

Afrofuturist Vision And Identity: Perspectives On Binti And Dawn

Mr. Ashwin M. Patil¹, Dr. S. D. Palwekar²

¹Assistant Professor of English

M. B. Patel College, Sadak Arjuni, Dist. Gondia-441807 Email:
patilashwin72@yahoo.in

²Professor and Head Department of English, Post Graduation
Teaching Department

R.T.M.Nagpur University, Nagpur.

Abstract

Afrofuturism, a genre that merges science fiction, fantasy, and African diaspora culture, serves as a powerful framework for exploring Black identity, technology, and history. This paper examines Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* and Octavia Butler's *Dawn* as exemplars of Afrofuturist narratives that reimagine identity through the lens of cultural hybridity, transhumanism, and futuristic possibilities. *Binti*, a Himba girl traveling to an intergalactic university, maintains her cultural heritage while navigating alien encounters. Conversely, Lilith Iyapo in *Dawn* undergoes genetic modification and negotiates her human identity in a post-apocalyptic world ruled by extraterrestrials. Both protagonists resist marginalization and forge new understandings of self and community through the intersection of race, technology, and resilience. This study highlights Afrofuturism's role in challenging dominant narratives, reclaiming Black histories, and envisioning alternative futures rooted in empowerment and collective liberation.

Keywords Afrofuturism, Black identity, transhumanism, cultural hybridity, science fiction, African diaspora, speculative fiction, race and technology, marginalization, empowerment

Introduction

Afrofuturism, a genre so distinctive in its form and treatment of black subjectivity that it created a prestigious niche for itself in the mainstream literature through vast array of works combining together the elements of science fiction, fantasy, and African diaspora culture. Afrofuturism places onus on the exploration of the themes of identity, technology and on the broader scale black experience in the light of changed circumstances. The genre although exploited in the past as a part of huge body of Science fiction earlier, it became known to the world only with the definition of the cultural critic Mark

Dery in 1994. In an attempt to define this distinctive genre in his seminal essay entitled 'Black to the Future: Interview with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose', Dery defines "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture- and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future- might for want of a better term be called 'Afrofuturism'." (Dery 179) The definition invited divergent opinions. Some of the critics vehemently criticised the definition and charged it to be conceived through white lens with biased mindset. Yatsa Womack turning down the definition defined the genre of Afrofuturism as "an artistic genre that blends imagination, technology, Black cultures, liberation, and mysticism. It is a way of looking at the future and alternate realities through a Black cultural lens." (Womack 9). Further widening the scope the genre, Alondra Nelson placed emphasis on broader concept of Blackness. In an insightful definition, Nelson describes "Afrofuturism is a vision of the future-including science, technology and its cultures in the laboratory, in social theory and in aesthetics-through the experience and perspective of African diasporic communities" (Nelson 12). The critics may perceive the movement through different perspectives but what holds true about the genre is "This unique artistic and cultural movement provides a powerful lens through which to examine the complexities of the Black experience, both in the present and in imagined futures (Carstens and Roberts 79). Afrofuturism not only transcends mere representation; it actively engages in re-imagining history, reclaiming narrative, and constructing empowering visions of what it means to be Black in a world often defined by marginalization and oppression (Youngquist 333).

Binti and Lilith Iyapo stand as an insignia of the narratives who through their lived experiences embark us on a journey that acquaints us and provides us with an opportunity to navigate cultural hybridity simultaneously challenging existing power structures and forging new understandings of self and community. The novels "*Dawn*" by Octavia Butler and "*Binti*" by Nnedi Okorafor exemplify the tenets of Afrofuturism in true sense by presenting protagonists who navigate cultural hybridity, historical trauma, and futuristic possibilities. While *Binti* focuses on intergalactic travel and self-discovery, *Dawn* rebuilds the future of planet earth through the involvement of extra-terrestrial species called Oankali. Despite their differing settings, both novels use speculative elements to explore themes of identity, power, and resistance. Transhumanism plays conspicuous role in both the novels in order for the narrators to heal the wounds of their past and present and imagine futurity. It acts on multiple levels viz. mental, spiritual,

cultural, physical and social and is instrumental in formation of their new identities.

At its core, Afrofuturism is concerned with the intersection of race, technology, and identity in the African diaspora. It provides a critical framework for examining the past, present, and future experiences of Black people, often challenging dominant narratives and envisioning alternative realities (O'Connell 291). In qualifying the tenets illustrated by O'Connell, 'Dawn' and 'Binti' potentially addresses the issues of race intersecting teaching in an attempt to forge identity. Reflecting on Butler's art of writing Melzer posits: Changing bodies, hybridity, treating the 'Other,' and extrapolating the apocalyptic human societies are of her major concerns. (Melzer, 14). In Dawn, Butler portrays Lilith Iyapo who represents acceptance of a new kind of identity infused with hybridity due to her transformation. She emerges as an influential and powerful agent among other human beings to save them as minority and forges altogether new identity modelled on the intervention of science and technology. 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. (Hashemi et al. 84-89) Binti is a brave Himba ambitious girl who defies everything in order to pursue her goal to study at an intergalactic prestigious Oomza Uni. In adapting to drastically changed circumstances, she fights all odds to form a new identity.

