart the black community, that community always mends itself back together by drawing strength from its shared anguish and suffering. The white characters in the novel are the ones that come off as strange, alone, pitiful, and foreign. Due to the mercy of their white masters, the slaves were occasionally permitted to leave their plantation for personal reasons like visiting their families. This free pass specified the slaves' freedom to go to a certain location for a specific amount of time.

Because of her unique qualities, including her education, her 'kindred spirit' of writing with her husband Kevin, and their extreme love and understanding for one another, Dana was a suitable black wife for Kevin. She was unwelcome to Carol, Kevin's sister who was undoubtedly white and the only survivor of his family, as well as to other people in their culture. Carol's animosity towards Dana, according to Kevin, is because; "That she didn't want to meet you, wouldn't have you in her house – or me either if I married you ...And she said a lot of other things. You don't want to hear them" (110).

On the other hand, Dana's maternal uncle and aunt, who took care of her after her mother passed away, also expressed reluctance and differing opinions about accepting Kevin because of his race. I told you they were elderly," Dana says in reference to her guardians' differing views on Kevin. She doesn't like white people very much, but she favours light-skinned black

folks. Determine that, Anyway, she ‘forgives’ me for you. But my uncle doesn’t. He’s sort of taken this personally” (111).

When Dana and her husband Kevin travel back in time to Maryland in 1815, the problems of gender and racial prejudice are expertly depicted as the ideal mix. Although not recognised inside themselves naturally as husband and wife, the master-slave community existence at that time demonstrates the disparities of Kevin as “a white male and a master” and Dana as “a black female and a slave,” before the public life exposed to members of the Weylin plantation. This is clear from Kevin’s account of what happened to Dana, which he told to Dana while telling Tom Weylin, the white owner of the Weylin plantation, during their stay there when Kevin pretended to be a white master and Dana to be his slave.

Being “black,” Dana was treated like a slave by Tom Weylin and mercilessly punished with whipping; also, during her repeated journeys to Maryland in the past, her own ancestor Rufus mistreated her because she was a “woman.” Dana was spanked by Tom Weylin for misbehaving by stealing books from his house and reading them.

The brutal nature of the novel’s depictions of both gender and racial victimisation is demonstrated by Dana’s experiences as a black slave lady. The next image vividly illustrates the callous white masters’ lash over their fearful black slaves and the veiny bulging scars of the multiple ruthless whips. The picture shows the horrific wounds left behind by a Mississippi plantation overseer named Artayou Carrier after whipping an African American slave named Peter for running away. In *Kindred*, Dana demonstrates her capacity for empathy with her actions of caring for Rufus despite his deceptions and educating the slave children while well knowing of the potential for whipping.

As Butler investigates the value of education from a reverse perspective, from the state of educational progression to educational regression, the novel, *Kindred*, exposes the worth of education from a unique and altered perspective. Any concept’s value and adoption within a society are typically evaluated in light of its potential future advantages. As a result, Butler seeks to examine the validity of education in its emission, whereas everyone tries to assess the worth of education by its forward-looking potential. She clarifies the twentieth-century modern American viewpoint on advanced education when it is compared to a desolate nineteenth-century America.

The prevalence of solecist bigotries like racism, gender, and slavery in nineteenth-century America puts a serious test on the information and enlightenment earned by Dana, the novel’s protagonist, through her education. In the twentieth century, Dana’s educational standing gives her economic, egalitarian, and professional stability. In the nineteenth century, however, it opened the path for her inequity in the areas of personal, social, and existential perspectives. The narrative includes passages that detail Dana’s schooling, which her maternal uncle’s family provided for her when her parents died tragically in 1960. Dana successfully completed her nursing secretarial major course and primary education. She left school early because of her academic prowess and began working to hone her developing literary abilities. In the novel, Dana describes this to Kevin before they got hitched as,

Meanwhile, for the real future, I was to take something sensible in school if I expected them to support me. I went from the nursing program into a secretarial major, and from there to elementary education...I always got good grades. They just didn't mean anything to me. I couldn't manufacture enough interest in the subjects to keep me going. Finally, I got a job, moved away from home, and quit school. I still take extension classes at UCLA, though, when I can afford them. Writing classes. (56)

Dana's schooling led the white residents of Tom Weylin House in the 19th century to perceive her as being overly learned. Despite the fact that her education provided her the bravery to educate the slave children in secret, it did not provide a way for her to avoid the hazards of the real, brutal slave punishments that were imposed on her. After receiving a second brutal flogging from Tom Weylin, Dana describes her own sad realisation as follows in the novel: "I knew about towns and rivers miles away - and it hadn't done me a damned bit of good! What had Weylin said? That educated didn't mean smart. He had a point. Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape" (177).

The white people believed that educating slaves would be a hassle or hardship. It is clear from the novel as Rufus was offered the following fatherly counsel by his neighbours: "Education made blacks dissatisfied with slavery. It spoiled them for field work. The Methodist minister said it made them disobedient, made them want more than the Lord intended them to have. Another man said educating slaves was illegal" (236). In Dana, however, education was viewed by the black slaves as just another valuable instrument that their white masters could utilise to their full advantage. When Dana assisted in tasks like schooling Rufus, the white master's son, and in preparing business letters for the same Rufus when he was to assume his role as a Plantation owner following his father's passing, education continued to be a "pseudo-security" at times.

In *Kindred*, Butler's religious reflections only represent the Western Baptist understandings of Christianity. Butler's commitment to the classification of Christianity as a Baptist is a part of her autobiography because her grandfather was a Baptist and her family raised her as one. She only admits to being a Baptist in her early writing career, and as the years went by, her logical understanding of God caused her to progressively renounce her Baptist faith.

In this novel, Butler never mentions the direct effects of religion. The novel has a few sporadic situations that highlight the characters' practise of Christianity. The Methodist priest, a frequent visitor to the Weylin estate, once used Bible scriptures to calm slave youngsters and keep them submissive throughout the novel. The youngsters always surrounded the preacher, and his wife too when he brought her around, according to Dana in the novel. The couple dispensed candy and "safe" Bible verses ("Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters..."). "The kids got candy for repeating the verses" (183).

Butler's prophetic viewpoints on life's extremes allow us to analyse them and make wise decisions about how to live our lives only through hopeful utopian improvements. Through Butler's science fiction novels, the future world might avoid the devastating results either before they occur or while they are being implemented by foreseeing the risks of these societal

extremities. In many aspects, the Afrofuturistic concept is ecumenical in that it views African American tradition, religion, history, and culture as instruments for achieving enlightenment for all people. As a result, Butler's studies of God iconize her literary works as the foundation of a comprehensive comprehension of the cohabitation of humans and other animals without distinction in a natural, transcendent existence.

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