

# Exploring the Legacy of Slavery through a Neo-Slave Narrative: A Study with Reference to Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*

Pritom Hatimuria

## Abstract

In the late 1960s and 1970s, neo-slave narrative emerged as a genre in the realm of African American literature that presents a contemporary point of view on the institution of slavery and critically examines the presence of the effect of slavery in America. This paper aims to explore the legacy of slavery in post-civil rights America by the genre of neo-slave narrative. Through an analysis of Octavia E. Butler's famous novel *Kindred*, I intend to examine how the institution of slavery continues to shape and influence the society of post-civil rights America. Thus, this paper tries to debunk the notion that the institution of slavery in America is only a part of history.

**Keywords:** History; *Kindred*; Neo-Slave Narrative, Post-Civil Rights America; Slavery.

“The past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms” (Morrison 241).

In the realm of African American literature, an “extraordinary genre of retrospective literature about slavery” emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s which is called the neo-slave narrative (Smith 168). The term neo-slave narrative is considered to have its origin in Bernard W. Bell's book *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* where Bell defines the genre as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289). Later on, this definition has widened to include a variety of texts that have different settings, deal with the institution of slavery from different perspectives, and are written in various literary styles—“from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern

experiments, satire, and works that combine these diverse modes" (Smith 168). In the book *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy defines neo-slave narratives as the "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (3). Despite the differences, the texts that are written in the neo-slave narrative genre display some distinguishing features: "these texts illustrate the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities.

Further, they provide a perspective on a host of issues that resonate in contemporary cultural, historical, critical, and literary discourses, among them: the challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories; the legacy of slavery (and other atrocities) for subsequent generations; the interconnectedness of constructions of race and gender; the relationship of the body to memory . . . the commodification of black bodies and experiences; and the elusive nature of freedom" (Smith 168-169). According to Madhu Dubey in "Octavia Butler's Novels of Enslavement", neo-slave narratives are "impelled by the conviction that the racial legacy of slavery has not yet become a matter of history" (346). This paper aims to explore the legacy of slavery in post-civil rights America through the genre of neo-slave narrative. Here, I give an analysis of Octavia E. Butler's famous novel *Kindred* to examine how the institution of slavery continues to shape and influence the society of post-civil rights America.

Published in 1979, Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* is a very popular and widely read novel in America. The novel is mainly categorised as a neo-slave narrative, although it displays characteristics of various literary genres such as science fiction, fantasy, historical novel, etc. In the interview titled "An Interview With Octavia E. Butler" by Randall Kenan, Butler calls *Kindred* a "fantasy" that does not contain any "science" (495). The novel is written in the form of a first-person account of a young African American woman named Dana living in Los Angeles in 1976 who time travels to antebellum Maryland when her white ancestor Rufus faces a hazardous situation. Initially, Dana time travels to the past alone, but later on, her husband Kevin comes with her and both of them witness the history together.

The use of the device of time travel enables Butler to make her characters experience the society of two distant periods—antebellum America and post-civil rights America. By giving a social picture of these two periods, Butler demonstrates the similarities and dissimilarities between the present and the past and thereby casts light upon the legacy of the institution

of slavery in post-civil rights American society. In the book *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy discusses a subcategory of the genre of neo-slave narrative which he calls palimpsest narratives by mainly focusing on three literary texts—Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975), Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) and David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981). Here, Rushdy describes the palimpsest narratives as fictional works that “represent an African American person in late-twentieth-century America haunted by a family secret involving an antebellum ancestor.” According to him, the overarching theme in these three texts is that “historical events have enduring afterlives” (ch. 1). As a neo-slave narrative, *Kindred* displays the legacy of slavery in the social institutions and relations of post-civil rights America. In the novel, Butler portrays the effect of slavery mainly in two major aspects of post-civil rights America: first, the interracial relationship between the blacks and the whites; and second, the institution of family and racial identity. The novel shows that despite the legal abolition of the institution of slavery, its effects have not been erased from the social fabric of America.

