



Voice and Identity Formation in Nnedi Okorafor's Binti trilogy: an Afrofuturistic Perspective

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Abstract

As a thriving contemporary movement, Afrofuturism has attracted black diasporic writers from many Western and non-Western countries. Afrofuturism has been described by cultural critics as a way of looking, navigating and imagining future conditions of life through a black perspective. Along the history, all the contributions of black women's identity in Africa mainly those in the Diaspora to a large part has been neglected, and while white females stood up for their rights through the mainstream of Feminism, colored women felt the need to have movements of their own after being rejected by the newly created white ideologies. The efforts of the movement's pioneers have led to the repossession of Black womanhood in the black literature. Analysis of the African novels by female writers is necessary to redefine African female identity through the lenses of Afrofuturism. This study aims to explore the formation of voice and identity in Okorafor's Binti trilogy, where blackness is technologically managed. The search for voice, identity, independence of thought and empowerment are the central features of the characters of Nnedi Okorafor's Binti trilogy which will be analyzed in this study.

Keywords: *Voice, Identity; Afrofuturism; Feminism; Africana Womanism; Nnedi Okorafor*

Introduction

Afrofuturism is a movement that, according to Ytasha Womack, is a multidisciplinary milieu to envision future possibilities through the black people's experiences and perceptions, and deals with the social effects of technology and scientific innovations' ability to bring an end to the "ism" forever and take care of humanity(Womack). By deciphering this word we realize that the term Afrofuturism create an unusual relation: "the term "Afro" is usually associated with primitive people and backwardness according to European people, and the term "futurism" refers to modernity and technology"(Djeddaï and Benabed; Elia). In any sense, Afrofuturism has given the black woman a voice and identity in which

she could relate to a future where she is depicted as a super hero and a leading power proving to the world that the black woman is not only an object to satisfy the other gender but rather a force that can save the world.

The term "identity" refers to one's rights, equality, dignity, equal opportunity in work and education and also equal pay ((ISWARYA and KAVITHA). Philip Gleason states that the concept of identity emerged in the United States in the mid-twentieth century in the context of immigration, social change, and emancipator movements (Gleason). The core themes of the black feminism are the search for voice, identity and independence (Tamilselvi and Prabha). This ideology is transparently evident in novels of many African-American writers such as Nnedi Okorafor and Octavia Butler among others. These writers contend that in the postcolonial era, the freedom sought by African women has complicated their conditions and social standings. The characters in the novels before Afrofuturism have tried to go up the ladder of education and economic success, but still have no voice and basically represent the rest of their gender who have accepted their role as second class citizens. Voice of the woman can be heard only when it is coupled with choice, and this powerful voice can then lead to self-identity, selfactualization and self-determination. Thus, self-esteem, self-definition, and self-determination are all forms of power for Black women who are portrayed in the novels of Okorafor and other Sci-fi writers. Many Afrofuturist writers also emphasize that the black woman can never become fully empowered as she faces too many injustices from the society around her, which in the end cripple and handicap her. Now, Afrofuturism has given a new identity and voice to the black woman, because as we delve deep into the minds and souls of the female characters we are forced to listen to and live out the suppression that they face. In Afrofuturistic novels, the young black female protagonists display daring heroism that is striking for its original perspective and its contribution to a more equal society in the future, in a genre that has historically been considered as a white male arena.

Okorafor is representative of a new generation of authors, who employ bold and strategic stereotypes to expose racism in the genre, popular culture, and society. By probing deep into science fiction realm, Okorafor has defied many critics who argue that Africa is not prepared for sci-fi or fantasy and that these genres are childish and unworthy, and there are more important issues to be discussed and written about such as contemporary African issues, war, hunger or humanitarian issues relating to the African continent. However, as Váňa points out, Okorafor may be considered a pioneer in her Afrofuturistic perspective and has in fact challenged the science fiction tradition (Váňa). Schalk (cited in Taylor) has argued that for Black female writers, speculative fiction offers "a freedom of style and content that is not restrained by patriarchal realities, and thus these writers can better explore alternative identities, roles, and relations"(Taylor). Väättänen also points out, African authors have used the Afrofuturistic genre to construct, negotiate, and deconstruct identity, difference, and otherness in their novels depicting human-alien contact and have consciously aimed at transforming or challenging the traditional Science Fiction to allow for more diversity and more different backgrounds, and more variety of themes in the formation of their female identities (Väättänen).

