



Original Article

Afrofuturism and Quest for Black Redemption in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*

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13 Jul 2022 Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* follows the trajectory of many Afrofuturist texts in the exploration of the Black fortunes in the contested futuristic space.

Keywords: *Afrofuturism, Speculative fiction, Oppression, Empowerment, Redemption.* Using science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction, Okorafor appropriate futuristic space as a locale for negotiating the redemption of black bodies. She also contextualises the experiences of Africans or people of African origin in known world history. This, apparently, show that the futuristic space is neither detached from the past nor the contemporary period but rather it is an opportunity to map an optimistic future through a keen reappraisal of history from an Afrocentric perspective. This article uses a close reading of Nnedi Okorafor's novel *The Book of Phoenix* to examine how prosthetically enhanced future is appropriated to re-enact the black struggle for redemption and relevance in the face of ruthless oppression through exploitation, dehumanisation, and slavery. The analysis is also guided by postulations of some prominent Afrofuturists like Mark Dery and Ytasha L. Womack. Data has been analysed using content and thematic analysis. This article finds that Afrofuturism can indeed portend optimism for black people in the sense that it utilises futuristic space to reconstruct the past and contemporary tribulations facing the black people in order to implement an ultimate solution and initiate the process of redemption. It can thus be concluded that *The Book of Phoenix* indeed lives up to Afrofuturist and Afro-optimist spirit by not only illuminating black challenges but also highlighting positive aspects of blackness like strength, resilience, humanity, and longevity. This article could benefit scholars in the field of postcolonial and diasporic studies by exposing the complex and dynamic nature of race, exploitation, and technology. It benefits the African/Afro-diasporic literary studies as Afrofuturism is creating an impact in the domain of sci-fi which has traditionally been dominated by the West.

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INTRODUCTION

Afrofuturism is one of the literary perspectives which arguably captures African aspirations at the time when Western pre-eminence on the global scene is still palpable. The struggle for recognition and redemption among members of the black race arguably dates back to the days of imperialism and slavery. Contrary to notions popularised by the imperialists West that the colonised Africans accepted their status (of inferiority) and desired Western domination (Said, 1993), black people, directly or indirectly, expressed a desire for dignity and freedom from colonial rule. Such expressions can be seen in postcolonial writing, notably Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and from narratives of former slaves such as Frederick Douglass (Douglass, 1845). Despite efforts by the above pioneers, their contemporaries, and subsequent postcolonial writers and civil rights activists; it is apparent that negative and judgmental attitudes towards blackness by some white people and institutions still exist. Afrofuturism arguably is seen as a continuation of the struggle to sanitise and redeem the African image from association with dystopia, servitude, misery, and poverty (Eshun, 2003). In order to fully formulate a redemption strategy in the Afrofuturist space, it is imperative that conditions which necessitate the need for redemption are highlighted. Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* indeed highlights such conditions by enacting modes of black oppression like slavery,

exploitation, and dehumanisation. The text then highlights the process of redemption of the oppressed bodies. The process of redemption, as highlighted in the text, happens through the empowerment of the oppressed and the neutralisation of systems of thought and worldview that propped and lay the ground for black oppression.

AFROFUTURISM

Afrofuturism has been variously defined. According to Womack (2013), it is a way of imagining possible futures through black cultural lens. It involves "total re-envisioning "of the past and optimistic imagination of the future that is fraught with 'cultural critiques' (Womack, 2013, p. 9). It is further noted that Afrofuturism functions by combining elements of science fiction, fantasy, magic realism, speculative fiction, and Afrocentricity. Mark Dery, one of the most renowned Afrofuturists, defines Afrofuturism as a "speculative fiction which treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the contexts of twentieth-century techno culture" (Dery, 1994, p. 180). He further describes it as "an African-American signification which appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future" (1994, p. 180). For Yaszek (2006, p. 42), Afrofuturism is an 'aesthetic mode' which encompasses a diverse range of artists who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences.

