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Afrofuturism : Embracing and Reconstructing The Concept of Blackness and Womanhood Through Nnedi Okorafor's Binti (2015)

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Dedication

This work is wholeheartedly dedicated to my beloved parents, who through thick and thin have been there for me. Their emotional, moral, and financial support and guidance, is what make me who I am today, a strong daughter who knows how to celebrate her womanhood.

A special thanks to me, I and myself for the commitment and hard work I put into this research.

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Abstract

The aim of this research work is to examine the concept of Afrofuturism and the efforts the movement's pioneers dedicated to the reclamation of Black womanhood. Along the history, Black women's identity in Africa mainly those in the Diaspora was most of the time neglected; putting aside all the contributions these women helped the world with. While white females stood up for their rights through the mainstream of Feminism, coloured women felt the need to have movements of their own after being rejected by the newly created white ideologies. Concepts of womanism and Africana womanism have been embraced by Afrofuturists who worked to shed light on past issues and spread hope to a future more hopeful and lighter than the one already in existence. With Africans and African Americans in the forefront of such movements and ideologies, many writers have been inspired to speak for themselves and their people through music, poetry and novels. Binti by Nnedi Okorofor (2015) is a novel, which most perfectly described and portrayed the movement of Afrofuturism while focusing on the importance of one's identity, in this case, a Black woman's identity. Binti is a young courageous girl who stood against all previous judgements about her and her people, and explored a world very different from hers while staying faithful to her identity as a woman, a daughter and a Himba. How is Afrofuturism the umbrella under which womanism and Africana womanism fall? What is the difference between feminism and previously mentioned Black mainstreams? In addition, how does Nnedi Okorofor depict such concepts to reveal and expose past facts that could be changed for a better future? Such questions are behind this dissertation.

Key words

Afrofuturism, African Americans, Black womanhood, movements, ideologies,

Identity, Feminism, Womanism, Africana womanism, Nnedi Okorafor, Binti

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General Introduction

Throughout the years, Black people in Africa and more importantly of those in the diaspora have lived in complex and traumatic circumstances that date back to the days of slavery. Even with the abolition in 1863, these people were still deprived from the ability to express themselves or to imagine a future where they could be in the forefront. With such circumstances, Africans mainly in the diaspora lost their voice, living the fact of belonging to a world dominated and regulated by white ideologies. Rejected by the white community, and separated from their homeland, African-Americans realized that their quest for identity, liberty and freedom was not yet achieved. They found themselves living two realities, yet felt like they belonged to none. Creating a cultural Black identity has been one of the principle goals of many Black leaders and movements through history, and the identity of Black women was no exception. African-American women had been marginalized for decades and suffered from discrimination and oppression not only physically but also psychologically for generations. History has constructed a persona of the African-American female using terms that are void of human characteristics and absent of qualities that define personhood. Movements of feminism often failed to shed light on this category of women and to involve them in their riots and protests. They were often criticized for ignoring Black women's needs and distress, and rather chose to pass over them. Nevertheless, African American women started creating movements of their own to regain their identity not only as Black but also as a woman.

African-Americans mainly women experienced many social inequalities, facing problems such as racism, sexism and gender inequality. As a result, these coloured women have gathered their forces to come up with movements totally Afrocentric, to shed light on these issues, and re-negotiate their Black womanhood. With the emergence of movements such as womanism and Africana womansim, these women succeeded in embracing their African womanhood and sharing their cultural pride with the world. Through literature, authors like Octavia Butler portrayed such concepts in their works using a very specific type of science fiction rather known as Afrofuturism. The latter not only succeeded in branching through all sorts of art, but also gave a platform to Black women writers that have a desire of being recognized as part of the past, present, and future societies, and reconcile with their lost identity. What greatly differentiates Afrofuturism from standard science fiction is that it is rooted in ancient African beliefs and black culture. It unapologetically celebrates the uniqueness and

innovation of black culture focusing mainly on Black womanhood with African Black women as the leading force.

The representation of women of colour from an Afro-futuristic perspective seems to have been a center of interest for many African American famous writers. Nnedi Okorafor is one of those who changed these women's portrait and prompted audiences to re-think the role Black women play in the superhero book universe giving black women and girls a regular presence. The author claims that because Afrofuturism offers a way of taking hold of the future, especially in this case of the Black Woman, it provides another way of reclaiming African diasporic voices, subjectivity, and humanity. This paper attempts to decrypt the ideas of Okorafor in order to demonstrate her unique approach to the portrayal of coloured women in an Afro-futuristic context through her novella Binti published in 2015. This story furnishes excellent material to examine the author's exploitation in depicting the bravery and intelligence of her African character who managed to break free of all barriers seeking her dreams of higher education in the galaxy. However, she remained faithful to her black heritage and traditions, which eventually led her to her identity as an independent, powerful Black woman.

Hence, this research paper seeks to reassure the literary representation of Black womanhood in Afrofuturism. The objective is to know how the Black woman after being rejected in white feminist movements gradually manifested her identity, and re-claimed her existence through Afrocentric movements of womanism and Africana womanism. Through the novella Binti, the author focuses on the importance of getting back to the African roots and cherish the land, culture and traditions with an aim of finding a voice outside of the dominant culture. In the light of what has been said, the following questions are put forward:

1. What is Afrofuturism? and how does it differ from any other type of fiction?
2. is Afrofuturism a womanist or an Africana womanist movement?
3. How has the imagination of a post human world made it possible for African American writers to envision the way Black womanhood could be re-configured and re-negotiated through the concepts of womanism and Africana womanism? And how did Okorafor depict such concepts in her Afrofuturist novella Binti?

It is hypothesized that Afrofuturism is a type of science fiction that distinguishes itself from any other type of fiction, as it is Afrocentric and serves only the Black African people. However, this movement gave a significant attention to women and their struggles while remaining faithful to their heritage and culture. It is also supposed that by writing such fiction,

many Black women mainly in the diaspora related to such a future were their voices would be heard and would not be overshadowed. They could relate to a future in which they are the superheroes and the leading power proving to the world that the Black woman is not only an object to satisfy the other gender but rather a force that can save worlds. The author through her novel attempted to destabilize the banal frame of women's role as weak and passive agents in order to prove that women of colour do indeed have a significant role and place in the world. Afrofuturism replied with a gender-specific context to the theoretical transformation of humanity by identifying the presence of women in a high-tech world bearing their black culture and heritage. Binti is an exploration of a future where women, Africa, and African roots are part of a textual framework. Finally, it is also believed that with all the Africana womanist values and perspectives that Afrofuturism carries, it is assumed that it is indeed an Africana womanist movement and they are strongly related.

This research paper is based on analytical and descriptive methods intended to investigate on the link between the story, womanism and Africana womanism as articulated mainly through the genre of Afrofuturism. Data collection is from library and internet. It follows two sources: primary sources and secondary sources as articles, journals, magazines and websites. This work is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is in the form of theoretical framework that provides definitions of important concepts in relation to the concept of Afrofuturism. The second chapter will start with examining the issue of Black womanhood and its relation to feminism; it will also provide a theoretical framework providing definitions of concepts of Womanism and Africana Womanism. The third chapter represents all plot summary and details of the novel Binti.

Chapter one

Afrofuturism

Chapter I: Afrofuturism

I.1 Introduction

Afrofuturism is considered as an important movement developed during the 19th century to crucially change certain ideologies about Black people, and re-identify the Africans mainly the African Americans of the Diaspora. Afrofuturism refers to a flourishing contemporary movement of Black Diasporic writers, philosophers, musicians, artists and theorists. Even though this movement crossed the boundaries of literature, novels are still Afrofuturism's central representation with a unique demonstration of all the principles, values, message and aim the movement carries.

First, this chapter will introduce Afrofuturism's historical background, and how it came to existence, along with all the areas touched and effected by this cultural force. The section will start with theoretical framework providing definitions of the concept and the movement's genesis. Second, this chapter will also tackle the fields where Afrofuturism flourished, from music to literature. Last but not least this first part will address other major concepts related to this Afro-Diasporic movement.

I.2 Defining Afrofuturism

Ytasha Womack (2013) defines afrofuturism in her book "*Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*" as follows "*For those who adopt the Afrofuturist paradigm, the ideas can take you light-years away from the place you call home, only to return knowing you had had everything you needed from the start. Readers, our future is now*." (p.1). This concept has been and still is the core of many debates as it re-identified the science fiction world within the scope of African culture and history. The Oxford Dictionary on the other hand defines Afrofuturism as "*A movement in literature, music, art, etc., featuring futuristic or science fiction themes which incorporate elements of black history and culture*.". Under the umbrella of science fiction and fantasy, two concepts were combined to create a movement purely dedicated to the Black cause known as Afrofuturism. First the word "afro" which represents the African heritage, history and culture, along with the future as indicated by the term "futurism". Futurism is concerned with events and trends of the future, or which anticipate the future, it is also regarded as an artistic movement beginning in Italy in 1909 and which strongly rejected traditional forms to embrace the energy and dynamism of modern

technology.[1] Out of the combination of these concepts, Afrofuturism was born. From the above definitions, one may deduce that Afrofuturism is a decolonization of the all previous ideologies built on the identity and the future of the African, mainly the African American. This movement paved the way for many African Americans to re-introduce what the future could be from an African lens.

Several points in time are important to consider when attempting to pinpoint the exact date of Afrofuturism's origin, however, the first scholar to actually introduce the term was Mark Dery in his essay *Black to the Future* (1994) stating that Afrofuturism is,

> Speculative Fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of the twentieth century techno-culture and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future. (P.180)

This essay introduced the many aspects of Afrofuturism and it is of cultural and social significance to Black people. The author in his interviews with black authors raised the central question of why do so few African Americans write science fiction. At the time of the interview, Dery stated that there were only four black science fiction novelists writing in English to name Octavia Butler, Steve Barnes, Charles Saunders, and himself specifying that the number did not increase in ten years. He also added:

> A community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn't the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers — white to a man — who have engineered our collective fantasies. (p.180)

In other words, the future is dependent upon the past, and therefore the future of African Americans is well connected to their history, heritage and experiences, which eventually led to the creation of a type of fiction that can only be understood if related to ancient African traditions and Black identity. This type of fiction is very different from the fiction known as much dominated by whiteness, its uniqueness stands in its celebration of the essence of Black

[1] First established by the Italian poet Filippo Tomaso Marinetti in 1908 in his manifestoes calling for the destruction of public establishments such as libraries, museums and academies with the desire to bring about true anarchy in favor of modern technology. (https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-futurists-art-fuel-fascism) Accessed on 01/2020.

culture. However, Dery claimed that many people have failed to understand the concept at that time and were unable to emphasis on its true aim.

