

## **Racial Identity and Otherness in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred***

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of the present study is to understand how racial identity and otherness have been presented in the work of Octavia E. Butler's Kindred and how Black women in the USA struggled to develop the Self. Kindred is a time-traveling narrative and a story of Dana, a Black woman who discovers her ancestors' sufferance and recognizes how people of color experienced oppression and racism. African American literature accompanies Black women's journey to construct their identity through history. Black feminism theory and intersectionality are used to provide a range of black woman perspectives and explore the truth of woman identity intersections. By drawing on these theories, we attempt to shed light on the representation of black woman identity through Black female characters and discover the reality of Black women's otherness between the past and the present.*

**Keywords:** *Black feminist theory, black women, female character, otherness, racial identity.*

### **1. Introduction**

African American people in the United States are known by several names such as Negro, Colored, Blacks, and Black-Americans; all of these labels are about one variable: skin color. For decades, black skin color was the reason behind the oppression of Black people regardless of their values. As documented throughout history, African American people were subjugated either in real life or in the field of art and literature. Portraying Africa and black skin people through the lens of white writers was oppressive and unfair. This embodiment led many anti-racist authors to write about the theme of accepting and refusing differences within a single society. African American writings were about the experience of blacks as being the Other in the white American society. Concerning women writings, their fiction highlight also the underlying values of Afro-American woman culture, experience, and history in the white community.

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The black woman experienced Otherness in the black community and the opposing one. She has been excluded from mainstream feminism because of her race and from black liberation movements because of gender. Hence, being both a woman and being Black are vulnerable criteria for a woman to be excluded. Black feminism is the struggle to end this exclusion. Black activists and advocates publish liberal perspectives that allow black women to speak publicly about their rights and, in particular, the rights of blacks who were not considered human (hooks, 1981). In this paper, we rely on Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as an analytical approach to understanding and analyzing the experiences black women share through their narratives. Notably, Black women took different paths for the same objectives. Speculative fiction was one of these prominent pathways, and Octavia Butler, a fiction writer, was one of the leaders through her Afro-futuristic works. BFT, as a theoretical and analytical approach, offers a wide arguable pathway for black women to be understood.

For this reason, this research would base on this theory to know the experiences shared by Black feminists, especially through Collins's *Black Feminist Thought*. Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith, bell hooks, and Kimberlé Crenshaw are some remarkable activists who lead this coalition. They often shared their ideas with other African-American women. Moreover, they explored the connection between that shared experiences and their beliefs. The recognition of this connection shapes the everyday lives of individual Afro-American women and often pervades their works.

While the concepts of black feminism and BFT are rich and well-developed, their application in science fiction works has been more limited. So, this research attempts to answer how Octavia Butler represents Black women's otherness in her prominent work *Kindred*. In addition, how do Black women struggle for the development of their Self?

## **2. Female Afro-American Authors at Glance**

Since the Harlem Renaissance, the quest for identity has become an indelible theme in Afro-American writings. There has been no American literature period void of significant changes in African-American writings that constantly affect the black living conditions. Among the prominent Afro-American writers, two pioneers in the field who tackled the fake perceptions about Africa and Africans in America were Ignatius Sancho and Phillis Wheatley. In Wheatley's poem *On Being Brought from*

*Africa to America*, which tackles the racist views towards Black people identity, Wheatley dogmatizes the whiteness vision towards the black color with a scornful eye:

Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, *Christians, Negros, black as Cain*,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train

(Wheatley, 1988, p. 53).

Phillis Wheatley was the first Afro-American and the second woman, after Anne Brad Street, to publish a book of poems that refused the way the Blacks had been treated and enslaved. Her first poem addresses the beliefs that none of her age writers could write about (Bassard, 1999).

Since the 1940s, Afro-American women started writing identity-themed works against the negative images of black women that appeared in whites' writings. For instance, Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* (1948) both portray frustrated, subjugated, and alienated heroines in their novels. These Afro-American female novelists earned their fame in the last phase of the twentieth century, and remain eminently affective until recently. Many of them have contributed significantly to the Afro-American fiction; such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Tony Cade, Alice Walker, and Octavia Butler. This latter, as a science fiction writer and as a woman of African origin attempted to resolve some of her own conflicted views on politics and social standards by tackling an array of issues like cultural and intersectional identities, female struggle, alienation, displacement, and gender through Afrofuturism genre, an artistic movement that has been calling for a new identity through science fiction. .

