Revue de Traduction & Langues **Volume 19 Numéro 2/2020**, **pp.290-304**
Journal of Translation & Languages مجلة الترجمة واللغات
ISSN (Print): 1112-3974 EISSN (Online): 2600-6235

The Strong Binti in Nnedi Okorafor's African American Science Fiction

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Received: 14/07/2019; **Accepted**: 06/11/2020, **Published:** 31/12/2020

Abstract: *By looking carefully at the history of science fiction, we can notice that African American authors have been excluded from the scene for a long time due to the "whiteness" of the genre in terms of writing and publication. In addition to racism, sexism persists in the science fiction community. Hence, marginalized black women writers of science fiction try to include more black women characters in their literary works. Through Binti, Binti: Home, and Binti: The Night Masquerade, Nnedi Okorafor focuses on the experience of being black and woman in a technological society of the future. This study discusses how Okorafor provides sharp comments on the lives of black women in America in terms of "race" and "gender." She challenges the stereotypical image of the black woman as "other" through the subversion of white norms and traditions. In this analysis, we use "Afrofuturism" and "black feminism" as a theoretical framework since "Afrofuturism" tackles African American issues related to twentieth-century technoculture, and "black feminism" deals with black women empowerment. The major character, Binti, proves that she deserves to reach a higher position as an empowered girl of the future, which gives her self-confidence to be autonomous and to have control over her own life.*

Keywords: *Binti trilogy - black feminism - black race – gender - science fiction - the other.*

الملخص: بالنظر مليا لتاريخ أدب الخيال العلمي الإفريقي-الأمريكي نجد ان هذا النوع من الأدب كان غائبا عن الواجهة لفترة طويلة من الزمن وذلك راجع لسيطرة الرجل الأبيض علي اساليب النشر و الكتابة. فالميز العنصري تجاه الكتاب السود لايزال مستمرا في مجتمع الخيال العلمي. لكن مع ذلك نجد ان كاتبات الخيال العلمي الإفريقيات-الأمريكيات

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المهمشات يحاولن ادراج عدد اكبر للنساء السوداوات في أدبهن. من خلال ثلايتها *Binti, Binti: Home, and Binti: The Night Masquerade*، نجد ان الكاتبة نندي أوكورايفور تركز على تجربة ان تكون إمراة وسوداء في الوقت ذاته في مجتمع مستقبلي متطور. تناقش هذه الدراسة كيف ان أوكورايفور تنتقد حياة النساء السوداوات في أمريكا وذلك من خلال تسليط الضوء على عنصرين اثنين وهما: العرق و الجنس. كما تبحث هذه الدراسة في تحدي الصورة النمطية للمرأة السوداء كآخر وذلك من خلال كسر أعراف و قواعد الرجل الأبيض في الكتابة. نستخدم في هذه الدراسة كلا من الأفروفيوتريزم و النسوية السوداء كأطر نظرية بما أن الأفروفيوتريزم لها صلة بالمواضيع الافريقية من حيث الثقافة التكنولوجية في القرن العشرين وكذا النسوية السوداء لعلاقتها بتمكين المرأة السوداء. لقد برهنت الشخصية الرئيسية بنتي انها تستحق بلوغ منزلة مرموقة كفتاة مستقبلية قوية و هذا ما منحها التقة كي تقرر مصيرها وحياتها بنفسها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ثلاثية بنتي - النسوية السوداء- العرق الاسود – الجنس - الخيال العلمي -الاخر

1. Introduction

Science fiction is historically considered as a white male genre. However, Nnedi Okorafor challenges the scarcity of female writing in black science fiction through her trilogy, *Binti* (2015), *Binti: Home* (2017), *Binti: The Night Masquerade* (2018), to create her own science fiction by subverting the norms and traditions of the genre. Through an imagined futuristic society, Okorafor criticizes the present world of black women by giving some perspectives on the concepts of "race" and "gender." Therefore, the main questions we investigate in this study are: first, how does Okorafor criticize the present world of black women in terms of "race" and "gender"? Second, how does Okorafor challenge the stereotypical image through the representation of an empowered black woman of the "future" and the development of her power as a "Master Harmonizer"? Third, how does this empowerment serve a black woman's interest? We attempt to answer these questions in the light of "Afrofuturism" and "black feminism" since Okorafor addresses the empowerment of black women in a future technoculture. We rely on seminal works on black feminism by Patricia Hill Collins and

bell hooks[1], as well as on Afrofuturism by Mark Dery and Ytasha Womack.

