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OF THE BINDING PAST: DISPLACEMENT AND IDENTITY IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *KINDRED*

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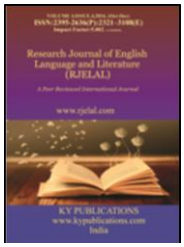

ABSTRACT

Octavia Butler, the first African-American woman to become an acclaimed writer of speculative fiction, addresses the discourses of power, race and gender in her works with a certain depth and passionate intensity. Her evocative narratives are a medium of revision and reconfiguration, which explore the Black cultural and racial identity in all its complexities and conflicts. In her novel *Kindred*, Butler uses a fluid narrative which mixes the genres of fantasy, speculative and slave narrative. It presents the Black female protagonist, Dana, who sporadically travels between her home in 1976 California and the Weylin plantation in 1815 antebellum Maryland which is crucial to her survival. These travels across the temporal and spatial realms parallel the history of dispossession and displacement suffered by the Blacks during the Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World. This paper analyses how the temporal and geographical displacement depicted in the novel explores the experience of cultural and racial dispossession of Blacks in America in relation to the history of slavery. The displacement of racial and gendered bodies across the entangled temporal and spatial frame of the narrative is explored based on the discourses of identity, belonging, memory and national history. The paper also examines the experiences of dislocation and marginalization and how the narrative seeks ways of rediscovering the personal and racial identity as a strategy of survival and resistance.

Keywords: displacement, racial identity, memory, history, time travel, slavery

Displacement, in its various manifestations, can refer to a sense of being physically, socially or culturally out of place. It is associated with a sense of loss, alienation, and dislocation depending on the contextual circumstances in which it happens, and can take many forms like migration, exile, enslavement, imprisonment, diaspora and travel. The Black diaspora constituted by the displacement across the globe, particularly across the Atlantic, signifies the physical and cultural dislocation which transformed both the individual and collective identities of the African denizens. Its implications are often explored in narratives of historical and cultural interrogation, revision and reconfigurations, through the discourses of pan-Africanism, Black Nationalism and Afrocentricity. The globalized black experience, informed by collective cultural identity, shared history, common experience of racial oppression and marginalization by racist ideologies, is represented in narratives transforming it into a discourse of subversion and resistance.

The novel, *Kindred*, by the Afro-American writer Octavia Butler, employs the fantastic element of time travel to present the Black diasporic experience as a continuum which forms a link between the cultural past and the present day

hybridized identities. Dana, the Black female protagonist of the narrative, finds herself sporadically travelling between her present day life in 1976 California and the antebellum South plantation in 1815 Maryland. Lisa Yaszek observes that the form of science fiction and the trope of displacement through time travel in *Kindred* "provide Butler with the tools to build the kind of memory machine adequate to the needs of Afro-feminist historical revision" (1058). The physical and psychological impact of the displacement across time, compels Dana to revise her racial and gender identity based on her present life and her personal and ancestral experience of history.

Octavia Estelle Butler is an acclaimed science fiction writer whose evocative novels explore the issues of race, sexual identities, marginalization, resistance strategies and the nature and discourses of power. She is the first African-American woman to storm the traditionally white male stronghold of science fiction, which was replete with biased generalities masked as common sense, thus promoting racial and gender stereotypes. Butler transformed the genre into a medium of revision and subversion, which explores the Black cultural identity and social marginalization, thus tapping into the genre's potential for social commentary and censure. Robert Crossley comments that Butler's novels "pointedly expose various chauvinisms (sexual, racial, and cultural), are enriched by a historical consciousness… and enact struggles for personal freedom and cultural pluralism" (274). Butler masterfully employs the unique playing field of the speculative to render more visible the realities of representations and ideologies by appropriating the unconventional ideas of the sci-fi/fantasy genre as resistance strategies.

In *Kindred*, the protagonist, Dana, is a young, intelligent, middle class writer who lives in the 1976 California with her white husband, Kevin. On her 26th birthday - and before the eyes of her husband - she is mysteriously transported from her home to a plantation in Maryland at the beginning of the 19th century. On her first trip into the past, she rescues a white child, Rufus, from drowning in a river. On her next trip back, Dana figures out that Rufus is her ancestor and that she is transported back in time whenever his life is in danger. She is to preserve her lineage by ensuring the birth of her ancestor, Hagar Weylin, the daughter of Rufus and Alice, a free black woman. Conversely, Dana is returned to the twentieth century when her own life is in danger. In her negotiation with the plantation life, Dana seems torn between two equally bleak options: either to submit to Rufus' and history's demands and thus preserve her family line or to resist these demands and run the risk of never being born herself. As a Black woman in the antebellum South, Dana experiences the confinement and cruelty of slavery, comes face to face with the nineteenth century racial and patriarchal discourses and gains knowledge of and a connection to her history.

