

An Analysis of the Time Travel Device for Exploring Black-White Race Relations in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*

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Abstract:

The thesis focuses on Octavia E. Butler's novel *Kindred* and employs close reading and textual analysis to explore the depiction of black-white race relations through the time travel device. It points out that Butler cleverly uses the method of temporal rescue to break the "grandmother paradox." The dual-time setting allows Dana, while saving her white ancestors, to witness the harsh realities faced by her African American ancestors in American history. On this basis, the thesis reveals and critiques the historical roots of racial issues, highlighting the physiological and psychological experiences of racial injustice endured by African Americans, as well as the persistence and improvement of the legacy of slavery. It emphasizes the importance of African Americans confronting history to break the cycle of oppression and shape a more equitable future.

Keywords: Time travel, *kindred*, Race Relations, Slavery

Introduction

Kindred by Octavia E. Butler is a pioneering literary work that seamlessly blends science fiction, historical fiction, and social commentary. Set against the canvas of late 20th-century America, a period marked by the civil rights movement and a renewed reckoning with the nation's historical injustices, it narrates the story of Dana, a contemporary African American woman, who inexplicably time-traveled six times to the antebellum South to save her ancestor Rufus. Known for the first recipient of the MacArthur "Genius Grant" and the first African American woman to win the Nebula and Hugo awards, Butler dedicated herself to the civil rights movement, conducting profound explorations of gender, race, power, humanity's future, and other related themes. In her works *Bloodchild* (1984), *Parable of the Sower* (1993), *Parable of the Talents* (1998), and *Fledgling* (2005), Butler vividly depicts the marginalized experiences of Black women, the creation of cross-species and transgender characters, and the intricate symbiotic relationships between humans and other species, all of which are imbued with profound and pervasive themes of power dynamics.

As one of Butler's masterpieces, *Kindred* is much more than just a work of historical science fiction but also harsh drilling against racial social injustice. The thesis argues that *Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler employs a unique time-travel device to expose and critique the historical

roots, multi-year changes, and physiological and psychological continuations of racial inequality between blacks and whites from the era of slavery to the present, emphasizing the importance of understanding and confronting history to break the cycles of oppression and shape a more equitable future.

How is time travel executed? Why undertake time travel? Time travel, also known as temporal travel, time travel, or time crossing, refers to the movement of a person or object from one point in time to another (Friend 52). In fact, everyone naturally progresses through time, second by second. Therefore, time travel specifically refers to violating the laws of time in real life, entering a specific time in the future, or returning to a specific time in the past. In the context of time travel, the concept of the "multiverse" also exists. In the latter half of the 20th century, physicists from diverse fields such as string theory, the Big Bang theory, and quantum mechanics independently engaged in the speculation and construction of the "multiverse." When humans travel back in time, every action they take alters the original state of affairs, creating a new universe. These universes exist as non-interfering parallel universes. For example, Jorge Luis Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths" constructs a scenario of multiple futures following a time bifurcation through a skillful and mysterious narrative. Similarly, Marvel movies like "Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse" and "Avengers: Endgame" are set against the backdrop of interwoven multiple timelines. In *Kin-*

dred, Butler employs a linear narrative structure, where the past, present, and future exist within a single universe. Regardless of the type of time travel setting, events involving modern people entering future and past spaces are bound to cause interactions, conflicts, and blends between modern people and those from the past or future (Pang 155). In the film *Back to the Future* (1985), the protagonist, Marty McFly, accidentally travels back in time and must interact with his parents during their youth while avoiding altering the future. However, despite Marty's efforts to ensure that everything proceeds as it did in his original timeline, he inadvertently causes his mother, Lorraine, to fall in love with him. His actions trigger a series of chain reactions that compel him to find a balance between the past and the future. In *Kindred*, conflicts arising from time travel are also evident, with linguistic conflicts being the most direct. When Dana first interacts and converses with the enslaved Black people, they immediately question her manner of speaking: "Why you try to talk like white folks?" (74) and label her as a "white-nigger" and a "reading-nigger." (160) As a Black woman living in a modern urban setting and working as a writer, Dana uses Standard English, which starkly contrasts with the Black English spoken by the Maryland slaves and is more similar to the language used by the local white population. Dana's use of language is met with unanimous resentment and hostility from the early 19th-century Maryland slaves. This reaction clearly reflects the slaves' strong linguistic consciousness; they are acutely aware of the relationship between language and identity.