2. Black Feminist Science Fiction and Afrofuturism

Before the 1970s, science fiction was dominated by male writers who tried to portray women as beings who lack the power to protect themselves from aliens or robots. Through their "focus on science and technology," they "naturally exclude women and by implication, considerations of gender" (Merrick, 2003, p. 241). In the 1960s, the United States has witnessed the Civil Rights Movement, which has influenced both society and literature. The considerable contributions of African American women writers in the field of literature can be noticed since the 1970s. This literary movement is considered as "a distinct period in Afro-American literary history" (Gates, 1990, p. 3), in which marginalized African American women writers started tackling the issues of being black and woman. The Civil Rights Movement had a positive impact on this movement.

Feminist science fiction, in general, can be considered as a recent sub-genre of science fiction (Roberts, 2000, p. 91). The whiteness of science fiction, which has controlled the scene for a long period, has changed to include a more diverse body of texts. Feminists have entered the male-centered world of science fiction; black women, in particular, "who are alien in relation to patriarchal society," have attempted to change the perception of the alien (Barr as cited in Roberts, 2000, p. 120).

2.1 Representation of Blacks in Mainstream Science Fiction

As science fiction has witnessed a huge development in the twentieth century, the United States and Europe have been on their way to build their own empire and "colonial rule in Africa" (Benabdi, 2018, p.43), Caribbean, Asia and Latin America "in which an empire establishes itself, justifies itself and continues by putting out the cultural message that […] raises up the dominant culture, […] by attacking those who are not part of that culture" (as cited in Roberts, 2000, p. 50). The tropes that reflect the colonial gaze towards the other exotic cultures started to emerge

[1] bell hooks chooses not to capitalize the first letters of her name to subvert writing norms.

and "Science Fiction has been an uncanny site of encountering others" (Myungsung, 2017, p. 8). In an encounter with an alien in mainstream science fiction, the alien is depicted as an "other." In many situations, this "other" is represented as an "enemy." In other words, he/she is portrayed as "a source of imminent danger, even extinction, for human race" (Edwards, 2011, p. 3). This leads to "shape American political behavior on the world stage and attitudes towards new preconceived threats" (Kerboua, 2018, p. 48).

However, a question comes to mind about the representation of this alien other who can "signify everything" that is "other to the dominant audience" including blacks (Marrick as cited in Edwards, 2011, p. 3). Adam Roberts (2000) explains that the depiction of the other is predominately linked to blackness. *Farnham's Freehold* (1964) by Robert Heinlein is an example of the dehumanization of black people. It is about a black character whose name is Joseph Abundons who serves a white family. America suffers from famine and Joseph becomes a leader of a black group. In order to save himself and his group from famine, he starts murdering and eating white people. This story expresses the deep anxiety of whites from blacks (p. 120). The absence of a positive description indicates that there is nothing there for them; they should keep away from the scene according to whites (Testerman, 2012, p. 51).

2.2. Why is Black Science Fiction Marginalized?

Through looking carefully at the genre history, science fiction is associated with white male writers, readers, editors, and protagonists (Salvaggio, 1984, p. 78). Saunders, a black science fiction author, provides a sharp comment on the situation of the genre. According to him, science fiction is "as white as a Ku Klux Klan meeting," and "a black man or woman in a space-suit was an image beyond the limits of early science fiction writers' imagination" (as cited in Jarret, 2013, p. 361). Carrington (2016) uses the expression "The Whiteness of Science Fiction" to refer to two things: first, "the overrepresentation of white people among the ranks of SF authors," and second, to "the overrepresentation of white people's experiences within SF texts" (p. 16). White science fiction author Edgar Rice Bourroughs assumes that "White men have imagination, Negroes have little,

and animals have none" (as cited in Testerman, 2012, p. 45). Therefore, Europeans maintained their "superior power upon the colonial periphery for so long" (Aaid & Maoui, 2019, p. 70).