Butler's method of time travel in *Kindred* is completely unconventional as there are no logical explanations regarding how Dana's sporadic trips to the past are made possible or even the rules regarding how the time flows at both ends of the spectrum. The narrative shows a conflated time frame which lacks a correlation between the passage of time in the past and in the present. The hours Dana spends in the present could be months or years in the past. In this context, Robert Crossley calls the novel's time travel "an irresistible psycho-historical force, not a feat of engineering" (267). He explains that instead of the technological marvel of time travel, *Kindred* evokes the journey from Africa to the slave markets of the New World which is "the terrifying and nauseating voyage that looms behind every American slave narrative" (268). Dana's forced and unavoidable displacement back in time into slavery certainly mirrors the helplessness and fear that the Africans felt on the Middle Passage. Butler seems to indicate that the past and the present are inextricably connected, in both directions. Thus in *Kindred*, history itself is presented as a process of narrative production through displacement.

Kindred's story is told from the first-person point of view of Dana, whose displacement across time and space render the cultural geography and the history of slavery from a contemporary perspective. In *Kindred*, Dana successfully knits together "an alternate family history based on her

newfound understanding of historical representation itself as a kind of mutable structure informed by multiple sources: official historical 'fact,' its commercially oriented counterpart, and, of course, those personal and social experiences outside dominant modes of representation" (Yaszek 1064). This fragmented narrative of sporadic travels is a harrowing recollection of the brutality of slavery and its cruelty and hardships experienced firsthand.

The novel is set in 1976, the year of the bicentennial anniversary of American independence. Dana's first trip to Maryland occurs on her birthday and the final trip occurs significantly on July 4, 1976 during the bicentennial celebrations. This conflation of personal history and national history exposes "how, even in the wake of the black protest movements of the 1950s and 1960s, the hidden histories and experience of slavery throw into question the grounds upon which a contemporary black woman is able to construct her sense of self" (Wood 85). Thus the narrative trope of travelling backwards in time becomes what Robert Crossley calls a "lesson in historical realities" (279) as it revaluates the progressive myth of freedom and equal rights to all in contrast to the realities of the discriminating and oppressive past which remains as a haunting presence in the present times.

Kindred posits a retrieval of history through imagination, where the collective and personal memories garnered through a journey across time is structured together to undermine the mainstream historical narrative. Sarah Wood observes this as "the articulation of contemporary society's obligation to history - to those individual histories that may contradict the 'official' representation of events" (94). Thus the study of American history also becomes the study of African-American history, and of alternative historical sources like slave testimonials and autobiographical narratives which facilitate more inclusive models of history. In interviews, Butler acknowledges that *Kindred* required extensive research and it refers to such figures in the history of Black racial struggle as Frederick Douglass, Denmark Vesey, and Harriet Tubman (Kenan 496-97). Thus Butler participates in the process of recovering the alternative histories by relying on individual testimonies of national history in the form of slave narratives and memoirs.

Dana is a woman of twentieth century sensibilities, and her experience of history parallels that of a traveller from another country or culture in an unfamiliar place. She only has what Yaszek calls the "commercialized form of historical memory" (1059) to rely on for her survival in the hostile conditions. For instance, Dana describes her first trip to the past where she saves a young Rufus from drowning and encounters Rufus' gun-wielding father before returning to her own time as, "like something I saw on television . . . something I got second-hand" (Butler 17). She thus attempts to distance herself from the past that quite literally touches her. This dislocated sense of history testifies to the colonial cultural denigration which has constructed in Dana a fragmented identity.

Eventually Dana immerses herself in stories of race relations and cultural power to gain an understanding of the African-American history. Upon her return to present day California after her third trip to the past, Dana resolutely reads anything she could find on America's history of slavery, both fiction and nonfiction. She even reads about World War II, "a book of excerpts from the recollections of concentration camp survivors" which documents stories of "beatings, starvation, filth, disease, torture, [and] every possible degradation" (Butler 116). Thus outside the constraints of mainstream history, Dana's narrative weaves together both past and present-day power relations in parallel histories of oppression. Sarah Eden Schiff observes this as "representative of the discursive manipulation of history that fiction as a genre accomplishes" which Butler achieves through the dual effect of Dana's travel "as an individually curative narrative of memory and the story of her travel as a communally curative narrative of history" (108). On her return to 1976 California, Dana has a stronger understanding of African-American history than earlier, having experienced it firsthand. She compares the horrific reality of slavery to that propagated through the popular culture. She condemns its falsified version depicted in movies such as *Gone with the Wind* which presents the "version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage" (Butler 116). Thus as the

narrative progresses, Dana's status as a witness of history changes to that of an active participant as she engages with and re-evaluate her cultural identity.