Ytacha Womack (2017) on the other hand, stated in one of her conferences : "*Afrofuturism is the imagination and creativity used to create a different world that we want to create and change things we want to change either from the past or the present to have a better future*"(Womack, 2017) . From her perspective, Afrofuturism is reclaiming racial identity in a unique, inspiring manner. The writer explained how human beings have the tendency to connect with either new or old ideas to help them break out of their boxes and celebrate the beauty of humanity, and this is where Afrofuturism takes place. "*It is a way of looking at the future and alternate realities through a black cultural lens people from the African continent in addition to the diaspora in the Americas, Europe ...etc.*" (Womack, 2017). She also mentioned that this empowering force was a way of self-healing and liberation along with taking the experiences of Black people either from the past or the present and placing them in a futuristic context not only gives hope to those people of colour but also highlights the fact that these people can indeed belong to the future .

The Afrofuturist dilemma then is centered around, the reality of limitation and the query of how to escape. It asks continually how we get to a moment or a world in time, space, or reality where there are no more structures. Where is the post-racial world? Where is the world where categories of identity no longer matter? Afrofuturism has laboured to answer these questions through the constructions of alternate realities, universes, and technologies (DeAnna M. Daniels 2016). Another scholar of Afrofuturism, Lisa Yaszek (2006), labels it as an '*'international cultural and aesthetic movement. Specifically, one that seeks to reweave and disrupt dominant narratives regarding the relationship between science, technology, mysticism, and race*'' (Lisa Yaszek. pp.41-60). From these theories, one can discover "*how does it feel to be colored me*"[2] , in such a world where no conventional boundaries exist and where everyone can celebrate the beauty of humanity.

[2] The phrase was originally coined by Zora Neal Hurston in her widely anthologized descriptive essay "How it feels to be colored me" were she described her experiences as an African American woman in the 20th century America. The writer also tells her journey towards her identity and self-pride and how she faced racism in her path of self-discovery. (https://www.enotes.com/topics/how-it-feels-to-be-colored-me) Accessed on 01/2020.

I.3 Afrofuturism And Music (From Sun Ra to Janelle Monáe)

Even though it was the author and critic Mark Dery who first introduced the term Afrofuturism, he did not just reveal the advent of a bold new style or social trend, he was just one of many who mirrored and theoreticized emerging thematic strains in seemingly disconnected works by Black authors and artists. Womack mentioned when interviewed about her book "*Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi Fantasy and Fantasy Culture*" (2013), that Prior to the term, people were looking at certain pieces as "*isolated inventions within specific genres" as opposed to parts of "one full perspective*." (Sutton Brandon, para 06). For example, before Afrofuturism was named, one might consider the work of Butler as Black science fiction and Sun Ra as belonging to the genre of avant-garde jazz, however, considering them as part of the same movement would have been a dubious proposition. After all, what parallels could be said to exist between the songs of Missy Elliot and the artwork of Jean-Michel Basquiat? According to Womack, Afrofuturism existed way before Dery gave it a proper term.

I.3.1 Sun Ra (1914 – 1993)

The avant-garde singer **Sun Ra** is considered the key leader of Afrofuturism, as a figure with one of the most distinct styles, both visually and in terms of sound. He was a Jazz musician and philosopher born in 1914 in Birmingham, Alabama. He believed he was born on Saturn, and came to Earth to heal people especially the Africans in the diaspora through his music. He had this idea that music could enhance telepathy and that music induced time travel. The figure was known for his belief in cosmic identity, he experimented sound and technology using imagination for protection, and then on some level escapism, and a way of deconstructing his own identity in a time of segregation. He was a symbol of Afrofuturism in his own respect.

Sun Ra's music was a form of meditation on the African heritage, but also innately progressive, in as much as the artist himself was a gifted and intelligent individual, which was apparent from his early beginnings. Performing for many years with his band Arkestra, his costumes and stage designs were suggestive of science fiction and cyber reality. At the same time, through their aesthetic appeal and gestures, the musicians reflected on ancient Egypt and other motives from the precolonial Africa. But one of the main reasons why one can safely say that this artist is the original Afrofuturist lies in the way he re-invented himself as a person and a performer, having denied his given name Herman Blount, and turning his entire life story into

a myth (Patina Lee, 2016). The musician claimed his life to be something else, something alien. He assumed that his journey to Saturn and meeting the Aliens made him see through himself, even his birth date was kept a secret. In a sense, the legendary character of Ra was an Afrofuturism personification.

> I'm not real, I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real. If you were, you'd have some status among the nations of the world. I do not come to you as a reality, I come to you as a myth because that's what black people are: myths. I come from a dream that the black man dreamed long ago. I'm actually a presence sent to you from your ancestors. From Face the music: Space is the Place (1972).

Many other musicians followed the path of Sun Ra, and tried to deliver the same message, and have the same impact with the hope of changing reality or even the future with the African diaspora as the leading force. Among these musicians, one can mention George Clinton and his bands Parliament, Funkadelic and Jimi Hendrix and his otherworldly guitar playing.

I.3.2 Janelle Monáe (1985- present day)

One of the greatest Afrofuturist women in the music industry of our time has to be Janelle Monàe. As a modern Afrofuturist, the singer, song writer and actress nowadays, Monàe succeeded in reviving the message of Sun Ra and the other Afrofuturist musicians before her, yet with a modern feminine twist. In an article written by Chase Quinn under the title *The Days of Future Past: Afrofuturism and Black Memory* (2013), it is mentioned that Electric Lady Janelle Monáe, who, on her concept album The Arch Android, assumes the identity of a fictional android named Cindi Mayweather circa 2719, and to television characterizations like the Walking Dead's Michonne. It is to show that no longer is the science fiction genre dominated by white male writers and readers, or characters for that matter. She succeeded in gaining a huge popularity with her distinct style and a unique image about the African American woman along with her African heritage, and her blackness, all together from a futuristic lens. She was born in 1985 and is known for her musical creation of the alternate cityscape Metropolis via multiple studio-released recordings and videos. The futuristic city is the landscape for the tale of Cindi Mayweather, or Monáe's vision of the subversive "electric lady," calling on the cyborg trope that Monáe revisits in each trip to Metropolis and one that is frequently in- voked by other Afrofuturists (Cassandra. L. Jones: 2018). In 2010, Janelle Monáe

told Rolling Stone magazine*, "I only date androids,"* firmly tying herself to her cyborg alter ego, Cindi. As an activist and womanist, she broke all boundaries and conservative thoughts about the black woman (Aja Romano, 2018). From her being in the American biographical drama, *Hidden Figures (2016)* where she played as the first Black Woman NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) engineer Mary Jackson, to her Albums such as *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase) (2007), Arch Android (2010)* and *The Electric Lady (2013)* which all elaborate in the science fiction world of Metropolis. The Electric Lady succeeded in portraying what the African woman can achieve.

L. Jones in her article on Manàe (2018) explains that her work echoes and challenges efforts like the Black Arts Movement, turning up the volume on queer tracks, in response to the heterosexist loops of the Black Power movement. Moreover, her stories are not simply tales of a highly technological utopian world. While she voices narratives of liberation via technology, she equally confronts the racist, heterosexist, patriarchal, capitalist origins of technology and how these have been used against black women's bodies. Her world is an escape from violence, Drugs, Racism and issues of gender and sexuality. In her Album *Dirty computer (2018)*, she stated *"Black Girl Magic, Y'all Can't Stand It",* referring to the white society who does not accept people from her kind. She stated in one of her interviews "*Embrace what makes you unique, even if it makes others uncomfortable*", she added "*I believe it's time that women truly owned their superpowers and used their beauty and strength to change the world around them* ".(Amandla Stenberg and Janelle Monáe, 2017)

Monàe is known to be the leading force and a role model for many African Americans especially women. this influenced a lot of singers and song writers to follow her path by representing their heritage, and defending it, leaving an impact on society. One can mention Messy Elliot and the Knowles sisters; Beyoncé and Solange who bring the motive of Black women into the "future is now" context within pop culture.

I.4 Afrofuturism And Literature (Science Fiction and Its Relationship with Black culture)

Although one can find many Afrofuturist motives in music, and probably in all sorts of art, it is almost certain that a science-fiction narrative is one of its main mediums. While reading fiction, one may sometimes see their own characteristics reflected in one of the generic

personalities, usually taken from the idealized protagonist one sees in these novels. Writers such as Butler, Delany, W.E.B Du Bois and nowadays, Womack, Nnedi Okorafor and many others, helped and are still mainstreaming the movement.

Afrofuturism as a genre in literature tends to be very different from any other Science Fiction. It is not only a style of writing, but also a way of thinking that blends Afro-culture, science fiction, magical realism, technology, and traditional African mysticism. It takes many forms, and tells many different stories, but one common feature is that Afrofuturists fight for equality and black people's right to a place in the future. A place and a future that must not be defined by whites. Afrofuturism is a language of rebellion, as put forward by Barbara Hilton, 2018. This genre has its own spot in the science fiction world, with its unique themes and ideologies. As mainly reserved to the African Diaspora, this speculative fiction is a voice for these people, allowing them to tell their story and expose their experiences without feeling limited by their society or media projections. This genre explores themes such as gender issues, slavery, sexuality, alienation, ability, identity and womanhood in a modern techno cultural futuristic way. Womack (2017) mentions that it is indeed different explaining that the other types of science fiction tend to have a traditional non-linear time, meaning that the events of the novel evolve from the past, present to the future. However, Afrofuturist novels tend to have an Afrofuturist non-linear timeline, meaning that the future is related to the past as they are related to the present as one, and the same time (ancient and futuristic at the same time).

> Afrofuturism is an interpretation of the kind of future we want Africa to be associated with. It is of course about aesthetics and entertainment, but it just as much about highlighting issues that are important to Africa as a continent. For me those issues are discrimination, inclusion, gender abuse, ivory poaching, female genital mutilation, care for the elderly, and conflict resolution. Lately I have also focused on conservation. I want to show what Africa really looks like; I want to portray how magical the continent is. (B. Hilton, 2018).