The above definitions often create an impression that Afrofuturism favours themes and concerns of Afrodiasporic people, more specifically the African-Americans. This fact has not escaped the notice of the African literary elite, some of whom have voiced their discontent urging that ‘Africans living in Africa need something entirely different from Afrofuturism’ (Talabi, 2020, p. 8). The apparent limitation on the scope of the term (Africanfuturism) finally led to the coining of Africanfuturism by Nnedi Okorafor. On her blog, Okorafor defines Africanfuturism as a “sub-category of science fiction that is similar to Afrofuturism but is more deeply rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point of view”. Okorafor’s works of fiction like *Zahra The Windseeker* (2005), *Who Fears Death* (2010) and *Akata Witch* (2011) evidently attempt to be faithful to the Africanfuturist perspective. *The Book of Phoenix* (2015), however, is decidedly Afrofuturist. Set in futuristic America and Africa, the text revolves around a character named Phoenix who escapes from her confinement at Tower Seven in the United States of America and flies to Africa, where she finds a true home. The texts thus idealise Africa as a real home and a place of freedom while regarding America (the former home of the protagonist) as a place of imprisonment and subjection.

According to Womack (2013), however, all Africans can appropriate aesthetics and principles of Afrofuturism to ‘both transform their world’ and wriggle themselves out of their limitations (191). Apparently, Womack is writing out of a conviction that Afrofuturist imagination is not limited only to the Afro-diaspora; it is the property of all black people irrespective of nationality or region. Furthermore, Okorafor admits that members of black origin, regardless of their present geographical location, are ‘all connected by blood, spirit, history and future’ (Talabi, 2020, p. 10). Thus, when it comes to imagining possible futures through black cultural lens, as Womack (2013) states, it least matters which aesthetic mode is preferred. Some writers have even suggested that Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and Africanjuism could be merged under the umbrella of Black speculative literature (Wabuke, 2021, p. 15). Black speculative is a way of imagining black futures fraught with “representations from black

perspectives from Africa and African diaspora” (Wabuke, 2021, p. 15). This article thus leans on the premise that Afrofuturism is the property of all black people.

As black writers strive to envision an optimistic future for black people, one cannot help but note that such a dream has bottlenecks. Race-related challenges have continued plaguing the African-Americans even after emancipation. Certain literary critics and writers have coined the term Afro-pessimism to refer to this wretched condition of the blacks as a racialised population in the United States of America. Afro-pessimism can be defined as a lens of interpretation which accounts for civil society’s dependence on anti-black violence (Douglass et al., 2018). Anti-black violence is a regime of violence which generally criminalises black people. The strand of thought that nurtured the Afro-pessimism perspective arguably sprouted from the shared conception of race, slavery, and anti-blackness (Wilderson III et al., 2017). The institution of slavery created a precedent where blackness and black bodies represented oppositions to humanity and normality in Western social discourse. It reproduced enslaved people as socially dead beings. As socially dead, slaves were open to gratuitous violence, violation, disgrace, and dishonour (Wilderson III et al., 2017). Hartman (1997) revisits scenes from the ‘peculiar institution’ of slavery and portrays how the African sufferings produced an enslaved body as being socially dead indignation from observers (p. 13). Seminal postcolonial writer Toni Morrison has argued that the black presence in the United States of America has evidently provided ways of imagining “chaos and civilisation, desire and fear, and mechanism of testing problems, and blessings of freedom” (1992, p. 6). In other words, everything negative is projected on black bodies, which then become sacrificial lambs and surrogates for white American tragedies. Afrofuturism endeavours to counter this discourse by transforming the pessimistic representation of blackness into an optimistic one. In a bid to redeem black bodies, Afrofuturism critiques structures and premises which generate, naturalise and mundanise the violations, denigration, and objectification of black bodies by exposing the horror and inhumanity of such misguided actions.

Burdened by the anti-black violence and lack of coherent history, some Afro-diasporic individuals may find Afro-optimism a farfetched dream. Mark Dery (1994), one of the founders of Afrofuturism, indeed wonders how “can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out imagine possible futures?” (p. 180). Dery question undoubtedly expresses the pessimistic view of the African future. It raises certain pertinent issues regarding the relationship that exists between the past, the present and the future. Apparently, the past and the present and all encumbrances attached to them have to be surmounted first before the future can be contemplated. Yet such a venture may prove futile because, according to Dery (1994), official records of African American history were altered to conceal what was done to them.

