

KINDRED: A STORY OF APPROPRIATION, BONDING, AND POWER RELATIONS

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Abstract

Eve K. Sedgwick's phenomenal study, "Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire", examines male bonding. Sedgwick argues that though her title specifically mentions "male" homosocial desire, it is impossible to speak of this without taking gender, and the subsequent power relations, into consideration. Sedgwick bases her argument on Rene Girard's idea of the triangular structure that brings together two rivals (usually male) through their desire for a common object (usually female). Girard, however, in Sedgwick's interpretation, and Freud's, for that matter, ignores gender and stresses that any rivalry between two entities over a common object of desire can form this triangle. For them, the triangle is symmetrical and is not affected by the gender of the participating entities. Sedgwick disagrees. In accordance with Sedgwick's theory, I shall examine Octavia Butler's Kindred, which illustrates the homosocial triangle as a structure that not only explains a power system based on race and gender, but also the issue of female bonding. Though Sedgwick's book deals only slightly with 20th century texts, I have used her theory as a useful way to talk about female bonding and the patriarchal power structure that governs societal relationships. Kindred also explores a power relationship that illustrates Girard's theory of "acquisitive mimesis" and "conflictual mimesis," with the female as the object of desire/appropriation. The text, Kindred, proposes an asymmetrical triangle with the white male attempting to exert power over the black female. But Octavia Butler also tries to show female bonding as a possible means to subverting this structure, by acquiring an equal status for the female. However, Butler's answer to the situation is not quite complete or final – the female bonding is temporary, and, finally, each woman must fend for herself.

In his book, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, Alan Bray speaks of the close relations that existed between men in Renaissance England that depended on physical proximity and intimacy. Such relationships generally developed between men of similar social standing or between a patron and his protégé, and arose usually as a result of the structure of the household or the academic setting, where men were brought physically close enough to have a sexual effect on each other. Both these institutions were patriarchal by nature and, where women were present, they appeared at the bottom of the hierarchy. Bray argues for sexual relations between men and does not consider the possibility of simple bonding, like in friendship, within a same-sex group arising out of common interests. Also, the entire structure appears to preclude women. In an Afterword, though, Bray refers to Eve K. Sedgwick's phenomenal study, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, which was written to answer some of the questions his own book gave rise to. One of these is the possibilities of "masculine friendship and political bonding" (Bray 117).

Sedgwick's prime focus in her book is male bonding. This bonding is given the name of "homosociality" and the relation that arises in such a bonding is one that subordinates sexual relations to friendship. It is also a relationship that marginalizes women and she argues that though her title specifically mentions "male" homosocial desire, it is impossible to speak of this without taking gender, and the subsequent power relations, into consideration. For men, homosocial desire and homosexuality are two separate states, but in

referring to same-sex relations between women, the terms are used almost synonymously. According to Nils Hammaren and Thomas Johansson who use Sedgwick's work to expound their thesis on male homosocial relations, "the concept of homosociality is often defined as a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, situating gender relations within a reasonably stable power structure" (2). That is, male bonding hinges on retaining equal status within itself while simultaneously upholding male superiority. However, the patriarchal power structure, according to Sedgwick, is homophobic in its attempt to retain that superior position over women or the "Other," and therefore will suppress its homosexuality in the same way it suppresses women, because admitting to homosexuality is like acknowledging a weakness and inability to deal with heterosexuality. In other words, homosocial bonding strengthens the patriarchy and is thus considered a necessary ingredient in the domination of women, while homosexuality undermines it. To Sedgwick, there is no, or should not be, any special distinction between "women loving women" and "women promoting the interests of women" because they are part of a continuum that "extend[s] over the erotic, social, familial, economic, and political realms" (Sedgwick 3). This continuum, however, is not the case for men who see themselves bonding without necessarily becoming sexually involved. In other words, there is a clear difference between "men loving men" and "men promoting the interests of men." Such distinctions give rise to an "asymmetry" in the relations between men and women, and consequently, the hierarchical "inequality of power" is perpetuated (Sedgwick 4-5).

Sedgwick argues that men are averse to acknowledging their feminine side and normally direct a disgust towards any such acknowledgment, that is, they are homophobic. This, however, means that they become misogynistic and oppressive of women. In Sedgwick's words, "homophobia directed by men against men is misogynistic, ... (By 'misogynistic' I mean not only that it is oppressive of the so-called feminine in men, but that it is oppressive of women)" (20). To illustrate this, Sedgwick uses for her model René Girard's idea of the triangular structure that brings together two rivals (usually male) through their desire for/desire to oppress a common object (usually female). It is what Levi-Strauss has called the "male traffic in women" (cited in Sedgwick 16). Girard, however, in Sedgwick's interpretation, and Freud, for that matter, ignores gender and stresses that any rivalry between two entities over a common object of desire can form this triangle. For them, the triangle is symmetrical and is not affected by the gender of the participating entities. Sedgwick disagrees, arguing that if the continuums for male and female bonds are different, they are bound to give rise to differences in the symmetry of the triangle, and therefore, to a power system that is governed by the male. As she explains it,