Binti, only Himba to be selected from her community at a prestigious intergalactic Oomza Uni, is a brilliant girl who helps her father in a family business of building astrolabes. In order to qualify for the Uni., she excels in mathematics and obtains a scholarship to pursue her dream. With a feeling of exhilaration in mind she recalls: When I'd received the scholarship to study at Oomza Uni, I'd gone into the desert and cried for hours. With joy. (Okorafor, 28) and her heart feels with pride when she listens to the words of an Old Khoush (a community) travel security officer saying: "You are the pride of your people, child," he said looking me in the eye. Then he smiled broadly and patted my shoulder" (Okorafor 15). Attributes like excellent mathematical ability, skill to develop astrolabes and transcending time and space with the help of an old amazing device called *edan*, empower Binti to adapt to her changed circumstance. It also provides her a new sense of identity, voice and power. We witness Binti's journey of identity formation since the moments she leaves her people and planet. We come across a rebellious girl when she says: 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. (Okorafor 10) She is well informed that by defying her people, her tradition and her society, she is turning down her marriage prospects as going away would diminish her marriage ability to zero level because: "no man wanted a woman who had run away" (Okorafor 8) She remains adamant on her decision and fights all odds to carve out a niche for herself in an alien atmosphere. Towards the end, she succeeds in her mission to establish peace among humans and aliens.

Dawn revolves around Lilith who after awakening finds herself on different planet, far different from planet Earth. She had been kept sleeping for two hundred and fifty years. Just when she awoke, she was confronted by an alien people called Oankali. In the first conversation with Jdahya, Oankali to know about her location, Jdahya says: "You're what? From some other world?" "From a number of other worlds, You're one of the few English speakers who never considered that she might be in the hands of extraterrestrials. (Butler 11). In the meantime, she learns that the Earth was completely ravaged by the Nuclear war and everything that used to exist is longer there. Human race in a mad rat race and their insane thirst for power has devastated everything. A few of humans were saved by Oankali and given a new lease of life to start afresh on planet earth. But, in order to reclaim earth, first the humans have to learn new ways to live life and come to terms with Oankali's expectations. Lilith has significant role to play in this regard as she has been assigned the task of leading this small group of humans to start their new life on their planet. However, they will be restrained from using their technology as they have brought havoc by misusing it simultaneously from their past as it is rebirth for them and they need not to know about their past. Jdahya says: "You'll begin again. We'll put you in areas that are clean of radioactivity and history. You will become something other than you were" (Butler 36). Lilith has to learn Oankali way of life and teach Oankali the human way. She has to cater to the needs of teaching and training survived group of humans as Jdahya says: "You'll live with my family for a while- live as one of us as much as possible. We'll teach you your work." "You'll Awaken a small group of humans, all English-speaking, and help them learn to deal with us. You'll teach them the survival skills we teach you. Your people will all be from you would call civilized societies." (Butler 34) As the novel reaches end, Lilith after going through many trials and tribulations where her capabilities are put to litmus test succeeds in her goal to send a group of human back to their homeland. However, she is compelled to remain with Oankali to prepare and train another batch of humans.

Afrofuturism reimagines Black identity within futuristic and science-fictional landscapes, challenging traditional narratives that often exclude African cultures from speculative genres (Womack 13). Mainstream science fiction has always turned blind eye to provide space to the African culture in its array of literature produced. It led to the emergence of Afrofuturism which was dominantly rooted in African tradition, beliefs, value system and spirituality. In this context, Afrofuturism reinvents and updates African culture by interconnecting with black futurity. This black futurity quite often but not always provides a optimistic picture of future. As Womack states: "Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total re-envisioning of the past and speculation about the future life with cultural critiques" (Womack 9). It is seen "as a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens" (Womack 9). Thus, African culture casts a significant impact on the identity formation of narrators which is evident in *Binti* and *Dawn* as well.