Through Afrofuturism, however, black people arise from pits of enforced historical oblivion and social death to reclaim their erased past and their sullied selves. Afrofuturism avails means by which the blacks can reconstruct their lost or concealed history by piecing together fragments of available history, memory, and imagination. The use of black people as guinea pigs in scientific experiments in *The Book of Phoenix*, for instance, can be seen as a re-enactment of the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study clandestinely conducted by the United States Public health services in 1932-1972 (Gray, 2002). In the study, over six hundred African- American men, largely impoverished and uneducated, were enticed with promises of free medical care and money to take part in syphilis study (Magner, 2005). The subjects were then barred from receiving any treatment and as a result, many of them died from syphilis and other related complications (Reverby, 2009). *The Book of Phoenix* arguably reformulates the Tuskegee Syphilis Study story in a way that makes it more horrible, more technical, and more widespread. Unlike the Tuskegee case, perpetrators of inhuman experiments in *The Book of Phoenix* are severely punished and the victims find justice and redemption.

Afrofuturism was born out of the need to sanitise the soiled and tragedised image of the Black people. Afrofuturist writers like Okorafor, through her written works like *The Book of Phoenix*, demonstrate that the battered African image can be salvaged. Afrofuturists, for instance, concede that

Africans may have been intentionally minimised or erased from world history, but the same should not be allowed to occur even in an imaginary future (Womack 2013, p. 7). This implies that the imaginary futuristic space, as envisioned in works of science fiction, should portend hope for the Black as it does for the White. This role indeed makes sense when Afrofuturism is discussed within the context of imagination, technology, future, and liberation (Womack 2013, p. 9). It is precisely the element of liberation that transforms Afrofuturism into Afro-optimism. Afrofuturism attempts to liberate blackness from its uncanny association with chaos, fear, dystopia, catastrophe, and suffering (Morrison, 1992; Yaszek, 2006). According to Kodwo Eshun, the drive to create a dark and uncertain future for the Africans is spearheaded by the futures industry: the Western-dominated media, corporations, and science (Eshun, 2003). These institutions work in tandem, often using falsified and unreliable data, to conflate the blackness with unfavourable economic projections, diseases, short life expectancy and immiseration (Eshun, 2003). The role of Afrofuturism in these scenarios is twofold— to counter the doomsday assumptions contrived by the futures industry and to redeem the blacks from the historical marginalisation and social death.

Oppression and Redemption in The Book of Phoenix

Okorafor’s fiction offers a re-examination of black challenges in a manner that gives overwhelming impetus to redemption and empowerment efforts. The texts take a reader to a futuristic dystopian setting where race, ethnicity, and rigid cultural practices and beliefs still cause untold suffering to members of the black community. *The Book of Phoenix* revolves around a futuristic commercial and technological enterprise called LifeGen Technologies, which is a world leader in research and innovation. LifeGen Technologies, however, runs a clandestine operation of recruitment, abduction, and internment of people, mainly of black descent, to be exploited in various ways, chiefly, as guinea pigs for scientific experimentation (p. 202-203). In addition, the enterprise is implicated in complicity in plundering African resources in connivance with rogue ruling elites (p. 120).

It is apparent from the above that oppression contributes significantly to the development of the dystopian climate in *The Book of Phoenix*. Oppression can be seen as either an unconscious or a conscious action or procedure by an individual or institution, which can inflict physical or psychological pain or cause harm, discomfort, or a sense of degradation in another person. According to Young (2009, p. 5), oppression basically involves an individual or a group exercising tyranny, abuse, exploitation, and degradation of those considered subordinate. In *The Book of Phoenix (TBP)*, therefore, the theme of oppression can be expounded by looking into the treatment of internees called the speciMen.

