Intersectionality through the Lens of Science Fiction: The Past and the Present in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

مفهوم التداخل من خلال الخيال العلمي

الماضي والحاضر في رواية "نسب" لأوكتافيا بتلر

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Abstract:

The African-American literary legacy has been rich with themes that tackle the social, political, economic, and psychological aspects of African Americans' lives. Octavia Butler adds to this profound heritage by revisiting a past of servitude through time travel to untangle existential questions in her novel *Kindred* (1979). Butler merges the real with the imaginary by shedding the social light of intersectionality on the commercial genre of science fiction. This article explores the function of time travel in offering social commentaries about the past and the present. It is a textual analytical study conducted from the perspective of black feminist theory to investigate the causality of agency, or lack thereof, in determining the past and present. Analyzing the intersecting oppressions in two different timelines shows that the present, in some aspects, mirrors a more extremist past.

Keywords: Determinism, Intersectionality, Past, Present, Science Fiction.

ملخص:

طالما كان التراث الأدبي الإفريقي الأمريكي غنيًا بالموضوعات التي تتناول الجوانب الاجتماعية والسياسية والاقتصادية والنفسية لحياة الأمريكيين من أصل إفريقي. إذ نجد الكاتبة أوكتافيا بتلر تثري هذا التراث أكثر بإعادة النظر في ماضي العبودية من خلال السفر عبر الزمن لفك تشابك الأسئلة الوجودية في روايتها الموسومة بـ "نسب" (1979). بحيث تدمج بتلر الواقع مع الخيال وذلك بإضفاء التداخل الاجتماعي على أسلوب الخيال العلمي التجاري. وعليه، يقوم هذا المقال على فحص وظيفة السفر عبر الزمن في طرح تعليقات اجتماعية حول الماضي والحاضر. والمقال عبارة عن دراسة تحليلية نصية أجريت من منظور النظرية النسوية السوداء للتحقيق في سببية النشاط، أو انعدامه، في حسم الماضي والحاضر. ويُظهر التحليل تقاطع القمع في إطارين زمنيين مختلفين أن الحاضر، في بعض الجوانب، يعكس ماضٍ أكثر تطرفاً.

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الكلمات المتاحية: الحتمية ، التداخل، الماضي ، الحاضر ، الخيال العلمي.

1. Introduction:

Among the features that distinguish the contemporary era is the alleged emphasis on hearing the voice of the voiceless. Political currents and social movements are shedding more light on the issues of minorities, and the media is no longer openly promoting the one-dimensional image of a superior race or gender. Hence, one may understandably be led to believe that these issues are in the past, until, one morning, a murder of a black man in the U.S. and an acid attack against a woman in the Middle East is heading the news. These incidents prove that fighting for basic human rights is still an ongoing battle. In this context, literature can work as a frame that highlights the sociopolitical areas in need of attention. Literature itself started as a white male-dominated area, where very little recognition was given to female and colored writers. In time, this distinction became less evident with the emergence of literary pioneers such as Virginia Woolf, Ralph Ellison, Tony Morrison, and others who massively broke the pattern. Nevertheless, some literary genres still fell under white male dominance until very recently; an example of this can be the genre of science fiction. Not only the pillars of the latter were white men, but its plots often revolved around a male protagonist who is faced with the extraordinary. Hence, literature as a medium can be said to have been a vacuum of discrimination.

Black feminist science fiction writer, Octavia E. Butler emerged in the late decades of the past century to shift the criteria of science fiction and direct its central thematic aspects toward the concerns of her community. While mainstream science fiction is often future-oriented, Butler introduces her novel *Kindred* (1979), which travels back in time to a period when denying human rights hits the extremes. By utilizing the possibilities that time travel offers and the certainties that history books disclose, Butler revisits the antebellum period from a contemporary perspective. She temporarily places her African American protagonist amid slavery, evoking, hence, questions about the past, present, and human actions. This novel takes the issues of racial, gender, and class discrimination, as well as time travel, to an utterly diverse dimension. It demonstrates the practice of oppression under the frame of science fiction to compare issues of the past with those of the present.