"the status of women and the whole question of arrangements between genders, is deeply and inescapably inscribed in the structure even of relationships that seem to exclude women – even in male homosocial/homosexual relationships. Heidi Hartmann's definition of patriarchy in terms of 'relationships between men'..., in making the power relationships between men and women appear to be dependent on the power relationships between men and men, suggests that the large-scale social structures are congruent with male-male-female erotic triangles described most forcefully by Girard and articulated most thoughtfully by others" (Sedgwick 25).

Sedgwick focuses primarily on discussing the "traffic in women" in the establishment of homosocial bonds between men. In this paper, I aim to employ Sedgwick's theory to examine Octavia Butler's *Kindred* as a text that illustrates the homosocial triangle as a structure that explains a power system based on race and gender. I shall take this theory further and attempt to show the subversion of the erotic triangle to illustrate a structure where female bonding is established alongside the male, and men can become the objects of desire/appropriation. Though Sedgwick's book deals only slightly with 20th century texts, I have used her theory as a useful way to talk about female bonding and the patriarchal power structure that governs societal relationships, in this case, slavery, which is a definite manifestation of patriarchal power. *Kindred* explores,

as I see it, a power relationship that illustrates Girard's theory of "acquisitive mimesis" and "conflictual mimesis," with the female as the object of desire/appropriation. According to Girard, "If *acquisitive mimesis* divides by leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same object with a view to appropriating it, *conflictual mimesis* will inevitably unify by leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same adversary that all wish to strike down" (Girard 26)¹.

Kindred proposes an asymmetrical triangle with the white males attempting to exert power over the black female – "acquisitive mimesis." But *Kindred* also tries to show female bonding as a possible means of subverting this structure, by acquiring an equal status for the female. However, Butler's answer to the situation is not quite complete or final – the female bonding is temporary, breaking down at places, and, finally, each of the women forming the bond must fend for herself. The bonding between women may also be understood in terms of Alice Walker's concept of womanism as the love of women for women, "sexually and/or nonsexually," as the "[appreciation] and [preference of] women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, ... and women's strength" (Walker, xi). Womanism demonstrates the various aspects of female bonding that the patriarchal system ignores through its equation of homosocial bonding and homosexuality in its consideration of women.

Walker, in *The Color Purple*, illustrates this concept of "womanism" in the connection between Shug Avery and Celie, where women can become the supporters and saviors of each other in a society governed by men, even though it may be temporary. The relationship between Shug Avery and Celie in *The Color Purple* may be seen as both homosocial and homosexual where the women come together to support and encourage each other by appreciating each other's qualities as individuals. In *Kindred*, however, the understanding is not constant and, in fact, useless when it comes to saving the lives of each other. The women characters in both the texts form bonds that serve to protect them against a common male adversary, sometimes, only for a while, but the point is that this solidarity subverts an established power structure that prioritizes males.

In his introduction to *Kindred*, Robert Crossley describes Butler's focus, in general, to be on the portrayal of "women who lack power, suffer abuse, and are committed to claiming power over their own lives and to exercising that power harshly when necessary" (Crossley, xvii). Indeed, *Kindred* deals with women who, whether they live in the twentieth century or in the antebellum South, must continuously struggle to retain their self-identity and power over their own lives. To begin with, the protagonist, Dana, a black woman, is married to Kevin, a white man. This, in itself, triggers warning bells given the history of slavery in the US. Although it is only later in the novel that the reader gets to know the color difference between the couple, it is obvious from the start that Dana must be assertive and forceful if she is to retain her rightful place in the two-member household. The couple has just moved into their new house and unpacking must be done. Dana's voice tells the story and a hint of anger or accusation comes through at times:

We were still unpacking – or rather, I was still unpacking. Kevin had stopped when he got his office in order. Now he was closeted there either loafing or thinking because I didn't hear his typewriter (*Kindred* 12).

The *black woman* continues her work – recalling the role of the slave, while the *white man* – the master – can relax. The relationship is a complicated one and while it illustrates the hierarchical structure of a typical white man-black woman relationship during slavery, it gives rise to a new picture also as Dana assertively makes her presence felt in both the lives of her husband as well as of Rufus, the man who calls her back into

¹ In very simple terms, "acquisitive mimesis" refers to the attraction of two rival entities to the same third entity and "conflictual mimesis" indicates the connection created between two entities united by their common enemy. These connections create the triangle of which Girard speaks.

the past. However, as the two men's focus converges on Dana, a connection is formed that also demonstrates Sedgwick's homosocial bonding, as explained later in this paper.

