Africanfuturism and the Reframing[1] of Gender in the Fiction of Nnedi Okorafor

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Abstract

Marvel's *Black Panther* movie, released in 2018, sparked renewed interest in the genre of science fiction (SF), particularly in Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism (AF) as SF subgenres that promote Black and African themes and heritage. This study delineates the similarities and differences between Afrofuturism and AF using two writings by Nnedi Okorafor to explore gender issues in AF—"Mother of Invention" (2018) and *Binti* (2015). Thus, the study applies a gender lens framed by feminist theories of science, technology, and ecofeminism to analyse the two fictional works and investigate how African speculative fiction portrays gender, technology, and power. Results demonstrate how literary imagination and creativity in AF is overturning gender stereotypes, changing existing gender-power dynamics, and offering a platform for reframing gender and relationships with technology. AF literature also allows the reader to envision alternative pathways for Africa's post-crisis development and economic prosperity.

Introduction

Marvel's *Black Panther* movie, released in 2018, sparked renewed interest in the genre of science fiction (SF), particularly in Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism (AF) as subgenres that promote Black and African themes and heritage. The release of *Black Panther* prompted discussions among scholars and practitioners about the usefulness of the Afrofuturism genre in the African context.[2] This work responds to the subject matter's ongoing debates by delineating the similarities and differences between Afrofuturism and AF. Further, I apply a gender lens framed by feminist theories of science, technology, and ecofeminism to analyse two fictional works by Nigerian American novelist Nnedi Okorafor.

I agree with the observation made by Burnett (2015) in his study of Okorafor's written works, in which he asserts that "Okorafor shows postcolonial speculative fiction's potential as a site for counterhegemonic discourse, as a space for examining

possibilities that are not available within mainstream realist literature" (Burnett, 2015: 134). I have selected two of Okorafor's stories to expand "counterhegemonic discourse" about the connections between African women, feminism science and technology in AF literature—"Mother of Invention" (2018) and *Binti* (2015). Both selected works have female protagonists who interface directly with technology, albeit on different levels and in different circumstances. Such AF stories offer a new platform for rethinking gender roles, reproductive health and rights, gender-power dynamics, and the gender division of labour in Africa.

Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism: Similarities and Differences

Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism have strong connections, and there is variety in the genres as well. Science and technoculture[3] loom large in both genres. Afrofuturism, like AF, uses "technoculture and science fiction as a lens for understanding the Black experience" (Strong and Chaplin, 2019: 58). As many scholars have asserted, sometimes the distinctions between both genres are subtle, and it is hard to separate the distinguishing filaments. Wabuke (2020), for instance, suggests that "Black Speculative Literature" could become the language that is adopted – inclusive of Afrofuturism, AF, and Africanjujuism.[4] Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism are also both agenda setting. In AF, for example a technologically advanced Africa that has overcome many of its currently daunting challenges and is enjoying the benefits of socio-economic and political development dominates the imagination.

The *Black Panther* movie perhaps best exemplifies the bridge between AF and Afrofuturism, demonstrating how the separating lines have been blurred. A product of the American Marvel Comics family, the film is set in a fictitious but technologically advanced African country. Wakanda is rich in vibranium and this gives its inhabitants mastery of technology. The film largely focuses on T'Challa (played by late American actor Chadwick Boseman) who is to become king after his father's death. He confronts a formidable enemy from within the clan as he prepares for his installation ceremonies. Yes, despite the focus on T'Challa, one of the most memorable scenes for Nigerian viewers was at the start of the movie when Wakanda's heroic female warriors, Nakia (played by Kenyan-Mexican actress Lupita Nyong'o) and Okoye (played by Zimbabwean-American actress Danai Gurira), fight terrorists alongside T'Challa in Nigeria's Sambisa Forest[5] and release kidnapped women and children.

The film's theme appealed to African sensibilities, showing off a mix of African cultures and traditional heritage in a manner that bred "fictive kinship" between Africans and African Americans, formed not by DNA but by shared experience (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). Beyond African American audiences, the movie enchanted Black viewers across the world. As Strong and Chaplin (2019) observe, *Black Panther* did expand Blackness globally.

Both Afrofuturism and AF also grapple with issues of chronological time, emphasising futurity. Strong and Chaplin (2019) suggest that *Black Panther* was endearing to Black audiences across the world because of its futuristic portrayal of an uncolonised Africa; far from the familiar stereotypes of a continent devastated by war, violence, disease, and famine (58). Strong and Chaplin (2019) observe that the movie *Black Panther* succeeded in bending time and space and thus, "merging both ancestral history and future possibility with the spiritual" (59).