A reference to Keith Jenkins' perspective on the matters of history and the past is due in this context. He explains that 'history' and 'the past' differ in that the former is a present interpretation of selected events, whereas the latter is an actuality that can be located in time and space (Jenkins 6 - 7). Lisa Long emphasizes that any embodiment of the past has been perceived as science fiction due to its intangibility. By conveying the bodily pain of the time-traveling protagonist, however, Butler performs a realistic endeavor through science fiction to bring the plot closer to the contemporary audience (Long 461). More deeply, tackling a social issue like black feminism often entails a realistic setting; thus, framing it in an imaginative and "interrogative" (Lefanu 100) genre, affirms the insertion of a contemporary perspective on the matter. On this subject, and through depicting the African American literary discourse in *Kindred*, David LaCroix evokes the perception of concepts like past, present, and future, to link the restriction of the character's agency and the time's unchangeability to white supremacy. From the aforementioned perspectives, this article narrows its scoop to the character's reactions toward the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class and the protagonist's experience with the past and the present under the umbrella of speculative fiction.

In this regard, a question arises about whether the horrible events of the antebellum years were inevitable in conceiving the reforms of the present or whether they were an unnecessary chain of inhumane acts that should have been opposed at once. To reach this end, this paper aims to examine *Kindred*'s perspective of the past, present, and intersecting oppressions by revisiting the latter from the lens of black feminism. The latter requires a literary analytical study that reads the events of the novel under the frame of the African-American context.

2. Juxtaposing the Past and the Present in *Kindred*:

The novel is constructed on a very fine juxtaposition between the past and the present. Throughout the novel, the protagonist, Dana, involuntarily travels back and forth in time and space from her home in 1976 California to Antebellum Maryland. The trigger of her picaresque-like journey is revealed to be the life-threatening incidents that Dana's ancestor, Rufus Weylin, encounters. The latter is introduced as a white kid who grows up to be a slaveholder. Dana learns later that her entire dynasty was a result of Rufus raping a free black woman named Alice, who was plotted to become his slave.

At the first glance, the past and the present may appear to be utterly diverse. From the depiction of the surroundings to the portrayal of the characters' clothes, accents, and behaviors, the reader may get a sense that the two settings are nothing alike. A closer glance, however, reveals that Butler cleverly situates the present as a form of an interval to comment on and analyze the past right when the latter becomes unbearable for the protagonist. When the latter is faced with imminent death situations, she teleports back to her present time, where she gets a brief break to process her journey before traveling again. More interestingly, Butler plays with the notion of time, as months in the past equal no more than minutes in the present. When Dana returns from her first travel, she answers her husband Kevin that she was in the past for a few minutes, and he replies: "[t]here were no more than ten or fifteen seconds between the time you went and the time you called my name" (12). Although the difference between minutes and seconds may appear insignificant, this time gap becomes more threatening when Dana travels with her husband and returns alone. She spends eight days before being transmitted again only to discover that Kevin has spent five years in the past. This narrative closely resembles reading a history book, where one may go through long periods in a matter of minutes.

This may evoke the approach of historical institutionalism, which focuses on the role of timing, scrupulousness, and concatenation in sculpting sociopolitical facts and tendencies. Although this approach came to be dominant almost a decade after the publication of *Kindred*, Butler demonstrates an early practice of its views. Historical institutionalism regards minor acts as a possible basis for severe consequences and emphasis that, once occurred, an event has an everlasting mark in history. This will later stand as evidence and an explanation for the irreversibility of the past event, which is asserted by the solidity of history itself.