LifeGen Technologies, also known as The Big Eye, owns seven massive towers which specialise in a wide range of scientific research, notably genetic alteration and manipulation and cloning (Okorafor, 2015, p. 8-9). The successes of the Towers have come at the expense of many people who have suffered intensely as a result of being used for scientific experiments. The speciMen, as guinea pigs are referred to, are subjected to barbaric and often lethal experimental processes which engender intense tortures and abuses, all in the name of 'getting information' about them (p. 17, 145, 219). There is a very strong indication that the majority of people who have suffered irreversible harm to their health after being subjected to unsafe experimental procedures are black (p. 203). The fact that most of the speciMen are of black descent strengthens an argument that racial considerations play a major role in the selection of people for exploitation. Treatment of inmates at LifeGen facilities constitutes the worst form of oppression inasmuch as it disregards their feelings or the safety of the subjects.

Oppression in Okorafor's fiction occurs in the form of violence, degradation, marginalisation, exploitation, and slavery. Violence involves physical acts like killing, beating, maiming, raping, and destroying, or non-physical acts like harassment, intimidation, ridiculing, humiliating, and degradation (Young, 2009). In Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*, violence is directly related to exploitation. Phoenix for instance is experimentally shot at a close range in order to observe her reaction and establish certain 'information about' her (p. 17).

She sustains a lot of pain, but the agency disregards her feelings saying 'nothing great comes without pain' (p. 17). Some experiments are cruel, barbaric, and outright inhuman. Such category involves inflicting severe pain on the subject as in the case of a black inmate called Mmuo, whose skin was all peeled off without the use of anaesthesia (p. 145). Due to laxity and deliberate disregard for safety protocols, some experimental procedures often cause irreparable damage or deaths to the subjects. Those whose health deteriorated irremediably were reportedly whisked away to a correctional facility 'secretly owned' by the LifeGen (p. 207). This apparently was done to keep the victims away from public scrutiny and minimise the scandal as much as possible.

Slavery and exploitation are forms of oppression which are linked to objectification and dehumanisation. Slavery and exploitation deprive one of their humanities in that feelings and autonomy of the victims are not taken into consideration by the slavers. Exploitation arguably occurs within structures of objectification and dehumanisation. According to Nussbaum (1995), objectification involves considering one as inert, serviceable, devoid of feelings, and lacking in autonomy. To transform a normal human being into a slave or an object in Nussbaum's definition, an exploiter apparently has to devise ways to deprive, impair or stop them from utilising their faculties. In LifeGen's towers, this was achieved by ensuring that many inmates were confined in their rooms to control their interactions or movement (Okorafor, 2015). Secondly, monitoring devices like chips were implanted in their bodies or installed in rooms to enable the tracking of their activities and changes in their bodies. With all these measures in place, the Big Eye were confident that their slaves (speciMen) were "perfectly contained" (p.8). 'Contained' in this context would refer to being deprived of autonomy and agency. As already stated, inertness (lack of agency) and lack of autonomy are some of the aspects of objectification (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 257). In as much as the speciMen lived in this kind of condition, they were veritable slaves. With regulations to contain the inmates in place, Okorafor (2015) concedes that even knowledge for them was not power. The insurrection by the inmates, which brought down Tower 7, however, can be considered

an affirmation that no amount of containment measure can possibly bridle human agency.

The reconstruction of the oppressive system of slavery in the futuristic world necessarily creates a chain which links the past, the present and the future. It shows that the ideology that gave birth to the past black subjugation and Trans-Atlantic chattel slavery could still be active in the distant future as it is in the present. This assumption becomes much clearer in the Phoenix's words:

To them, I was not a human enough to be a threat. I was their tool. I was nothing to worry about or fear. They saw me as they saw Africans made slaves during Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade hundreds of years ago. They saw me as many Arabs saw African slaves over millennium and how some still see African today. The Big Eye did not think they needed to put leash on me because my leash was in my DNA (p.136)