In the 1970s, an essay written by Charles R. Saunders entitled *Why Blacks Don't Read Science Fiction*, a provocative title, focuses on multiple proofs of the idea that only white writers can emerge in science fiction. Hence, the deformity of racism spreads to tarnish the liberal views through writings, poetry, and novels in particular. Anti-blackness in the genre highlights the debate about the image of African people in Western literature. They are often portrayed as inferior and marginalized. A

tremendous amount of critics and authors whose African have agreed that although white American science-fiction writers could spread their visualization to the point of conceptualizing aliens with sympathetic qualities, African Americans were presented offensively and with outrageous belittlement .

Since Saunders' stringent arguments on Blacks as science fiction writers, Afro-American writers have been invigorated to be more active participants in this field. Hence, their writings aim to providing readers with a wide range of short stories and novels by 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century , some of which have not been published then. However, white authors remain dominant. Black people suffer marginalization in their own communities by the whites. This truth is authenticated in the writings of Afro-American writers such as Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, and Nnedi Okorafor who produced remarkable works that examine race intersections, gender and identity, science, and fantasy. In addition to women race issues which were more tackled in women writings.

### **3. The Afro-American Woman as the 'Other'**

African American women suffered from American society's ignorance and unawareness of their rights. Women's issues became timeless and largely tackled as the women faced the intersection of being women in a male-dominated society and black women in a white-dominated region. The intersection of personal patterns in a woman pushes her to strive for different prejudiced mentalities. *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins explains women's struggle for identity and the concerns of black women that had been silenced, ignored, and marginalized long ago. The black woman is subject to discrimination. She is considered inferior and treated as the 'Other.' Being the Other means being a member of an out-group (not belonging) that does not match the in-group (belonging). A black woman struggles to develop her Self by eliminating the differences that hinder her from belonging to that group. Afro-American women are also confronted with racism, ethnicity, and gender inequality. This sufferance was consequently the creative nucleus of the new women's Black literature. In this context, Nadine Gordimer, in her *The Black Interpreters*, stresses this truth by the following: "African writing is a writing done in any language by African themselves and by others of whatever skin color who share the African experience and have – centered consciousness" (1973, p. 05).

In order to understand the meaning of the women as the Other, sociologists, critics and authors first tried to put a critical spotlight on how social and ethnic identities are constructed. Various identities are often thought of being natural or innate, but in some cases, some scholars highlight that this taken-for-granted view is not always accurate. Considering racial identities as innate may lead to the result of a homogeneous community that could not be distinguished between the Self and the Other.

Society is made up of opposite parts: one part believes in its superiority over the Other, which is seen as inferior and dehumanized. This Other, According to Homi Bhabha, “loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse”(1994, p. 31). *Otherness* would be defined as the inability to fit in within the norms of the different groups of people it does not belong. In his book *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977), Hegel also argues that the process of Otherness begins within the Self. The self experiences Otherness in a dualistic nexus where one part of the identity can fix the eye on the other identity parts and comes to a greater understanding of the Self. Hegel's ideas then lead to knowing how people can be objectified in a master-slave relationship because one can have a divided identity and objectify a part of oneself (Hegel, Miller, & Findlay, 1977).

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Society is made up of opposite parts: one part believes in its superiority, and the other one suffers race, class, and gender exclusion. The social activist bell hooks asserts in her book *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* that domination always involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group (1989), and she added, “As subjects, people have the right to define their self reality, establish their own identities, name their history” (hooks, 2000, p.42). hooks also focus on exploring the intersections of race, capitalism, and gender. Patricia Hill Collins challenges the white feminist dominance and nurtures the appreciation for diversity in reflecting differences. Their main concern was beyond merely black women's liberation. In her declaration about African women, Elizabeth Higginbotham appreciates Collins' attitude:

Finding her own voice and sharing with us the voices of other African-American women, Collins brilliantly explicates our unique standpoint. As a black feminist, Collins traverses both old and new territories (1997, p. 02).

The qualities of African American women were not supposed to be shown as a weakness but as a strength. This reality does not protect black women from being the Other, which summarizes their whole annoyance and discomfort. Furthermore, the understanding of Self and Others is predominant in de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1997). de Beauvoir maintains that Otherness, although associated with everything sidelined, avoided, rejected, unwanted, abandoned, and marginalized actually provides a distinct advantage. She seeks to examine how identities are constructed. For woman identity, de Beauvoir insists that it is constructed by man to

serve his own interests. Women thereby produced subjectivity and presented as the *Other Sex*, as she claims, "he is the subject, he is absolute, she is the Other." (1949, p. 03)

In a particular community, being the 'Other' is a way to exist despite changes, differences, and stigmatization. The Other is bound to the notions of being foreign, inferior, and marginalized and can be a stamp of identity that is different from the dominant one. African American writers reconstruct Afro-Americans ethnic identity and racial identity by examining their journey out of their groups. Hence, the black women's journey bears different experiences one has in life. Black women maintain the portrayal of themselves as the Other and admit ideological excuses for race, class, gender, and oppression. The notion of the Other, however, implicitly emphasizes the identity of an existing group with all its components.