Binti although leaves behind her own people and her planet, she carries the baggage of her culture, tradition and belief system with her even in the intergalactic travel. She never surrenders to the alien gaze of people and never denounces her cultural identity because culture for her is her very existence. She is accustomed to smear her body with *otjize*, an orange substance made of clay from her land and oil from certain fragrant flowers. She takes pride in being Himba. It must be noted here that Himba people due to scarcity of water do not bath and use *otjize* instead. When Okwu curiously asks about *otjize*, Binti replies: "Mostly...mostly clay and oil from my homeland. Our land is desert, but we live in the region where there is sacred red clay." "Why do you spread it on your skins?" "Because my people are sons and daughters of the soil," I said. "And...It's beautiful." (Okorafor 47) When it demands the jar of *otjize* she says: "I couldn't give all my *otjize* to this Meduse; this was my *culture*" When it further presses her she replies: "If your chief knows my people, then he will have told you that taking it from me is like taking my soul," I said, my voice cracking. (Okorafor 49). These pieces of conversation show how much she was rooted in her culture. She was the product of her culture which she revered the most in her life. Her culture was her soul and she cannot be separated from it. Because, this separation from the culture was nothing less than death to her. She used to borrow the very sense of her identity from these cultural practices. She derives strength to fight even the toughest battle simply from the clay because it not mere clay but home to her. "I sat in the landing chair beside my window, hand-rolling *otjize* into my plaits. I looked at my reddened hands, brought them to my nose and sniffed. Oily clay that sang of sweet flowers, desert

wind, and soil. *Home*, I thought, tears stinging my eyes. I should not have left.” (Okorafor 38). In *Binti*, Okorafor has also confronted the issue of beauty. Although the idea of beauty is subjective, we must accept that the concept of beauty has a lot to do with the colonial mindset of the people. Okorafor questions the European concept of beauty and portrays *Binti* as a strong girl who despite the castigating, mocking and criticizing gaze of the people, often take pride in her appearance. She straightway rejects the glances of these biased people and behaves self-confident in whatever situation she may be. When she leaves for Oomza Uni., the attire she chooses is very much Himba- a long red skirt, a light orange wind-top and heavy anklets which jingle unstoppably. Indeed, she loves her appearance very much and loves her braided hair in particular. Although she has to face difficult situation first in the shuttle when her hair slaps the passengers, then at the launch station when two Khoush women mocks at her *otjize*-smeared hair and lastly when Heru hurls plaits of her hair, she keeps calm. As she is convinced that there is nothing to be ashamed of in her hair. Her cultural identity always provides her self-assurance and boosts her self-esteem.

Contrary to *Binti* who is well conversant with her cultural identity and proud of her ancient Himba culture, *Dawn* begins with the loss of cultural identity in the aftermath of war on some alien planet inhabited by alien species called an Oankali. Although, rebellious initially, she surrenders to Oankali and allows them change her genetically. She does not perceive Oankali as enemy although sceptical about their intentions. In order for the larger good of humanity and revival of life earth, she emerges as a personality who is both combination of human body and Oankali special powers per se hybrid individual. In this respect, Butler provides an optimistic interpretation of African American futuristic identity by presenting a black female’s future and genetic engineering (Mann 61-76). Within Afrofuturist narratives, identity is often portrayed as fluid and multifaceted, shaped by historical trauma, cultural heritage, and the potential for technological advancement. Afrofuturism acknowledges the complexities of identity formation, particularly for those who exist at the margins of society, and offers empowering visions of self-discovery and collective liberation (Pindi 23). *Lilith* who is awakened after two hundred and fifty years struggles to rebuild her identity but what she receives is nothing but the hybrid sense of identity. After the awakening, she is no longer the same Yoruban black girl who was keenly interested in anthropology. This inclination towards the discipline of anthropology shows how she wanted to study the varied cultures. When Tate questions her about reasons for her keen interest in anthropology she says: “I started out wanting to do exactly that, *Lilith* said. “Snoop, Seek. It seemed to me that my culture-ours-was running headlong over a cliff. And, of course,

as it turned out, it was. I thought there must be saner ways of life.” (Butler 149). Time and again when on Onkali’s planet, she keeps thinking about her life on earth. But, she has to adjust with the Oankali way of life. She is left with no other alternative but to accept the submission to Onkali. Because, a revolt against them would mean to lose the last chance to survive and return back to earth. When the memory of her homeland keeps tormenting her she asks Nikanj to take her to the place where she can witness open sky and have a full view of other planets. She gets very emotional when she perceives her own continent i.e. Africa and earth in particular. “She searched hungrily for familiar continental outlines. She believed she had found a few of them-part of Africa and the Arabian peninsula.....but it was Earth that drew her gaze. Nikanj let her look at it until her own tears blinded her.” (Butler 130). At times, Lilith even suffers feeling of alienation. When she is to live in the house of Ahajas and Dichaan, she feels alone, alien and outsider. Oankali did not want the surviving humans to know about their past. When Lilith ask Nikanj to provide writing material, he avoids replying to her demand. They wanted to wipe out traces of their past as they wanted to start their new life on earth afresh. For Lilith, it is not to maintain the question of her cultural identity but rather her human identity. Because, the group of people she awakens questions her identity as human and are sceptical about it. When Allison puts question mark on her human identity doubting her to be alien construct, she clarifies: “This would be so goddamn much easier if I weren’t human,” she said. “Think about it. If I weren’t human, why the hell would I care whether you got raped?” (Butler 204). Lilith although aware about her cultural past, does not express her cultural identity in the subtle as is seen in the case of Binti. Rather, she accepts her role as an influential agent to act upon the directions of the Oankali with a positive aspiration to rebuild human society on earth and revive humanity. Her personality is transformed after genetic modification and she is altogether a different personality. She is not undermined by her past life and succeeds in de-marginalising her identity.