Through Dana's experience, Butler attempts to assert the intangibility of the past. The latter lives along in history books, narratives, and memories. Nonetheless, Butler shows that the past is, for most people, a mere abstract entity. It can be understood, memorized, or explained, but it can never be completely felt or experienced by people who live in a different era. To explain, Dana is shown to be an educated woman with considerable knowledge about the antebellum years; however, she describes her first experience in this actual period as

highly surreal (Yaszek 1059). For her, the past cannot be real. As a way of rationalizing and detaching herself from the past, she describes it "like something [she] saw on television or read about—like something [she] got second hand" (Butler 14). On her second travel, she starts to get a sense of truthiness in her surroundings. This realization is triggered by an incident where she witnesses a slave being beaten by a group of patrollers for visiting his free wife and daughter without permission:

> I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on. My stomach heaved, and I had to force myself to stay where I was and keep quiet. Why didn't they stop! **[…] I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me.** In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike. My face too was wet with tears. (35; emphasis added)

This affirms Dana's previous detachment from the past. It is the first awakening moment for her where she sees it as her present. The physical interaction with her environment functions as a stimulator to realize its verity.

Butler deploys what Jenkins terms "epistemological fragility" by using Dana to picture the past from a literal modern perspective. Jenkins argues that "[…] history relies on someone else's eyes and voice" (12), which is precisely what Butler creates in her novel. This experience tames Dana's epistemological comprehension of the past and places the latter in parallel with the present. The mistakes of the past are, then, no longer regarded from a back seat; they are occurring in Dana's present time. Moreover, the past and the present are far from homogeneity. They appear almost as separate entities, and the only link between them is the timeline of Dana's life. This idea serves as a lens through which intersectionality is aligned with the act of slavery.

3. Slavery as a Cradle of Intersectionality: The Dynamics of Now and Then

Kindred defies the Manichean worldview often attached to the claimed reforms of social movements, which demonstrates the past as bad and the present as better. By contrasting the intersectional mistreatment of the present with the act of slavery that fathers all oppressions, Butler shows that the past has little to do with preaching the reforms of the present. As an attempt to frame the overlapping forms of discrimination enacted against African American women, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' in 1989, which was, then, inserted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2015 (Perlman). Crenshaw explains that the synthesis of the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class formulate the basic social perception of the black woman (Crenshaw 57). What distinguishes the plight of the latter from that of the black man and the white woman is that each of them has one struggle to overcome, which is racism and sexism respectively, whereas the black woman is faced with both –and in most cases, classism enters the mix as well. To this end, black feminism emerged to voice these discriminations, which are visible even within movements like first-wave feminism and the Civil Rights Movement (Clark & Brown 79; Thomlinson 453). Intersectionality can, thus, be seen as the core target of black feminism.

Despite the relative contemporariness of the term intersectionality, Butler draws a circle to show the residue of slavery that accumulates into the latter. To give an instance, interracial marriage is initially perceived to be almost mythical in the antebellum South and is later shown to be considered quite equally imprudent in Dana's present. When she travels with her husband –who is white- to the past, Rufus immediately assumes that Kevin is her master. Understanding the uselessness of attempting to convince everyone of the legality of their relationship, Dana and Kevin decide to adapt to the roles of a master and a slave. Rufus backs this role-playing because it is closer to his reality than the actual truth; he says, "[t]hat's better than saying you're his wife. Nobody would believe that" (Butler 67). Butler reveals later that interracial relationships are rejected in the present as well. Kevin's sister as well as Dana's aunt and uncle oppose their marriage. In this situation, Kevin symbolizes the modern perspective with the assumption that racism is fading. Dana notes that "he wasn't ready for his sister's reaction" (117). His attempt to rationalize this situation is clear when he admits, "I thought I knew her […] I mean, I did know her. But I guess we've lost touch more than I thought" (117). At the end of the novel, Dana and Kevin revisit the location of the same plantation in the present time. They find "Burger King and Holiday Inn and Texaco and schools with black kids and white kids together and older people who looked at Kevin and me, **then looked again**" (284; emphasis added). This scene is supposed to show how much things change in time; instead, modern symbols are juxtaposed with old habits of processing interracial couples.

