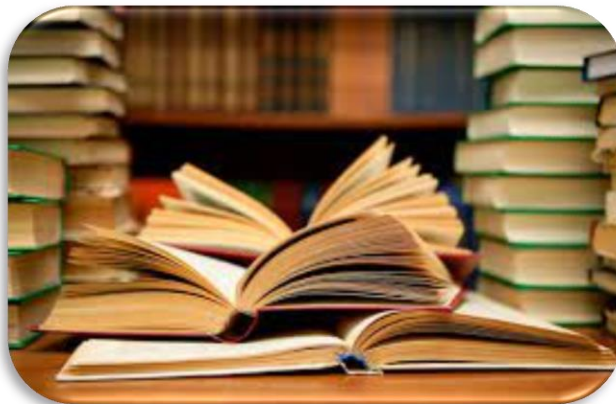


Research Paper



**Impact of Afrofuturism on the Voice
and Identity in Contemporary Black
Female Narratives**

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ABSTRACT

Afrofuturism is described as a new genre of speculative fiction which converges speculative and realist modes in order to explore amalgamation between African Diasporas, African American writing, and the modern technologies. Contemporary Black female novelists have utilized Afrofuturism as an umbrella under which Womanism and Black Feminism fall to address topics such as voice, identity, and race to show the quandary of the African woman and how she has tried to overcome her plights and regain her selfhood. The aim of this study was to compare and analyze the works of contemporary and pioneering African female authors Octavia Butler and Nnedi Okorafor who have portrayed ground-breaking strategies in their protagonists' attainment of power, voice, survival and embracement of alternative identities through Afrofuturism and ultimately reclaimed the identity and voice of the Black womanhood. This descriptive-review study was designed with a library approach, and the theoretical approach utilized was the Feminist and anti-racist theories of Ytasha L. Womack's Afrofuturism. Based on the review of the two texts, the results indicated that Afrofuturism as a womanist movement in the African-American contemporary literary scene has been more successful in empowering and giving the African women's identity than the western-based feminism.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, Race, Identity, Voice, African writers

نقش جنبش آفریقایی آینده نگر بر صدا و هویت در آثار نویسندگان زن رنگین پوست

در طول تاریخ زنان سیاهپوست بی عدالتی‌های اجتماعی زیادی شامل نژادپرستی، تبعیض جنسی یا نابرابری جنسی را تجربه کرده‌اند. زن‌باوری آفریقایی یک ایدئولوژی است که برای همه زنان آفریقایی تبار ایجاد و طراحی شده است و به عنوان مجموعه‌ای از جنبش‌های سیاسی، ایدئولوژی‌ها و جنبش‌های اجتماعی ظهور پیدا کرده است که مبتنی بر یک هدف مشترک می‌باشند: تعریف، ایجاد و دستیابی به برابری سیاسی، اقتصادی، شخصی و اجتماعی برای هر دو جنسیت. این نهضت در فرهنگ آفریقایی پایه‌گذاری شده است و متمرکز بر تجارب، تلاش‌ها، نیازها و مطالبات منحصر به فرد زنان آفریقایی است. زن‌باوری آفریقایی نه تنها موفق شده است که به همه انواع هنرها وارد شود، بلکه بستری در اختیار نویسندگان زن سیاه پوست قرار داده است که در آرزوی این هستند که ضمن بازگشت به هویت از دست رفته خودشان، به عنوان بخشی از گذشته، حال و آینده‌ی فرهنگ غنی خود شناخته شوند. رمان‌نویسان زن سیاهپوست معاصر از ژانرهای نظیر جنبش آفریوتوریسم و پان‌آفریقا به عنوان چتری برای پوشش زن‌باوری و فمینیسم سیاهپوستان استفاده کردند تا تنگنای زن آفریقایی و چگونگی تلاش او برای غلبه بر مشکلات خود را نشان دهند. این مطالعه نقش آفریوتوریسم، پان‌آفریقا و زن‌باوری آفریقایی در احیای زینت سیاهپوستان را از دیدگاه دو نویسنده زن سیاهپوست با دو رویکرد متفاوت مورد بررسی قرار می‌دهد که راهکارهای بدیعی را در دستیابی قهرمانانشان به قدرت، صدا، بقا و پذیرش هویت‌ها و نقش‌های جایگزین به تصویر می‌کشند.