By combining the genre of the science fiction, which incidentally, was once a male genre, and that of the historical narrative, Butler brings into focus the issues of domination and struggle for power between races and genders. As a writer, Butler traverses the dominions of a genre that had primarily been male dominated, as she explains in an interview with *The Black Scholar*, "science fiction began in this country as a genre for young boys ... it was white, it was adolescent and it involved a particular kind of adolescent best described as a nerd. So this did not make it popular with blacks or adults or women for quite a long time" (Interview 15-16). Thus, Butler's use of this mode for her literature implies a transgression into a male site and an attempt to equalize the positions of herself as a black female writer and the white male writer, reflected too, in the relationship between Dana and Kevin. Both writers, Dana feels that Kevin is a "kindred spirit" but Kevin apparently does not reciprocate her feelings in exactly the same way (*Kindred* 57). When the question of moving in with each other comes up, Kevin wants Dana to get rid of some of her books to make place for his. Also, he is angry when she refuses to type up his manuscripts like a secretary. Dana, in both instances, must stand her ground before he accepts that he cannot treat her as subservient. The relationship is played out again between Dana and Rufus when he wishes her to write his letters for him. Though it is understandable in Rufus's case for him to expect Dana to perform such tasks, considering his socioeconomic surroundings, Kevin's behavior can only be explained as being typically male, conditioned by generations of masculine superiority.

Sandra Govan in her article "Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel" discusses the relationship between Dana and Rufus as one that enacts the roles of teacher-pupil and protector-protected. Certainly, in this relationship, the typical roles are reversed with the black woman higher up in the power ladder than the white man. Govan, however, does not take into consideration the fact that Dana is, in fact, playing out the role of a mammy. The crux of the story is Dana's repeated rescue of Rufus. She must care for him as a mother for a child – their colors and genders prevent them from having any other relationship at first other than that of mammy-white child. Dana is aware that she is

the worst possible guardian for him – a black to watch over him in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children (*Kindred* 68).

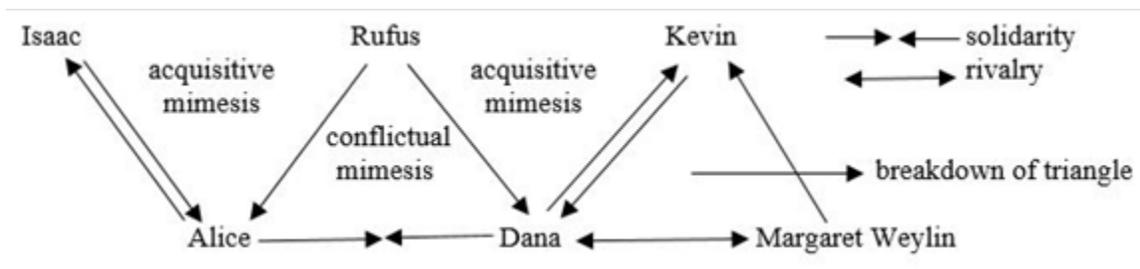
She cannot assert herself as teacher or protector in Rufus's society for the simple reason that she is black and a woman. But the question arises, how far is she able to do this in her own time? Does Kevin allow himself to be taught or protected? The answer to this second question is yes, but up to a certain point, after which he must take over. Kevin would like to perpetrate his role as white master in his attempts at dictating Dana's life – throwing out her books, not his; having her type his manuscripts; force himself upon her in her journey to the past, etc. But Dana's assertiveness disallows this and she is able to reclaim power and an equal place for herself in his life.

When the couple must live for a while in the antebellum South where the patriarchal system is believed in and followed, Kevin adjusts well because there are moments when he feels that he belongs to that society of the past. Kevin's identity threatens to merge with that of Rufus', in particular, and with slave owners, in general:

He nodded, and after a while said, "I could survive here, though, if I had to. I mean if..."...If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him. No large part, I knew. But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here (*Kindred* 77).

Kevin's bond with the white slave owners, Rufus particularly, is further accentuated by both their desires to appropriate Dana. For a time, at least, Kevin gets to play the master with Dana as his slave, a role that threatens to merge with reality. In the common white male desire to appropriate the black female, a bond is formed that reflects Sedgwick's homosocial triangle. With Rufus and Kevin at two points of the triangle and Dana as the object of desire at the other end, a typical power structure is formed.