**Interracial Relationship:** During the period of chattel slavery, the American society was constituted of a “powerful black-white divide” (Sollors 3). The white elites used “a vast range of mechanisms to gain and maintain control over enslaved people, including, violence, legislation, slave patrols, religion, paternalistic demeaning behavior, and racist proslavery ideology” (Williams, ch. 4). In *Kindred*, when Rufus comes to know that Dana is Kevin’s wife, his immediate reaction is an utter shock—“Niggers can’t marry white people!” (Butler 60). As a son of a slave owner, it is a matter of extreme astonishment and disgust for Rufus to know the existence of interracial relationships like the marriage between the blacks and the whites. When Nigel enquires Dana about her marriage with astonishment, Dana refrains from talking about it because interracial marriage was not legal in antebellum Maryland. But as Dana rightly points out, it is legally allowed in her society: “where we come from, whites and blacks can marry” (61).

The social scenario of America in the 1970s where Dana belongs to was a time of transition due to the civil rights movement and what it succeeded and failed to achieve. As a result of the civil rights movement, the lawful segregation between the whites and the blacks was abolished and the mingling of both the communities was allowed, including in the institution of marriage. Some of the African Americans showed tremendous growth and achieved a position in some important institutions of Amer-

ica. The claim of the larger white section of American society was that “race was no longer germane, that the whites aimed to live in a society where people would be assessed by the substance of their personality and not by the colour of their skin” (Dutta 164). But this prosperity was limited to a handful of African Americans. Moreover, the end of legal racial discrimination was yet to be implemented in the social activities and norms by the majority of the population. Thus, the post-civil rights society “rests on unsure footing because of its continued resistance to resolving past issues in the present. . . . Themes like racial inequality, white dominance, and gender inequality carried through from the past into later years and caused unrest” (Manis 9-10). Consequently, although interracial marriage is legally allowed in Dana’s time, many people still adhere to the division between the blacks and whites that was prevalent in Rufus’s time. When Buz—Dana and Kevin’s colleague from their agency—sees them together, he calls them “Chocolate and vanilla porn!” and advises that they can write “poor-nography together!” (Butler 56, 54). According to a woman from the agency, Kevin and Dana are “the weirdest-looking couple” she has ever seen (57).

Thus, there is not much difference between the attitude of Rufus and Buz and the woman from the agency towards the interracial relationship between the blacks and the whites. Moreover, the families of both Kevin and Dana disapprove of their relationship. For her uncle, Dana’s decision to marry a white person is like a “rejection”—a “rejection” to him and the black community (111). Consequently, Kevin and Dana have to break their tie with their families to enter the institution of marriage. Through the relationship between Kevin and Dana, the novel presents the idea that in post-civil rights America, “marriage between the two races would be tumultuous due to mixed feelings of pride in one’s race and the collective memory of the slave era” (Manis 9). Thus, the novel casts light on the fact that although the institution of slavery no longer exists, the black-white division and racial discrimination which paved the way for and were prevalent in the slavery system continue to govern the people of the late twentieth century America.

In the prologue, Dana is shown in a hospital with her left arm amputated in her final return to the present. When the police investigate the incident, they suspect Kevin as the perpetrator, and Dana has to convince the police that Kevin has not harmed her. On the other hand, when Dana’s cousin sees the bruises on Dana’s body after her return from the second trip, she thinks that Kevin has hit Dana, and hence, she requests Dana to complain to the police against Kevin. These two scenes reflect that many people of

the late twentieth century America are not ready to believe that a cordial and equal conjugal relationship can exist between a white man and a black woman. Rather, they seem to be influenced by the assumption of considering the whites as the tormentor of the blacks which is derived from history and to which Kevin is “trying to get used to” (Butler 10).

**Family and Racial Identity:** One of the overarching themes of the novel *Kindred* is familial relationship. Its story is premised on the discovery of the ancestry of the protagonist Dana. For Dana, Rufus’s survival means the survival of her family lineage. By giving the trajectory of Dana’s family history, the novel shows how the institution of family of some African Americans in post-civil rights America is shaped by the history of slavery. As Ashraf H. A. Rushdy points out, the “family secret at the heart of *Kindred* is that Dana’s great-grandfather is a white slave-holder” (“Remembering”, ch. 4). When Dana hears the surname “Weylin” during her second trip to the past, it brings the memory of her ancestry – “Maybe he was my several times great grandfather” (Butler 27, 28). Dana gets the information about the name of her ancestors from a large Bible where her grandmother Hagar Weylin kept the “family records” (28). But apart from the family names, the other relevant information about her ancestry such as the reason behind the marriage between Alice and Rufus, the racial identity of Rufus, etc. are not available because most of the information about Hagar “died” with her death or “it had died before it filtered down” to Dana (28).