From the outset, Collins considers racial discrimination as a determining factor in Black women's lives that hinders them from better living conditions. Patricia Hill Collins states in the prologue of *Black Feminist Thought* an essential and elusory question, "How can I as one person speak for such a large and complex group as African-American women?" (p. 208). Collins believes that she may speak on their behalf, but this would not end their weaknesses and sufferance only if her voice was sustained by the whole community. She explains her point of view as follows:

I cannot and should not because each of us must learn to speak for ourselves. In the course of writing the book, I came to see my work as being part of a larger process, as one voice in a dialogue among people who have been silenced.... More importantly, my hope is that others who were formerly and are currently silenced will find their voices. I, for one, certainly want to hear what they have to say. (p. ix)

Each woman should find a way to describe her journey and experience, whether as a black woman looking for justice or a female who seeks her own liberation or any specific right. Each black Afro-American woman has her own journey. Some of them have witnessed the period of segregation and studied in segregated schools. Thereby, they own that racial identity and sense of responsibility. Others lived post-segregation period and did not experience the hardship of being totally invisible. Each experience is a lesson for black women's liberation progress. Gay Becker explained the influence of each experience on others in *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World* (1998):

[...] the stories that people tell about themselves, reflect people's experience, as they see it and as they wish to have others see it [...] Narratives are a way to articulate and resolve core, universal problems and a way to avoid or heal biographical discontinuities.

Through stories, people organize, display, and work through their experiences. (p. 25)

Becker's belief about African American literature extended to being a kind of solution that not only solved race problems but also shaped black women's self. Hence, According to Afro-American women authors and critics, after the publication of *Black Feminist Thought*, black feminism has moved to a new level. Collins's work sets standards for discussing black women's lives, experiences, and thoughts that need attention to the intersection of these experiences.

#### **4. The Identity of African American Women in American Literature**

African-American women experience of race, class, and gender stereotypical views leads to her invisibility. This invisibility, particularly in western literature, merged with is not difficult to comprehend, as Elizabeth Schultz documented:

On national wage scales she has always been the lowest paid; in national political life she has only recently been seen; in national statistics she is categorized as the unwed mother the welfare recipient, the maid; in national myth she is designated by multiple names all of which conceal her identity... aunt Jemima, Mammy, Matriarch, sometimes sister, Black Bitch, Girl (1997, p.316)

These images are particularly depicted by a dominant whites culture and community, and imposed upon black women to assert their inferiority. This was a kind of exclusion, blacks were forced to be restricted to, as Collins noted(2009).These restrictions that face black women regarding their voice deprivedthem of their proper identity. Barbara Christian also determined the stereotypical patterns appeared in both American literature and Afro-American literature precisely. Collins also admitted that Black feminist thought can create a collective identity among African-American women and extend the dimensions of Black women's attitudes and standpoints.

African-American literary history witnessed dozens of women authors who defended black women's identities, self-existence, and self-definition in a white supremacy society. The painful state Black women have faced through history remains the same but the oppression they lived in as women of color takes different forms to humiliate their intellectual power, self-expression and self-concept. The confrontation was led by well-known African-American women such as Harriet Tubman, Mary Church Terrell, Rosa Parks, and Ella Baker This defiance was spiritless and takes different forms accordingly.

All of the above mentioned names were black activists, journalists and authors who fought against racism, classism and sexism by documenting truths about them.

However, their objectives remain far to be achieved. The black feminist Anna Julia Cooper wrote her best-known work, *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* where she suggested that education and self-intellectual development are a must for black women to survive and gain their freedom. Furthermore, Anna's book was considered as one of the first articulations of Black feminism where she insisted further significance of woman's voice. She stated "It is not the intelligent woman vs. the ignorant woman; nor the white woman vs. the black, the brown, and the red, it is not even the cause of woman vs. man. Nay, it's woman's strongest vindication for speaking that the world needs to hear her voice" (Cooper, 1892, p. 121).