The objection to interracial marriage is merely an example of the many racist acts that transcend the barrier of time. A more evident example is clearly stated in the novel:

> I turned off the radio and tried to cook the meal in peace. South African whites had always struck me as people who would have been happier living in the nineteenth century, or the eighteenth. In fact, **they were living in the past as far as their race relations went**. They lived in ease and comfort supported by huge numbers of blacks whom they kept in poverty and held in contempt. Tom Weylin would have felt right at home. (212; emphasis added)

In this passage, Butler shows that the barrier between the past and the present fails to restrict racism to a limited time and place. The reforms that the world has been witnessing in recent decades have proven to be insufficient in eradicating this racial segregation.

Furthermore, education can be the reflection of social class in the novel. Although Butler builds an intellectual and independent image of the protagonist, the latter is still put in situations where her race and gender compel unfairness toward her. Although Dana is the narrator of the novel, which puts the reader in direct contact with her writing, Kevin, being a white man, is described to be blessed with more appreciation as a writer. One can naturally conclude the continuing prejudice against black women in literature. Along a similar vein but in a different timeline, when Tom Weylin, Rufus' father and the master of the plantation, catches Dana teaching Nigel, a slave boy, to read and write, the latter surprisingly goes unpunished. Dana, however, gets brutally whipped, which triggers her third departure from the past.

Finally, the issue of gender is presented in an entangled way in *Kindred.* In addition to the almost-traditional sexist behaviors against women, the novel shows that, even from a female perspective, the topic of sexism and sexual abuse is far from simplicity. The entire

dynasty of Dana is the result of a rape. When she goes back in time, Dana herself is faced with two sexual assaults. In a conversation with her husband, she asks, "[y]ou mean you could forgive me for having been raped?" (266). This shows that, although Kevin is portrayed as an accepting modern man, Dana is still threatened by her gender. Naturally, being raped is not a crime that begs forgiveness. Additionally, when Rufus desires Alice, the slave who starts Dana's dynasty, he asks for Dana's help:

> I caught Rufus alone again the next day [...] His mind was on Alice. She was stronger now, and his patience with her was gone. I had thought that eventually, he would just rape her again—and again. In fact, I was surprised that he hadn't already done it. I didn't realize that he was planning to involve me in that rape. He was, and he did. (175)

Dana is aware that Alice is being coerced, yet she sees no other option. Albeit coming from a less extremist time, it can be argued that Dana demonstrates a remarkable weakness in terms of gender discrimination.

This race, gender, and class division that labels the protagonist in a submissive position bring forth the doctrines of Marxist historiography, which explains that the temporal flow of history is subjected to universal lows that can only be emancipated through the revolt of the oppressed class. In the case of *Kindred*, both Dana's past and present represent a stagnant period in the fight for equality. Dana herself demonstrates passive reactions to these discriminations. Despite her awareness of the unfair treatment she is exposed to, she refrains from standing up for her rights or those of others. This begs the question of determinism and the significance of the protagonist's agency, or lack thereof, in shaping the present.

4. Soft Determinism and Hard 'Right' Choice:

The novel revolves around a highly philosophical question: Does a trip to the past work as a pass to change it, or is it simply a ticket to witness it happen all over again? In this context, the notion of determinism comes to the fore. In the rent of this philosophy, the flow of events is submissive to a force beyond human actions. The ability of choice is disregarded and rendered to be equally predetermined. A less extreme viewpoint is expressed by philosophers such as G. E. Moore and Harry Frankfurt, who suggest compatibility between free will and determinism. This perspective is referred to as 'soft' determinism, or simply compatibilism.