Like Afrofuturism, AF uses "the speculative to challenge contentious issues around Black futurity" (Clark, 2019: n.p.). Though futuristic, AF also permits a re-imagining of the historical past and a recasting of the narrative to show what it should be (Austen-Peters, 2018). The AF genre tinkers easily with chronological time, introducing a fluidity: it can reverse into the historical past full throttle, bend time, and accelerate into the future. As Omelsky (2014) points out, a post-crisis African science fiction (SF) story can overcome "climate change, nuclear radiation, and the imbalances of global capitalism" (34).

But to be clear, themes of futurism have always been present in African literature. Bryce (2019) notes that futurism has been a strain in African writing from its inception and is reflective of Africa's strong folkloric storytelling, filled with magical tales. Bryce (2019) argues that earlier non-realist writing by Africans such as Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) were not initially celebrated in the same way that realist works like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) were widely acclaimed. Indeed, Bryce (2019) positions Tutuola's work as a precursor to recent speculative fictional works from Nigeria like Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991).

The longstanding themes of futurism in African writing aside, there are subtle differences between AF and Afrofuturism, despite their "fictive kinship" ties. Some writers insist that works in the AF tradition must be distinctly about Africa, or Africans on the continent, or Africa-born immigrants living in the diaspora.

Päivi Väätänen points to Africa's discursive absence from America's SF, especially where technology and social development are concerned, as to why AF must be "rooted geographically and culturally on the continent" (2019: n.p.). Steingo (2017) introduces the term "African Afro-futurist" to describe speculative fiction coming out of Africa, suggesting that "rather than thinking about AF in the Americas and Africa as distinct movements…it may be useful to establish a more inclusive Black Atlantic narrative" (50). While Steingo's naming addresses the lives of individuals in Africa as well as in the diaspora, using the term "Africanfuturism" gives the genre a more targeted African focus. Similarly, Okorafor notes that while Afrofuturism may be a subset of SF, it is of a different "ancestral bloodline".[6] The bloodline, she admits, is Western SF which is mostly White and male. Western SF has the reputation of casting other races as the "other". As Okorafor contends, this is one of the key departure points – the break away from the male and White hegemony of Western SF is a characteristic of AF. As she asserts in her blog, "Africanfuturism is concerned about visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centred on and predominantly written by people of African descent…and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa" (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.).

Frequently, in AF literature, women are equal participants with males, and beneficiaries of the progress achieved in technology and other areas. In this study, I use feminism, "the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes", as a lens for understanding the framing of gender in Okorafor's works (Brunell and Burkett, 2021: para. 1). Specifically, theories of ecofeminism—the power dynamics between gender, capitalism, and patriarchy (Mies and Shiva, 1991)—will be applied.

A Synopsis of "Mother of Invention" and Binti

"Mother of Invention" (2018), a short story, is set in fictitious New Delta in futuristic Nigeria. Twenty-nine-year-old Anwuli's lover abandons her and returns to his wife and children when she announces her pregnancy. Fortunately, he had built them a smart house, Obi 3, that they both shared before the relationship ended. Due to the dangers of an impending pollen storm, Anwuli is advised by her doctor and her smart house to leave New Delta for safer territory. She is allergic to the pollen from a genetically-engineered grass that grows in New Delta that could kill her and her unborn baby. But she remains adamant in her refusal to vacate her

home. "The house was her respect; what else could she claim she'd earned from the relationship? She knew it was irrational and maybe even deadly, but she took her chances (Okorafor, 2018: 6)." Fortunately, the house has a plan – that she is unaware of – to protect her and her baby.

Binti (2015) documents the adventures of 16-year-old Binti from Namibia[7], southern Africa. She is of the Himba ethnic group in northwest Namibia. Binti is skilled in technology and mathematics, skills in which her ethnic group have specialised know-how. She takes a bold step in applying, gaining admission, and receiving a scholarship to the foremost university located on another planet. She leaves home secretly in order not to be discouraged by her family and joins the ship that takes her from the familiar into unknown territory. The Himba are very conservative, and no Himba had ever undertaken such a journey. On her way, Binti engages with non-human characters known as the Meduse. She succeeds in brokering peace between the human and non-human characters following an attack of the ship by the Meduse that causes the death of all on board. Binti is the only human survivor among students and professors on the way to Oomza University.

The Africanfuturist Worlds of Binti and Anwuli
While *Binti* facilitates a re-imagination of rural Africa, "Mother of Invention" rivets our focus on a more urban, post-crisis African setting. However, rural (and even urban) electrification is still a challenge in Nigeria, for instance, and this further deepens disparities in access to technology especially for rural dwellers, and most especially for women who bear the brunt of unremunerated, tedious, and unending domestic and farm labour.