Okorafor apparently expresses anxiety about the possible continuation of subjugation and subjection of black people in the distant future. The fact that many slaves in LifeGen's facilities are of black origin confirms that Okorafor attempts to locate futuristic black exploitation in the continuum of Trans-Atlantic slavery and subsequent forms of Black exploitation, or indeed any forms of black subjections which have happened in the world history. The futuristic system of slavery, however, is characterised by the use of sophisticated technology to confine, control, and exploit the slaves. Again, this may not be an entirely new phenomenon because according to Dery (1994, p. 18), technology has always been brought to bear on black bodies by means of branding, forced sterilisation, tasers, and Tuskegee experiments. In Okorafor's imagination, the recruitment of the slaves in the futuristic system of slavery could become less overt and less suspicious. Sometimes victims are lured into a trap with promises of better opportunities. This happened to a character named Vera, who was duped into carrying a very dangerous pregnancy with promises of better prospects at the corporation (p. 202). After the birth, her health deteriorated irremediably and she had to be confined in an institution. Another mode of acquiring slaves identified is abduction. In the text, this happened to a talented Nigerian student called

Mmuo, who was captured by LifeGen's agents, in connivance with the Nigerian government, and spirited to the United States of America, where he would end in the LifeGen's towers (p. 119).

The above discussion leads to a conclusion that the West needs to dominate the black world and space in order to realise its futuristic ambitions. If LifeGen's Technology is to be taken as a microcosm of Western dominance, then according to Okorafor's imagination, the West will need to brutally exploit others (especially non-whites) in order to make any notable impact in futuristic space. They needed black bodies to create ultimate weapons and superior minds that "absorbed information and stories like a sponge" and became walking libraries (p. 9); they need immortal blood and regenerative tissues of black people to become "immortal", ageless and wealthy (p. 170, 187); they need to subject black people to sufferings, misery and harm in their scientific laboratories in order to develop futuristic, cutting edge technology, and they need to control African mineral wealth to ensure that Africans will always look up to the West for economic assistance (pp. 118-120). In contrast, the blacks are presented as people who are self-sufficient and do not need to use /exploit anybody to attain their futuristic aspirations. Their main weakness, however, is poverty, mismanagement of their resources, and inability to see and appreciate their advantages and strengths.

Projection of black suffering to a futuristic screen arguably serves as a warning to the contemporary black generation that an optimistic future is not guaranteed until present socio-political and economic upheavals are resolved conclusively. It is apparent in the text that bad leadership and poor economic policies will always predispose black people to exploitation by much richer Western nations. In the text, for instance, futuristic Nigeria is presented as one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world. It has created intelligent digital devices called "Anansi droids" to guard its oil pipelines (p. 118). Lagos is presented as the second-largest city in the world. Yet this seemingly prosperous nation is suffering from "corrupt", inefficient military leadership, which has denied its people the prosperity it deserves by allowing the oil wealth to be controlled by "meddling" foreign multinationals (pp. 117-118).

Okorafor refers to this state of affairs as being “so colonised” that one actually builds his “own shackles” (p. 118). These same corrupt leaders allow brain drain to happen under their watch. They allow brilliant minds like Mmuo, whose expertise would benefit the nation, to be abducted and spirited to a foreign nation for their selfish reasons.

Another possible explanation for Okorafor’s construction of a pessimistic black future is for the purpose of foregrounding themes of empowerment and redemption. For the black people to become agents, and not objects, of the future as Womack (2013) observes, they need to be empowered. It has been noted that exploitation that takes place in LifeGen’s facilities is largely premised on the dehumanisation of the inmates. First, the inmates are all classified as speciMen (p. 9). This classification renders them separate from the rest of humanity. One notes the consistent use of the pronoun ‘it’ by LifeGen’s staff to refer to the speciMen (p. 170). The use of impersonal pronoun to refer to an inmate basically dehumanises the inmate and emboldens the staff to treat them inhumanely. Dehumanisation leads to the exclusion of a ‘group or individual from moral consideration’ (Moller & Deci, 2009, p. 44). The most appropriate step to redeem dehumanised bodies, therefore, is by humanisation and empowerment.

Okorafor appropriates science fiction and speculative fiction to effect black empowerment and thus debunk the racial myth of Black inferiority. The process of empowerment and humanisation process in the text can be seen as having started when the speciMen hatched a plan that led to an successful escape from Tower 1. Phoenix was shot repeatedly as she tried to escape from Tower 7, and because of her complicated nature (she had been created to be a biological weapon), she burst into flames and “burnt to ash” (p. 36). Seven days later, she rises from her ashes, miraculously develops wings and flies back to Africa. The new Phoenix born from her ash can be considered a novel creation whose enhanced capabilities had nothing to do with the LifeGen Technologies. Immortality and the ability to fly can be considered empowerment inasmuch as they enabled Phoenix to escape to freedom. The potency of the wings becomes more apparent when one considers the vast distance Phoenix had to cover to reach the African coasts.