Black women writers, like black male writers, suffered from the publishing industry in a white-dominated culture. First, the publishers could reject the literary works of black women because they consider them as inferior in their writing to white (women) writers. This is "based upon internalized racist standards of universality of appeal or deviance from ethnocentric principles of excellence in writing." Second, the publishers might accept only to publish short stories to some chosen writers of color which can be considered as a distortion and domination to the image of minority experiences, "so, the lives of women of color are scrutinized, distilled, whitewashed, and offered to a scrutinized, distilled, whitewashed American public" (Helford, 2002, p. 130). Samuel Ray Delaney, a science fiction writer, comments on the situation as follows: "they signaled technology. And technology was like a placard on the door saying, 'Boys Club! Girls, Keep Out […] Blacks […] go away" (as cited in Dery, 2008, p. 9).

2.3 Afrofuturism

The notion of Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery in his article "Black to the Future." According to him, Afrofuturism refers to:

> Speculative Fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century techno-culture – and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future (2008, p. 8).

Lisa Yaszek explains that in the first part of his definition, Dery indicates that Afrofuturism as an aesthetic genre is closely linked to science fiction. In the second half of the definition, he reveals that Afrofuturism includes different groups of artists from the Afrodiasporic experiences who manage to work together in the different genres in order to plan for the future of blacks (2006, p. 42).

Afrofuturism is a portmanteau word composed of "Afro" and "Futurism" in which both terms create an unusual relation. The term "Afro" is usually associated with primitive people and backwardness according to European people, and the term "futurism" refers to modernity and technology. Following common belief, the two terms somehow contradict each other (Elia, 2014, p. 83). However, Alondra Nelson, who has contributed to the development of the concept of Afrofuturism, views it from another angle. For her, when we mix both terms "Afro" and "Futurism," the result is that "race disappears into technology," and "Afrofuturism works on a metaphorical level to reject a number of clichés that have commonly referred to people of African descent" (as cited in James, 2015, p. 9). By challenging stereotypes, black science fiction writers can re-evaluate the role of blacks in Western community in order to create alternative roles in the future (Elia, 2014, p. 83).

Afrofuturism has three essential aims. First, the Afrofuturist author should write good fiction stories. Second, the other main concern of the Afrofuturist writer is to recover the lost history of the black nation and to show how this history is important to constitute the culture of today. Third, the Afrofuturist author wants to see the influence of this history on shaping the new visions of the future. Afrofuturism is more than telling stories about the bad past; it is rather the ability to employ stories that are talking about the past and the present in order to empower future (Yaszek, 2013, p. 2).

3. Race and the Other

In the twenty-first century America where racism still exists against black women, the future of race is somehow foggy. White writers consider that race is not a serious problem in the alternative future. According to R. Scholes, "distinctions based on race will become invalid in possible future worlds," and "it is therefore unnecessary for a character to have a distinct racial background" because "humans become remarkable for their humanity, not their ethnicity" (as cited in Rutledge, 2001, p. 239). However, the question of race is still marginalized; in his book *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011), Isiah Lavender III

criticizes science fiction for its proclivity to marginalize racial identification:

> Because sf helps us think about the continually changing present through the dual lens of defamiliarization and extrapolation, it also helps us to think about alternate tomorrows as well as to question images of these tomorrows, distortions of the various historical presents and realities (2011, p. 27).