Okorafor probes existing practices that are injurious to women. In "Mother of Invention", she turns the spotlight on reproductive and maternal health, (single) motherhood, and intimate relationships where male deceit and infidelity fester, leading to abandonment. No wonder Dowdall describes Okorafor's "feminist fantasy" style as a "narrative of resistance" and "a radical counter-narrative to Eurocentric perceptions of Africa" (2013: 1).

Tiedeu (2020) questions African women's under-representation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). African women make up half of the continent's population, and their under-representation means "scientific work is missing women's perspectives and contributions" (Tiedeu, 2020: para. 6).

It is laudable that Okorafor overturns gender stereotypes in her presentation of women regarding STEM. Women-friendly technologies reduce their notoriously laborious domestic chores and enhance wellness and productivity.

Binti has achieved proficiency as a harmoniser. She builds the finest astrolabes (a practical technological tool) that even non-Himba utilise. Remarkably, her proficiency is the result of skills she inherited from her mother, who is gifted in mathematics. The Africa of AF is a science and technology-savvy one for urban and rural dwellers, and both females and males (and even non-human creatures like the Meduse), who know how to produce and (or) operate and enjoy the benefits of technological devices.

Binti scores so high in the mathematics entrance examination into Oomza University that she obtains a full scholarship. She decides to leave her people in pursuit of tertiary education. Binti is adventurous in disengaging from the known and stepping into a world that no other person from her ethnic group had ever dared to explore. She contradicts 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 (Okorafor, 2015: 6).

Binti is ambitious even though she was born within a culture that prefers to keep to itself. "We Himba don't travel", Binti accedes (Okorafor, 2015: 8). She turns her back on marriage, admitting that if she remains at home, her prospects of marriage are 100 per cent assured, but going away would plummet her marriageability to zero level because "no man wanted a woman who had run away" (8).

She does not conform to the standards set by the people she meets, who find her hairstyle, mode of dressing, and her skincare product made from orange clay awkward. When asked, "Why are you covered in red, greasy clay and weighed down by all those steel anklets?", Binti explains that she is Himba (Okorafor, 2015: 14). One cannot help commending Binti for the pride she has in her cultural heritage.

Binti has the strength and will to decide to turn her back on family and marriage and to prioritise education. She admits that she has never taken such a decision before. She ponders this move for a while, weighing the strengths and threats that the decision holds. The pull of knowledge takes precedence over other

considerations. Indeed, Binti defies gender stereotypes that cast women and girls as emotional, lacking decision-making ability, and weak. In the characterisation of Binti, we catch a glimpse of Okorafor's feminist thought. Binti defies the motherhood pull that is an element of African feminine existence. Yet, she is independent and embraces Himba cultural practices which lean in the direction of African gender norms.

In "Mother of Invention" (Okorafor, 2018), Anwuli loves her smart home, and she converses with it. Her smart home is designed to respond to her every need, offering her protection. It anticipates every source of danger in preparing to serve as her place of refuge in the threatening pollen tsunami. The house responds to Anwuli's emotional and psychological needs and her inner struggles, considering the threat to her health and life. Thus, the house protects her in the same manner that her womb protects her unborn baby. It sings to her and comforts her when she is tense. "You are fine; your baby is fine; everything is fiiiiiine", it croons (Okorafor, 2018: 5). There is a natural connection between Anwuli and her dwelling place. Anwuli's home – Obi 3 – is the third house that her ex-fiancé Bayo built. It is smaller in size than Obi 1 (where he lives with his wife), and Obi 2 - his office. However, Obi 3 is the most technologically advanced of these smart houses.

The feminist undertones of "Mother of Invention" and *Binti* are clear. Anwuli is independent and challenges gender boundaries. Anwuli's friends and even her parents and relatives desert her because she is considered a homewrecker due to her relationship with her lover, who later abandons her. Unlike Binti, who is disturbed about leaving home without informing her family, Anwuli seems unbothered about the backbiting going on among family, neighbours, and friends. Besides her ex-lover, her technology and artificial intelligence devices (computers and drones) represent the only family she possesses. Although Anwuli seems unbothered about her alienation from parents and other family members, one can sense bitterness reflected in the scathing remarks she makes about those who deserted her.