As Dana is drawn further into the realities of the antebellum South, her knowledge of her twentieth century self makes her socially and culturally out of place. Her autonomy and self-awareness threatens both the slave community and the white owners. Dana's clothes, her skin colour and, most prominently, her ability to read and write, mark her out as an outsider. Seemingly placed in contrast to Dana's experience in Maryland is that of her white husband Kevin. When Dana is transported back to Maryland for a third time, Kevin, unwittingly goes with her. Kevin's position as a white male figure of authority creates for him a radically separate experience of slavery. He assesses the Weylin plantation as remarkably liberal which has "no more work than people can manage" (Butler 100). This sharply contrasts with Dana's experience of inadequate food, clothing, housing and her urgent injuries incurred from being whipped and beaten which are the corporeal signs of her confinement by the nineteenth century patriarchal and racist discourses. Kevin's unawareness of the realities that Dana experiences suggests the divergent experiences of displacement contrived by ones racial identity.

Kindred alludes to the American representations of home and community in a present that continues to be haunted by a slaveholding past whose disturbing memories have been repressed in the national mythmaking. Butler makes the late twentieth-century present meaningless and strange for Dana, while making the unknown and potentially dangerous antebellum South meaningful and familiar. After returning from her first trip back in time, Dana remembers Rufus and his parents more than she wants to. They stay with her as a "shadowy and threatening" presence which traps her in a limbo (Butler 18). Later, Dana finds it shocking how easy it is to feel at home in the past where Kevin and she "became more of a part of the household, familiar, accepted, accepting" and it disturbs her to realize "how easy [they] seemed to acclimatize" (97). When both of them return to their present later, she feels homeless in her contemporary Los Angeles house and senses "as though I were losing my place here in my own time, [whereas] Rufus's time was a sharper, stronger reality" (191). The home which is a fitting symbol of blood connections and communal relationships is presented in *Kindred* as occupying an ambiguous place in the historical discourse of national and cultural identity.

Dana in the twentieth century is a self-willed woman who takes her own decisions regarding her career and marriage. But, when she is taken to antebellum Maryland, her agency is threatened by the discourses of slavery, colonization of body, inferiority, and sexual objectification. She is "not simply on the wrong side of history but trapped and maimed by a history stranger and crueller than [she] has been taught to imagine" (Yaszek 1053). Dana has to endure hard labour, whipping, humiliation and attempted rape. When Kevin time-travels with her to the Weylin plantation, they are forced to pretend that they are master and servant rather than husband and wife, as their marriage is legally invalid in the nineteenth century. Thus only the performance of nineteenth-century black female sexuality can give validity to their relationship in which Dana becomes Kevin's sexual property.

Dana, in spite of the oppressive circumstances, does not lose her individuality or voice and transcends the stereotype of the victimized Black woman. She grasps her history with a heightened understanding catalysed by her modern-day insight. Dana offers a telling explanation of herself as a self-authorized individual who asserts her agency, and refuses to be considered as property: ". . . if I have to accept limits on my freedom for Rufus's sake, then he also has to accept limits on his behavior toward me [and] has to leave me enough control of my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying" (Butler 246). When Rufus finally breaches Dana's trust and attempts to rape her, she stabs him and is sent back to her home in California. But upon her return, the spot where Rufus had grabbed her arm gets trapped in the wall, and has to be amputated. Octavia Butler commented that the loss of the arm was necessary, as she "couldn't really let [Dana]

come all the way back. . . [because] antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole" (Kenan 498). She could not let Dana escape from the encounter with her racial history unscathed. This highly symbolic occurrence indicates the fragmented and silenced nature of African-American history and its lingering effect on the present and the future in the form of ruptures in the mainstream history.

Sarah Wood views *Kindred* as "a counter discourse, one that problematizes the marginalization of black history by white America, and seeks to challenge the mythologized identities of black women during slavery that have subsequently been constructed by both black and white America" (84). Through Dana's travels the narrative seeks to negotiate how the Black woman's sense of self can be reconciled to the historical constructions of race, gender and sexuality that inform black femininity. She undergoes subtle yet incontrovertible changes as the cumulative effects of the past make an impact upon her life through the awareness and experience of slavery. This becomes a means of empowerment for Dana who realizes that her personal experience is not isolated, but instead is part and parcel of the historical experience of the African-American community as a whole.

Octavia Butler superimposes the two settings and eras of time, to focus on the relationships within and between members of different racial and class backgrounds and its repercussions in the cultural geography. The trope of displacement through time travel which collapses the historical distance between the two moments in time allows the reader to view them as interrelated and continuous, instead of distinct and compartmentalized segments of history. This element distinguishes *Kindred* as a narrative of historical and cultural reconfiguration, which allows the readers to witness the full import of slavery in the nineteenth century, while figuratively acknowledging its continued influence in the present.

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