In this context, race plays a significant role in Okorafor's trilogy: *Binti*, *Binti: Home*, and *Binti: The Night Masquerade*. This is clearly visible where her protagonist, Binti, is both black and female. In an interview, Okorafor answers the question why her main female characters are always African Americans by saying: "Part of why I started writing was I wanted to tell stories of women and girls—African women and girls" ("Wired Book," 2017). Through inserting a black heroine in her fiction as a primary character, Okorafor is able to reflect a world where the black woman can contribute to building it, and most importantly, to become fully represented; "addressing this blackness in sf is centural to changing how we read, define, and critique the genre itself" (Lavender, 2011, p. 24). This depiction is a response to the previous science fiction novels which are dominated by white protagonists. This has a relation with Womack's definition of Afrofuturism through re-creating blacks as main characters, as opposed to minor characters (2013, p. 8).

Binti (2015), the first novella in this trilogy, tells the story of a young black girl whose name is Binti. She is the first person in her Himba tribe who has accepted to go to the finest university in the galaxy. However, her relatives refuse her space adventure to Oomza University because in the Himba culture, there are some specifics about leaving home. She boards the ship and leaves her planet to seek education from extraterrestrials. Suddenly, alien creatures known as Meduse hijack the ship. All those who are in the ship are killed, and Binti finds herself surrounded by these floating jellyfish creatures. She is saved by her Edan, a piece of technology. She starts to build a friendship with Okwu, a Meduse with whom she communicates through her Edan. Due to a change in her genetics, Binti becomes half-Meduse and half-Himba. She comes to know that the Meduse

have a problem with the Khoush of Oomza University who have stolen the stinger of their Meduse's chief. The Meduse want to take back the stringer of their chief, and Binti suggests to be their ambassador to the Khoush. As a Master Harmonizer, which is a meditative state that enables her to communicate with the mathematical flow of the universe and to make it as one current, Binti succeeds to mediate between the two sides. The scholars agree to give back the chief's stringer to the Meduse without conflicts; Binti starts studying at the university, proving her talent and capacity.

Binti: Home (2017), the second novella in Okorafor's trilogy, describes the trauma that Binti has experienced in the Third Fish spaceship in order to reach Oomza University. She has PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), which is a mental health condition triggered by the terrifying attack of the Meduse on the spaceship. After one year in Oomza University, Binti decides to come back to Earth and go on pilgrimage for reconciliation with herself, having become part human and part Meduse. However, the members of her family are so angry because she has left her duty to be her father's successor as a Master Harmonizer. The problem becomes worse because she brings Okwu with her; he becomes the first Muduse who comes to Earth. Instead of finding security, Binti sees the Night Masquerade which is a creature that is supposed to be seen only by men. Binti is taken by the Desert People, the Enyi Zinariya, in order to learn more about her true heritage. She acquires the Enyi Zinariya power which enables her to communicate through long distances. The alien technology has awakened in her body. During her absence, the Khoush come after Okwu which is considered as a bad sign of futuristic war between the Khoush and Muduse on the Himba land.

In *Binti: The Night Masquerade* (2018), the last part in Okorafor's trilogy, Binti comes to know through her advanced abilities that her home and her friend Okwu are under attack from the Khoush. She comes back home with the help of Mwinyi, a member of the Enyi Zinariya people, in order to help Okwu and her family. As she tries to make a compromise between the Khoush and the Meduse in order to stop the war, Binti is betrayed by the elders of the Himba community. However, she succeeds to end up the war between the Khoush and the Meduse on the Himba land. She dies and her friends, Mwinyi and okwu, decide

to take her to the rings of Saturn. On the spaceship, Binti comes back to life again due to the New Fish DNA. She returns to Oomza University to learn more and enhance her abilities.

By giving some perspectives on the concept of race, Okorafor criticizes the present and past world of black people, and then, "empowering the position of suppressed groups in the present" (Chaami & Grazib, 2019, p. 144). Through her major character, Ocorafor wants to convey some visions on race. Binti describes herself as "Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib." Although her people own techno-mathematical skills, they are considered as a minority. The Khoush, as a dominant group, exert power on the Himba people and consider them as inferiors like their "African" ancestors who "were forced" to become "slaves" (Beghdadi, 2018, p. 101). Binti states, "despite the fact that they needed us and our astrolabes to survive…my people were maltreated by the Khoush majority" (2015, p. 54). Okorafor insists that racism and marginalization African Americans suffer from today will still exist in the futuristic society.