The bond between Kevin and Rufus is formed to show an "acquisitive mimesis" wherein both males converge in their common desire to appropriate the body and the mind of the same woman, Dana. Moreover, the power structure is played out significantly as both the males are white while the woman they desire is black. The triangle here becomes more asymmetrical than Sedgwick would have liked as the black woman reciprocates the feelings of one of the white men. The union between Kevin and Dana thus is able to succeed for the most part, and Dana can hold a certain extent of power over Rufus. According to Diana R. Paulin, "Although legally and socially whites, particularly white men, possess all of the power in the slave system, Dana's relationship to Rufus and to Kevin disrupts this power dynamic" (Paulin 181). However, I differ with her as Dana's relationship with Rufus, in particular, is similar to a mammy-white child interaction. As Paulin says, "Rufus has the power to bring her back to 1819," but he does so only when he needs rescuing, which, in turn, gives Dana power over Rufus' life or death, thereby, disrupting the power dynamic (Paulin 181, emphasis added). Dana has to take care of him and for the most part of the novel, she treats him like a spoilt child. So, in spite of her assertive character, Dana continues to play out her constructed role as mammy while Rufus and Kevin converge/bond in their status as white males.



There is, in *Kindred*, a chain of interconnected triangles (see above) formed in the following manner through the relationships of Isaac and Alice, the black slaves on Rufus' plantation who love each other, Kevin and Dana, and Margaret Weylin, Rufus' mother: Isaac and Rufus are both desirous of Alice. The master-slave relationship here is subordinated to the more important man-woman relationship. Here too, is an example of the acquisitive mimesis. The bond formed by rivalry between the men is aimed towards the appropriation of Alice so that, in spite of their rivalry, a patriarchal structure is set up where Alice has no say. She is unable to keep her husband in spite of her love for him, and she is unable to prevent sexual relations with Rufus in spite of her hatred of him. The power structure is, however, complicated in that in this rivalry, the black man loses out to the white man, so that the balance is tilted.

On the other side of the scale, though, is the issue of female bonding, which occurs as a result of a "conflictual mimesis." The two women, Alice and Dana, are united by their common adversary, Rufus. Though Dana maintains a hold over Rufus in her ability to save him from near-death experiences, she is nevertheless subjected to his brutality and forced, albeit in her interest too, to be party to Alice's rape. Alice acknowledges the bond between herself and Dana. This bond helps to support them against the men who threaten their bodies although her acknowledgement can take the form of anger. Alice vents her anger at Rufus on Dana and the two women come close and feel protective towards each other as a result:

"Why you let me talk about you so bad?"
 "Why do you do it?"

...

“Because I get so mad ... I get so mad I can taste it in my mouth. And you’re the only one I can take it out on – the only one I can hurt and not be hurt back” (*Kindred* 168).

The women’s helplessness against a racial and gendered power structure comes through in this exchange, their bond strengthened, and creating solidarity against a shared enemy.

There is, again, the asymmetrical triangle formed by the Margaret Weylin-Kevin-Dana relationship. This is a triangle that illustrates in reverse the same triangle that was formed by Isaac-Alice-Rufus. That is, the man becomes the object of desire. Margaret Weylin is attracted to Kevin and wishes to appropriate him. The rivalry occurs because Kevin is wanted by Dana too. The situation is one that is common in a slave community with the master desiring a black slave woman and the wife/mistress being unable to retain strict possession of her husband. The black slave woman and the white mistress are, in such situations, linked or bonded by their common hatred for the white master. In the triangle produced by the Margaret-Kevin-Dana relationship, though, the triangle is complicated because the desire between the white man and the black woman is reciprocal and excludes the white woman. Sedgwick’s triangular model threatens to break down at this point, although, Govan feels that

[j]ealousy based on the unacknowledged sexual tension between white mistresses and Black slave women linked to white men surfaces frequently in slavery annals (93).

The links between the black slave woman and the white mistress do not hold up when one of the two participants in the triangle subordinate sexual subjugation to sexual desire. When the triangle breaks down, one of the women must surrender. Interestingly, it is the white woman who loses in this battle over a white man and the black slave woman ultimately wins, although she must pay a price for her victory.

In *Kindred* finally, the one instance of female bonding/friendship aimed towards support and protection – that between Dana and Alice – is broken as the two women are separated by time and space. Because they are not allowed to continue to stick together, each woman must finally find a way to save herself. By the time Dana comes back for the final time, Alice has killed herself in anger at her inability to keep her children. With no Dana to support her, she takes her own way out. And vice versa. In the absence of Alice, Rufus turns to Dana for his sexual gratification because, to him, they are two halves of the same whole. Like Alice, Dana must protect herself and, in her effort to do this, Dana must kill Rufus and find a way back home, except this time, as she leaves the Weylin plantation, she is scarred for life – she leaves a part of her body behind. Butler seems to be saying here that without the support of other women, a woman can protect herself but it is not a protection that can serve them too well. In other words, neither female bonding (Alice-Dana) nor rivalry (Dana-Margaret Weylin), therefore, provides complete security against the established patriarchal power structure. ■

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