واژگان کلیدی: زن‌باوری آفریقایی، نویسندگان آفریقایی، آفریوتوریسم، پان آفریقا، هویت، صدا

INTRODUCTION

Afrofuturism is described as a new genre of speculative fiction (SF) which converges speculative and realist modes in order to explore amalgamation between African Diasporas, African American writing, and the modern technologies (Lavender, 2011). However, Ytasha Womack defines Afrofuturism as “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” (p. 9); she further highlights such an Afro-futurist prospect that conjoins the past, present and future (Womack, 2013). Afrofuturist stories started to emerge alongside the science and speculative fiction genre (Boccaro, 2020), but unlike the science fiction, this new mode of speculative fiction not only depicted unbelievable stories, but also integrated questions of race and the history of oppression and slavery into its speculative narratives. Afrofuturism in fact challenges the Western and especially male science fictional narratives of the future.

Throughout the history, the Black woman has experienced many atrocities related to her color and race, and, thus, has been battling identity complications in many occasions. Allen writes that to be a black person as well as a woman “engenders complex ways of knowing and being”(Allen, 1998). In this light, African Feminist activists, through their writing have sought “to demonstrate that they were relevant to the African context and, in particular, that they did not simply seek to emulate their western feminist counterparts” (Mekgwe, 2008). This research attempts to undertake an Afrofuturist reading of selected works of two African female writers and in doing so create a broad analytical survey that combines aspects of identity patterns, genre conventions, voice and empowerment, and their manifestations in not only science fiction, but also under the umbrella of Afrofuturism in the course of a time span of forty years, a period during which much has changed both in the genre of science fiction and in the real world.

The first writer which is discussed in this study is Nnedi Okorafor (b. 1974), the award-winning Nigerian-American author whose fiction has been celebrated by the American and African SF communities similarly. Okorafor is a pioneering and imaginative Afrofuturist writer, whose most famous work is *The Binti Trilogy* (2015-18). This trilogy has attracted the Afrofuturist scholars all over the world and prompted many researches into the development of the identity formation and empowerment of a teenage girl named Binti into a scientific genius. The second author whose work (*Kindred* 1979) will be analyzed in this study is Octavia Butler (1947-2006), who has been granted the title of “Mother of Afrofuturism”. There have been many scholarly studies on the impact of this novel on the understanding the antebellum south from the sensibility and point of view of a modern black writer. These two prominent writers in their own ways not only portray the scholarly works and ideals of Afrofuturist writers, but also use science and speculative fiction’s conventions to portray diasporic identity patterns and ways to reshape the identity, voice and healing during and after traumas distinct to the Afrodiasporic community. The research method utilized for this descriptive study was interdisciplinary which is interchangeably described as textual analysis, and the major sources of data included the selected novels as well as scholarly articles and books. The question put forward was: Does Afrofuturism, as a new category in the genre of science fiction allocates alternative identities, voice, and relations compared to those which typically offered Black women?

The Quest for Identity

As Iswarya & Kavitha (2019) assert, identity is defined as “one's rights, equality, dignity, equal opportunity in work and education and also equal pay”(ISWARYA & Kavitha). Identity also implies a



relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. When we talk about national identity, cultural identity, or gender identity, for example, we imply that our identity is partly a matter of what we share with other people. According to the psychologist and narratologist, Michael Bamberg, identity “designates the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory” (Michael, 2013). The identity problem faced by the Black woman relates to the fact that black people’s identity has been carved out and shaped by the white people (Tamilsevi & Prabha 2016). Throughout the history, the black woman has experienced and been excluded from mainstream feminism because of her race and also from black liberation movements because of gender. Hence, being both a woman and a Black person has been the vulnerable criteria for a her to be excluded from the society and be labeled as the “Other”. Afrofuturism as a derivative of Black feminism was developed to end this exclusion. Notably, Black female writers have taken different paths for this objective. Speculative and science fiction was one of these prominent pathways, and Octavia Butler and Nnedi Okorafor, among other writers, were the leaders who associated African Science Fiction with Identity and voice.

