



The Oppression Towards Black Female Character in Kindred Novel by Octavia E. Butler

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ABSTRACT

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This research explores the profound oppression experienced by the Black female protagonist in Octavia E. Butler's novel Kindred. It addresses the question of what forms of oppression are encountered and how these reflect the framework of postcolonial feminism. Using qualitative methods and detailed textual analysis, this study examines how the character, Dana, faces various forms of oppression as defined by Iris Marion Young's "Five Faces of Oppression" theory: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. The primary data source is Butler's Kindred, with analysis involving close reading, coding, and interpretation in relation to postcolonial feminism. The findings reveal that Dana encounters all five forms, with powerlessness and violence being the most dominant. Her experiences highlight deeply rooted systemic injustices stemming from the intersection of race, gender, and class within the context of American slavery and its intergenerational trauma. This research significantly contributes to understanding postcolonial feminism in speculative fiction narratives and emphasizes Kindred's powerful depiction of compounded oppression, underscoring slavery's enduring legacy on Black women's lived experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Women in the *third world* or postcolonial countries often experience unequal treatment due to various social factors such as race, ethnicity, class, religion, and education (Tong 2009). These women tend to possess more complex identities compared to women in the *first world*, making them more vulnerable to what is known as double colonization (Agbaje, 2021; Hawkes et al., 2025; Kotliuk, 2023). One of the most striking examples of this is the experience of Black women. As part of the colonized and enslaved community, Black women have historically faced persistent oppression rooted in slavery (Chai et al., 2023; Henderson et al., 2021). According to Iris Marion Young, oppression

is a condition in which individuals are unable to develop and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings due to systemic barriers (Young 1990). In the case of Black women, their voices are often silenced, their agency denied, and their suffering normalized even into the present (Tong 2009; Soundarya and Nagarathinam 2016).

Literature has long served as a medium for women writers to challenge this silence and oppression by giving voice to marginalized experiences (Showalter, 2009). One such example is *Kindred* (1979), a science fiction novel written by African-American author Octavia E. Butler. The novel tells the story of Dana, a Black woman from 1976 who is repeatedly transported back in time to the antebellum South, where she is forced to navigate the brutal realities of slavery (Crossley, 2000). Her journey becomes more than just a struggle for survival; it becomes a confrontation with historical trauma, gendered violence, and racial injustice (Gavin, 2013). Dana's experiences reveal the harsh truth of what it meant to be a Black woman during slavery: to be dehumanized, controlled, and silenced (Prince, 2010). Butler uses speculative fiction not merely as escapism, but as a critical lens to reinterpret American history from a feminist and Black perspective (Melzer, 2006). Through *Kindred*, Butler disrupts traditional narratives of slavery and inserts a contemporary Black woman's voice into a historical period where such voices were erased (Jacobs, 2017).

This research focuses on *Kindred* as the object of study because it powerfully portrays the layered oppression that Black women faced in both past and present contexts. The novel stands out not only for its speculative narrative but also for its bold engagement with intersectional identity and power dynamics through the lens of postcolonial feminism. Thus, this research raises the following question: What kinds of oppression are experienced by the Black female protagonist in *Kindred*, and how do these reflect the framework of postcolonial feminism? The aim of this research is to analyze the forms of oppression present in the novel using Iris Marion Young's "Five Faces of Oppression" theory, to explore how Butler gives voice to historical trauma and gendered racial inequality.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research design used in this study is qualitative research. Snape and Spencer describe qualitative research as a naturalistic and interpretative approach that focuses on understanding the meanings people attach to actions, decisions, beliefs, and values (Snape and Spencer 2003). This research aims to explore the oppression experienced by the Black female protagonist in *Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler. A qualitative method is considered appropriate because the data are textual, derived from the characters' experiences and expressions, which are analyzed using postcolonial feminism theory.

The primary data source in this research is the novel *Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler. The novel consists of 264 pages and was first published in 1979 by Beacon Press. The data include all textual evidence such as words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, and paragraphs that reflect the oppression experienced by the Black female character, Dana, particularly within the framework of Iris Marion Young's theory of the Five Faces of Oppression and postcolonial feminism.

To collect the data, the researchers conducted close readings of the novel multiple times to obtain a deep understanding of the narrative, context, and characterization. Important passages that relate to the forms of oppression and postcolonial feminist elements were highlighted and recorded. Each piece of data was noted along with its chapter and page number to facilitate further analysis.