During the course of the flight, Phoenix came across a gigantic sea monster “the size of thirty large houses” (p. 58). She had to fly higher as a precaution in case the creature tried to leap and get at her. All these prove that without her wings and strength, Phoenix probably would not have been able to make it to Africa.

Another empowerment strategy utilised in the text is the association of some of the enslaved black characters with agelessness and immortality. Agelessness is explicitly portrayed using examples of long-lived black children confined at Tower 4 whose organs “grew back” or regenerated after being removed (p. 169). These characters stayed children even though they were much older. On the issue of immortality, Phoenix and HeLa serve as perfect examples. Phoenix is considered immortal because she came back to life after burning up to death. HeLa, a black Indian rescued from a submerged island, confesses that “her blood is a river of time” (p. 187). By this, HeLa meant that she was immortal and that anyone who was injected with her blood also attained immortality. Attributing agelessness and immortality to black individuals indirectly positions them as life-givers. This contrasts sharply with the LifeGen scientists whose unscrupulous or ‘well-intentioned’ actions have caused numerous deaths and sufferings (p. 145, 219).

The first phase of Phoenix’s humanisation starts when Phoenix lands on the coast of Senegal and is given a hearty welcome by a woman. The woman she meets is not afraid of her wings; such a gesture confirms that she regards Phoenix as a bona fide human. In Ghana, Phoenix finds more acceptance as the people she encounters all “welcomed” and “hugged” her (p. 60). She is given a new name, ‘Okore’, which means eagle in the local language (p. 62). Phoenix later meets a man called Kofi, with whom she becomes romantically involved. Kofi makes Phoenix realise that she is not only an ordinary human being but also “God’s creature” (p. 80). Phoenix found it difficult to believe all that she had experienced in Africa because she had been raised as a non-human in America.

To further re-affirm the Black’s humanity, Okorafor devises a concept of the Black as ‘traceable direct descendant of Mitochondrial Eve’ (p. 97). She uses

an inmate named Lucy, an adopted Ethiopian girl who was found to possess a complete genetic blueprint of the entire human race. This argument is meant to give the black people a more genuine claim to humanity on account of being the direct descendants of the first human ancestor. The argument could also be seen as an oblique rebuttal of the slave-era racist and pseudo-scientist claims that the black race was “degraded and degenerate” and could not possibly share the same origin as the more superior Caucasian race (Jackson & Weidman, 2004, p. 50-51).

Humanisation and empowerment are very important ingredients of resistance. The kind of resistance foregrounded in the text aims at overcoming the oppression, punishing the oppressor/oppressive system, and re-establishing a just, cohesive, and progressive social system. The speciMen led by Phoenix broke out of the prison and, in the process, brought down the once impregnable Tower 7, killing many LifeGen’s staff. The resistance disproved LifeGen’s notions that the speciMen were “perfectly contained” at the tower and that their “knowledge wasn’t power” (p. 8). Phoenix was created to be a superhuman with enhanced physical and mental capacities. She was a voracious and superfast reader whose brain absorbed every information and story “like a sponge” (p. 9). At Tower 7, she had been allowed to read as many books as possible including “top secret files” about the establishment (p. 7-8). All this happened because the Big Eye was sure that Phoenix was not a “threat” at all (p. 8). Phoenix, however, would later use the vast knowledge she had amassed to infiltrate all other towers, cause destruction, and free inmates. In addition, Phoenix had been created to be a potent “weapon” (p. 27). Her body could generate heat strong enough to disintegrate any substance. Phoenix used her power to cause an apocalypse which ended wicked civilisation (pp. 220-221). In the end, the technology developed by LifeGen worked against them. The success of the black people represented by speciMen in throwing off the slavers’ yoke and ending wicked civilisation therefore fulfils the Afro-optimist desire that black people can be agents, and not objects, of the future (Womack, 2013, p. 191).

