


Birthplace Revisited – a look at Humanity in Nnedi Okorafor

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Abstract

As the ultimate birthplace of Humanity, Africa is fertile ground for writings and rewritings of human history. The tragedies and atrocities in its historical path add to the relevance of reflecting on humankind through Africa. Thus, AfroSciFi is playing a pivotal role in 21st century utopian and dystopian thinking. Nigeria in particular has always been at the forefront of African literature, with remarkable contributions including Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The second decade of the 21st century welcomed the work of Nigerian-American Nnedi Okorafor as a cosmo/afropolitan, afrofuturistic voice. All three share a highly politicized type of writing and a stern opposition to reductive, dogmatic readings of the world, and of Africa in particular. In fact, all three, in various ways, embrace a hybrid tradition of western(ized) education applied to African exceptionalism and often seasoned by the bitter experience of the oppressed. Rejecting “the single story” and all stereotypes, whether friend or foe, is a constant concern in contemporary African fiction. When Nigeria comes to witness the literary work of young Nnedi Okorafor, the possibilities are almost limitless and bringing together African past and future is both feasible and challenging.

Keywords

Afrofuturism; AfroSciFi; Utopian Literature; Nigerian Literature; Nnedi Okorafor

Resumo

Enquanto berço derradeiro da Humanidade, África é um terreno fértil para escritas e reescritas da História humana. As tragédias e as atrocidades do seu percurso civilizacional acrescem à relevância de refletir sobre a Humanidade com recurso a África. Também por isso, a ficção científica africana (AfroSciFi) tem um papel central no pensamento utópico e distópico do século XXI. Na dianteira da literatura africana tem estado a Nigéria, com contribuições notáveis como as de Chinua Achebe e Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Na segunda década do século XXI irrompe o trabalho de Nnedi Okorafor como voz afrofuturista, cosmo/afropolitana. Todos três partilham uma escrita altamente politizada e a total oposição a leituras redutoras e dogmáticas do mundo e, particularmente, de África., assim como uma tradição híbrida de formação ocidental(izada) em contexto Africano, com ecos da experiência agreste de opressão. Rejeitar a “narrativa única” e todos os estereótipos é um tópico contante na ficção Africana contemporânea e quando o trabalho de Nnedi Okorafor chega à Nigéria as possibilidades já são ilimitadas e unir passado e futuro Africanos é simultaneamente factível e desafiante

Palavras-chave

Afrofuturismo; AfroSciFi; Literatura Utópica; Literatura Nigeriana; Nnedi Okorafor

Being militant and seeking to promote certain theories does not imply necessarily either having to make a photographic portrayal of reality or, on the opposite angle, telling lies. (Cunha, 2016, p. 560, translation mine)

As the ultimate birthplace of Humanity, Africa is fertile ground for writings and rewritings of human history. The tragedies and atrocities in its historical path add to the relevance of reflecting on humankind through Africa. Thus, AfroSciFi is playing a pivotal role in 21st century utopian and dystopian thinking. In fact, one can even say, in the line of Moradewun Adejunmobi's reflection, that science fiction would necessarily appeal to "African artists pondering the unfinished project of post-colonial liberation (Adejunmobi, 2016, p.267), as a simultaneous act of liberation and of revisiting. The history of African literature is deeply shaped by the process of colonization and de-colonization experienced throughout the continent and by the reestablishment of an identity which includes all the stages that generate its distinctiveness. Hence, the ethical angle is prevalent in most works¹. Still, many more look at the past than those that look to/at the future. As late as 2020 authors signal "Africa is absent from the future. In almost every future, dystopian or utopian, there is a continent-sized hole in the story" (Pereira, 2020).

And it is true that this "hole in the story" offers room for aspirational utopias, many of which may even be linked to various liberation struggles in the continent (cf. Moonsamy, 2016, p. 329). But, in fact, when the future is read in African fiction, it is more often linked to (or melted into) universal events (dystopian pandemics, drastic climate change, etc)². This paradoxical inclusion in the global stage – via shared disgrace – seems to level humanity placing it in the same dire conditions and before the same challenges. Thinkers like Allison Mackey go further in inferring that cases in which climate devastation sets the ground for AfroSciFi "can, at the very least, serve as antidotes to complacency in light of the uneven planetary distribution of resources³ or despair in the face of environmental devastation" (Mackey, 2018, p. 530). Africa crossed the 20th century moving from bountiful paradise to exploited prey and that circumstance tends to keep it in an eternal condition of Alterity. As such, when being established through contrast, African identity loses in complexity and variety. That too is the challenge of most contemporary African novelistic.

Nigeria, in particular, has always been at the forefront of African literature, with remarkable contributions including Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The second decade of the 21st century welcomed the work of Nigerian-American Nnedi Okorafor as a cosmo/afropolitan, afrofuturistic voice. All three

¹ Chielozona Eze, in a recent work on Ethics in Anglophone African Women's Literature, is adamant: "African literature has always addressed human rights" (Eze, 2016, p. v).