In qualitative research, Given outlines four stages in data analysis: gathering, memoing, coding, and interpreting (Given 2008). The first stage is gathering, in which the researchers compiled all relevant quotations and scenes. The second stage is memoing, where researchers noted their initial thoughts, interpretations, and hypotheses. The third is coding, which involves classifying the data into categories based on the five types of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Finally, in the interpreting stage, the data were analyzed in relation to postcolonial feminism to reveal how Dana's experiences represent systemic oppression.

RESULTH AND DISCUSSION

1. Exploitation

Exploitation refers to the use of one social group's labor for the benefit of another without fair compensation. In *Kindred*, Dana is forced into situations where her skills and labor are exploited, especially by Rufus Weylin. Though Dana is from the 20th century and not legally a slave, she is compelled to work, teach, and care for others without pay and under threat.

"I had come to almost welcome the hard work. It kept me from thinking. White people thought I was industrious. Most blacks thought I was either stupid or too intent on pleasing the whites." (Butler, 1979, p. 225)

This quote illustrates how Dana's labor is extracted under coercion. Her modern education and intellect are ignored in favor of her utility within a slave-based economy.

2. Marginalization

Marginalization is the exclusion of individuals or groups from meaningful participation in society. Dana, though educated and free in her own time, is reduced to a status lower than human when in the past. She becomes invisible to the social structure and is treated as disposable.

"If Kevin never came back for me, Weylin's property was increased by one more slave." (Butler, 1979, p. 229)

Dana's marginalization is evident in how she is treated as property. Despite her autonomy in 1976, she is denied any form of legal or social recognition in 1819.

3. Powerlessness

Powerlessness is defined by a lack of authority, status, and capacity to defend oneself or shape one's own destiny. Dana constantly finds herself in powerless positions, even when she tries to use her intellect or morality to protect others or herself.

“Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape.”
(Butler, 1979, p. 177)

Her modern knowledge, which should empower her, becomes meaningless in a world where Black bodies are owned and brutalized. Dana cannot escape the dynamics of slavery no matter her internal sense of justice or identity.

4. Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism occurs when the dominant group's culture becomes the norm, silencing and invalidating others. Dana must suppress her 20th-century identity and adopt behaviors expected of a submissive, enslaved Black woman in the 1800s. This transformation erases her voice and forces her into roles that contradict her values.

“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.”
(Butler, 1979, p. 97)

This quote shows the psychological toll of cultural imperialism. Dana, pretending to be Rufus's compliant slave, is coerced into participating in a social role that deeply violates her sense of self and dignity.

5. Violence

Violence, as defined by Young, refers to the physical and psychological harm inflicted on members of oppressed groups. Dana experiences violence both directly and indirectly. She is physically attacked multiple times and witnesses the brutalization of other slaves, leaving her with lasting trauma.

“I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip ... I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against an urge to vomit.” (Butler, 1979, p. 112)

The vivid sensory detail here reflects Dana's psychological trauma. Her exposure to the violence of slavery leaves deep emotional scars, aligning with Young's framework of systemic and normalized harm toward oppressed individuals.

After analyzing the oppression experienced by the Black female protagonist in *Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler through the lens of Iris Marion Young's *Five Faces of Oppression*, the researchers concluded that Dana, as the central character, encounters all five forms of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Among these, powerlessness and violence emerge as the most dominant forms of oppression throughout her journey.

Dana's experiences of oppression stem from the intersection of race, gender, and class within the context of American slavery. Although she is a free and educated Black woman from the 20th century, her status becomes meaningless when she is repeatedly transported back to the antebellum South. In that world, she is perceived and treated solely based on the social constructions of race and gender of the 19th century. Her labor is exploited without reward, she is marginalized as a non-person in the legal and social system, and she has little to no power to change her fate or protect herself. Furthermore, she is forced to adopt behaviors that suppress her identity to conform to white societal norms, and she experiences and witnesses brutal acts of violence that leave deep emotional trauma.

The characters who embody and enforce these forms of oppression include Rufus Weylin, Tom Weylin, and other white figures who hold social and economic power. Dana is subjected to these oppressions not only by men but also by the entire societal structure of slavery that dehumanizes Black women. Her suffering is exacerbated by the fact that even her knowledge, intelligence, and assertiveness traits valued in her own time are powerless in a society where Black women are systematically silenced.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Kindred* presents a powerful depiction of the compounded oppression faced by Black women in both historical and contemporary contexts. Through Dana's character, Butler emphasizes how slavery's legacy continues to haunt and define the lived experiences of Black women, making the novel an essential contribution to both postcolonial feminist literature and the discourse on racial and gender injustice.

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