Through the works of inspiring writers, this genre succeeded in gaining popularity not only among African people in Africa and the diaspora, but also among other races and cultures. These writers made it possible for coloured people to relate to a story and its characters as it was a representation of their culture and heritage.

I.4.1 Octavia. E. Butler (1947 – 2006)

This genre has been put on the spotlight by brilliant writers from the 19th century up until this day with pioneering figures interfering in the white, male-dominated field of American science fiction, among which Octavia Butler is seen as the mother of Afrofuturism and the winner of the Nebula and Hugo awards for sci-fi literature. Butler with her exploration of themes such as violence, survival, race, gender inequality, social hierarchy, diversity, identity and womanhood and through her series, novels, short stories, essays, and speeches, succeeded in reflecting the real meaning of Afrofuturism from an African American feminine perspective. Her novels often had strong characters who could be identified by their appearance, battling against the tyranny of vampires, demons, super humans, and owners of slaves. According to Kat Tenbarge in her article on our writer (2018), Butler dealt with gene manipulation, interbreeding, evolution, non-consensual sex, infection, hybridity and social interaction with sociobiological violence-built characters. In addition, the common theme of overcoming the loss of franchise and welcoming transition.

The fictional worlds she created were focused on African race and culture, but included extraterrestrial and other elements of fantasy in order to create a strong sense of science fiction. Tenbarge also specified that Butler was criticized under the claim that the themes included in her writings do not match with today's definition of Afrofuturism. The real term was coined in the 90's, while the rest of Butler's work was written in the 70's and ' 80's. Furthermore, she opposed being limited by any one genre, claiming that only black readers and feminists were her devoted audience. With that being said, one cannot neglect the fact that her novels are a pure sample of what an Afrofuturist novel can be. Projecting the complexities of human lives and the trauma the African diaspora lived in; along with non-Western, mythologies and strong spirituality were the aim of her works. Artist and filmmaker Selam Bekele also apply an afrofuturist aesthetic to her work saying: "*I was thinking of Parable of Sower. The main character in Octavia Butler's book has this condition called hyper-empathy, and it's this condition where you're really sensitive to what's going on around you. I think Afrofuturism is what you do with that sensitivity*," (Whaley, Revolt. 2018)

Butler's works tend to be the most remarkable when it comes to Black Science Fiction. Her debut novel, Patternmaster (1976), became the first of the five-volume Patternist series. Her breakthrough finally came in 1979 with her fourth novel, Kindred, which remains her bestseller. The novel's protagonist Dana moves between 20th century Los Angeles and the

antebellum South, where she witnesses the savagery of American slavery. It is a story of an over-familiar paradox of time travel, which is spliced into a neo-slavery narrative with a grim clarity that was new to American fiction, though the manuscript was repeatedly rejected by publishers unable to comprehend how science fiction could be set on a Maryland plantation. Its success vindicated Butler's desire to write "*a novel that would make others feel the history: the pain and fear that black people have had to live through in order to endure*". (Kodwo Eshun, 2006). After Kindred, the writer continued writing masterpieces winning valuable awards, books such as Wild Seed (1980), Dawn (1987), Parable Of The Sower (1993) , Blood Child And Other Stories (1995) ,Parable Of The Talents (1998) , Feldging(2005) and many others .

I.4.2 Samuel R. Delany (1942-present day)

Samuel R. Delany can also be identified as another genius figure in the Afrofuturism field. Delany is a visionary in science fiction: a talented prose stylist with amazing ideas who was one of the first openly gay authors in the genre and one of the first Black writers to be admitted into the industry. He is one of the Afrofuturist fathers. He was honored in 2013 when he was named one of the Grand Masters of the field by the Science Fiction Writers of America. Born in Harlem in 1942, at the age of 19, Delany published his first novel, inaugurating a wide-ranging career that now includes more than 40 published works and several major literary awards. His fiction blends space opera with neo-slave narrative, memoirs, sword-and-sorcery fantasy and sexual freedom beauty. The author of "Dhalgren" and dozens of other books *"gives readers fiction that reflects and explores the social truths of our world,"* the novelist Jordy Rosenberg writes .(Jordy Rosenberg,2019) .An article written by Cheryl Morgan (2014) presented the writer by stating that Samuel R. Delany was the confirmation that as far back as the 1970s, science fiction supported diversity. His many novels deal much more effectively with issues of race, sexuality and gender identity than most of his white contemporaries. With masterpieces such as Babel-17 (1966), Aye and Gomorrah (1967), Dhalgren (1974), Dark Reflections (2007). Denaly is regarded as a major contribution to Afrofuturism and the Black Science Fiction World.

I.4.3. W.E.B Du Bois (1868 – 1963)

As much as Afrofuturism is about the future, it is also about the past. One of the earliest Black American sci-fi writers W.E.B. Du Bois was not excluded from writing in this Afro

diasporic genre. With his short stories such as *The Comet* (1920), and *The Princess Steel* (1908), the author alongside many Afro diasporic authors who came after him, embraced themes of sexuality, gender inequality and race depicting the reality of the American society in times of segregation. *The Comet* (1920) was one of his few fiction works that was originally published as the final chapter of the author's autobiographical collection of poems and essays *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920) with an aim of educating about racial discrimination in America. DuBois aimed to write a story fully in the modern futuristic, yet contemporary world, and to place Black people in it. In this, he truly is one of the founders of Afrofuturism. "The Comet", (1920) was reprinted in Dark Matter: The Anthology of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Speculative Fiction by Black Writers, edited by Sheree Thomas and Martin Simmons (2000) that also discusses Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and the issue of Blindness and Invisibility. *The Princess Steel* on the other hand could be considered as a foundational text of Afrofuturism. The story is claimed to be Du Bois earliest fiction, discovered by Scholars Adrienne Brown and Britt Rusert who first wrote a draft of the story under the name: *Megascope: A Tale of Tales* (Charlie Jane Anders, 2015). Rusert said in a seminar on Afrofuturism that Du Bois was already understanding something about social construction and technology. She added that Du Bois commitment to revolution and social justice means he was always interested in the future and would always push them to think about Afrofuturism, mainly the critical one that deals with questions of history (Jane Greenway Carr, 2015). These two short fictions were the highlight of Du Bois writings in Afrofuturism.

I.5 Afrofuturism VS Afro-Surrealism – Cultural Difference

Afrofuturism and Afro Surrealism are two terms originating from the same root that can be very similar yet very different. An article written by Kier Adams named*:* Afro-Surrealism: Embracing & Reconstructing the Absurdity of "Right Now".2019*,* gives a definition to Surrealism as a 20th-century unusual or unconventional art movement that serves the purpose of releasing creative expression of the unconscious mind. He explains that Surrealism is interested in exploring the minds thoughts and concepts directly as they come. Afro-surrealism is the styles of artistic work influenced by Black cultural imagery in order to empower people and extend their perception of how Black people live. Afro-surrealism is a term invented in 1988 by Amiri Baraka (the famous writer associated with the Black Arts Movement) before it was coined by D. Scot Miller in his article: Afro surreal Manifesto: Black is the New Black

(2013). He explained that Afro-surrealism is about what is going on now, not about what happened in the past, or in the future, it is rather about what is in the current state. Miller also claims that The Invisible man by Ralph Ellison (1953) is an Afro surreal work. The author claims that Afro Surrealism is *"Ambiguous as Prince, black as Fanon, literary as Reed, dandy as André Leon Tallysees*" (Miller, D. P.113, 2013) .One can mention Junot Diaz's The Brief Wondrous Life Of Oscar Wao *(2007)* or Erykah Badu and even Kanye West as belonging to the realms of Afro-surrealism .

Afro-surrealists aim to raise social awareness and expose the "right now", another way of saying what is currently happening universally to affect the black livelihood. Black people especially African Americans adapted Surrealism and made it their own , and used it as a device to provoke audiences to understand social structures, social reforms, and so-called "uncomfortable" truths that the White-Straight-Male-Western-Civilization seems unable to absorb , with a message that **Black people exist and can do**. With the same message, and the same purpose, Afrofuturism and Afro-surrealism are still two different worlds. Writer Womack immerses herself in the realms of both Afro-futurism and Afro-surrealism and how they compare to each other and the effect they have on society in her book titled Afrofuturism (2013) where she discusses all genres and explores their cultural meaning and importance. Both are at their core what Blackness is all about. The article written by Jack Moore (2018) explains the difference between the two by stating that Afro-surrealism is actionable realizations of Black agency and empowerment, however, Afrofuturism is aspirational, and does not necessarily provide links between the present and the idealized future. He also explains that Afro-surrealism is that fiction which focused on depicting the '' here and now '', problems that are localized in the present for the Black person. In Miller's definition, Afrofuturism relies on the '' there and then '', and it is rather an escape which does not provide clear solutions grounded in the present. However, Miller's claims were criticized saying that his Negritude[3] made him give more importance to Afro surrealism because of its more actionable nature, and that the way in which he refers to Afrofuturism was in large measure negative. One may say that both of these genres are under one umbrella representing Blackness and African Pride. "*The focus of Afro-Surrealism is the present but it does not deny succession of time and the importance of the past as an agent in shaping the now*''. Wrote Rali Chorbadzhiyska, demonstrating the fact that both

[3] The affirmation or consciousness of the value of black or African culture and identity. In other words, the quality or fact of being of black African origin. (https://www.lexico.com/definition/negritude) Accessed on 01/2020.

terms are related to past experiences of Black people, with an attempt of making the present and the future better for the African diaspora.

