

Power in kindred: the development of dana's agency over the course of the novel



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the novel *Kindred*, Octavia Butler tells the story of Dana and Kevin, an interracial married couple living in 1976 who repeatedly travel back to the time and place of Dana's ancestors. Butler's plot brings up agency, which can be defined as one's ability to think and act individually without the influence of others. Dana's agency over her situation develops over the course of the novel. In the beginning, when Rufus blackmails her into burning a map, Dana has no agency. Later, in the chapter "The Fight," Dana demonstrates an increase in agency when she challenges the power dynamic between her and Rufus. Towards the end of the novel, she uses the power she gains from her time-travel to threaten Rufus' father and regain control of her situation. Overall, as the novel progresses, Butler depicts Dana's change from submissive to opportunistic to reveal an increase in agency. Ultimately this suggests, a sense of agency can be developed with knowledge.

At first, Dana has no agency since Rufus' blackmail prevents her from having control of the situation. In the beginning of the chapter, "The Fight," Rufus promises to mail Dana's letter to Kevin if she will burn her map of Maryland. Dana protests this form of blackmail; however, she submits to Rufus' request. Rufus says, "'That map is still bothering me. Listen. If you want me to get that letter to town soon, you put the map in the fire, too.' I turned to face him, dismayed. More blackmail. I had thought that was over between us" (142). Saying that the map was "bothering" instead of "vulgar" suggests that Rufus views the map as only a minor annoyance. Therefore, when Rufus goes to drastic measures to meet this small desire, Butler reveals his extreme power and agency. However, unlike Rufus, Dana is

powerless. In writing that Dana feels “dismayed,” Butler demonstrates Dana’s hopelessness upon realizing that she has no control over the situation because for Dana, the burning of the map was not a negotiation or choice. Dana also thinks, “I wanted to ask him what he would do with my letter if I didn’t return the map. I wanted to ask, but I didn’t want to hear an answer that might send me out to face another patrol or earn another whipping” (Butler 143). Repeatedly using the phrase “I wanted to” instead of “I did” emphasizes Dana’s conformity because instead of having agency and disagreeing with Rufus, Dana corners her thoughts and yields to him. Dana’s potential punishment of “facing another patrol or earning another whipping” and her fear of not being in contact with Kevin limit her agency because in both examples Dana must rely on Rufus to fulfill her desires. Butler uses these two different examples to indicate the scope of Rufus’s control, as Rufus has agency over both Dana’s physical and emotional state. Thus, Dana lacks agency at the beginning of the novel since she must remain dependent on Rufus in order to reunite with her husband and remain safe.

However, as the novel progresses, Dana shows a slight increase in agency when she disputes Rufus. As Dana and Kevin are escaping, Rufus intervenes and invites them to dinner at his estate. Rufus tries to manipulate Kevin and Dana into going back to the house so that he can keep Dana for himself and assuage his fears of abandonment by possessing her in some way. As a response, Dana challenges and insults Rufus. Butler writes, “‘Still trying to get other people to do your dirty work for you, aren’t you, Rufe’ I said bitterly. ‘First your father, now Kevin. To think I wasted my time saving your

worthless life!" I stepped towards the mare and caught her reins to remount. At that moment, Rufus's composure broke. ' You're not leaving!' he shouted. He sort of crouched around the gun, clearly on the verge of firing. ' Damn you, you're not leaving me!' He was going to shoot. I had pushed him too far. I was Alice all over again, rejecting him" (Butler 187). Firstly, Dana "bitterly" replies to Rufus to demonstrate her rebelliousness and non-conformity to him. Even when she is held at gunpoint, Dana insults Rufus saying, "To think I wasted my time saving your worthless life!" In this moment, Dana challenges the power dynamic between herself and Rufus because when Rufus exhibits his superiority, holding a gun, she bickers him nevertheless. Rufus' "composure breaking" suggests he has lost agency in the situation, as his decrease in composure results in a decrease in power. The fact that Dana refuses to submit to Rufus after he repeatedly says " you're not leaving me" indicates that she has agency and power over him because he has a pleading and unstable tone. However, Dana does not have complete agency over her situation since her tone shifts from confident to fearful. In saying "I had pushed him too far," Dana feels pity for Rufus because when her agency increased, Rufus' agency deteriorated. The fact that she feels pity for weakening Rufus indicates that Dana herself is losing power because in showing compassion, she shows weakness too. In sum, Dana demonstrates an increase in agency when she refutes Rufus, although she does have complete control over her situation.