Butler explains that the central themes of her neo-slave narrative were inspired by a comment she heard against the agency of African Americans:

> When I got into college […] the Black Power Movement was really underway with the young people, and I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive […] He said, "I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents." […] That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred* (1979). I've carried that comment with me for thirty years. He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary not only for their lives but his as well. (Rowell 51)

Butler's viewpoint is more compassionate toward the plights endured by the past generations (Yaszek 6). Her novel shows that free will and determinism are not as opposed as they may

appear, opening hence a room for soft determinism. The characters are often put in situations where choices are limited to a bad and a worse one. The very notion of free will, hence, appears to be severely restricted and restrictive.

On the one hand, Dana's time travel is predetermined by an external force. She travels to the past when Rufus' life is endangered and returns to the present when hers is. She is unable to control or interrupt this circle, which eliminates any trace of free will in her time travel. On the other, despite being aware of Rufus' maleficent intentions for Alice, she not only allows the rape to happen but takes part by talking Alice into it. It can be said that Dana was understandably under the impression that Rufus will rape Alice either way. Her very existence is proof enough that this act will inevitably occur. Therefore, by taking the bitter choice of being a part of the rape, Dana exhibits a pressured and paradoxical practice of free will.

The Weylins' cook, Sarah, is another case of submission to time instead of defying the enforced societal norms. Unlike Alice's case, Dana takes a critical stand here:

> She had done the safe thing—had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called "mammy" in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter. (Butler 156)

As far as Sarah's life is concerned, she is presented with two bitter choices: run north and risk her life and that of her daughter or accept the life of slavery. Under this limited freedom of choice offered to her, she goes for the latter. In this context, Dana's reaction reflects the modern perspective, which condemns the inactions of people in the past. While criticizing, Dana admits her lack of agency: "I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone even less courageous than I was" (156). Thus, it can be observed that Dana recognizes the existence of free will, yet, like Sara, she repeatedly chooses the safe course of action.

Even white males are paralyzed by the overwhelming misdeed of the past. Kevin recalls to Dana that he passively witnessed a pregnant black woman having her belly cut open and her fetus brought out. The characters who tried to defy the rules are faced with severe consequences. When Alice and her husband, Issac, attempt to run north, they get soon caught and brutally punished. Alice experiences dissociative amnesia, and when she regains her memory, she recalls: "They beat me […] I remember. The dogs, the rope … They tied me behind a horse and I had to run, but I couldn't […] They cut him! They cut off [Issac's] ears" (170 – 171). Alice is also sold into slavery after she was a free woman. This gruesome incident may work as an affirmation of the consequences that often befall blacks for attempting to run. It shows the imminent danger that the slaves were faced with, which inevitably affects their choice-making.

From a compatibilist perspective, the engine that drives the character's inactions in *Kindred* is the desire to preserve life, which, in many cases, is presented to be more urging than the desire for freedom. In short, the oppressed characters' lack of agency represents a

sanctuary in which they escape the brutal consequences of what the reformers of the present may call 'the right choice.'

5. Conclusion:

This paper reads a social issue framed in a science fiction novel to trace the agency of a character from the present amid the past. Trying to right the wrong and undo what has been done appears to be a much more recondite task when the hardship is immediate. The mistakes of the past did not prevail due to the lack of knowledge or motives. The fact that a woman from a relatively accepting society travels to the past and relives the atrocities of slavery could be read as an indicator that modern-day black women are still projected with the same problems but in an imperceptible way. Also, the analysis of the intersectional oppressions in two different timelines reveals that the present, in its essence, mirrors the past. Finally, the choices that the characters are presented with, rate from life-threatening to severely unbearable. Butler exonerates the choice-making and inactions of past African American generations from the occurred misdeeds. This can easily be projected on the present; the latter is lived according to the available possibilities, and today's actions or inactions are not meant to create a perfect future. The utopian hopes are mere fantasy, because today's present is tomorrow's past, and it will inevitably contain its fair share of mistakes.

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