An Overview of Binti and the Identity formation of a Black Teenager

Binti trilogy (Okorafor, 2019) was first published in October 2015, and immediately earned a great number of awards such as Hugo and Nebula for best novella, as well as much acclaim from critics and readers. This science fictional tale of this story presents the themes of survival, identity, voice and empowerment of a sixteen-year-old mathematician, scientist and inventor named Binti who comes from the tribe of Himba in an African Sahara. Binti gets acceptance to a prestigious university in outer galaxy and against her family’s wishes leaves the Earth to attend the Oomza university.

In the *Binti trilogy*, Okorafor has turned to Afrofuturism to give her 16-year-old protagonist voice and power through technical skills and mathematical skills. *Binti trilogy* completely describes and portrays the movement of Afrofuturism while focusing on the importance of one’s identity, voice, control and empowerment and in this case, a Black woman’s identity (Hashemi et al., 2022). Okorafor’s aim is to challenge all the ideologies that allude that the Black people are backward and illiterate. Binti is not just an African person, but a symbol of a rich heritage who plays a crucial role in the identity formation of herself and her people, the Himba people of Namibia, and constantly refers to herself and her ethnic group as “We Himba” (p. 12). Binti becomes the center of the discussion as an active participant in the creation of a new futuristic society, and in the process she not only changes the identity of the black woman but also rebels against those social norms imposed on Himba women:

I was defying the most traditional part of myself for the first time in my entire life. I was leaving in the dead of night and they had no clue. My nine siblings, all older than me except for my younger sister and brother, would never see this coming. My parents would never imagine I’d do such a thing in a million years. (Cadwell, 2020).



Okorafor creates an atmosphere that reminds us of Womack's term "The African Cosmos", which values the power of ancient knowledge, dissolves the boundaries of normative identity, and promotes selfhood, individuality and identity. Therefore, through Okorafor's lens, her combination of past (Himba tradition), present, and future (the use of 'astrolabe' and 'edan' as technological instruments in space travel) advocates racial uplift and paves the way to what African people are capable of doing. Okorafor also challenges the notion of children in the African community. Binti's educational intelligence disrupts dominant dialogues about Black females in North American culture, including the fact that some people insinuate that Black girls are underachievers and are not interested in math and science. Instead, Binti has the role of hero who has many potentials. Yaszek (2015: 2) suggests that "casting lead characters as scientists and engineers who actively create the theories, techniques, and things that can change race relations forever"(Yaszek, 2015) ensures futurity for the Black race and the planet. Binti reinvents the young Black female as active, reproductive, and capable of making meaningful contributions in society with a voice that promotes change. As Burger emphasizes, Okorafor presents mathematics in a way that empowers African people and confirms her Africanfuturist fiction as rooted in African traditions with no need to refer back to an imaginary Western default (Burger, 2020).

We see the transformation of identity and individualism immediately after Binti boards the ship. Binti leaves her people and her homeland in search of identity and of course identity is the core of Afrofuturism (Reddell, 2013), and the reader witnesses a depiction of a rebellious teenager who is willing to disobey her tribe and step into a world that no other person from her ethnic group had ever dared to explore. It seems evident that Okorafor is trying to portray and bring back past experiences of Black people in a dominant white society and Afrofuturism and science fiction is used as a tool for this endeavor. Csicsery-Ronay argues that Afrofuturism is a way of thinking and feeling one's way through the world, by this thought process like science fiction, Afrofuturism reveals history to be contingent rather than teleological, always open to new interpretations, critical speculations and novel sensations (Csicsery-Ronay Jr, 1996). Thus, Okorafor makes a point of giving value to the traditions of African tribes; for example, Binti is proud of wearing her traditional clothes and even coloring her hair with the traditional natural dying products she uses in her hair. It is interesting to note that unlike the dying products used by the western woman as an object of beauty, Otjize is not just an object; it is a part of what Binti represents in her cultural traditions and how she communicates with others. By loving her long colored, braided hair, Binti denounces the ideal European beauty, and Okorafor not only contends the issue of idealized beauty, but also makes the point of showing self love and individuality of the African woman through her unusual appearance (Hashemi et al., 2022).