² Cf. as an example Pepetela, 2008.

³ Sometimes this happens in very specific terms as it happens in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* and the oil pipeline episode: "This moment, while whimsical, is grounded in Nigeria's very real economic dependency on exported oil" (Jue, 2017, p. 171).

share a highly politicized type of writing and a stern opposition to reductive, dogmatic readings of the world, and of Africa in particular. In fact, all three, in various ways, embrace a hybrid tradition of western(ized) education applied to African exceptionality and often seasoned by the bitter experience of the oppressed⁴. As the founding father of Nigerian – and possibly African – literature, Chinua Achebe, through his programmatic essays, becomes pivotal in defining the role of the African writer, and to him that is one of repossession:

Since Chinua Achebe`s popular statement, in his essay "The Novelist as a Teacher", that his stories are meant to correct negative impressions about the past, many Nigerian writers have revalidated the need to turn to the past in order to comprehend the present and to present for the future. Achebe clearly perceives storytelling as very important to both Nigerians and Africans in general. (Aiyetoro, 2016, p.229)

Thus, in a way, Chinua Achebe is quite focused on recuperating the complexity of African postcolonial identity through the establishing of contemporary Africanness. His lead position as writer and as intellectual is something later authors both resist and embrace, many of which verbally, as is the case of Nnedi Okorafor. Just as she admits to be thinking of Chinua Achebe`s *Things Fall Apart* in the writing of the opening lines of her novel *Who Fears Death* (Okorafor, 2011), Okorafor also recalls her rejection to reproduce his work, when confronting African studies academics at a book session in Schuler Books & Music, Lansing, MI: "[According to them] I must replicate *Things Fall Apart* for the millionth and one time (Of course, if I tried to do this, I`d have also been attacked because I`m an `Americanized Nigerian` to them and I therefore would have no business attempting such a feat)" (Okorafor, 2010b).

Rejecting "the single story" and all stereotypes, whether friend or foe, is a constant concern in contemporary African fiction. In Chimamanda Adichie`s well known 2009 lecture, the positioning is clear:

I`ve always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar...

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story (Adichie, 2009)

⁴ Nnedi Okorafor penned an article in 2015 titled "Writing Rage, Truth and Consequence" which is instrumental in understanding this complex circumstance (Okorafor, 2015).

When Nigeria comes to witness the literary work of young Nnedi Okorafor, the possibilities are almost limitless and bringing together African past and future is both feasible and challenging.

Nnedi Okorafor was born in 1974 as the African-American daughter of two Nigerian immigrants to the US and grew up “feeling like an outsider” (Anyangwe, 2017) who had to face the name-calling and chasing of skinheads in Chicago before becoming a professor and well-known author. Currently, the “speculative fiction writer” (Burnett, 2015, p.133), as Joshua Burnett calls her, is on her way to becoming a household name for American readers – and fiction-enthusiasts, with the novel *Who Fears Death* on its way to being adapted for tv by HBO in a production led by George R. R. Martin. Most of her work plays with African tradition and western-based futurism (cf. Rahn, 2019, p. 86), bringing magic into the equation – something she has no qualms with and which brings her close to a new sort of magical realism, mixed with fantasy, and which is prevalent in so-called Afro SciFi, announced in 2013 by Mark Bould (cf. Bould, 2013, p. 7). She does so bringing the world into it, whilst not abandoning Africa. Hence, Dustin Crowley’s choice to refer to her novels as “Afropolitan SF” (Crowley, 2019, p. 268). Okorafor’s positioning extends beyond the aesthetics of her writing into a political and philosophical positioning

Afrofuturist texts in general and Okorafor’s novel [*Lagoon*] in particular help to set the scene for a Black posthumanism that will recognise the complex topography of horizontal subjectivities to include all human actors. Black posthumanism will re-invent the term hu-“man” to go beyond the traditional Western (essentially still humanist) understanding of the term “man” as predominantly white and Western and will allow the intricate global networks of actors to establish an all-inclusive notion of the human. (Rahn, 2019, p. 84)

Other authors, like Joshua Burnett, describe some of Okorafor’s novels as “a postcolonial revision of speculative fiction and a speculative revision of postcolonialism” (Burnett, 2015, p. 133). Most agree with Matthew Omelsky’s qualifying Okorafor as “[t]he writer who in many ways opened up in the African postcrisis field” (Omelsky, 2014, p. 36).