Hence, Dana has to confront the past to explore her family history. Throughout the novel, Dana time travels six times to antebellum Maryland. She keeps helping Rufus till the birth of her grandmother Hagar Weylin. In the novel, Dana’s return to her past and her attempt to save Rufus’s life is not shown as an easy and voluntary act done by her. Rather, the novel manifests “the costs incurred in confronting the past” and the “losses that come with having to confront and coming to know one’s origins” (Rushdy, “Remembering”, ch. 4). During her sojourn in antebellum Maryland, Dana is beaten, verbally abused, and sexually assaulted in which she loses her left arm. The novel starts with the cost that Dana has to pay for confronting the past – “I lost an arm . . . about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security” (Butler 9). In “An Interview With Octavia E. Butler”, Butler comments on Dana’s journey to the past in the following way: “I couldn’t really let her come all the way back. I couldn’t let her return to what she was. . . . Antebellum slavery didn’t leave people quite whole” (498). The amputated arm with which Dana finally returns to the present symbolises the continuation of the historical trauma at the

present.

In the novel, Butler also explores the emotional tension between Dana and Rufus. Despite being disgusted by Rufus's misdeeds and observing that he has become a cruel master like his father, Dana is compelled to save Rufus against her will. On her fourth trip to the past, Dana sees that Rufus is beaten by Alice's husband Isaac for trying to rape Alice. Although she agrees that Rufus deserves this punishment, she cannot allow her ancestor to get killed. She further tolerates Rufus's cruelty when she sees him rape Alice repeatedly, cut Isaac's ears, and even severely beat her. Thus, she seems to turn against her own people and acts like a "White nigger" who helps the "white folks keep niggers down" (Butler 165, 167). Dana's compulsion to return to the past and to save her ancestor shows that, for contemporary African Americans, it is necessary to face their traumatic past to understand the present condition. In other words, an African American has to deal with the past to know his or her familial roots and understand the present familial structure. Thus, through the character of Dana, *Kindred* explores the complexities faced by the African Americans of the late twentieth century while confronting the history of miscegenation existed during the period of chattel slavery, highlights the sufferings arising out of it, and questions the "purity in family" that was a pertinent issue in the intellectual discourse of the 1970s America (Rushdy, "Remembering", ch. 4).

Intertwined with the institution of family, another aspect of the post-civil rights America on which *Kindred* shows the impact of slavery is the racial identity of both the blacks and the whites. By portraying Dana's identity as "the product of a coercive relationship between Rufus and Hagar," the novel highlights "the interdependence of constructions of black and white identities" in America (Smith 172). When Dana's uncle comes to know her decision to marry a white man, he accepts it as a "rejection" to him because he wants her to marry "someone who looks like him. A black man" (Butler 111). He thinks that Dana's choice for interracial marriage is a sort of disloyalty to him as well as to the whole black community. But, by presenting the very identity of Dana as racially mixed, *Kindred* implies that the effort to maintain a pure black identity by forsaking any connection with the whites is not possible. Thus, the novel highlights how "the idea of slavery remains most resonant in the ascription of African American identity" and thereby questions the essentialist view of the black identity developed by the ultra-black nationalists of the 1960s (Rushdy, "Remembering", ch. 1)

A significant intellectual development that emerged in 1970s America is the rise of ethnicity studies. One of the primary concerns of this new ethnicity study is the concept of whiteness which provides a new perspective on the notion of race. It demonstrates the constructive nature of the concept of whiteness by showing that whiteness is not only a genetic identity; rather it is also a historical one that emerged as a result of certain social conditions. These studies also show how the idea of race in 1970s America is influenced by the institution of slavery. In his book, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy discusses the palimpsest narratives as a part of this intellectual movement. According to him, there are two ways via which the palimpsest narratives interrogate the meaning of whiteness: first, by presenting racially mixed characters; and second, by an examination of the social process and structure which attach certain powers to whiteness and how this "social meaning of blackness and whiteness continue to exert influence on the contemporary significance of those categories" (ch. 1).

