

A Discourse of Power: The Manipulation of Stereotypes in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

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Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is set in two time periods, the late twentieth century and early nineteenth century. Butler, known for her science fiction writing, creates a story in which her protagonist, Edana Franklin, known as Dana, travels in time from her modern, post-Civil Rights Movement life in 1976 California to the antebellum South of the early 1800s. These historical and geographical placements allow Butler to fully explore the tension between love and power among her characters and to manipulate the stereotypes commonly associated with African Americans in the twentieth century. Butler demystifies, dispels, and renders powerless some of the controlling images that helped to naturalize oppression throughout history as the reader comes to understand what it meant to live as a slave for Dana, who struggles to maintain her sense of self, and for the black men and women who were born in the era of slavery.

Butler sets up a world that is realistic, but contests the romanticized stereotype of the Southern plantation, which was originally propagated by Southern writers to respond to abolitionist writings by glossing over the ugliness and brutality that existed in slavery. Butler's use of the Eastern Shore of Maryland as the geographical location of the home of Dana's ancestors allows her to create a setting different from what one typically envisions as a Southern plantation—the white mansion with a grand veranda and massive columns framed by live oaks heavy with Spanish moss—which was not common in rural areas north of southern Virginia. In order to emphasize its differences, Butler writes from Dana's perspective, "The Weylin house surprised me too when I saw it in daylight. It wasn't white. It had no columns, no porch to speak of. I was almost disappointed. It was a red-brick Georgian colonial, boxy but handsome...in our own time, Kevin and I could have afforded it" (67). So, not only does Butler contradict the notion that all slaveholders have mansions, but she has her black female protagonist acknowledge that, in her own time and place, she and her husband, who are both moderately successful writers, could afford a similar house. Setting the story in Maryland also reminds readers that slavery was a widespread problem, not simply an issue of the Deep South. In a review of Butler's book, Angelyn Mitchell writes, "Her choice of setting also allows Butler to dispel the notion of 'deep South slavery' as the worst...[A]ny type of slavery is barbaric and inhumane" (53). However, it is important to note that in Maryland, despite its lack of white-columned mansions, the Weylin plantation operates under

the same economic, social, and cultural guidelines that prevailed in other slave states during the antebellum period.

The societal guidelines of the Southern states were crucial to normalizing the institution of slavery. In her article discussing the ideology of slavery, Katie Geneva Cannon states,

The institution of chattel slavery and its corollary, White supremacy and racial bigotry, excluded Black people from every normal human consideration. The humanity of Black people had to be denied, or the evil of the slave system would be evident. . . [L]egislatures enacted laws designating Black people as property and as less than human. . . The intellectual legacy of slavocracy was the development of certain white preconceptions about the irredeemable nature of Black women and Black men as “beings of an inferior order,” a subpar species between animal and human. (414)

The laws of Maryland and other Southern states made the oppression of Black Americans legal, but it was the assimilation of dehumanizing stereotypes that normalized the idea that they were “Baboons on two legs gifted with speech,” and made it more acceptable for Christian white people to own slaves (414). Although some resisted, most white Southerners allowed themselves to adopt this ideology. Lucy Breckinridge, a young white lady who grew up on a Virginia plantation, refers to her family’s slaves as “singular creatures” in her diary (Breckinridge 133). Also, after hearing that a house slave told male field servants which way to run to join the Yankees, she writes indignantly, “We always treated him like a *friend* rather than a servant, and his ingratitude is more disgusting than it would be in the others. Slavery is a troublesome institution and I wish for the sake of the *masters* that it could be abolished in Virginia” (35-6, italics in the original). In her diary, she never entertains the concept that the institution of slavery is “troublesome” to the slaves; her only concern is for her own injured sensibilities and the other white masters, confirming the successful naturalization of a hierarchy in which white supremacy was the norm. The white patriarchal ideology was naturalized, allowing oppressors the added freedom to feel insulted and betrayed when their victims wanted to help one another escape their lives of bondage.