Butler cleverly uses the method of time and space rescue to break the "grandmother paradox," allowing Dana to witness the cruel reality of African American ancestors in American history while rescuing her white ancestors. The "grandmother paradox" mainly refers to the problem that arises if a person travels back in time and kills their grandmother before she gives birth to their mother (Pang 155). Butler effectively resolves this issue in *Kindred*. Living in the 1970s, Dana travels back over 100 years to the Southern society of the United States to save her white ancestor Rufus, witnessing his transformation from a young child to a cruel slave owner each time she travels to the past, and enduring the cruel treatment of the Weylin family. As a descendant of Hagar, Dana has given up on saving Rufus many times after encountering racial discrimination, brutalization, and several sexual urges from Rufus. But as a descendant of Rufus' daughter, Hagar, Dana must maintain her relationship with Rufus to ensure her own birth and that of her ancestor, Hagar, and intervene each time. Meanwhile, Butler skillfully juxtaposes two vastly different temporal backgrounds through the narrative technique of time travel. The entire text employs a non-linear narra-

tive with dual timelines, spiraling through two time axes and two geographic spaces (Gan and Lin 105). One is the present-day system in which Dana and Kevin live, spanning from June 9 to July 4, 1976, for over 20 days, which is the time system adopted by most modern countries. The other is the past system in which Rufus lives, roughly from June 1819 to July 1840. Dana's first time travel from the present day on June 9, 1976, leads to her arrival in the past on June 9, 1819. The 26 days in present-day time equate to over 20 years in the past time. Whenever Rufus's life is threatened, Dana immediately travels back in time as a savior to help Rufus escape danger. The present and past intertwine, with her modern identity and the historical identity of a slave continually alternating. Dana is the only one who moves back and forth between these two worlds. However, Dana involuntarily shuttles sharply between the modern time and the past.

The linear interruptions in these traditional slave narratives allow readers to better understand the significance of the past and present for Black people through juxtaposition. The extended time spent on the southern plantations compared to modern standard time allows her to live in an imposed memory of the past, observing and enduring the harsh outdoor work, enduring verbal abuse, whipping, and other daily forms of enslavement (Crossley 266). Moreover, this juxtaposition not only reveals significant differences spatially (between the modern era and a Southern plantation) but also temporally (between the 1970s and the 19th century), uncovering the continuity and ruptures in history.

The exploited history and the legacy and improvement of racial issues

It can be seen from above that *Kindred* breaks the traditional limitations of time sequence in novels, narrating the story by often reversing the past, present, and future at will, such as paralleling, intertwined, and jumping. The cleverly designed time travel makes Dana a bridge connecting the past and the present, experiencing first hand the cruel history of African Americans' suffering and exploitation, helping to unearth the origins of Black-White Race Relations.

First, time travel serves as a tool to showcase to Dana and the readers the black-white racial relations in the pre-Civil War South - where black people were considered inferior and suffered under the brutality of slavery. Dana witnessed the pain of black slaves being whipped, sold, and torn apart from their families. Dana also saw the sexual violence under slavery, such as her grandmother Alice being sexually assaulted by the slave owner Rufus. Even Dana herself was whipped, she described,

"I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against an urge to vomit. [...] 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. And my mind was darting from one thought to another, trying to tune out the whipping” (36).

The black people were “naturally” seen as white people’s property, and the predominantly white American men had arbitrary control over black people. According to Katie Geneva Cannon, chattel slavery and its inevitable outcomes lead to white supremacy and racial prejudice. Black people, therefore, were excluded from all normal human considerations. Legislative bodies passed laws treating black people as property and subhuman, disregarding their humanity. The belief that black women and men had incurable natures, were “lower beings,” and were a ridiculous “natural” protection between animals and human, continuing the slavery system (414). In Maryland, for instance, black slaves were forbidden from receiving education, lacking literacy skills, while Rufus, their slave owner, was educated since childhood, having the right to attend school and to have private tutors. Upon learning this, Dana covertly taught literacy to black slave children, but when this was discovered, she endured a brutal beating from Weylin. In fact, the prohibition of education for black slaves was a legal mandate during the era of Southern slavery in the United States. As early as 1740, the South Carolina colony enacted laws forbidding anyone from teaching or assisting slaves in learning to read and write. Subsequently, nearly all Southern colonies (later “states”) prohibited or restricted the education of free people and slaves, with severe punishment for slaves caught learning to read and write. White people deprived black individuals of the right to education, keeping knowledge in their own hands, silencing their voices, and subjecting them to white power and control. This institutionalized and legally entrenched racial inequality, rendering Black individuals politically unequal and deprived of political power and freedom of action.

Second, *Kindred* demonstrates the changes of racial inequality between black and white people in America by juxtaposing two different time periods, contrasting the past with the present. Dana’s reading ability as a writer could never have developed under the oppressive and constraining conditions of slavery on Black education in the past. And taking Dana and Kevin’s modern marriage as an example, they freely fell in love and got married in the modern society of the 1970s, which was prohibited in the plantation society of the 19th century South, so that Rufus exclaimed in surprise, “Niggers can’t marry white people!” (60).

However, the legacy of slavery continues to affect modern African Americans, represented by Dana, both physiologically and psychologically. Butler deliberately arranged the

interactions of Rufus and Kevin with Dana to imply the physiological continuation of slavery. As a modern white man, Kevin is sympathetic to black slaves, however, he rarely understands their trauma the way Dana does. The distance between him and the slaves keeps almost all of the violence away from him. As Dana and the slaves go through the bloodshed of the era, Kevin downplays it as “a great time to live in” (97), because they get to witness the founding of the country. He is surprised that “there’s so little to see” (100), and his indifference to the atrocities angers Dana. Kevin and Rufus demand Dana to be their scribe and type for them. In the past, Dana handled Rufus’s letters and bills, which parallels Kevin’s insistence on having Dana type his manuscripts. She said, “He really had asked me to do some typing for him three times. I’d done it the first time, grudgingly, not telling him how much I hated typing, how I did all but the final drafts of my stories in longhand [...] The third time when I refused again, he was angry” (109). Kevin’s insistence on Dana typing for him, even though she explicitly states her dislike for the task, reflects a certain expectation he has of her. This is similar to the exploitation and control of Black labor by whites during the era of slavery. Kevin’s anger further reveals this desire for control, even though he might not be consciously aware of the racial and gender inequalities his behavior exhibits.