I.6 Afrofuturism 2.0

Afrofuturism is a body of systematic Black speculative thought originated in the 19th century, as a way of expressing the African self-determination and creative expression, yet the movement has now matured into an emerging global phenomenon. Reynaldo Anderson in his essay "Notes on a Manifesto, Afrofuturism 2.0 And the Black Speculative Art Movement", 2016, defined Afrofuturism 2.0 to say:

> the beginning of both a move away and an answer to the Eurocentric perspective of the 20th century's early formulation of Afrofuturism that wondered if the history of African peoples, especially in North America, had been deliberately erased. Or to put it more plainly, future-looking Black scholars, artists, and activists are not only reclaiming their right to tell their own stories, but also to critique the European/ American digerati class of their narratives about cultural others, past, present and future and, challenging their presumed authority to be the sole interpreters of Black lives and Black futures (P.228)

The movement however was first coined in a conversation between both writers Alondra Nelson, and Reynaldo Anderson at the Alien Bodies conference in 2013. Anderson explained that the previous definitions given to the term are not sufficient, due to the development of social media and technology. It is also explained that Afrofuturism2.0 was created with an attempt of redefining Afrofuturism to refit it to the 21st century. The manifesto also defined Afrofuturism 2.0 as:

> The early twenty-first century techno-genesis of Black identity reflecting counter histories, hacking and or appropriating the influence of network software, database logic, cultural analytics, deep remix-ability, neurosciences, enhancement and augmentation, gender fluidity, posthuman possibility, the speculative sphere with transdisciplinary applications and has grown into an important Diasporic techno-cultural Pan African movement. (P.231)

Afrofuturism2.0 has been broadened to all fields, from cultural aesthetics and the digital divide to philosophy of science, metaphysics and geopolitics (Anderson, 2017). With all the changes happening in the world in terms of cultural and social basis, along with the involvement

of social media and its huge impact on today's thinking, Afrofuturism had to expand its boundaries to a larger concept and 2.0 volume appeared. According to Anderson and Jones:

> Contemporary expressions of Afrofuturism emerging in the areas of metaphysics, speculative philosophy, religion, visual studies, performance, art and philosophy of science or technology that are described as "2.0," in response to the emergence of social media and other technological advances since the middle of the last decade. (Notes on a Manifesto, Afrofuturism 2.0 And the Black Speculative Art Movement, p .09).

To conclude, Afrofuturism2.0 is a more developed version of Afrofuturism, a version that is adapted to the 21st century's concepts and perspectives, yet keeping the same roots, message and purposes of Afrofuturism.

I.7 Movements Related to Afrofuturism

Even though Afrofuturist novels offer a unique medium to project light on the history of the African people, other movements as well tend to have the same perspective and aim when it comes to hoping for a better present and future.

To begin with, Pan-Africanism is the belief that African cultures possess shared interests and should be united. It is a cultural and political movement originated in the 19th century, that Pictures a single African country in which all people of the African diaspora can live as one. Starting with efforts to end slavery, slave trade, colonization and racism to end as a worldwide power. '' *Pan-Africanism is the sentiment that people of African descent have a great deal in common, a fact that deserves notice and even celebration*.'' (Peter Kuryla on Pan-Africanism, Britannica). The most important figures that led these movements were Martin Delany and Alexander Crummel, both African Americans, and Edward Blyden, a West Indian. These voices believed that the Africans and African Americans should work together throughout the world, because of their common history and culture. Delany is another major figure that believed that people from the African Diaspora had to return to their homeland in order to civilize their people in Africa and introduce them to Christianity as a way through enlightenment. Moreover, it is said that Du Bois was the father of modern Pan-Africanism with his famous 1903 saying '' *the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line*'' which had been proven to be said with Pan-Africanist sentiments in mind.

With ideas to restore the Black identity and self-esteem along with encouraging the economic growth, international cooperation and independence, all for a better future , one can say that it is indeed very similar to Afrofuturism, in fact , one can think that Pan-Africanism was the movement that led to the birth of Afrofuturism . Alex Zamalin in his book Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism (2019) offers a pioneering study of African American social transformation and their counter-utopian counterparts. He claims that the Black Utopian tradition continues to criticize American political thinking and history, taking into account figures identified with racial separatism, post racialism, ant colonialism, pan-Africanism, and Afrofuturism. Black Utopia encompasses Black Nationalist fantasies of a perfect Africa through Du Bois's novels, and the metaphysical theory of alien abduction by Sun Ra. The writer also casts Delany and Butler as political theorists along with other writers who proved his ideology to be right.

Another movement known to be very similar to Afrofuturism is **''Indigenous Futurism''**. Like Afrofuturism, this movement also highlights the role of Fiction not only in reimagining a future with indigenous people, but also its ability to recreate lived, past events or reality. Indigenous fiction allows indigenous people to regain these events in a new context related to technology and space, and to give a counter interpretation to the imperialist experience of the past, present and future, quite very similar to what Afrofuturism stands for.

1. Conclusion

From all what has been presented about Afrofuturism, one can deduce that the movement is more than a literary genre, it is real life. "*It's not just an ideological thing, it's how people live*," this is how anthropologist Niama Safia Sandy explained the concept to The Huffington Post (2016). *"Magical realism is used to talk about literature of the other, literature from pretty much everywhere except the West. But I feel like it isn't just a literary genre, it's how we understand the earth, an ambulatory cosmology, how we move through the world."* (Priscilla Frank, Huffington post 2016). Sandy also discussed how certain concepts, signals, colours and thoughts have become to be decoded as literary representations through the prism of Afrofuturism. How history and development are to be perceived, she said: *"It's this meaning imbued in everything that you do. That is something that has been passed down to us through generations through our ancestors"* (Sandy, 2016). Sandy believes that Black people should celebrate the experiences and journeys they have been through whether they are intentional or

forced journeys and many writers, theorists and scholars have shared her opinion. Even though this Afro-Diasporic force highlighted many sides of very common issues such as racism and alienation, it also projected light on gender and inequality. Black Women found their voice through this movement to claim it as their own, reclaiming their womanhood from the lens of their African heritage. The concept of Afrofuturism and Womanhood shall be further explored in the second chapter.

Chapter two

Afrofuturism Reclaiming Black Womanhood

Chapter II: Afrofuturism Reclaiming Black Womanhood

II.1. Introduction

Nowadays, Women's rights and gender equality are top priorities on the international community's table for discussion. However, that was not always the case. Women especially women of colour always fought for their rights and their visions on their womanhood and this battle continued until this day. Women are still trying not to remain discriminated and subjugated to their male peers, and Black women are still negotiating and proving their force and identity. With movements such as Womanism and Africana Womanism, this category of women finally found their lost voices and spoke loudly what was long ago hidden by history. Afrofuturism is one of the genres that enabled women of color to express themselves and the movement they belong to, carrying with them their African heritage and Black pride.

First, this part of the research paper will start with examining the issue of Black women and their relation to feminism. Second, this chapter will also provide a theoretical frame work providing definitions of concepts of Womanism and Africana Womanism and how African American women created such movements to embrace their cultural background, all along with the differences and similarities that the movements share. Finally, this section will also debate the issue of how did Afrofuturism embrace such movements to be combined as one body of representation to Black women.

II.2. Black Women and Feminism

II.2.1. Defining Feminism

Laura Brutel and Elinor Burkett defined Feminism as: "*Feminism, the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Although largely originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests*" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). The movement was also defined as a social system whose main objective is women's empowerment and gender equality achievement. Feminist campaigns are focused on women and often see men as possible rivals. Feminism began to spread in the United States in the 1960s-1980s and had a profound effect on American society (Giulia Squadrin 2017). This movement is also known as "*the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated*

in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state" (Cambridge Dictionary). Feminist-backed "political" proposals have resulted in transforming cultures and societies around the world, for instance, Feminist protests obtained : universal suffrage , labor rights for women , reproductive rights for women , gender equality , decrease of violence against women , equal employment opportunities , equal rights of owning properties , and changes in the patriarchal society . Nether less to say, Feminism operated primarily against the capitalist society's traditional values as Patriarchy was and still is a system of power that separated cultures on the basis of "traditional" gender roles. (Squadrin, 2017). The early 20th century America was dominated by ideologies that men must be privileged, and society was built on certain perspectives that only strengthened male superiority. Moreover, women lived with serious restrictions such as not having the right to vote, not having the right to own properties or work, or even basic life rights of controlling one's own body. This movement came as a consequence to the "old mentality" to reject all previous boundaries and ideologies formed on women, and it came as waves through time and evolved along with the needs of women on the spot.

II.2.2. Mainstream Feminism VS Black Feminism

Throughout history, Black women have gone through certain experiences that the world saw as a harsh and a cruel part of the world's history. They always found themselves struggling against sexism and racism, and were obliged to live objectified and under certain circumstances that trapped them in an unjoyful life. Many Black nationalist groups and active coloured women constantly debated wither their oppression was racial or rather based on their gender as men are always trying to assert their manhood, while Others debated that it has always been a matter of sexism. It is a known fact that Black women earn less than everyone else, they are often marginalized and underestimated, not to mention the forgotten and mislead crimes such as abuses, violence, killings and so forth against Black women. Sadly, movements of feminism often failed to shed light on this category of women and to involve them in their riots and protests especially the first wave, when the movement was debuting. Feminism had a strong impact on many communities; however, the movement was seen to be mainly devoted to middle and upper-class white women. Nevertheless, Feminists were often criticized for ignoring Black women's needs and distress. Even though many Black women stood up with this movement and supported all its principles to define themselves as Black feminists, Feminism was mainly

dominated by white women who somehow neglected colored females and chose to pass over them. Even when the movement was mainly created to support a woman's cause and celebrate womanhood, the white woman did not accept the fact that a woman just like her, only different in skin color, could be identified as a feminist too. That eventually created a tension over time and only led to the rise of the question "are the white people really going to accept the people they once saw as servants?", and could they accept the fact that two women with different color and different race could enjoy the same privileges? As put forward by Diana L Hayes

> The feminist movement, both in society and within the Christian churches, has been one of white women—usually educated, middle-class women—with the freedom and privilege to become militant without fearing consequences as harsh as a woman of color or lower-class white woman would be subject to. (Diana L Hayes, 1993. p.291)

One must consider the fact that women of color never had the privilege of only fighting for their womanhood taking into consideration problems of racism, sexism and even economic and social injustice "*We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us*." (Anthea, Butler: Combahee River Collective, 1977.P.212). Women of color only started to get more attention after the civil rights movement[4] as feminists started to give more importance to their colored sisters. As a result, many colored women opted to expose the inequalities they faced outside the term "feminism" and sought to have movements supporting their own ethnicity and race and this time not Eurocentric but rather Afrocentric. Movements such as Womanism and Africana Womanism were born and were all about the African Woman; however, many Black women still remained Black feminist icons.

II.3. Womanism

Colored women's issues had to be widely reported and discussed, empowering black women to have their voices heard outside the boundaries of feminism. It was therefore important to focus on unique issues for women of color, considering the different challenges they faced. Colored women had to struggle not only with the challenges of being women but also because they were marginalized as coloured people, so as a consequence, the term "Womanism" came into existence to shed more light on Black women. Even though many

[4] mass protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination in the southern United States that came to national prominence during the mid-1950s . https://www.britannica.com/event/American-civil-rights-movement .Accessed on 02/2020

people saw it as only a branch of feminism, a lot more debated that it is different not only in terms of the concept itself, but also the principles and values it follows.