Patricia Hill Collins, a black feminist and social theorist who analyzes the distribution of power among race, gender, and class, explains that stereotypes and other controlling images “are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life” (68). Collins also states that controlling images like “mammies” and “jezebels” are “key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression,” positioning black women as the opposite of what is expected of white women and naturalizing the white patriarchal views of femininity (68). This ideology normalized the process of belittling, dehumanizing, and sexualizing the black woman while, at the same time, alienating her from becoming allies with the white woman, who was being valued only for her “purity,” passivity, piety, and obedience (Collins 69). The white women are oppressed by the controlling images of the Angel-in-the-House and the Mad-Woman-in-the-Attic. Although black men did have the slight advantage of being male in a patriarchal society after slavery ended, terms like “bucks”

and “Uncle Toms” defined them as the binary “Other” in relation to white men, placing emphasis on their supposed animalistic and hyper-sexual natures (Collins 68).

Butler places Dana in 1976 as a twenty-six-year-old woman, so she is familiar with the lingering stereotypes that had infiltrated American culture and remained long after the emancipation of slaves and the Civil Rights Movement. This, in turn, shapes her expectations and perceptions of plantation life. Through Dana, Butler allows the reader to experience a realistic environment of slavery, use stereotypical characterizations to attempt to understand its dynamics, and realize that stereotypes cannot convey the complexity of the individuals they attempt to categorize.

According to Collins, the image of the mammy “symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power” by her willingness to nurture and care for her white family better than her own (71). The white perception of how a “good mammy” should behave maintains that her faithful submission and dedication to white children are natural because she is part of the white family, too. In Harriet Jacobs’s book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda Brent describes her grandmother as

an indispensable personage in the household, officiating in all capacities, from cook and wet nurse to seamstress... My mother’s mistress was the daughter of my grandmother’s mistress. She was the foster sister of my mother; they were both nourished at my grandmother’s breast. In fact, my mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food. (9-10)

Brent’s grandmother was viewed as the stereotypical mammy figure by the white family who owned her, and the image’s attached concepts allowed them to pretend that the black servant’s selflessness was given as an act of love, thus normalizing and excusing their exploitation of her. However, the grandmother knew that, according to law, she did not possess a “self” to give, and did what she could to better her life, and her children’s lives, with what resources she had; she baked crackers at night to sell, hoping to buy her freedom and her children’s, too (Jacobs 12). This behavior proves that Brent’s grandmother did not accept her bondage as natural or deserved, which contradicts the “good mammy” image that the white patriarchy wanted to classify as the norm.

Despite proof of its inaccuracy, the stereotype was still powerful in maintaining racial oppression even after the Civil War because, if some black women believed the image was the expected cultural norm and their only option to secure societal approval, it would affect how they mothered their children. Their black children would be raised to treat whites with deference, supporting the ideology of white entitlement (Collins 72). In her effort to debunk the mammy myth, Butler introduces Sarah, Weylin’s cook, on Dana’s third trip back in time. Unlike the appearance of the Weylin’s house, Sarah’s description is similar to what one thinks of when picturing a mammy figure, allowing Dana and the reader to complacently make analogies to the controlling image of mammy as Dana tries to process Sarah’s role on the plantation. Butler writes, “There was a stocky middle-aged woman stirring a kettle that hung over the fire in the fireplace. ... She was [a] light-skinned... handsome... woman. Her expression was grim, her mouth turned down at the corners, but her voice was soft and low” (72). Dana observes that Sarah