At the end of the novel Binti comes back to Earth to make peace between the battling tribes and help save the planet Earth, but in the process loses her left arm. So although she becomes a master harmonizer, she is not a whole person anymore. This mutilated body signifies the fragmented identity that Binti experiences. In this sense, as Vääänen points out, we may conclude that *Binti* novels represent a newer form of Africanfuturism, which are geographically and culturally rooted in the whole continent of Africa and Africana Womanism. But in the end, it becomes evident that it is not just her technical skills and mathematical genius that saves her, but also her cultural and traditional roots(Vääänen, 2021).



The Identity and voice of a Modern Black Woman in the Antebellum Slavery

The second Afrofuturist novel selected to be discussed in this study is Octavia Butler's pioneering work *Kindred* (1979) which candidly challenges the racial politics, racial discrimination and slavery in a very innovative and radical mode, involving time travel and other devices typical of science fiction, which thus becomes a new means to analyze (and criticize) the biased approach towards people of the black color. *Kindred* is about the story of a young African American woman named Dana who travels back in time to personally experience the horrific life of the enslaved people in pre-Civil War Maryland. As Kim (2017) suggest, Butler shows a "racialized historical continuity between the colorblind racist culture of the post-civil rights era and the formation of American democracy in the antebellum nineteenth century" (Kim, 2022). Kim further argues that this novel portrays the 1970s as a cultural time period where "colorblind, neoliberal market universalism" is prevalent and the 1830s as a germinal era of "Herrenvolk republicanism" (Ibid).

Kindred (Butler, 2004) begins and ends in mystery. Dana is the narrator and heroine of the novel. On June 9, 1976, on her twenty-sixth birthday, Dana, an educated, Black writer from Los Angeles and married to a white man named Kevin Franklin feels a sense of nausea or hallucination while unpacking cartons in her new home and suddenly finds herself in a strange new place near a river. As the story unfolds, the reader realizes that Dana the protagonist has traveled to the past to meet her ancestors, "Rufus" a white slave holder, and Alice, an African American slave. Further on in the story the reader understands and becomes evident that whenever Rufus's life is endangered, Dana travels back from 1976 to the 1815 to the cotton plantation to save him and moves back when she believes that her own life is being jeopardized. The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Dana, in fact must save the future existence of her family, particularly the ruthless Rufus, the man who is going to father one of her ancestors with a Black slave girl named Alice. Therefore, as a young black woman writer living in the end of the twentieth century, Dana finds herself thrown into the antebellum South of the nineteenth century, an alien world (one of the symbols of Afrofuturist works) in which she must struggle to establish an identity (another core characteristic of Afrofuturism) and to maintain her freedom. Dana must also battle her own conscience being to save him or to let him die and in effect jeopardize her own existence, because only if Rufus, her ancestor, survives will she herself live, so she has to constantly save him from death. At the end and after the death of Alice and the birth of Hagar, Dana's many times grandmother, Rufus has eyes on Dana as a sexual partner and when she refuses him they get into a fight and Dana kills Rufus with the knife that she has brought from the future. In the battle, Dana too loses her left arm and becomes a fragmented person both in body and mind.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the two stories which were very briefly described, we are dealing with two protagonists who stand up to what society considers the norm. Afrofuturist thinkers challenge both the racial-colonial stereotype of Africans and the African diaspora as primitive barbarians as well as the assumption that the technological skills belong to the white race. is inherently antithetical to the natural (BLITHE & BAUER). In this manner, Okorafor tries to change the African women's portrayal in the literary scene and prompts her audience to re-think the role Black women play in the superhero books in the universe