The technology in use in both stories is indigenous and is an extension of Africa's flora and fauna, making for sustainability. In the AF tradition, African cultures and spirituality form a cohesive and organic whole. Indeed, Okorafor (2009) describes her brand of speculative fiction as "organic fantasy" because it "emerges from the very nature of its story" (275). Describing how she envisions her fictive Ooni Kingdom of Ginen, she says there is "a perfect marriage between

the ancient and the modern, nature and technology" (281). Rather than being constructed with brick and sand, houses grow like plants. "Ginen is a series of African stereotypes that I turned on their heads" (Okorafor, 2009: 281).

We see examples of these overturned stereotypes and the unity between nature and technology in both "Mother of Invention" and *Binti*. For example, the spaceship Binti boards to Oomza University – the Third Fish – is designed in the form of a shrimp so the exoskeletons can "withstand the harshness of space" (Okorafor, 2015: 13). Her home, though the oldest house in her village, is fitted with environmentally-friendly materials, such as solar panels and bioluminescent plants that glow at night and stop emitting light at sunrise. Ecofeminism affirms these eco-friendly technologies. The spacecraft and house are designed to conserve and promote wellness and are pollution-free.

In "Mother of Invention", New Delta has become the world's greenest place in complete contrast to the old order – Nigeria's Niger Delta region, where extractive activities by oil companies have polluted the sources of livelihood of the residents. The air-scrubbing genetically-modified grass (periwinkle) that grows in New Delta replaced oil as the country's major revenue earner, reducing the destructive impact of oil extraction. However, leadership structures are still operating in the mode of the old order, repeating the same mistakes made in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Revenue from the sale of periwinkle is going into government coffers while the host community, New Delta, continues to suffer neglect. The result is that government fails to spot the changes in the grass pollination system, leading to "pollination misalignment" (Okorafor, 2018: 19) and the pollen tsunami that put Anwuli and her unborn child in grave danger. It triggered an ailment – *Izeuzere*. Because of their gender roles – reproduction and reproductive functions – women suffer more from leadership failure.

While gender and heteronormative hierarchies appear minimised in futuristic Africa, it is paradoxical that both women (Anwuli and her ex's wife) depend completely on smart houses built by the man who deceived them both. Code's (1981) questions are relevant here: Who is the knower where knowledge about science and technology is in question? Are women unable to also design and build a smart house? Do they lack the skills or financial clout to do this because they are women? Is a woman restrained from building or buying her own property due to socially constructed barriers? As Code (1981) rightly notes, "Many kinds of knowledge and many skills have, historically speaking, been inaccessible for

women from a purely practical point of view. Women were simply not permitted to learn" (268).

Binti took her place among the intelligentsia of her world on the journey to Oomza University: "outward-looking people who loved mathematics, experimenting, learning, reading, inventing, studying, obsessing, revealing" (Okorafor 2015: 15). Describing Binti, Okorafor explains in a TED talk titled, "Sci-fi Stories that Imagine a Future Africa", that "as the story progresses, she [Binti] becomes not other, but more" (Okorafor, 2017: 03.04 mins.).

This art of leaving, and thus becoming more, is at the heart of AF and 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.

Okorafor draws deeply from the traditional and spiritual beliefs of the Igbo people. She uses Igbo names in "Mother of Invention" and explores the African worldview in both works. For example, Igbo spiritual beliefs strongly refer to the *Ogbanje*[8] concept and the Igbo word for a house – *Obi*. The name Anwuli in Igbo means "joy". Anwuli's information video features a man with a cane dressed as an elder from Anwuli's village in Arochukwu.

Likewise, Binti brings alive the culture and lifestyle of the Himba. She observes, "Our land is desert, but we live in the region where there is sacred red clay…. Because my people are sons and daughters of the soil" (Okorafor, 2015: 34). She does not cringe from applying *otjize* (red clay) to her hair and body even when those around her find the smell offensive. In a bid to defend herself in the face of attack from non-human creatures known as Meduse, she wields her *edan*[9] as her protection and it has a devastating effect on the Meduse (17).

As the story of "Mother of Invention" unfolds, we feel Anwuli's birth pangs, and her fears recall the fact that more women die from pregnancy-related complications in Nigeria than in most countries of the world. Beyond this, a pollen tsunami is also looming, and the fear is that it will trigger fatal complications in people with a respiratory condition known as *Izeuzere*. We follow the decisions she makes and why she makes them. We empathise with her determination to defy death, to stay back and establish possession of her home, striving to make a home for and her forthcoming infant amidst environmental crises.