Moreover, Okorafor describes how Binti travels across space to Oomza University and how she boards the spaceship with the majority of the Khoush who are strangers to her culture and customs. Marginalization and the state of being an "other" is fully presented in Binti's future world. Stuart Hall (1997) demonstrates that "othering is an act of power by the dominant culture over the marginal culture" (p. 249). Binti is away from her home and she is different among the Khoush due to her race. She says, "here in the launch port, most were Khoush […] here I was an outsider" (2015, p. 13). As part of Himba women's culture, Binti covers herself and her hair with Otjize which is a substance made by mixing ochre and butterfat together. This cultural heritage, which is inherited from the ancestors of Himba women, makes her subject to humiliation and racist discourse by the Khoush who regard her as primitive and inferior to them despite her prodigious mathematical skills.She says, "as I stood in line for boarding security, I felt tug at my hair. I turned around and met the eyes of a group of Khoush women. They were all staring at me," and "I hear it smells like shit because it is shit…these dirt bathers are a filthy people, the first woman mattered" (2015, p. 9). However, this act does not thwart the will

of Binti because she knows that she has an aim to reach: "those women talked about me, the men probably did too. But none of them knew what I had, where I was going, who I was" (2015, p. 17). Patricia Hill Collins (1989), a black feminist scholar, insists that in order to deal with the situation of being subordinates, black women should confront the perspectives of the dominant group and start developing "self-defined standpoints based on their own experience and resistance" (p. 749).

On the spaceship, Binti is subject to a biological transformation, and she becomes half-human and half-alien. She becomes a hybrid between two races: she is no longer fully Himba since her DNA is infused by Meduse DNA. Her hair, which is plaited into a complex mathematically precise design that carries her family's bloodline, history, and culture, has been replaced by tentacles, or what the Meduse call "okuoko." Binti has experienced a sense of fragmentation and estrangement that is evident in the second novella, *Binti: Home*, when she comes back as someone who is mentally and physically different. The state of being both Meduse and human makes her unwelcomed by her family and the Himba community as a whole. This biological change, which is forced on Binti by the Meduse, is subject to verbal violence by her parents, sisters, and the Himba elders. Instead of bringing harmony, according to them, her physical transformation brings shame. However, Collins (2000) states that:

> As the 'Others' of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the sense of belonging (p. 70).

It is important to trace the elements of Afrofuturism in Binti to discuss race in science fiction. The main concern of Afrofuturism is to employ stories that deal with the past in order to empower the future in an alternative world (Yaszek, 2013, p. 2). Moreover, Afrofuturism insists on the continued connection to one's origins and ancestry. In *Binti: Home,* Binti comes back home after one year in Oomza University. She goes through a journey to know more about her ancestors because her identity is shaped by theirs. Binti comes to know that she is the daughter of

the "Enyi Zinariya [who] are old old Africans" from her father's side (p. 57). Her grandmother teaches her the history of her own people:

> Our clan was even smaller and nomadic back then, and we became fast friends with the Zinariya. Though many of them left for Oomza within a few months, a few stayed with us for many years before going on to Oomza. Before leaving, they gave us something to help us communicate with them wherever they were and with each other other wherever we were (p. 58).

Even though the Enyi Zinariya are black people who are stereotyped as primitives, Okorafor depicts them as an enhanced society. Long ago, these Desert people met the Zinariya, an alien species who stopped at their desert land before going to Oomza University. The Zinariya is left in their genetic code which enables them to master the science of communication via communal speak-mind. Okorafor wants to convey that black women cannot detach themselves from their past which gives them power. The Enyi Zinariya genetic code is inherited in Binti's DNA which gives her strength to continue her path. Thus, the process of future self-definition should be identified with the past self-definition.