“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...I looked down on her myself for a while” (Butler 145). Dana’s opinion of Sarah is clouded by her 1976 ideas about what slavery was and, because of those modern ideas, she has an immediate negative reaction to anyone who could let herself be called “mammy.” As time passes, Dana learns that “Marse Tom” sold three of Sarah’s four children and realizes that the black woman is not faithfully subordinate to the Weylins: she tolerates Tom and abhors Margaret, but her loyalty is to her daughter, Carrie (Butler 76). After hearing the story, Dana observes that “[t]he expression in [Sarah’s] eyes had gone from sadness—she seemed almost ready to cry—to anger. ...How amazing that Weylin had sold her children and still kept her to cook his meals. How amazing that he was still alive. I didn’t think he would be for long, though, if he found a buyer for Carrie” (76). Dana and, through her, the reader understand that Sarah is not some docile matron who meekly does what she is told out of compassion for her masters; thus, the mammy stereotype is revealed as incorrect and has to be discarded. Sarah is there because she loves Carrie, and Tom Weylin uses his power as Carrie’s master to control Sarah; it is this tense balance between love and power that is dynamic. The human tension is lost in the image of mammy because the image wrongly suggests that the black woman is acting out of free will—that she is “naturally” subservient.

The stereotypes labeling the black women who were not seen as mammies—the “jezebels,” or “bad women”—are used to excuse white men for raping their slaves, reducing the black women to sex-crazed animals and breeders (Collins 77). According to Collins, “Jezebel’s function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white men typically reported by Black slave women” (77). When discussing the unwelcome sexual advances her white master made, Jacobs’s Linda Brent states, “I now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. ... He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny” (Jacobs 26). Brent did not have the sexual agency to protect herself from her master’s behavior; she was his property by law. White patriarchal law protects white men and their interests, just as the stereotypes naturalize their behavior and perceptions of their world. An escaped slave who believed himself to be the son of one of his masters, Frederick Douglass, realizes this and writes, “[S]laveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to [the white masters’] own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable” (Douglass 49). According to Jacobs, “[Black w]omen are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner’s stock. They are put on a par with animals” (44). The white patriarchal ideology determined that a black woman’s sexuality would be controlled and profited from by white men, and she would be blamed for her own exploitation by all white people and judged by fellow blacks. The jezebel stereotype diminished the black woman to a sex-hungry animal—a breeder—during the antebellum period and justified white male behavior to white society.

This atrocity is part of U.S. history, influencing societal norms for years, and Butler addresses the inaccuracy of the jezebel stereotype through several female characters, but especially with Alice and Dana. The reader first meets Alice as an adult on Dana's fourth trip back in time. Butler writes, "Off to my opposite side was a woman, black, young—just a girl, really—with her dress torn down the front. She was holding it together as she watched a black man and a white man fighting" (117). Alice's dress is torn because Rufus has just raped her; even a free black woman was not safe from white men who felt entitled to exert their dominance. Her husband, Isaac, is the black slave who is fighting Rufus to punish him. The reader meets Alice as a free adult woman who has chosen to be married to a black slave; she has a defined sense of self and her own sexual agency that Rufus, a white man brainwashed by stereotypes of blacks, does not acknowledge or respect. When Dana asks him how he could rape Alice, his childhood friend, he says, "We grew up. She got so she'd rather have a buck nigger than me!" revealing his acceptance of common stereotypes—"buck nigger"—and his inability to respect Alice as a human with rights (123). After Alice and her husband run away together and are caught, she is sold at a slave auction as punishment for attempting to aid the escape of a slave: Rufus buys her. When Alice has to choose whether or not to go to Rufus's bed willingly, her alternatives—to be beaten then raped, or to run and be torn apart by dogs if she is caught—are so traumatic that the reader does not judge her harshly for accepting him. Dana's twentieth century conviction that Alice's body is her own is an alien concept to Alice who replies, "Not mine, [Rufus's]. He paid for it, didn't he?" (167). Alice has been raised as a free child but, as a member of the oppressed race, she understands and resents her current position. The tension between power and love becomes the dynamic between the master and the slave woman; Alice is not driven by sexual desire, but Rufus is. Alice is not willing to succumb to Rufus entirely; she "separates" her body from her spirit to maintain her sense of self. Rufus cannot buy her affections or love, although he can demand sex and she does bear four of his children. Through the relationship between Alice and Rufus, Butler exposes the jezebel stereotype as a falsehood, enlightening the reader to the real issue—white male entitlement—that restricted the white man from experiencing healthy relationships as much as it hurt the white and black women who were subject to his whims. Rufus wants to have a relationship like the one Dana has with her white husband Kevin, who has accidentally time-travelled into the antebellum setting. But the role restrictions and stereotypes that shape Rufus's life and define Alice's will not allow him to do so without becoming radically different and, probably, ostracized from white society.