The ecofeminist undertones of "Mother of Invention" are clear. Operating from the premise that women are largely responsible for harnessing the earth's resources to nurture their families through domestic food production, and therefore must guard jealously this earth-wealth, African ecofeminism, championed by global figures like Kenyan Wangari Maathai and her Greenbelt Movement, Ruth Nyambura of the African EcoFeminist Collective, and organisations like Concerned Farmers Association (Ghana) and Kizibi Community Seed Bank (Uganda) are working to enshrine environmental sustainability continent-wide and locally through various strategies (Kelleher, 2019). These strategies include challenging patriarchal and neo-colonial systems that imperil the continent, critiquing gender-power structures, interrogating multinational capitalism, and curbing the destructive tendencies of extractive industries while protecting biodiversity and precious seeds (Kelleher, 2019).

Anwuli's smart home provides a model for protecting women through the delicate process of birthing a child, which heightens a mother's vulnerability. The house ensures that Anwuli receives skilled and optimal-quality care throughout her pregnancy, delivery, and post-natal period. "Mother of Invention" touches on salient issues. Hardly do families, governments, and even health care providers respond as Obi 3 does to every present and anticipated need of Anwuli and her baby. There is a relationship of mutual trust that even her ex-fiancé was incapable of providing.

Conclusion

This study examines the nature of the genre of AF and the contributions of Nnedi Okorafor's fiction, within the framework of ecofeminism, gender, science, and technology. The analysis shows that AF, like Afrofuturism, is an offshoot of Western SF, is agenda-setting by nature, and developed in response to the gaps created by the near-absence of positive or empowering Black and African themes in Western SF.

Okorafor's organic fantasy style grounds her stories in the African soil, drawing deep, refreshing draughts of freshness from the traditions, beliefs, and worldview of the Igbos. *Binti* unveils the cultures and traditions of the Himba. Okorafor unabashedly presents strong African female characters in a manner that is startling and defies gender stereotypes. The style grows on the reader if not

repulsed by the sheer scale of the technology and development landscape that Okorafor paints. She lights up Africa's future in new ways that almost cause the reader acquainted with the existing narratives to gasp in disbelief.

In the heat of the excitement over the movie *Black Panther*, a friend observed that after watching the dramatic rescue of Nigeria's Chibok girls from Sambisa Forest, she left the cinema hall with a sinking heart because she suddenly realised that in real life, some of the girls were still trapped in the forest. Notwithstanding, fantasy has a role to play in assisting us to see differently, think out-of-the-box, or discard the box. As the scales fall off our eyes, we see endless possibilities. Undoubtedly, there is a need to reframe technology for women as a fun tool for dismantling patriarchal oppressions and for easing the workload that gender roles impose on females. Okorafor does an excellent job of this, modelling to younger women the potential power within their reach.

Okorafor uses the tool of speculative fiction to showcase alternative pathways for Africa's post-crisis development and economic prosperity, enabling one to focus on astonishing future possibilities, rather than the excruciatingly painful present. Conserving and not harming our living environments certainly will get us there faster. Indeed, who does not long for a post-crisis Africa?

Endnotes

1. We reframe when we consider the use of alternative lenses and determine to look at an issue in another way that challenges our previous beliefs.

2. For example, Chikafa-Chipiro (2019) speaks extensively about the Black Panther movie's phenomenal representation of Black womanhood, noting that it is "a return to the source of sorts which recalls African women warriors who have been celebrated in the African past" (4).

3. "A culture as informed or defined by its technological activity, especially a culture characterised by a high level of technological development; (also) the practices, attitudes, etc., characteristic of those proficient in the use of information technology" (Oxford Lexico dictionary).

4. According to Okorafor, "Africanjujuism, [is] an inherent aspect of Nigerian culture in which magical fetishism is displayed through wearing exuberant head ornaments." (Paige, 2018: n.p.)

5. On 14 April 2014, a terrorist group known as Boko Haram that operates in the West Africa region broke into a school in Borno State in Nigeria's northeast at night and abducted 276 female students from the hostel. Many have since been rescued, but a number are still in the hands of their abductors.

6. Okorafor (2017:03.47 mins) Sci-fi Stories that Imagine a Future Africa.

7. "This ecoregion has been arid for 55 million years due to climatic conditions, thankfully not attributable to human environmental excesses. Though located in Namibia, the desert extends to Angola and South Africa. Available at https://www.worldwildlife.org/ecoregions/at1315

8. Ogbanje refers to children who die and are believed to reincarnate several times due to the alliance of the said children with certain deities or spirits (Ilechukwu, 2007).

9. An object she picks up around her living environment. She had no idea of its spiritual/mystical powers until she came face to face with the Meduse threat; a pointer to the need to protect our environment so we can enjoy optimal benefits from it. As described in Binti, it has a stellated cube shape with intricate loops and swirls of blue and black and white. See Nnedi Okorafor. 2015. Binti (New York: Tor Books).

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