Womanism can be identified, as a social and cultural theory based on people of colour's history and daily encounters, its major focus is the experiences of Black females as they sought to re-gain their womanhood and identity not only as females but also as Black females. According to womanist scholar Phillips, Layli (2006), Womanism seeks to "*restore the balance between people and the environment/nature and reconcil[e] human life with the spiritual dimension*", in other words, womanism combines spirituality and environmentalism to bring back dignity to a woman's everyday life tasks. This movement unlike feminism is not just about feminity , but rather about feminity and culture (Black culture) as a whole as both concepts are equally important to a woman's existence ,and one's feminity cannot be apparted from the culture in which it exists (Layli (2006). *The Womanist Reader. New York: Routledge*). Womanism supports the idea that culture or skin color is not what makes up a woman's feminity, but rather her culture and heritage as the lens through which femininity exists (Gillman, L (2006). As such, the Blackness of a woman is not a part of her feminism; rather, her Blackness is the prism through where she experiences her femininity. However, the sexism faced by Women of color in the feminist movement must be recognized as both have distinguished perceptions on womanhood and feminity. Some feminists agree that black women's perspective will not be accepted by feminism as comparable to White women's experience because of the flawed way some feminists have handled blackness in history (Mazama, Ama 2003). Thus, womanists see womanism not as an aspect or an extension of feminism but as a conceptual framework that exists independently of feminist theory.

II.3.1. Alice Walker's Womanism

Alice Malsenior Walker (born in 1944, Eatonton, Georgia, United States), American writer whose novels, short stories and poems are notable for their thoughtful portrayal of African American culture. All her writings focus mainly on women and their quest for re-claiming their womanhood. Born one eye blinded, her mother gave her a typewriter to encourage the sense of writing in her. After graduating, she moved to Mississippi and was an active member in the civil rights movement; she was approximately teaching and releasing some essays and short stories. Her first work was a book of poetry *Once* (1968), and her first novel was *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), and later on she published more poetry

and her first collection of short stories*, In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Woman* (1973) , and her most popular novel is “The Color Purple (1982)”. She was the first writer to give a proper definition to the term Womanism in her short story, "Coming Apart", in 1979 and later in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* in 1983 and she defined it as:

> From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious. (In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens .1983. P.11)

> The author also defined it as:

> A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tear as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. […]. (In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens .1983. P.12)

Womanism is a social construct that distinguishes itself from feminism and incorporates Black females, promotes womanhood and seeks to achieve and sustain an inclusive culture in all societies. This movement is not only about one issue that these women faced; it is rather about and against all types of oppression. Basically ‘womanist, womanism, womanish are all terms associated with Black womanhood and it has had an influence in both literary and socio-cultural context. Although many African American writers contributed largely in the womanist field, yet, the poet, novelist, short story writer, theorist, and activist Alice walker remains the one who gave it a proper term and definition. The writer observed Black women facing issues such as lack of education and bigotry and being doomed to suffer the horrors of discrimination, racism, crime and poverty, as she was herself a witness of such trauma in her childhood. Walker defined a womanist as a "black feminist or feminist of color, and she classified the black women

into three cycles: ‘Suspended’, ‘Assimilated’ and ‘Emergent’. Suspended women belong to the period from nineteenth century to early decades of 20th century. The Assimilated women belong to the forties and fifties when blacks were fighting to gain prestige and honor for them to be equal citizens of American society, and the Emergent women belong to the sixties. (https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/215207/8/08_chapter02.pdf)

Almost all her fictions are about womanism with major themes such as female solidarity and wholeness, identity and consciousness-raising in her black community. Her style is likely to be similar to other African American writers such as Toni Morrison. Her writings are pregnant with the idea of addressing the African-American women's personal experience and demonstrating a female connection with another, while recognizing the common problems that they encounter in the marginalized sexist and racist culture which is all what womanism is about. (https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/215207/8/08_chapter02.pdf)

Other writers contributed to the field of womanism, among them Deborah K. King (1486) who said:

> Womanism represents an expectation and experience of female knowledge, competence and responsibilities that are beyond those associated either with youth or with the gender traits traditionally assigned females in the Western culture. Its characterization of women as audacious as well as capable of contrasts with an image of females under patriarchy as submissive and inferior. It is significant to note that while black males regardless of their ages, have been stereotypically addressed as “boys”, black females were supposedly denigrated by being referred to as “women”, rather than “ladies”. However, the connotations of “women” within the black community have become positive ones, asserting and affirming the value in females of adult qualities such as ability, independence, creativity, loving, and strength.

As she argues, womanism is a disposition, a behavior, or a sense of a deep willingness to believe in oneself despite of all previously built ideologies and stereotypes, and claims that Black women’s identity has always been taken away as they have always been referred to as something rather than someone even when they were most accomplished.

II.3.2. Contrasting Feminism and Womanism

Feminism and Womanism as theories have so many things in common but possess many differences as well. Feminists often see men as their rivals and mainly fight for gender equality, and to add, their movement was only centered to white women who often keep themselves away from anything feminine. On the other hand, womanists support Black men and show solidarity with them against all sort of oppression. Rather than gender equality, they mainly sought gender reconciliation and also took into account the interests and desires of African, Latino and White women as well. They embraced womanhood and female sexuality, and they sought to establish criteria by which colored women could determine their experiences in both thought and practice. (Squadrin , 2017) . Walker differentiated between the two by saying her much cited phrase *"womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender*", she states that a womanist is different from a feminist, as purple is different from lavender. Womanism is a manifestation of black women's issues through which these colored women articulate their policies and ideas, and as walker said: *"I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival. Whole of my people, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women"* (In Search of Our Mother's Gardens .1983. P. 250). She compares womanism to the color purple, as it is the royal color, and Feminism as the pale lavender hue that cleverly delineates the connection between feminism and white women, not brown women.

To sum up, one can say that despite of all the differences between the two movements, they still fight for one major thing which is their womanhood, and they do share some features in common. However, white females started from a more privileged place when compared to Black female's starting point. One can say that both ideologies seem to be closely linked, with womanism as the broad umbrella under which feminism falls. Today feminism is giving more attention to these colored women, and the difference between the two movements is luckily less and less apparent.

Although womanism was helpful in presenting Black women with an agency, reputation, and an identity where they have been traditionally marginalized, womanism itself was said to be not sufficient to describe the women's experience in these specific cultural communities. Therefore, another concept appeared to focus even more and mainly on the woman from the African descent to claim the African womanhood and completely dissolve itself from Feminism.

II.3.3. Africana Womanism As a Vehicle of Empowerment and Influence

II.3.3.1. Africana Womanism

The term Africana Womanism came as a revolution against all previous ideologies on Black women. It was first coined in the late 1980s by Clenora F. Hudson-Weems (born 1945) who is an African American author and a groundbreaking theoretician, scholar and activist who devoted her works to provide a detailed descriptive distinction between Africana Womanism, Feminism, Black Feminism and Alice Walker's Womanism. This movement is focused on African culture and Afro-centrism and draws on African women's experiences, challenges, needs and desires mainly within the diaspora. In "Africana Womanism: A Historical, Global Perspective for Women of African Descent," Hudson-Weems clearly indicates that her hypothesis is not just a concept but a method — with special African requirements and sensitivities

> Africana Womanism as a theoretical concept and methodology defines a new paradigm, which offers an alternative to all forms of feminism. It is a terminology and a concept that consider both ethnicity (Africana) and gender (Womanism), which I coined and defined in the mid-1980's ... It was later established that the concept is neither an outgrowth nor an addendum to feminism ... Black feminism, African feminism, or Walker's womanism that some Africana women have come to embrace ... It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between the mainstream feminist, the Black feminist, the African feminist, and the Africana Womanist. (Reed, Pamela Yaa Asantewaa, 2001)

Weems claims the ideology's development distinguishes African women's contributions from African male intellectuals, feminism and black feminism. She decided it was time for African women to have their own ideologies defined by them in an effort to prevent being mixed in with other social groups. Therefore, the word Africana Womanism suits the Africana woman more accurately, who is both Self-Namer and Self-Definer (who is this woman of colour?), and those facts involve African women's different challenges, perceptions and desires. Nether less to say, women of colour in the Americas have shuffled their identity, in which two aspects of their complexion (Blackness and Womanhood) sometimes put them in double-threatening roles, therefore, Black Women saw and lived their lives in a way that was different from Black men, White women and men.

> The Africana woman did not see the man as her primary enemy as does the White feminist, who is carrying out an age-old battle with her White male counterpart for subjugating her as his property. Africana men have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress Africana women as White men have had to oppress White women.45 (.in the effort to fight against racial injustice) Black women cannot afford the luxury, if you will, of being consumed by gender issues. (Hudson-Weems. Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves. P.28)

Such movement has certain groundbreaking values that distinguishes it from both Feminism and Womanism. Such values were best illustrated in Brenda Verner's (1994) article "The Power and Glory of Africana Womanism":

> Africana Womanism in essence says: We love men. We like being women. We love children. We like being mothers. We value life. We have faith in God and the Bible. We want families and harmonious relationships. We are not at war with our men seeking money, power and influence through confrontation. Our history is unique. We are the inheritors of African-American women's history, and as such we shall not redefine ourselves nor that history to meet some politically correct image of a popular culture movement, which demands the right to speak for and redefine the morals and mores of all racial, cultural and ethnic groups. Nor shall we allow the history to be "shanghied" to legitimatize the "global political agenda" of others. We reject the status of victim. Indeed, we are victors, Sisters in Charge of our own destiny. We are Africana culture-keepers: Our primary obligation is to the progress of our cultural way of life through the stability of family and the commitment to community. The rite of passing generation-to-generation knowledge free from outside manipulation, coercion or intimidation ensures traditional integrity, which fosters a climate of cultural security. Traditional cultures should not be obligated to bow to redefinitions foisted upon them by elitist entities that gain their authority via the drive of well-organized media hype (P.8)

II.3.3.2. The Key Components of Africana Womanism

According to Reed's article (2001), Weems defines eighteen "descriptors" that should direct educated analyzes of the life of the Africana woman. The Africana womanist is 1) a self-namer "nommo"; 2) a self-definer; 3) family-centered; 4) genuine in sisterhood; 5) strong; 6) in concert with the Africana man in struggle; 7) whole; 8) authentic; 9) a flexible role player;

10) respected; 11) recognized; 12) spiritual; 13) male compatible; 14) respectful of elders; 15) adaptable; 16) ambitious; 17) mothering; and 18) nurturing . As she merely says, *"Africana womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women"*. (Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves P.154-155).