Through the characters of Dana, Rufus, and Kevin, *Kindred* casts light upon the impact of slavery in creating the meaning of the white identity and highlights the social conditions and forces that pave the way for the creation and recreation of the white identity. In antebellum Maryland, Dana is considered by others as white because she possesses the qualities that are assumed to be white such as access to learning, active participation in the white masters' discussions, behaving like a free individual, etc. According to Alice, Dana is a "Reading-nigger. *White-nigger!*" because she behaves rationally. On the other hand, for Nigel, Dana tries to talk like the "white folks". When Dana tries to stop Rufus from hurting Alice, he says to her—"You think you're white! . . . You don't know your place any better than a wild animal" (Butler 160, 73, 164). These scenes show that along with skin colour, the element of power constitutes the status of whiteness. Therefore, Tom Weylin beats Dana severely when he finds her helping Nigel in reading because the access to learning and knowledge by the slaves will turn out to be a threat to his superior white identity.

By portraying the difference between Rufus and Kevin, Butler explores the social causes that pave the way for the creation and recreation of the status of whiteness. By presenting Kevin as a white man adhering to democratic ethos and Rufus as a cruel slave owner, the novel shows that it is the upbringing and the environment which determine the meaning of whiteness. Moreover, Rufus is not shown as a dominating figure at the beginning of the novel; rather he acquires it from his father, upbringing, and surrounding. Along with showing the constructive nature of the white

identity by revealing its root in the institution of slavery, *Kindred* also demonstrates how this identity functions and influences the people in 1970s America. Although Kevin is not shown involved in any discriminatory practice, he acclimates to the environment of the Weylin plantation easily. While walking outside the Weylin estate, Dana and Kevin see a group of boys playing a game in which they auction each other. This game horrifies Dana whereas, for Kevin, it is just an act of the children's imitation of what they see. For Kevin, Dana's act of taking the game seriously and worrying about the children's future is an act of "reading too much into a kids' game" (Butler 100). This scene shows the contemporary white people's lack of understanding of the harrowing experience of the slaves under the institution of slavery. Moreover, sometimes Kevin's thinking towards Dana seems almost similar to the way Rufus thinks about Dana. When Rufus asks Kevin whether Dana belongs to him, he replies – "In a way. . . . She's my wife" (60). After Dana's return from her first trip, Kevin grabs her by the shoulder, holds her tightly, and orders her to tell what happened. It is only after Dana's request to loosen his grip, Kevin lets her go. Thus, the novel hints at the continuation of white male privilege even in a character like Rufus who almost looks like an egalitarian. On the other hand, through the character of Dana and the discovery of her ancestry in antebellum Maryland, Butler shows that in America, the racial identity is constructed with a denial of the history of interracial relations and by hiding the biological relationship between the blacks and the whites.

**Present Versus Past:** Octavia Butler's use of the device of time travel in *Kindred* functions as a perfect tool to narrow the distance between the present and the past. By situating Dana's trip to the past on the bicentennial anniversary of American independence, the novel "underscores the extent to which American national consciousness depends upon the sexual violation of black women" (Smith 172). The time travel narrative also enables the contemporary characters of Butler's time to directly experience slavery rather than knowing it only as a part of the past. While the continuation between the present and the past is evident in the text, Butler equally points out the fact that "Today and yesterday didn't mesh" (Butler 115). An apparent difference is seen between both periods in the field of medical facilities. To heal Rufus's wounds, Dana goes to the Weylin plantation with modern medicines such as Excedrin, sleeping pills, etc. Another significant contrast is manifested in the characters of Kevin and Dana. Although the novel indicates a slight similarity between Rufus and Kevin, Kevin is almost opposite to Rufus.

Throughout the novel, Butler foregrounds the resemblance between Dana

and Alice both in their physical appearance and their relationship with Rufus. Rufus considers Dana and Alice as "One woman. . . . Two halves of a whole" (257). This resemblance is heightened by Dana's continuous silence over Rufus's cruel behaviour. But the contrast between the two is revealed at the end of the novel. Dana fails to stop Rufus from tormenting others, especially his repeated rape of Alice, to ensure her future birth. But once her aim is fulfilled, she becomes free from the compulsion to tolerate Rufus's cruelty. By killing Rufus when he tries to rape her, Dana stands as a contrast to Alice who, as a slave of the antebellum period, had no option but to suffer. Alice's suicide shows that for a slave like her, sacrificing life is the sole option to get rid of the trauma of slavery. On the contrary, Dana does not need to kill herself to take back her life and her future from slavery. But Butler does not show Dana's act of taking back her life as an easy one. Dana escapes from Rufus and returns to the present with the loss of her left arm. Dana's lost arm stands "as a symbol of the inability to escape the trauma of the past without being hurt" (Manis 58). Moreover, it also suggests that the African Americans of post-civil rights America have to live with the wound and misery derived from the past.