by giving her black girl a regular presence in the technology of the space. Through Binti, she asserts that because Afrofuturism offers a way of taking hold of the future, especially in this case of the Black Woman, it provides another way of reclaiming African diasporic voices, subjectivity, and humanity. The female protagonist defined in Binti emerges as a liberated and empowered woman by undoing her feminine and racial roles; Okorafor sends the message that one can never move forward unless one is fully conscious of religion, culture, traditions and values, and in the case of Binti, the African Himba values which in the end save Binti from death. In this context, Okorafor effectively reshapes the society by rewriting gender conventions and, consequently, demolishing gender identities. Nnedi Okorafor prompts us to re-evaluate the role that the Black women have played in the literature by giving them strength, control and voice and in a way has reclaimed the African diasporic identity, voice, subjectivity, and even humanity. It is interesting to note that unlike the dying products used by the western woman as an object of beauty, Otjize is not just an object; it is a part of who Binti is, her culture and how she communicates with others. It is part of her daily life and is used as a means to protect her from the heat when she is among her people as their lands are similar to a desert and throughout her journey she feels naked, lost, and homeless without it.

Butler also portrays black women's identity based on their history, time, and place. In *Kindred* the narrative is different, but the pattern is the same. Dana's killing of Rufus when he tries to rape her puts an end to the sexual domination of women by men who uses it as a way of reinstating power over women. 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.

In the 1900s during the time of antebellum south, the issues of race go under significant changes in the American history, while the 1970s is the start of a new racial rethinking in the American society where changes are inevitable, because New Post-Civil Rights Movement in the United States is underway. Kim in her article entitled *Colorblind Racism and Herrenvolk Republicanism: Contesting American Democracy in Octavia Butler's Kindred*, mentions that Dana's time travel is "a rhetorical device to disclose the invisible continuity between these historical eras, illuminating the racist nature of American democracy and allegedly post-racial society" (Kim, 2022). Butler powerfully describes the reality of slavery, as well as the chronological shifts on which the novel is based, allowing her to examine the influence of past events on the present time. Rather than science fiction, Butler herself defined the novel as a "kind of grim fantasy", because she did not explain the scientific reasons that made time travel possible (Snider & Swedo, 2004). However, as Elia (2014) in the languages of Afrofuturism points out, *Kindred* is certainly an imaginative and "original document making science fiction functional to an innovative discussion of old discourses regarding slavery and racial discrimination" (Elia, 2014). In *Kindred*, by using science fiction and or grim fiction, Butler openly condemns slavery: even more, as she puts it, "I was trying to get people to feel slavery" (Elia, 2014). At the end of the story in order to protect herself from rape Dana kills Rufus, her ancestor who sees Dana as just another slave girl and his property to do whatever he wishes to do to her, but in the process loses her arm and so does not come to the present time a whole person.

In both of these novels the protagonists go through a fragmentation of body and mind. Both lose an arm in the battle to gain a voice and identity. Dana loses an arm but becomes the voice of the voiceless slaves and in the end tries to make peace with her history as a black person and descendent of a slave.



Binti, on the other hand, relies on education and technology to gain a voice for the black teenagers. She dies the stereotype that black children are less smart than the white children and do not excel in math and science. She loses an arm, goes through fragmented body and mind but gains individuality and sense of self.

CONCLUSION

This study was done with a view of exploring how the contemporary African women confront individual problems as the African society grapples with gender, class, ethnic and other social inequalities and it concludes that it is high time for male and female African writers in the contemporary era to retrace their roots to provide a greater meaning to the interactions of the male and female in the search for a construction of a holistic African nation based on African cultural specificities. In the texts that are analyzed and presented here, we are dealing with different types of women who are facing similar predicaments and injustices in different time spans and totally different settings. Hence, in the works of each of these black female writers, the protagonist's arsenal of resources is critical to her survival in the male dominated world that has them entangled, because as young females, even in fictional world their bodies alone are not enough to protect them; each must struggle and depend on its own resources to gain power and control. In the end, however, these protagonists are in fact able to mobilize their own distinct forms of power, and channel the power inside them to recreate a new world in which their survival and the survival of their communities is celebrated and valued. Ultimately we presented bold, functional choosy and strong women and in both works a female character with capacities for goodness, weakness and error emerges in the African woman scene.

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