Butler also manipulates and demystifies the jezebel stereotype through Dana's actions. Mitchell states, "When Sam, one of Weylin's enslaved men, shows a romantic interest in her, Dana adamantly declares that 'one husband is enough,' belying the supposed lasciviousness of enslaved black women" (59). Margaret Weylin, the powerless, white Angel-in-the-House figure, accuses Dana of being a stereotypical jezebel. Margaret finds out that Dana is sleeping with Kevin in her home and shouts, "You filthy black whore!... This is a Christian house!" (93). The hypocrisy of the institution of slavery and the people who adopt the ideological concepts as truth is glaringly obvious to the reader, and Butler manipulates the stereotype of the pure, non-sexual white woman. Margaret is willing to overlook the half-black children who look like her husband, but cannot abide the fact that Kevin—a man she actively flirts with—wants Dana, so she strikes out at the person with less power than herself. In a description of a Southern white marriage

similar to Butler's fictional Weylins, Jacobs writes, "The young wife soon learns that the husband in whose hands she has placed her happiness pays no regard to his marriage vows. Children of every shade of complexion play with her own fair babies, and too well she knows that they are born unto him of his own household. Jealousy and hatred enter the...home, and it is ravaged of its loveliness" (33). Such is the life of Margaret Weylin and, although she has accepted her husband's indiscretions as society has demanded, Kevin's preference for Dana over her is too much for her to bear. Her husband, however, not unexpectedly, has a different reaction to Dana's sleeping arrangements. Butler writes, "[Tom Weylin] almost smiled—came as near to smiling as I'd ever seen. And he winked. That was all. I knew then that if Margaret got me kicked out, it wouldn't be for doing a thing as normal as sleeping with my master" (97).

Butler reveals through her depictions of white people that the institution of slavery is damaging to both blacks and whites, although the blacks certainly suffered far more. The ideology of white supremacy did not benefit anyone, not even the white males who held the reins of power and control in their hands. In many instances, they paid a price—love was unattainable—and Butler exposes this consequence through the lives of Tom and Rufus. Tom's marriage is not a happy one, and his sexual exploitation of black slaves is damaging to his and Margaret's relationship. Rufus cannot marry the woman he loves and can never have what Dana and Kevin have. Butler also symbolically scars both Kevin and Dana once they are exposed to the harsh realities of history. Just as white people were hurt less by slavery, Kevin bears the less significant injury: he has a scar on his head. Dana, however, is a black woman who is maimed by her experience in the past: she loses her left arm.

It is because Butler creates many three-dimensional, complicated human characters as slaves and masters that the stereotypes of mammy and jezebel are demystified and rendered impotent and inappropriate. Butler illustrates that it is the tenuous balance between power and love that controls the actions of the slaves and the masters in this historical fiction narrative. Stereotypes and controlling images replaced, over time, the knowledge of this complex tug-of-war between power and love, and the true cultural experience disappeared from public memory. Dehumanizing terms such as "mammy" and "jezebel" reduced those who lived during slavery to white-man-sanctioned shadows of themselves. Butler manipulates twentieth century stereotypes of those controlling images, placing them opposite human, complex characters, to reveal the flimsy uselessness of those stereotypes, empowering a once oppressed people to see their past from a truthful perspective.

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