Every one of the above-mentioned characteristics has a specific meaning, which collectively lays the foundation for Africana Womanism. The first Self-Naming theory addresses the significance of self-identification within society as an Africana individual. The definition with Africana separates itself from feminism and black variations, and that this movement is named after the people it serves. The second established theory, self-definition, serves to highlight the challenges facing African women via a Pan-African prism**,** which creates a certain unity among all Africans "*Self-definition explores gender inequalities and stereotypes in the modern patriarchy*" (Hudson-Weems.1998)**.** Indeed**,** one needs to recognize himself first and identify himself within any dominant culture or society, in order for others to recognize him. The other elements are grouped together as a whole; therefore, the belief in the black community as a whole's progress retains a feeling of wholeness.

Some major results are transmitted as the Black community's perceived closeness is reinforced by women in society. According to Nah Dove's view in **(**African Womanism: An Afrocentric Theory.1998): "*having been exposed to Africana Womanism, having taught from my book for several years--I don't really know what the difference is, as she sees it. I really don't. I just know that with Africana womanism, I tried to look at us, and who we really are, and what we really do*" (P.515). The writer clearly states that Hudson gave her a new vision about herself as an African American, and that African women are known to be one "I Am because we are" (Janiece L. Blackmon, 2008).

II.3.3.3. Africana Womanism vs. Feminism and Womanism

As the difference between Womanism and Feminism has already been explained, Africana womanim came to denounce and contrasts sharply with both of the movements. Black women authors, academics, and activists have often criticized feminism as a threat to progressive change within the Black Diaspora, and as a typical "white" political body. On the other hand, Womanism itself was not sufficient to demonstrate women's experiences in these

particular cultural groups. However, Hudson-weems claims that Africana womanism was THE proper term to best illustrate the experiences of Black African women in Africa or the Diaspora. Like other Afrocentric thinkers, Hudson-Weems insists the theory (both its name and its contours) must be culturally rooted or "centric" and clearly identified with African descent citizens. Africana womanism is more about the “US” than the “I” , it is more about unity , family , and race empowerment agenda (mainly the Africana woman's agenda) which can be differentiated from all other female-based theories, mainly because of its requirement that race, class and gender be given priority in that order . Weems believes "*Africana Womanism is not an oblique reference to feminism, black feminism, African feminist movements or the womanism of Alice Walker*" (Weems.1998). The writer’s ideology is also against the ideology of Walker’s consideration of feminism as an integral part of the broader political framework of womanism. Apart from womanism, though strongly linked, Africana womanism is a movement explicitly designed for women of African descent. It is focused on African culture, and reflects on African women's particular challenges, needs and desires (Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd and Evelyn M. Simien (2006), pp. 67-89). Depending on this logic, Africana womanism finds oppression based on race and class to be far more critical than oppression based on gender “Maparyan, Layli (2012)”.

II.4. Afrofuturism And African Womanhood

Afrofuturism is known for its encouragement and embracement to the concepts, values, works, feelings, behavior and experiences of Black women. It is an ideology that explores the African and African American creativity and elegance, and it is also used to build a world that has space and time for black bodies to exist within their culture. Womanhood is Afrofuturism. (Williams, Timothy, 2018). With that said, along with the previous body of evidence, one can conclude that Afrofuturism is the force empowered by all the principles and values most carried by Africana womanism. This movement is what Black science fiction is about, all with an aim of reclaiming the African woman’s womanhood and identity. Dery (1994) argued that While Afrofuturism addresses black topics such as racism, segregation, othering, marginalization in the sense of Africa and the diaspora’s history, imperialism, post-colonization and decolonization as interpreted and (re)conceptualized and (re)articulated by the twin lenses of technoculture and science fiction ; such principles also tell a large part of Africana womanism. Like Afrofuturism, Africana womanism explores the same cultural concepts in the sense of

Africa and mainly the Diaspora, yet with black women at the forefront. For women of African descent and their experiences, Africana womanism as conceived by Hudson-Weems (1998) is concerned not only with black women but with the wholeness of black people; that is, race, class and sex. (Chikafa-Chipiro, Rosemary. 2019). At the heart of the eighteen characteristics of Africana womanism are concerns about self-articulation, social engagement, group empowerment and interpersonal relation and that is the core features of any Afrofuturistic work**.** Africana womanism has always been a historical reclaiming approach that aims to reclaim the roles and subjectivities of women of color in the face of White feminist hegemonies. This ideology flourished in the works of many Afrofuturistic writers such as Okorafor, and Butler were the stories are often about a Black woman as the protagonist who saves the world.

Afrofuturism has proven itself able to provide a place and a platform for black womanhood in the African futures discourse. Black women are no longer passive objects that simply live it. Chikafa in 2017 argued that Africa**n** womanism is multi-dimensional and diverse in scope not only because it applies to the perspective of the black woman , but also incorporates other intellectual forms, such as Afrocentrism, postcolonial theory and also Afrofuturism, as it attempts to appeal to the entire black community **:** "*The Africana woman is spiritual and the African woman is, 'the highest incarnation of wisdom; the future and the fate of the community depend decidedly on her*" (chifaka rosemary on Bujo 1998:124). Afrofuturistic and Africana womanist theory has proved flexible in engaging the imperial archive in a materialistic and metaphysical context that gives precedence to specific postcolonial and decolonial subjectivities that inevitably place African content in speculative futures (Chifaka. 2019**).** Afrofuturism has proven itself to be Africana womanist centric in many works from films to books to even music. The first notable work that is familiar with the majority is probably the **"**Black panther**"** movie, which differentiated itself for not only representing Blackness but also Black womanhood. The women in this science fiction work are an embodiment of the eighteen attributes or characteristics of Africana womanism, and they are scattered through their different roles and personalities. The film like many other Afrofuturistic works has made a pleasant progress in re-claiming and re-imagining Black womanhood out of any hegemonic concepts about colored women and people in general.

Even though many scholars have agreed that Afrofuturism most represents Africana womanism, however, many other argued that this whole perspective of Africana womanism is not much different of the concept of womanism. They claim that both movements have the same aim in reclaiming the Black womanhood**.** According to Chifaka, the scholar Anyabwile

(2018) argues that Alice Walker claims that womanism transcends the limits of patriarchal domination owing to its qualitative characteristics. He cites Alice Walker (1983), and suggests that through Walker's openness to American South encounter, there was such a thing as behaving womanish by breaking socially accepted limits, while appreciating the history of women, the sensitivities of women and at the same time being committed to the preservation of entire peoples. Even though Hudson-Weems (1993) dissolves her African womanism from the womanism of Walker, the connection here is clear. (chifaka, Rosemary. 2019).

Such definitions are paired with each other to shape a concept known as intersectionality, invented in 1989 by the law professor, Kimberle Crenshaw. The later spoke about womanism as a movement that tackled the issue of Black women who cannot be identified neither as Black or as a woman. On the other hand, each word needs to be viewed separately and hence retains the viewpoints of each other (Williams, Timothy, 2018). In the final anaysis , womanism, Africana womanism and Afrofuturism objectively examine society and culture through the fields of race, gender, law and influence, all under the banner of reviving the Black identity, primarily the identity of the Black woman (Rosemary. 2019).

II.5. Conclusion

Afrofuturism is a movement that sought to reclaim and restore the Black identity with Black womanhood in its forefront. Along with other movements such as Africana womanism, it gave a platform for Black writers to share the experiences of Black women and their contributions to the world. Nnedi Okorafor through her novel “Binti” proved that a Black woman could achieve beyond any expectations or limitations. The following chapter will explore this Afrofuturistic work to show how it portrayed the modern, strong, and intelligent Africana woman in a futuristic context, all in reliance to the African heritage and culture.

Chapter three

An Afrofuturist Reading to Binti by Nnedi Okorafor (2015)

Chapter III: Binti By Nnedi Okorafor (2015)

III.1. Introduction

In her young adult science fiction novella Binti (2015) Nnedi Okorafor, an Igbo[5]-American author, writes about African girlhood in the future. This novel is an Afrofuturistic work that embraced the Africana womanism in all its senses, along with the significant importance it gave to one's own heritage and culture.

This chapter is divided into four parts**.** The first point introduces a short biography about the author - Nnedi Okorafor **-** her life and her major contributions to Afrofuturism and Afro-American literature. The second part is concerned with a summary of the story highlighting the most important events that happened to the protagonist "Binti", followed by the major characters that play in the story. The next part is devoted to the major themes exposed in the novel, and the last point is about how the protagonist is an exemplification to an Africana womanist under the umbrella of Afrofuturism.

III.2. About the Author

Nnedi Okorafor, originally named Nnedimma Nkemdili Okorafor is a Nigerian-American writer born in April 8^{t}, 1974 in the US to Nigerian immigrant parents. Okorafor's parents moved to America to attend school but were unable to return to Nigeria due to the Nigerian Civil War[6] , however that did not stop the Nigerian writer from visiting her homeland very often. She studied in Homewood-Flossmoor High School where the later was known for her skills in Tennis and Track. She was excelled in physics and mathematics, and decided to be an entomologist because of her interest in insects. At the age of 13, she was diagnosed with scoliosis, a disease that worsened over time. She underwent spinal fusion surgery to straighten and connect her spine; an unusual complication caused Okorafor to become paralyzed from the

[5] Nnedimma is Igbo for "mother is good", Okorafor, Nnedi (May 11, 2014). "My full name is Nnedimma. It means 'mother is good' in Igbo. 'Nnedi' means 'mother is'. Mothers r celebrated any time someone calls my name" (from twitter)

[6] The Nigerian Civil War was a civil war waged in Nigeria between the Federal government and the Biafra secessionist state from 1967 to 1970. Biafra represented the Igbo people's separatist ambitions, whose leadership thought they could no longer coexist with the federal government that is controlled by the North due to political, economic, racial, cultural and religious conflicts ("Nigeria - Independent Nigeria". Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved 2020)

waist down. Okorafor shifted to writing short stories on the fringes of a novel she had for science fiction. It was the first time she had ever creatively written anything. Okorafor regained her ability to walk with intensive physical therapy that year, but she did not resume her sporting career. She took a creative writing class that spring semester at the recommendation of a close friend, and completed her first book by the end of the semester.