Conclusion:

Afrofuturism uses imaginative storytelling, speculative fiction, and artistic expression to explore themes of alienation, displacement, and the search for belonging, reflecting the lived experiences of many within the African diaspora (Nwanyanwu 386). There is sense of displacement and belonging in Binti as well as in Lilith. Time and again both the protagonists strive hard to get back to their roots as is evident from the novels. However, for Binti this search of identity is very subtle. Lilith on the other hand doesn’t show her cultural traits so dominantly as Binti. For her survival is her priority. Their identities are very fluid. They are constantly in state of change. It is evident from

both the novels and as it the basic premise of Afrofuturism, both the narrators basically use technology to ensure positive futurity for them and their community as a whole. They always welcome technological advancement and adapt themselves to the changing circumstances. They see the ray of hope in the use of technology and exploit as an instrument for the amelioration of their community. Identity for them is a continuous self-discovery where at every step they discover something new about their own self and adapt to it for collective liberation of their community. Afrofuturism seeks to challenge monolithic representation of the concept of blackness. It emphasizes on diverse expressions of identity which is clearly evident in *Binti* and *Dawn* as well. It keeps the black voices and experiences at the centre as is evident- Binti being Himba and Lilith being Yoruban. It also stresses the need for demarginalization. Both of the protagonists in order to forge their new identity demarginalize their role as black African persona and uplift themselves as powerful heroines. Both *Binti* and *Dawn* exemplify Afrofuturism's ability to interrogate identity, history, and technology. While Okorafor's novel presents a hopeful vision of cross-cultural understanding and self-determination, Butler's work serves as a stark reminder of historical traumas that continue to shape Black experiences. Together, these novels underscore the complexity of Afrofuturism, blending speculative fiction with deeply rooted social, cultural and historical concerns.

Works Cited

- 1) Butler, Octavia. *Dawn*. Headline Publishing Group, London 2022
- 2) Carstens, Delphi, and Mer Roberts. "Protocols for Experiments in African Science Fiction." *Scrutiny*2, vol. 14, no. 1, Taylor & Francis, 1 May 2009, p. 79, doi:10.1080/18125440903151694.
- 3) Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." In *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Edited by Mark Dery,. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994. pp.179–222
- 4) Hashemi, Zahra and et al. Voice and Identity Formation in Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* Trilogy: an Afrofuturist Perspective. *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding*, Vol. No.9, Issue 5, May 2022. Pp 84-89
- 5) Mann, Justin. L. Pessimistic futurism: Survival and Reproduction in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*. *Feminist Theory*, 19(1), 61-76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700117742874>
- 6) Melzer, Patricia. *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*. University of Texas Press. 2006
- 7) Nelson, Alondra. *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Every Day Life*. New York University Press, 2001.

- 8) Nwanyanwu, Augustine U. "Transculturalism, Otherness, Exile, and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." *Matatu*, vol. 49, no. 2, Brill, 15 Nov. 2017, p. 386, doi:10.1163/18757421-04902008.
- 9) O'Connell, Hugh Charles. "'We Are Change': The Novum as Event in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 3, Cambridge University Press, 1 Sept. 2016, p. 291, doi:10.1017/pli.2016.24.
- 10) Okorafor, Nnedi. *Binti*. A Tom Doherty Associates Book, New York September 2015
- 11) Pindi, Gloria Nziba. "Hybridity and Identity Performance in Diasporic Context: An Autoethnographic Journey of the Self Across Cultures." *Culture Studies Critical Methodologies*, vol. 18, no. 1, SAGE Publishing, 25 Oct. 2017, p. 23, doi:10.1177/1532708617735636.
- 12) Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*. Lawrence Hill Books, an imprint of Chicago Review Press, 2013.
- 13) Youngquist, Paul. "The Space Machine: Baraka and Science Fiction." *African American Review*, vol. 37, Saint Louis University, 1 Jan. 2003, p. 333, doi:10.2307/1512318