At the end of the novel, Dana uses her time-travel situation to threaten Tom Weylin and demonstrate an increase agency. Because Dana has knowledge of modern medicine, she is the only person that can aid Rufus when he is

injured. Dana uses this ability to intimidate Tom Weylin. Butler writes, “ If you can manage to put up with me a little more humanely, I’ll go on doing what I can for Mister Rufus. He frowned. ‘ Now what are you talking about?’ ‘ I’m saying the day I’m beaten just once more, your son is on his own’ His eyes widened, perhaps in surprise. Then he began to tremble. I had never seen a man literally tremble with anger...’Crazy or sane, I mean what I say.’ My back and side ached as though to warn me, but for the moment, I wasn’t afraid” (Butler 201). Tom Weylin “ frown[ing]” and his “ eyes widen[ing]” reveal his surprised and fearful tone because Dana unexpectedly blackmails him to decrease his authority and thereby increase her own control. Even when Weylin “ trembles with anger,” Dana “ wasn’t afraid” because she has leverage on him. Moreover, Tom is outraged and recognizes that he can’t do anything to Dana. Weylin shouts, “‘ Get out!’...’Go to Rufus. Take care of him. If anything happens to him, I’ll flay you alive’” (201). Because his potential consequence is solely a “ flay[ing],” Tom Weylin yields to Dana’s desires and gives her control of her punishment. Tom Weylin’s response to Dana’s blackmail is submissiveness because he acknowledges that Dana is in control of the situation. In addition, Butler contrasts Dana’s previous obedience in the beginning of the novel to her maverick control in the ending to reveal a change in her agency over the novel. Butler writes, “ My temper flared suddenly. ‘ I don’t give a damn why you did it! I’m just telling you, one human being to another, that I’m grateful. Why can’t you leave it at that!’ The old man’s face went pale. ‘ You want a good whipping!’ he said. ‘ You must not have had one for a while.’ I said nothing. I realized then, though that if he ever hit me again, I would break his scrawny neck” I would not endure it again” (Butler 200). The detail of Tom Weylin’s face turning “ pale” <https://assignbuster.com/power-in-kindred-the-development-of-danas-agency-over-the-course-of-the-novel/>

indicates that he has lost authority in the situation because he is showing weakness. Dana's resistance to Weylin increases her agency since in resisting, she develops the capacity to act independently and to make her own free choices. The fact that even after Tom threatens with a "whipping," Dana does not fray and submit to Weylin (unlike when she submitted to Rufus in the beginning when he threatened to cut off her communication with her husband) suggests Dana has had an increase in authority, as her previous submissive nature is replaced by rebellious behavior. Moreover, Dana admits she has more agency than Tom when she thinks to herself "I would break his scrawny neck" since she reveals the potential power she has. The line "I would not endure it again" furthers this idea since Dana restates her independent capability and ability to act on her will. Overall, Dana uses the power she has from her situation to gain control over people in a higher position in society.

In sum, Butler uses Dana's increase in agency throughout the novel to argue that a sense of agency can be developed with intelligence and awareness. At the end of *Kindred*, Dana demonstrates a great deal of agency when she threatens Tom Weylin. In "The Storm," Tom Weylin insults Dana's intelligence when she tries to explain her time traveling situation, however, Dana replies, "If you can manage to put up with me a little more humanely, I'll go on doing what I can for Mister Rufus" (Butler 200). Dana demonstrates her agency when she replies that she will help Rufus as long as she is never beaten again. Tom realizes that because Dana has knowledge of medicine and the future, she is the only one that can aid his son. Therefore, in this example, Dana's knowledge is what gives her power to negotiate with him

and blackmail him. A real-life example this theme applies to is The Arab Spring. During the Arab Spring, younger generations in the Middle East gained knowledge from the internet about their government. They used that knowledge to gain self-confidence and agency over their situation. Their organizing on Twitter and creation of massive protests often led to regime change. Similar to Dana's increase in agency, in this example, the information the younger generation gained caused an increase in activism and power. Overall, the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices can be increased through education and awareness.