Influential touches on black feminism have been documented by prominent black female intellectuals Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins. Their writings are about Black women rights, struggle, and the intersection identities they should have in a racist community as Higginbotham has explained through Collins' perspective,

Collins explores the familiar themes of oppression, family, work, and activism and also examines new areas of cultural images and sexual politics. Collins gently challenges white feminist dominance of feminist theory and nurtures an appreciation for diversity in positions reflecting different race, class, and gender junctures. Her work is an example of how academics can make their work accessible to the wider public (1997, p. 02)

One of the prominent themes that black feminists have produced is the concept of intersectionality, which is coined by the activist Kimberlé Crenshaw. As cited in Evelyn M. Simien's *Black Feminist Voices in Politics*, Ransby asserted that intersectionality maintains that "race, class, gender, and sexuality are co-dependent variables that cannot be separated or ranked in scholarship, political practice, or lived experience" (2012, p. 10). Collins added to the notion of black women identity, intersectionality, as a theory investigates the way woman suffers from being black in a white society and as a woman in a black or white male-supremacy society. Collins wrote her book to combine the theory with the most immediate feminist practices. According to Rosemarie Tong, the author of *Feminist Thought, A More Comprehensive Introduction*, enfolding Collins's ideas and principles is a kind of a must for any feminist's library (1998)

Black women almost share the same racist experiences as Others. According to Collins, black female critics and feminists have tackled the issue of gender inequality within the black community due to denying black women multiple political and social activities. Hence, black feminists recognized that gender inequality exists within the black community and point to the patriarchal nature of black male-female relationships.

Collins maintained that black feminism is more than a social justice project, and building coalitions is central to advancing that project. Black feminists instead focused on the sense of belonging or conscious loyalty to the black woman in a question that emerged by everyday black women's experiences. A woman's true self is how she senses and understands the meaning and responsibility of the lived experience. Collins' book was centrally arrogant in understanding that at the core of black feminist thought was empowerment. Through her work, Collins encouraged black women to achieve higher consciousness through knowledge leading to this empowerment.

Thus, speaking about all these patterns, class, gender, sex and colour that joined the term intersectionality makes it difficult for a black woman to discuss and write about one pattern. For this reason, Black literature tries to tackle the issue of female blackness and reminds the reader that African American women do not have the luxury of choosing to fight only one battle because they contend with multiple burdens.

Though these scholars have different perspectives about Blacks, several recurred themes that delineate the contours of Black feminist thought. Women, power, peace, and the black women's fight journey are the most audible and tackled themes.

## **5. Otherness and Female Racial Identity in Butler's *Kindred***

Octavia Butler is one of the prominent Afro-American female authors of the twentieth century, and *Kindred* is the novel she wrote in 1979. The fiction gathers a succession of events between Maryland and California, the past and the present, and the future permutation. The language of *Kindred* is knowledgeable and straightforward, but what is meant is that between the lines, things become severe and show an alert message. Butler's novel consists of multiple themes of modern world concerns such as gender, race, class, identity, power, and trauma. Butler encapsulates the idea of this work in an interview with *The Black Scholar* magazine. She defines her novel by relying on the actual event, Afrofuturism. Taken together, particular events allowed Dana, the protagonist, to discover her ancestors' injustice experiences that Butler explained later:

*Kendra* is the story of a black woman who is pulled back to the antebellum South. She is a woman from the present era who is pulled back and enslaved. She has a long association with a pair of her ancestors' one black and one white. (Butler, 1986, para. 5)

Butler's realization of science and technology makes her know the ultimate ending points of racism and oppression, which justifies the essential nexus between the past and the present. Accordingly, maturity in this genre is not easy; Butler considered the first reason behind the idea of writing this piece of work that she was a sixties woman, and she wanted to be enough of blacks' sufferance at that point in the U.S. history.

In the sixties, when the history of the United States began to change, a newly passed law banned colour discrimination in all public accommodations for the first time. This law might be a chance to pass other black rights, especially black women ones. The influence of history on *Kindred* elevates the black authentic self, the actual existing of otherness, and the simultaneous of having history, then you exist. Butler explains this relation by sharing her beliefs also in a form of narrative, that is what Black feminists believed the right path

I grew up during the sixties that was the period of my adolescence and I was involved with the black consciousness raising that was taking place at the time. And I was involved with some people who had gone off the deep end with the generation gap. They would say things like, would like to get rid of that older generation that betrayed us. I'm not going to do anything because to start, I would have to kill my parents.(Butler, 1986, para.15)