By situating the novel in the year 1976, *Kindred* shows that after two hundred years of independence, the USA, as a nation, is still working to achieve racial equality. Dana's wound shows that the suffering of the African Americans of the 1970s has not been erased. But the novel also suggests that one has to accept the social evil stemmed from the traumatic past and try to achieve a better future. For instance, Dana and Kevin and their relationship give an optimistic picture for the future of America. They willingly make a cordial relationship with each other by fighting the trauma and prejudices derived from the past and try to create an environment of peaceful coexistence.

**Conclusion:** In the book titled *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory*, Nancy J. Peterson says that in America, "minority histories have never come into full cultural consciousness, because mainstream American history is so relentlessly optimistic and teleological that it has become painfully difficult to articulate counterhistories that do not share these values" (1). The novel *Kindred* seems to contribute to, what Peterson calls, a minority history by giving a counter-narrative to the "grand narratives of US racial history as an emancipatory movement beginning in slavery and ending with the civil rights movement" which came into circulation during the 1970s (Dubey 349).

This paper explores the legacy of slavery in post-civil rights America by

studying the genre of neo-slave narrative. Through the analysis of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*, this paper demonstrates that although the institution of slavery does not exist in the post-civil rights period, the black-white division and racial discrimination – two prevalent practices during the time of chattel slavery – continue to govern the relationship between the blacks and the whites of post-civil rights America. My study of the major characters of the novel casts light upon how the institution of family among the black community and the racial identity of both the white and the black community of the late twentieth century America are shaped by the biological and interracial relations existed between the blacks and the whites during the time of slavery. A critical lens is also given on the novel's portrayal of the differences between antebellum America and post-civil rights America. Thus, this paper debunks the notion that the institution of slavery in America is only a part of history.

### Works Cited

- Bell, Bernard W. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987.
- Butler, Octavia E. "An Interview With Octavia E. Butler." Interview by Randall Kenan. *Callaloo* Vol 14, no. 2. 1991. pp. 495-504. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2931654](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2931654).
- . *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. Print.
- Dubey, Madhu. "Octavia Butler's Novels of Enslavement." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. vol 46, no. 3. 2013. pp. 345-363. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/43829973](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43829973).
- Dutta, Padmashree. *Racial Identity in Selected Twentieth Century African American Autobiographies*. 2014. Assam University, Ph.D. thesis. *Shodhganga*, [hdl.handle.net/10603/105142](http://hdl.handle.net/10603/105142).
- Manis, Haley V. *Reconciling the Past in Octavia Butler's Kindred*. 2016. East Tennessee State University, M.A. Thesis. *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, [dc.etsu.edu/etd/3173](http://dc.etsu.edu/etd/3173).
- Morrison, Toni. "Author Toni Morrison Discusses Her Latest Novel *Beloved*." Interview by Gail Caldwell. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994, pp. 239-245.

Peterson, Nancy J. *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. Print.

Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.

---. *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001. *Amazon Kindle*, [www.amazon.in/Remembering-Generations-Contemporary-African-American-ebook/dp/B00ZVEZT7E/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?dchild=1&keywords=Remembering-Generations&qid=1619717107&s=digital-text&sr=1-1&uril=search-alias%3Ddigital-text](http://www.amazon.in/Remembering-Generations-Contemporary-African-American-ebook/dp/B00ZVEZT7E/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Remembering-Generations&qid=1619717107&s=digital-text&sr=1-1&uril=search-alias%3Ddigital-text).

Smith, Valerie. "Neo-slave narratives." *The Cambridge Companion to The African American Slave Narrative*. Ed. Audrey A. Fisch. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 168-185.

Sollors, Werner. Introduction. *Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law*. Ed. Werner Sollors. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. pp. 3-16.

Williams, Heather Andrea. *American Slavery: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2014. *Play Books*, [play.google.com/store/books/details/Heather\\_Andrea\\_Williams\\_American\\_Slavery\\_A\\_Very\\_Sh?id=pPs-5BAAAQBAJ](http://play.google.com/store/books/details/Heather_Andrea_Williams_American_Slavery_A_Very_Sh?id=pPs-5BAAAQBAJ).