The author has a Master degree in Journalism from Michigan State and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Illinois, Chicago. She is a graduate of the Lansing, Michigan, Clarion Writers Workshop in 2001. She currently lives with her family in Olympia Fields, Illinois. She is known as a writer of fantasy and science fiction for both children and adults, and is known for incorporating African cultures into imaginative worlds and iconic personalities. Some of her notable works are: Who Fears Death (2010), Akata Witch (2011), Zahrah the Windseeker (2005), and Binti (2015) which is said to be her best work so far which won both the 2016 Nebula Award and 2016 Hugo Award for best Novella.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nnedi_Okorafor#cite_note-ChiTrib-2019-05-23-8)

III.3. About the Story

Binti is in fact a trilogy written by the Nigerian-American author of African-based science fiction and fantasy, Nnedi Okorafor and was published by Tor books. The Hugo- and Nebula-winning Binti trilogy is the story of an exceptional girl's trip from home to distant University of Oomza. This paper's focus will be mainly on the first book of the trilogy, published in 2015 to narrate the beginning of Binti's journey. In this Afrofuturistic novella, Okorafor Skillfully uses science fiction as a way to examine the various aspects of ethnic identities and gender variations. How is it like to be oppressed? What does being an oppressor signify? What does being both, or being stuck on both sides, mean? are we who we think we are because of our beliefs or the way we want to describe ourselves? (Alex Brown, 2018). All these questions asked through history added to the fact that Binti is a Black woman from a very conservative African society in a futuristic context who is willing to discover who she really is, along with her contribution to the world as an African Black girl.

Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib is a young teenage woman and a Himba. Himbas are a minority group of people located in South Africa specifically in north Namibia. These people exist in today's world, however contrary to reality, the story portrays them as

families of skilled artisans with powerful techno-mathematical abilities. They are a minority group and are still marginalized until this day. They believe that they should live true to their ancestral land, that women should cover their bodies and hair in otjize, a combination composed predominantly of "sweet smelling red clay." (p.11). Otjize is not just an object, it is a part of who they are, their culture and how they communicate with each other, it is part of their daily life and is used as a means to protect them from the heat as their lands are similar to a desert. She feels naked, lost, and homeless without it. Binti's narrative weaves rich culture with advanced science, as Binti is given a spot for her expertise of mathematics at the prestigious Oomza University. She thinks of numbers and codes, and through treeing, or running abstract algorithms of her mind, reaches a state of heightened consciousness. By doing so, she helps her father construct astrolabes (instruments that disclose the identity of an individual and serving certain useful functions, such as observing wide distances or looking up details). Her analytical abilities also are valuable in many aspects, she is a harmonizer with the potential to use intelligence to establish harmony. These facts about Binti shows Okorafor's skillfulness in merging an ancient African group of people along with their culture and believes, and placed them in a futuristic intergalactic world to best exemplify what an Afrofuturistic world could be with mainly Africans in the center.

The story starts with the difficult decision Binti has to make in leaving home, and because the Himba people have strong ties to the land, they rarely ever leave their homelands. Binti goes further by leaving the planet, despite the disrespect explicitly displayed by her family for her university acceptance. Even though they are notoriously creative, they were also inward looking "my *parents would never imagine I'd do such a thing in a million years*" (P.10). Her admission to a prestigious institution is almost as thrilling for her as it is devastating for her family. Binti is an outsider away from home and she is being handled as such. Not only is she stared at, but she is also ashamed, humiliated and publicly gawked for being different, in a show that would echo with many people for being different, whether it be color, gender, religion or sex. "*I was defying the most traditional part of myself for the first time in my entire life……. We Himba don't travel. We stay put. Out ancestral land is life; move away from it and you diminish. We even cover our bodies with it. Otjize is red land. Here in the launch port, most were Khoush and a few other non-Himba. Here, I was an outsider; I was outside*" (P.9-12). Just by leaving she has shamed her family and despised her people. She was supposed to stay home and get married "*my prospects of marriage were at a 100 percent and now they would be zero,*

no man wanted a woman who'd run away" (P.13). She instead went against the will of her parents and conservative society to go after her dreams.

Binti finally arrived to the ship that was heading to the university, named "**Third Fish**", mainly looking like a shrimp and as alive as any living creature. She was not surprised to know that she was the only Himba on the ship and the first of her people ever to attend a university. The other ethnic group and most likely the dominant one is the Khouch people. The Khoush is the dominant, and a fictitious society. They are identified as pale and one of them as described by Okorafor has green eyes "Covered *their mouths with their hands so pale that they looked untouched by the sun…. the sun was her or his enemy"* (P.11). They wear turbans, and veils, and are usually carefully treated and utterly entitled. Khoush men and women approached Binti's hair on many occasions without approval, and were often both deliberately and inadvertently disrespectful " *I hear it smells like shit because it is shit*" A khouch woman said about Binti's hair " *these dirt bathers are a filthy people"* she said referring to the Otjize they use (P.16). Her father had always expressed aggressive anger towards the Khoush clients who came to buy his astrolabes. Her mother had also showed intense mistrust of the renowned Oomza University, whose human students and faculty were all Khoush. She claimed that, for their own benefit, they wanted Binti, the prodigy: "*You go to the school and you become its slave*." (P.14).

The sixteen years old was seen as an outsider and was often criticized for her way of dressing, but she could not possibly change it as her culture was part of her identity "*The thin metal rings I wore around each ankle jingled noisily*" (P.10). She tried to avoid all their stares, as her dream was bigger than all their hate. She ignored the full life scan she had to go through in the ship "*I hadn't even gotten there yet and already I's given them my life*" (P.14). She needed to assimilate their ways to be recognized, to look and behave like them. One can tell that Okorafor is trying to portray and bring back past experiences of Black people in a dominant white society. The aim is to challenge all the ideologies based on the fact that Black people are backwards and illiterate *" to them , I was probably like one of the people who lived in caves … who were so blackened by the sun that they looked like walking shadows*" (P.18). However, Binti succeeded in making some friends (Olo , Remi , Kwuga , Nur , Anajama , Rhoden) who eventually got to like her because of her remarkable skills , love for knowledge , **God** , and because they shared the same interests with her "…*people who loved mathematics , inventing , studying…. The people on the ship weren't Himba, but I soon understood that they were still my people. I stood up as a Himba , but our communalities shined brighter*" (P.22). Binti even

liked a boy on the ship named Hero who was very nice to her and both were attracted to each other.

Binti never forgot where she truly belonged, and her beliefs directed and ensured her safety, highlighting the need not only to embrace differences, but also to recognize who you are. One can assume that Okorafor in her story builds controversy in under 100 words, addresses it, and challenges society's biases, all while providing a solution: tolerance by awareness, empathy and understanding. Binti painted her body in otjize, as well as her hair that was plated into elaborate designs and codes that represented her bloodline "*I wanted to tell him that there was a code, that the pattern spoke my family's bloodline, culture, and history. That my father had designed the code and my mother and aunties had shown me how to braid it into my hair*" (P.23)

Binti had a sort of ancient Object called "The Edan" which is a stellated cube of obscure metal that bears enigmatic markings. Binti claimed that a "desert woman" once named it a "god stone," but she explained it as an "inert computative apparatus" she carried around for luck and protection. Binti discovered it in the desert years ago: *"edan" means such an ancient tool that no one knows what it is, or whether it is .it is simply known as a work of art "edan was general name for a device too old for anyone to know it functions, so old that they were now just art*" (P.17). At some point in the story she was questioned about it but she could not explain, not because she could not, but because the other khouch would never understand her "*he didn't want to show that I, Himba girl was more educated than he*" (P.19). Binti was having a good time with her new friends and crush on the ship, and was very excited to get to the university when suddenly everything changed.

There was a scream so loud, and warm blood all over Binti. Heru's chest was open, he was dead, everyone was. The ship was hijacked by hostile aliens, and that is how we meet the meduse. The Meduse look like human-sized floating jellyfish, "*their domes' flesh thin as fine silk, their long tentacles spilling down to the floor like a series of gigantic ghostly noodles*" (P.25). They are decisive, clear and honorable. We discover that the Meduse had a history of conflict with the Kouch but in a time of peace, this was a surprise assault. The Meduse appeared ignorant of any other kind of human being until they meet Binti. However, that was not the reason Binti survived the initial attack. The Meduse could not reach her because of her enigmatic ancient artefact, the edan to which she prayed for protection. She discovered that the edan actually kills the meduse, which guaranteed her protection. She then learned she could use it to interacte with them, it was both an interpreter and a weapon. The violence it was capable

of effecting on Meduse bodies was weaponized conversation. They seemed to recognize the edan and called it “shame” which means that ancient Meduse technologies could have been lost on Earth a long time ago. Another explanation to presume some sort of ancient connection between the Meduse and Earth, or even more precisely with the Himba, is that the otjize has healing powers for the meduse. Even if there was such a friendship, it was forgotten long ago.

Just when communication was available, the first thing Binti learned is that the Meduse viewed her and her entire race as inherently cruel. Despite the invasion on a human vessel and the human passenger slaughter, the Meduses were not trying to restart their old Khoush war. They tried to use the innocent student transportation ship as a means to carry the Khouch to Omza University to launch an attack. At a certain point in the past, a Meduse leader was attacked and mutilated by Oomza’s scientific researchers, taking the stinger from his body and carrying it back to the university for exhibition in a museum. The Meduse wanted vengeance and that was the point of that attempted murder. At that particular moment, Binti remembered all her loved once, and how she ignored them only to fit in a new place. She held the edan so tight for protection and tried to swallow her fear. Stuck in a room for three days, hunger and dehydration were starting to mess with her head.