In *Kindred*, history has been expressed differently by investigating black women in the past and future through Dana Franklin's journey. Moreover, Butler describes survival that ignorance would be by trusting others, maybe whites, men, or other contradictory sides. Ancestors, in the situation of Dana. Her personal choices affected not only her life but also others, including Rufus, Alice, and Kevin (other significant characters):

But I would help him as best I could. And I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come. I might even be making things easier for Alice. (Butler, 1979, p. 68)

It is hard to recognize her otherness according to her ancestors, who had the same roots; however, they transmit different lifestyles. Being a friend to her white ancestor gives Dana valuable relation to her history and reality. Although Rufus, the friend, symbolizes the more significant political power, he did not affect Dana's identity construction in the earliest meetings.

Butler portrays black women's identity based on their history, time, and place. She produced this identity in an ironic story to tackle the reality of the United States blacks' freedom and mimic the enslaved African American women's sufferance, particularly in the nineteenth century. Dana Franklin faced a world that did not consent to her presence as a free woman in the Antebellum South. She hopelessly tries to return to her own time, earth, and place, Los Angeles, 1976, where she could reshape her identity. Dana indicates the way she would survive by friendship. According to her, it is not only a human relationship but also the only way to help her and all black people who live in the same situation. Despite the friendship shared between two opposed poles, the black Dana and the white Rufus Weylin, Dana this relationship because she

feels belonging, especially when she is stuck in the Antebellum South, where people of color are prejudiced because of their skin color.

Octavia Butler also encouraged her black women to strive against racist behaviors and segregation laws. Along with her aim to defend her female perspectives, the objective behind producing hegemonic marriage between a black woman and white Speaking about Dana or Octavia seems to be the same. The doubt may reach some black authors unconsciously because of their attachment to the sense of belonging to the white community. Returning to Dana, it is hard for her to do so in the black/white male supremacy community; she has to be physically strong and protest against raping. According to Dana, this fight could end her life: I closed my eyes in pain and weariness. It hadn't just seemed longer to me. I had been gone for hours, and I knew it. But at that moment, I couldn't have argued it. I couldn't have discussed anything. The surge of strength that helped me to fight when I thought I was fighting for my life was gone. (Butler, 1979, p. 44)

However, Afro-Americans went through hard times to improve their belonging to the United States. The sense of belonging was less recognized, non-applied, and far from being a reality for them. Essentially, it is not necessary to have significance in belonging to a group that refuses people just because they are different and considers them enslaved or ignored. The idea concerns people's feelings and attitudes towards their blackness and themselves. Afro-Americans thus believe that their destiny in the United States is challenging because of their skin color, and they accept the fact of being black in a white society. For Dana, accepting herself in her ancestors' community symbolizes her blackness and otherness in the same time.

I stumbled and fell, got up and fell again. Finally, I lay face-down in the dirt, unable to get up. Then came a welcome blackness. I could have been going home or dying or passing out; it made no difference to me. I was going away from the pain. That was all. (Butler, 1979, p. 213)

Falling, dying, and passing out, all these kinds of pain were derived from one truth: considering Blacks as the Other who cannot escape from this reality. According to Butler, recovering something of the experience of the nineteenth-century ancestors who lived in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement is an homage to those women who still struggle for their own identity. Undoubtedly, the United States became free of multiple segregation laws, but minds are still locked up with its descent racist views.

## **5. Conclusion**

The adoption of a Black Feminist Thought lens on the work of Butler has fostered particular findings about our analytical endeavor. Overall, Black feminism directs feminist views to expand its ideas between the lines of Afro-American

women's experiences and works in the past, present, and future. Although The African American female is an independent enslaved woman who tries to defeat her denial of her ancestor history, Black feminists focus on black human condition components that would maintain the black woman identity apparent. In *Kindred*, Octavia Butler explores the themes of racial identity and otherness by depicting Dana's journey between the past as an enslaved woman and the present as a black woman in American living conditions. In addition to her experience of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability. In this narrative, the attempt to feel belonging and self-identified, either in the past or the present, is the ultimate dynamic engine for fighting racism. Hence, there is a fearsome of which could blend the truly valued, pure Black woman Self with weak and disclaim attributes, irrevocably assimilating it to degenerate Other status. Butler demonstrates the mechanism of the black woman's portrayal of different identities as a slave woman, a black woman who tries to impose her twentieth black identity. Octavia Butler and Dana express two coins for the same perspective; they address a woman's racial identity as it controls the minds and emotions of an enslaved woman at any period of history.

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