No doubt violence toward Black women remains especially prevalent in fantasies, because fantasies are more abstract than realist literature; Therefore, Afrofuturist authors like Okorafor, who refers to herself as "Naijamerican," tend to portray intelligent, savvy and brave female characters that defy the odds and work toward creating an identity for themselves which would help them stride over the obstacles. By examining the experiences of the female characters, she symbolizes a future possibility for black women to obtain agency. Through *Binti*, *Binti: Home*, and *Binti: The Night Masquerade*, Nnedi Okorafor presents us with a sixteen year old girl and her experience of being black and woman in a technological society of the future. As the science fiction novella unfolds, through Afrofuturism, Okorafor "commands freedom in reimagining the African identity by mixing multiple elements, including Himba myths and legends with the far-reaching future" (Nasser). Also, through this black heroine, Okorafor is able to reflect a world where the Black women are strong and have an identity of their own.

Lavender points out that “addressing this blackness in science fiction is central to changing how we read, define, and critique the genre itself”(Lavender III).

Binti and Afrofuturism: Cultural and Social Impacts on Identity Formation

Colonialism has changed the modes of identification and in effect has transformed the definition of men and women in the African societies. In this sense, African female writers often tackle with neo-colonialism, racism, misrule, poverty, gender bias, ethnic animosity, religious fundamentalism, famine and misrepresentation, and, as George points out, confronting these social challenges, in fact creates stories that depicts the unique conditions of the African woman (George). Okorafor presents a multi-faceted way of viewing female identity thorough her sixteen year old protagonist Binti, which means “girl” in Kiswahili and is portrayed in the real world of Himba people of Namibia and Angola in the novella.

Binti is a gifted mathematician, and scientist who gets an invitation to study at a prestigious intergalactic university called Oomza Uni. Binti scores high in the mathematics entrance examination into Oomza University and subsequently obtains a full scholarship, and decides to attend the university despite all the oppositions from her family and friends. Binti like many other Himba people can manipulate mathematical currents and create sophisticated devices like astrolabes. At first, Okorafor presents mathematics and knowledge of futuristic science as a way that empowers her protagonist and gives her voice, power and identity. Binti’s change of identity starts from the moment she decides to leave her people. We see a depiction of a rebellious teenager who is willing to disobey her societal rules and jeopardize her future as a woman in the confined society and step into a world that no other person from her “tribe” had ever dared to explore. She is fully aware that by leaving her tribe, she may lose the chance of marriage and ultimately her people would shun her, but she stays firm on her decision. She admits that if she remains at home, her prospects of marriage are 100 per cent assured, but going away would diminish her marriage ability to zero level because: “no man wanted a woman who had run away” (8).

However, in order to defy the societal rules, she must first challenge the gender and age stereotypes: “I was defying the most traditional part of myself for the first time in my entire life. I was leaving in the dead of the night, and they had no clue...My parents would never imagine I’d do such a thing in a million years.” And “We Himba don’t travel” (8). It is evident that Okorafor is trying to portray and bring back past experiences of Black people in a dominant white society. Her aim is to challenge all the ideologies based on the fact that Black people are backwards and illiterate: “to them, I was probably like one of the people who lived in caves ...who were so blackened by the sun that they looked like walking shadows” (P.18). Binti as an active participant in the creation of a new futuristic society, also changes the identity of the Black woman which was previously illustrated by the science fiction writers and challenges others’ expectations; she rebels against these 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 (1).

Of course this journey is not without challenges; just one of them would be enough to devastate a young girl. From the very first moments of her journey, she experiences many instances of racism and offensive behavior from the other passengers, particularly a different “pale skinned” ethnic group called Khoush, who are the dominant and privileged ethnic group on Earth, and have absolute control on space travel and in effect consider Binti’s people as near slaves, but Binti remains proud of being Himba and in order to show this pride, she continues to use the symbols and traditions that identify her ethnicity; for example using otjize a dye like product made from orange clay which covers her skin and hair and signifies Himba identity, despite the opposition and disgust of the other passengers. But, being different is not an easy task in the new world that Binti walks in since she does not conform to the standards set by

the people she meets, who find her hairstyle, mode of dressing, and skincare product awkward: “Why are you covered in red, greasy clay and weighed down by all those steel anklets?” (p.14) Binti explains that she is Himba, and in this powerful introduction she illustrates that every aspect of her appearance becomes a clear example of identity that give her power and voice to introduce herself in the new world. Even her African hair which traditionally is disliked by both the people of African descent and probably other races, because of its kinkiness and unruliness, turns into an object of power and control. Marotta points out that this long and Himba styled hair also works as a barrier between her and others who see her as different (Marotta). When Binti comes back to Earth and to her home land, she mentions that there have been many commentaries about her hair and this hair is another motif depicting her identity: “being in this place of diversity and movement was overwhelming, but I felt at home, too. As Marotta points out, Binti accepts the changes made to her identity (Marotta), by one loving her appearance, particularly her long braided hair and in fact Okorafor denounces the ideal European beauty. 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 different appearance. By depicting her appearance as an object of pride, Okorafor in fact gives her protagonist self- confidence and self-assurance and in doing so gives her a strong identity to be proud of her heritage and her culture, something that people of colonized societies have found hard to acknowledge.