However, we must always bear in mind the way Okorafor’s Africa is inherently postcolonial, and consequently both hybrid and always in touch with the global nature of humanity:

[Okorafor’s] fiction speculates about and subsequently strives to engender a genuinely postcolonial world in which particular, local Afro-centered identities and relations are simultaneously enabled, complicated, and transformed within complex geographies of planetary and cosmological connection (Crowley, 2019, p. 268)

Thus, it pays attention – both localized and universal – to issues that are common to all Humanity, as is the case with climate change and her reference to desertification of vast extensions of Africa in *Who Fears Death*. Still, Nature is used in that novel (and in most of Okorafor`s work) as an intrinsic part of the setting and worldview, never discussed directly in terms of ecology (cf. Curry, 2014, p. 38). This universal angle chosen by Nnedi Okorafor allows for a sharper, more acute reading of Africa itself and its role in the world. It accounts for – or risen by – her ability to stand on the side and critique the communities she shares roots with. In several interviews and public debates, for example, when asked about the weight of patriarchy in her life and work, Okorafor moves comfortably onto issues of patriarchy specific to Igbo culture. Though she claims that the underlying conclusions might easily be applied worldwide, she is completely unapologetic of focusing on a problem specific to the Nigerian community:

I learned through my siblings about the way widows were treated within Igbo custom, even the ones with Phd`s... like my mother. I was again infuriated. And I was reminded yet again of why I was a feminist (Okorafor, 2010a).

The ethical intent that lies beneath all her reproofs goes hand in hand with her choice of science fiction as a way of both criticizing the present and proposing alternatives for the future, making her "narrative of resistance" part of a tradition of Black women authors using sci-fi as a preferred method of critical fiction (cf. Dowdall, 2013, p. 173). Her own life-experience – as perceived by herself – as an in-between (racially, nationality-wise, but also in several personal traits highlighted by herself, such as growing up as both an athlete and a bookworm, or being healthy and then physically challenged) explains part of her fierce resistance to simplification and labelling also in her writing, in what Lisa Dowdall called "Okorafor`s trans-genre novels" (Dowdall, 2013, p. 178), and in the highly relevant blog entries the author posts on her politics, on her art, and on her writing process. In the case of *Who Fears Death*, Igbo echoes are retrieved in a futuristic setting as a way of "[d]isrupting gender hierarchies" (Capers, 2019, p. 15). Two of the most controversial issues in Africa when it comes to women rights are propelled into the future and made relevant in a raw and guileless fashion: female genital mutilation and ethnic cleansing through forced miscegenation. The descriptions are vivid and personal, as she uses "obscene violence as a rhetorical argument" (Monk, 2019, p. 93). Okorafor herself highlights the present relevance of her depictions, as when she attributes her attention to rape as a weapon of war to having recently read Emily Wax`s 2004 *Washington Post* article on Arab militiamen in Sudan using rape as a weapon of ethnic cleansing. Okorafor treats Africa as an agent, understanding and valuing its motifs while holding it accountable for its present and its future and having no

complacency in the face of destructive traditions. On occasion this led to accusations of misusing an opportunity to address the virtues of traditional African cultures, verging on unfairly suggesting complicity:

Who Fears Death's focus on the experiences of exclusion also means that the novel misses an opportunity to explore the potency of female-only institutions in Igbo societies. *Who Fears Death* focuses not on empowered female characters, but rather on a female character who must struggle to become empowered, a portrayal that, as Ezeigbo contends, reinforces the colonial stereotype of the downtrodden African woman (Ingram, 2013, p. 90)

Nnedi Okorafor is not oblivious of racial semiotic or narrative abuse, as she has proven vocally (cf. Drage, 2019, p. 73), but it would completely betray her rejection of the single narrative – a rejection common to so many other African writers – to have a Manichean reading of reality. Her dislike of a single voice and an only narrative is evident in *Who Fears Death* in the protagonist Onyesonwu, the daughter of Najeeba, an Okeke woman, and Daib, the Nuru man who raped her, and her attempt to rewrite (reclaim) the Great Book in order to deprive her biological father of mystical powers, but also to supersede the narrative which determined/dictated that the Okeke were slaves and the Nuru their masters. In the constant flow of past and future, ancient and modern, Okorafor blends fantasy with the rhythm of African storytelling (cf. Hugo, 2017, p. 49), as had Achebe before her, and with supposed traditions and communal interpretations of reality (cf. Cámara, 2014, p. 321), not in order to replace or even co-place said interpretations of reality, but in order to acknowledge and deal with “dictatorship through dictation, the effects of epistemological narratives on society and collective identity” (Pahl, 2018, p. 207). It is her cumulative counter-narrative(s) and her attempt to go beyond poles and to incorporate all narratives that is still currently mandating that Nnedi Okorafor establish and justify her own “lugar de fala”, as established by Djamila Ribeiro, her own standpoint: “I was basically accosted by ironically my own people: African academics” (Okorafor, 2010b).

Thus, Okorafor continues and expands Achebe and Adichie's plight for a complex, utterly post-colonial depiction of reality made out of multiple and contradictory stories, towards a truly collective future, for Humanity.

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