4. The Strong Binti

Okorafor addresses certain issues that are central to black feminism, especially the empowerment of black women. Thus, a black woman becomes at the center of the discussion as an active participant in the creation of a new futuristic society. Binti is the first Himba and the first black female who goes to Oomza University. Although the Himba are obsessed with technology and innovation, they prefer not to leave Earth; "they prefer to explore the universe by traveling inward, as opposed to outward" (2015, p. 12). However, Binti challenges others' expectations; she rebels against these social norms imposed on Himba women:

> I was defying the most traditional part of myself for the first time in my entire life. I was leaving in the dead of night and they had no clue. My nine siblings, all older than me except for my younger sister and brother, would never see this coming. My parents would never imagine I'd do such a thing in a million years (2015, p. 1).

The development of her individual voice gives her self-confidence to be autonomous and to have control over her own destiny.

bell hooks (1991) explains that in a black segregated society, "there is very little written about Black female intellectuals. When most Black folks think about 'great minds' they most conjure up male images" (p. 150). However, Okorafor depicts Binti as a first female Himba who has entered the most prestigious university in the galaxy. Binti believes that she has the capacity, as a mathematician, to enter this university. Through a journey of empowerment, she proves that she is the prototype of a strong black woman. According to Okorafor, race and gender are not obstacles for black women to be successful in the academic field. Binti defies two assumptions. The first one is that she is Himba and the Khoush consider them as less advanced despite the fact that her people are skilled in making astrolabes. The oversimplified image about her tribe does not constitute a hindrance to be a successful mathematician and to enter Oomza University. The second assumption is that she is a woman in a male society. According to hooks, talking about the situation of black women helps to "awaken a critical consciousness" (1989, p. 30). Black women should be freed from the position of the "other" which is imposed by both race and gender.

Binti proves that a black woman has strong abilities which help her deal with difficult situations. Okorafor depicts Binti as an enduring fighter who wants to bring harmony between the different races. The power of "harmonization" is depicted as an exclusive ability of this female character. She struggles twice to stop the war between the Khoush and the Meduse. The first success is when she has convinced the Meduse chief to be their ambassador to the Khoush. As a Master Harmonizer, she is able to negotiate with the Khoush male scholars to stop this war through mediating between the two sides. The second time, in *Binti: The Night Masquerade*, when the Khoush come after Okwu. Although Binti is betrayed by the Himba male elders, she has succeeded to stop the war on her land through calling on the deep culture of Himba by herself. She states:

> Because I was a master harmonizer and my path was through mathematics, I took what came and felt it as numbers, absorbed it as math, and when I spoke, I breathed it out. "Please," I said, the words coming from my mouth cool in my throat, pouring over my tongue and lips. I was doing it. I was speaking the words to power. I was uttering deep culture. "End this," I said, my voice full and steady. "End this now" (p. 108).

Both male leaders of the Khoush and the Meduse: Goldie, the Khoush king and Mbu, a military head, are eager to launch a war. Relying on what hooks calls "great minds," Binti uses the power of her mind to put an end to this war. She proves that she can control both male leaders. She is depicted as a woman who is "Superior," in comparison to these male leaders. In an act of heroism, she does not only save the lives of her people, but also the lives of the other races. Through Binti, Okorafor wants to convey the message that black women can decide about the destiny of their community along with men and sometimes, they can reach what men cannot achieve.

Through the stages of her journey, Binti becomes an empowered woman. In the first novella of Okorafor's trilogy, she leaves home to explore the outside world. In the second novella, she returns home to seek reconciliation with herself and to answer the question of who she is. In the last novella, she becomes her own person in her own way.

5. Conclusion

Black science fiction has been marginalized for a long period due to the "whiteness" of the genre. Although black women writers have been viewed as newcomers to the realm of science fiction, Okorafor's trilogy is a good example of the subversion of the white literary tradition of science fiction. The inclusion of a black female character in her fiction allows her to shed light on the situation of black women in terms of race and gender. Okorafor succeeds in challenging the stereotypical depiction of a black woman through giving power to her character, Binti, who acts as a model of an empowered girl of the future.

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