Things start improving for Binti once she discovers that all her future classmates love math just as much as she does—and though they’re all Khoush, they can all still connect over this shared interest, and this shared affection helps Binti feel more secure in her choice of leaving her people and starting the new life. Raised in a culture that prefers to keep to itself, she becomes ambitious and determined, and undoubtedly starts to defy African and in a sense the neighboring Middle Eastern gender stereotypes that cast women and girls as emotional, lacking decision-making ability and weak. Here, Okorafor benefits from Islamic and Middle Eastern traditions as well and borrows some traditional and cultural practices from them to both show their dignified past and to glorify their futures. For example the running away of a young girl is illustrated as a scandalizing and subject of gossip for the Himba people; but as Oku points out: “This art of leaving, and thus becoming more, is at the heart of Afrofuturism. Leaving her home to another planet to study does not diminish Binti; she takes along her cultural mementoes and adds on other attributes as she continues her journey. She adds value to her world by brokering a peace accord between the Oomza University authorities and the Meduse”(Oku). At the same time, as was mentioned before, symbolic braiding of the hair, using red clay and sacred oil, respect for the mother nature, use of astrolabe (which is said to be the invention of a Muslim woman named Mariam Al-Astrulabi) and other elements of the past are depicted as explorations of the past through tradition, beliefs, and mythology in which Africa could be a place in the future and contribute to the conception of not only Womanism, but humanism, because as Nasser reminds us, Afrofuturism “is rooted in ancient African traditions, creating a contrast between the past and the future expressed in realms with futuristic technology that all come from the minds of black people” (Nasser).

Through Binti’s “metamorphosis” into a powerful and fighting scientist, Okorafor uses Afrofuturism and imagination as a tool to reshape the culture and transcend social limitations, as Nasser considers Afrofuturism becomes a language of rebellion, which blends African culture, mysticism, and technology, in a way to change negative stereotypes and reconsider new roles for the black in the future (Nasser). Okorafor herself has confirmed that the theme of leaving homeland in search of self-discovery affirms and reestablishes identity (Nasser), therefore, through the genre of Afrofuturism, Binti discovers a new self identity. Okorafor’s depiction of Binti’s journey to a planet, hundreds of light-years away from earth, produces a typical life-changing quest for a young black woman through a non-stereotypical image of the African woman endowed with fantastic potentialities and “non-Western beliefs”(Womack). There is a presumptuous belief that claims that the Nigerian novelist is timid and that “... is not adventurous....He is not daring... He is afraid of exploring new frontiers. That is why he works on a very small canvas,”(Nnolim) in *Binti* we witness a young girl who asserts herself and expresses a deeper identity and, thus, use this freedom to redefine the black or African identity in any manner

that their imagination permits them. Through her adventures, we witness the identity formation of a stubborn, rebellious and smart sixteen year old into a self-confident female scientist who not only saves herself, but will go on to save the future of the Earth through the realm of Afrofuturism.

According to Gloria Eme Worugji, African feminism differs from western feminism because it is not power oriented. It seeks to restructure by reshaping and modifying old and outdated traditional practices that hinder the progression and the freedom of women from all spheres of life. It accommodates the African sentiments in favor of both male and female and encourages the manifestation of what is individual despite the male being the head who must also be respected with caution (Worugji). In this sense in Binti's character, Okorafor unveils the cultures and traditions of the Himba and unabashedly presents strong African female characters in a manner that is very refreshing and defies gender stereotypes. Of course the best way of connecting Afrofuturism to the past is through attention to ancestry and tradition and Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist work powerfully illustrates the importance of tradition in space-age futures in this novella. She also lights up Africa's future in new ways that almost cause the reader acquainted with the existing narratives to gasp in disbelief. She points out that Binti leaves her people and her homeland in search of identity and of course identity is the core of Afrofuturism.

The human race is in the midst of a sweeping shift in human potential. Women's movements has moved from the subjugated position of second class on the societies' status ladder to an equal and valued existence and no doubt will have a far reaching impact on human society (Awogu-Maduagwu and ANTHONY). Of course this shift is by no means complete, but the ever-present progress made in the latter half of twentieth century by the female African writers is impressive and reassuring. Of course, the gender issues in Africa are like the other issues of Colonialism will not be solved overnight and have no ready solutions, but novel approaches, such as Afrofuturism will help the pattern of success and freedom for women and give them an identity to be seen and a voice to be heard. Likewise, the past is not forgotten in the African novels, it is only re-interpreted but, the hunger for attention and reformism is just refreshed. Therefore, as Nasser points out, "Binti is a free space which signifies a new wave of future-African fiction that is generating vivid and original new futures while giving the reader access to an African-centric outlook. This allows Okorafor to reexamine her heritage and re-imagine the future in a cross-cultural context." (Nasser)

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