Lastly, culture has played a remarkable role in the process of empowerment and redemption.

Okorafor’s fascination with African cultural heritage cannot be denied. In *Organic Fantasy*, Okorafor (2009) admits that nearly every aspect of African culture and nature is an ingredient for great stories. She credits most of her creativity and her works of fantasy to her ‘complex African experience’ (p. 276). Okorafor’s writing arguably should be conceptualised within the continuum of African cultural and historical recovery efforts, which began in response to colonialism and cultural imperialism. According to Edward Said, the European colonialists devised and relied on self-other binarism to homogenise, feminise and essentialise the colonised (as cited in Mountz, 2009). Furthermore, imperialism and colonialism were supported by “impressive ideological formations” which included notions that ‘certain territories and people’, categorised in the language of the metropolitan centre as ‘subject races’ or ‘inferior’, accepted their status of inferiority and desire to be dominated (Said 1993, p. 9). In *Orientalism: Western conception of the orient*, Said indeed confirms that the Western imperial ideologues often asserted that the colonised were actually benefitting from the occupation yet could not provide single evidence that the colonised acknowledged or ‘even understood’ any benefit of colonial occupation (Said, 1978, p. 32). By arrogating their responsibility of defining and essentialising the colonised whom they regarded as other, the colonisers denied the colonised opportunities to define themselves, make decisions on matters affecting their lives, or defend their culture. From the structures of imperialism also emerged means by which notions of culture were ‘clarified, reinforced, criticised or rejected’ (Said, 1993, p. 9). With the colonial system in place, the traditional African values and culture were progressively side-lined, and the colonised were acculturated to ways which were generally compatible with the Western worldview. Postcolonial discourse therefore emerged as a strategy to counter the imperialist’s adverse claims about African image and culture.

Postcolonialism seeks to dismantle the epistemologies of intellectual hegemony generated by the West through its academics (Irobi, 2008). It offers ways of examining how African novelists ‘talk for themselves’ within the context of postcolonial reality and highlights the manner in

which colonial contact distorted the socio-political, economic, and cultural patterns of the colonised states (Jatau, 2014). That Okorafor's work is influenced to a certain extent by postcolonial thought is seen in the way she pays special attention to the writings of some well-known postcolonial writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ben Okri (Okorafor, 2009). Citing Ben Okri's *Birds of Air*, Okorafor (2009) recognises the centrality of storytelling as an aspect of African culture. By writing stories, a postcolonial writer is able to reconnect with the pre-colonial African past and in the process, help re-establish culture and history that had been distorted, marginalised, negated, or replaced as a result of colonial contact. Postcolonial writing can therefore be rightly considered a precursor or forerunner of Afrofuturism. Okorafor fiction can be considered 'talking for self' in as much as its raw material derives from African/ black experience, culture, philosophy, spirituality, or worldview. In the light of the above argument, therefore, narrating culture automatically becomes an important aspect of black redemption and empowerment.

One, however, may want to know why affirmation of black culture, reflection on the black tribulations and challenges, and redemption of black bodies should constitute a substantial part of optimistic imagination of the future as implied in Okorafor's selected fiction. Shouldn't the imaginary future be contemplated in terms of awe-inspiring technological innovations, scientific breakthroughs, and expanded space programmes, among others? After all, Womack (2013) thinks the inequities of the present and the past should not be carried into the future (p. 191).

The future should not be considered only as a vast stretch of endless space but also as a stretch of infinite possibilities, answers, and solutions to the past or current challenges facing black people all over the world. *The Book of Phoenix* indeed recognises the instrumentality of prosthetically enhanced futuristic space in reaffirmation of African culture and history, empowerment, and tackling of African/ black challenges.