Psychologically, the legacy of slavery has left the two racial groups in a state of tension. Parham (1326) has singled out the pervasive “tension” between Dana and Kevin. For example, Dana recalls having to play the role of Kevin’s ‘slave’ and says, “I felt almost as though i really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went away feeling uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed” (97). Furthermore, Dana’s uncle reacted negatively not only to Dana and Kevin as an interracial couple, but also as a black man, he felt a sense of betrayal. Especially, he threatened to leave his property to his church rather than let it “fall into white hands” (112). Subsequently, Dana, after experiencing trauma inflicted by white men upon her and other enslaved women, gains a deeper psychological understanding of her uncle’s historical perspective on interracial relations. As Sharp articulates, “Our knowledge about slavery and the position of Blacks within it is derived from our research, yes, but it also transcends these studies; it is acquired through everyday knowledge” (12). Interestingly, Dana’s last return to Los Angeles was on July 4, 1976 - the 200th anniversary of the *Declaration of Independence*. However, in the 1960s and 70s, the historically persistent trauma was quite evident (Manis 10). Since the implementation of the *Civil Rights Act* in the 1960s, most forms of racial discrimination in the United States have become more co-

vert (Hu 16). For many ordinary African Americans, it is not only difficult to find a job in a society permeated with white racism, but they also face daily explicit or implicit racial hostility and discrimination at work. This leads to the increasing marginalization of lower-class Black individuals. The combination of overt and covert discrimination makes it challenging for urban African Americans to secure decent employment, access quality education, and ensure public safety. Consequently, they remain trapped in environments characterized by decay, desolation, poverty, and disillusionment. This was particularly due to the civil rights movement and its unmet goals. Themes such as racial inequality, white dominance, and gender inequality continued from the past into later years, sparking unrest. In the South, Dana had to endure harsh slavery; and in the 1970s, she still faced the reality of racial discrimination and inequality. This continuity emphasizes the depth and persistence of racial issues, as well as the urgency and necessity of addressing them. At the same time, by juxtaposing historical and modern racial tensions, Butler also reveals the impact of time and space on racial relations, as well as the impact of racial relations on individual identity and social structure. For example, Dana's time travel experiences strip away the false veneer of the official obfuscation and beautification of America's history of slavery, making her more understanding and sympathetic to the pain endured by her ancestors. And when she returns to a future that is not only built on the conquest of her ancestors but also on the ongoing oppression of African Americans, she and the African Americans she represents may reconsider her existing rights and current freedoms. Additionally in the text, Rufus is infatuated with black slave Alice, asking Dana to assist in raping her. Dana does not vehemently oppose, but persuades Alice to resist Rufus's tyranny. In this complex scenario, Dana is viewed by Alice as an accomplice to Rufus, aiding the slave master in oppressing fellow slaves. Dana betrays the ideal of overturning slavery, even siding with the slave master. Her conflicting psyche and actions subtly represent some contemporary African Americans becoming unwitting perpetrators of the legacy of racial issues, prompting deep reflection. In a white-dominated environment, African Americans, much like Dana in Maryland, often have to adhere to mainstream standards, struggling to break free from the racial prejudices left by history. At the same time, they continuously strive to improve their knowledge and create more opportunities to change their circumstances. However, such "escape" cannot truly resolve the issues between black and white races. The author hopes that African Americans will confront history, reshape their identity, and write a new chapter in the future.

Conclusion

The thesis first explores the manifestation of time-travel device in Octavia E. Butler's novel *Kindred*. The novel breaks the grandmother paradox through the logic of temporal salvation, allowing Dana to witness the history of slavery as she saves her white ancestors. And Butler juxtaposes two different time and space settings, intentionally slowing down the flow of time in the past to enrich the protagonist's experience of slave life, showing spatial differences and the continuity and rupture of history. Secondly, Time-travel facilitates non-linear exploration of racial inequality roots, with whites legally and psychologically deeming blacks inferior. The juxtaposition of time and space also explores the changes in black-white race relations and slavery from the past to the present. Lastly, it discusses how the legacy of slavery continues to affect modern African Americans, represented by Dana, physiologically and psychologically, leading to the ongoing tension between black and white races.

Based on the above analysis, Butler clearly uses the concept of time travel not just as a science fiction gimmick, but as a tool to delve into the complexity of race relations, illustrating the continuity and variability of race relations over time. *Kindred* starkly reminds us that the past history still resonates in the present, affecting people's identity and social structure. It urges people to confront historical legacy issues, address racial differences, and strive to create a fairer future.

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