Culture basically encompasses a range of capabilities and habits that one acquires as a member of society, including knowledge, beliefs,

art, morals, law, and custom (Tylor, 2016, p. 1). Restoration and valorisation of black culture can be considered an important aspect of the black futuristic aspiration. Cultural restoration efforts are part of empowerment because it is apparent, from Okorafor's perspective, that the African future devoid of African indigenous beliefs, philosophies, spiritualities, morals, arts, and habits is generally incomplete, impractical, and inconsequential. Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix (TBP)* is set in a futuristic apocalyptic society where traditional African God *Ani* is portrayed as the creator and designer of the destinies of every creature on earth (p. 219). She (*Ani*) is implicated in an apocalypse that 'wiped the slate clean' by incinerating anyone and anything responsible for iniquities on earth (p. 220). Elsewhere in the text, *Ani* is considered the most supreme God above all other Gods, deities or forces like Krishna, Allah, nature, or Christian God (219). She is the spirit of the earth and flesh; and the creator and controller of the universe who does not forgive iniquity. Despite being created in laboratories at Tower 7 in the United States of America as an 'accelerated organism', Phoenix considers herself an African who has been forced to live in the 'false home' of America (pp. 9, 94). Phoenix has great respect for *Ani* and considers herself "Ani's soldier" (pp. 133, 221).

By centralising and universalising the primacy of *Ani*, Okorafor is, in essence, living up to the Afrofuturist spirit of envisioning possible futures from a black cultural lens (Womack, 2013). Okorafor apparently envisions an imaginary future where African God will also be put on a global pedestal. The Goddess not only judges the world for their waywardness, but she also punishes the western nations (represented by the LifeGen Technologies) for perpetrating acts of slavery against the black people (represented by the speciMen) (Okorafor, 2015, p. 8).

CONCLUSION

Nnedi Okorafor's fiction follows the trajectory of many Afrofuturist texts in the exploration of the Black fortunes and hope at times when Western pre-eminence on the global scene is still palpable. Afrofuturism has been variously defined. Womack (2013) defines it as a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens. According to

Dery (1994), Afrofuturism is a “speculative fiction which treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the contexts of twentieth-century technoculture” (p. 180). Afrofuturism functions by combining elements of science fiction, fantasy, magic realism, speculative fiction, and Afrocentricity (Womack, 2013). According to Womack (2013), however, all black people can appropriate aesthetics and principles of Afrofuturism to both “transform their world” and wriggle themselves out of their limitations. Apparently, Womack is writing out of a conviction that Afrofuturist imagination is not limited only to the Afro-diaspora; it is the property of all black people irrespective of nationality or region.

The trip towards an optimistic future for Africans apparently is not an easy one. The imaginary future for Africans cannot always be contemplated in terms of awe-inspiring technological innovations, scientific breakthroughs, and expanded space programmes, among others. Sometimes the inequities of the present and the past, contrary to what Womack (2013) believes, may need to be carried into the future. This is because the future cannot be considered only as a vast stretch of endless space but also as a stretch of infinite possibilities, answers, and solutions to the past or current challenges facing black people all over the world. Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix* draws attention to tribulations, salvation and triumphs enacted in futuristic space. Oppression in Okorafor’s fiction occurs in the form of violence, degradation, marginalisation, exploitation, and slavery. Violence involves physical acts like killing, beating, maiming, raping, and destroying, or non-physical acts like harassment, intimidation, ridiculing, humiliating, and degradation (Young, 2009). The reconstruction of the oppressive systems in the imaginary future arguably affirms that the ideology which birthed the black subjection and dehumanisation on racial grounds could still endure to the distant future unless resolved conclusively. The pessimistic projection of the black future can therefore be seen as an implicit warning to the contemporary black generation that an optimistic future is not guaranteed until bad governance and inept economic policies, which always predispose black people to exploitation by much richer, are reviewed.

Okorafor’s fiction also enacts strategies of empowerment like humanisation, reclamation, and valorisation of African culture, awarding black characters unique attributes like supernatural strength, agelessness, immortality, resilience, strength, and intellect in order to resist slavery, exploitation, and dehumanisation. *The Book of Phoenix* thus affirms that Afrofuturism was born out of the need to sanitise the soiled and tragedised image of the Black people. Through Afrofuturism, black people are able to arise triumphantly from pits of enforced historical oblivion and social death to reclaim their erased past and their sullied selves.

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