After a long discussion with Okwu (a meduse who was healed thanks to the Otjize), Binti was given food and got her strength back, after all it was because of her differences, her culture and heritage that she was still alive. Binti tried to explain to Okwu who she was and from where she came to the meduse with a hope that she would remain alive. However, the meduse had a huge grudge for the Khouch as they stole their chief’s stinger, and the medusa were willing to take it back with violence. Binti remembered what her father taught her and how smart and a great of a harmonizer she is and asked to meet their chief in exchange of her Otjize, which was something precious to the meduse for its healing powers. "*My stinger is my people’s power*,” the Meduse chief said. "*They took it from us. That’s an act of war*." (P.62). Their anger was caused by the disgrace of emasculation. Binti spoke with great determination to consider negotiation and volunteered as a negotiator, but the head of Meduse insisted that she first gives up her edan. She needed to rob herself freely of both her willingness to kill them, and her ability to communicate with them. When she did, they stinged her unconscious instantly. Again, she was referred to not only as uncivilized but also as **a girl** who knew nothing, however this time by the meduse “*forgive it, it is a young, a girl ….. You people are good at hiding, especially females like you”* another meduse said (P.63). Therefore, those people did not only look down to her for her culture and heritage, but also because she was a female, a

Himba Black female. The young girl was ashamed of herself for leaving home which eventually led to what she was facing. She betrayed her people and herself as a woman "*I had not gone on my pilgrimage as a proper woman. I was sure I'd return to my village as a full woman to do that*" (P.65).

When Binti awakened, without the edan, she could still comprehend the Meduse. Previously, Okwu bonded with Binti as to what he perceives as a commonality between her plaits and his tentacles. The Meduse swapped her hair with real tentacles, pure okuoko. "*The okuoko were a soft transparent blue with darker blue dots at their tips. They grew out of my head as if they'd been doing that all my life, so natural looking that I couldn't say they were ugly .. I could no longer braid them into my family's code pattern*" (P.87). They were functional organs that enabled contact without using the edan, and they were not just substitutes for her hair but fused with her brain and nervous system in alien ways (tremendous improvements to her body without her permission or knowledge). Okwu makes it clear that it was the only way for them to communicate. The Meduse leader called it a gambit to enhance their negotiation chances. He thought that Binti could prove to Oomza that she was actually their representative, not a hostage.

Once arrived at Oomza, she is mesmerized by it. The place was a small planet comparing to Earth, very sunny at times and very dark at others. Binti acted in all courage and was willing to restore peace, and she started by telling Oomza people about her, her people and culture along with what happened on the ship. She informed them about the meduse , their plan and how they could be dangerous. The Oomza Representative Board, headed by a spider-like creature "Haras", showed surprise and dismay at the cultural violation unintentionally performed by all of them. Oomza seemed to have little knowledge of how the stinger ended up in their museum, however it was all for scientific purposes, and they were incredibly ashamed for any damage. "*The scholars who did this will be found, expelled, and exiled,"*(P.78). Haras welcomed Binti warmly and explicitly showed his feeling of pride towards her. The stinger was returned and Okwu was asked to stay as the first meduse ever to study there to show allegiance. Binti used her Otjize to reattach the stinger and heal the scar. She felt honor, pride and an outsider too, because even though she was a hero in the galaxy, she still betrayed her family and people, and now that she bonded with Okwu, it was even worse. Her story spread in the university, known as the dark skinned with strange hair wonder. However, they still found a hard time to accept her because of Okwu whom they saw as a dangerous threat. The crisis was over and she was officially a student at Oomza University. Binti succeeded in creating an Otjize

from the lands of Oomza , and even though it was not the same as the one she made from the lands of her home, it was still very helpful to her and Okwu. She encountered Okwu who convinced her to call home and reconcile with her parents. (Chandrasekera, 2016 and Ratcliff, 2018)

Binti is a full exemplification of what an Africana woman can be. She gave her all (Body, culture, soul) to save others from a war her people had nothing to do with. She run away from home to seek education and high knowledge at the most respected University in the Universe knowing well that her people and parents would never accept her as true Himba again. The strong female lead character saved a race that looked down to her and her people using her culture, what her father tough her, and her great skills as harmonizer to create peace between two ethnic groups she never thought could accept her. It was not her skills in mathematics that saved her but rather her culture. Okorafor highlights through Binti that one can never move forward unless he is fully conscious of his religion, culture, traditions and values, and in this case, the African Himba values as they are what saved Binti from death. She placed an ancient African tribe's heritage and placed them in a futuristic world to shed light on certain issues that these dark-skinned people still face until this day, and will face if people do not change their visions on them. Racism, sexism, womanhood, gender, bravery and courage are what made this story highly valuable to its readers, all in a work where advanced technology, intergalactic worlds and African cultures are mixed to be known as Afrofuturism. In the words of Melissa Ratcliff (2018) "*While the world is full of prejudice, Binti offers hope. She does not renounce her tradition, even when she is put in grave danger. Instead, she uses her knowledge to create peace and hope, forming new and unexpected relationships in the process*". This time we are presented another hero, however, a different kind of hero.

III.4. Binti's Main Characters

There are many characters and voices participating in this story, however these are the major ones that have predominant roles in the novel. To start with, the protagonist **Binti** is a young Himba woman who left her very conservative parents' house to pursue her dreams. Binti's "otherness" is portrayed and described in particular ways that may be very familiar to us. She is a dark-skinned girl with a skin covered in red clay from as a part of their identity and tradition. Her hair texture is typically Afro, which is also coated with the same clay and braided in symbols and codes that represents her Tribe. However, it remains a very strong symbolism

in the story, as it does not only represent her and her otherness, but also her transition when bonded with one of the Meduses. She also wears anklets that jingle constantly and loudly as she walks. She is very skilled in mathematics, engineering and programming as are the majority of her people. The strong leading woman is also an excellent Harmonizer, able of creating peace and harmony between races. Although Binti understands how different she is from those around her, she declines to be bowed by it. She goes everywhere confidently, and faces obstacles on her own terms. She is very courageous to confront her own terror. In the words of Shannon Payne (2016) "*Binti shows that different ways of knowing are not lesser ways, as the titular character proves that the very things that set her apart from the dominant culture are the things that help her survive and save lives*".

Okorafor exposes Binti to other cultures and people where she finds her own place in a very wide universe, populated by several different cultures. Before moving to other races, one must mention **her parents**. Even though they are considered passive characters in the first novella, they still have a huge impact on Binti and the story itself. Binti's parents are very conservative and strongly opposing the idea of their daughter leaving home. They want to see her married and practicing her skills to benefit her tribe, not other people who according to her mother would use her as a slave. Unnamed in the story, they believe that if anyone of them leaves their land, they will face doom, which eventually left Binti no choice but to run away without them or anyone else knowing. Her father master harmonizer and most prominent astrolabe maker and seller. Her mother on the other hand sees mathematical equations in the air around her and unlike Binti and her father who use their powers to create and benefit people; she uses hers to protect her family.

Another significant character is **Okwu**. He is a Meduse as curious about Binti as she is about him (it). He becomes a close friend, ally, and partner to Binti throughout their months at Oomza, and Binti becomes related to him (half human, half meduse). It is headstrong, logical, and mischievous; he enjoys causing trouble for the Khoush and is deeply loyal to its people. Humans are incomprehensible to Okwu sometimes, though it slowly begins to understand them through Binti. It begins to care for Binti and protects her at risk to itself and its life multiple times.

Other characters in the story are involved in Binti's journey and had an impact on her identity. **Heru** is the Khoush boy onboard Third Fish that Binti falls in love with. He notices that Binti's hair is braided into specific mathematical equations and is very curious about them. Binti at first doubted him when he touched her hair but at the same time liked him a lot and

figures out, he is actually nice and probably likes her back. After Binti witnesses the Meduse killing Heru, she becomes wracked with guilt and anxiety. The repeating image of Heru's murder haunts Binti throughout her adventure. We also encounter in the story **The Meduse chief**, another character who unlike the other Meduse, is entirely clear. Khoush researchers forcibly removed and stole its stinger. This violated the Meduse and is the reason for their murder of the academics onboard **Third Fish**. Although the Meduse chief is initially unsure of Binti, it eventually becomes almost fond of her. The Meduse begin to see Binti as a new family member with a bond forged through war. He is forever grateful to her for saving two races from a war.

The story also includes other minor characters that Binti talks about such as Dele, Binti's childhood friend and apprentice on the Himba council of elders. Dele is extremely traditional and believes in the old Himba way. He is furious at Binti for leaving Earth and shuns her during her time at Oomza University. Binti also mentions her friends on the ship (Olo, Remi, Kwuga , Nur , Anajama , Rhoden). Okorafor did not give a description to them, she only mentions through her protagonist that they were nice and share the same interests with Binti and eventually became good friends with her before they all die leaving Binti with only great memories.

III.5. The Social Construction of Gender in Binti

Through Okorafor's Binti, the field of science fiction permits the writer throughout a futuristic context to tackle modern issues of gender in society. Gender tends to distinguish individuals in a world of hyper-advanced science and space exploration, and is built less by any technological or scientific attribute and more by its socialization. To start with, Gender like race or ethnicity is an identity marker where boys and girls, men and women have certain roles and positions in the society. The concept of gender was defined by Winsome (2000) in his module of gender and sensitivity to say: "*The word was used by Ann Oakley and others in the 1970s to describe those characteristics of men and women which are socially determined, in contrast to those which are biologically determined*" (introduction, p.1). According to him, this distinction can change through change in time and cultural factors. These differentiations have helped understand manhood, womanhood and self-identity in general.

Simon de Beauvoir in her book “The Second Sex 1940” also tackled the issue of gender but through a womanish lens. She explained that Females felt forced to play a second role for men. She opposes the Aristotelian belief that women have a restricted role to play in society because of their biological characteristics. She refuses the idea that women are passive characters and are referred to as the “other” who only completes a man’s image in society. Judith Butler in her book (Gender trouble, 1990) adds that self-identity is constructed in order to develop the performative theories of gender. Therefore, Okorafror agrees with both Butler and de Beauvoir and through Binti proved wrong all basic assumptions about gender grounded by society. Not only as a woman, but also as Black and a Himba, Binti with her intelligence and skills saved two races from a war that no one before her could stop. The writer challenged the dominant ideologies of what heroines look or behave like in science fictions and also tackled the question of what the future could be with a Black female in lead. Being a woman who went against her parents, her people and the other races she encountered, Binti proved herself as strong, smart and capable, and she could not be what others tried to make her, willing to reach her goals in a world full of challenges.

Another character who fell under the social constructions of gender has to be Okwu. Most of the characters in the story refer to him as an “it” rather than “he”. Okwu belongs to the meduse who are seen as dangerous and full of hatred where in fact those feelings were only a consequence of other’s actions towards them. Binti on the other hand knew him as an “it”, but things changed along with Binti’s view on Okwu as he gained her respect and trust along with all his people whom Binti refer to as noble and courageous.

III.6. Otherness and The Act of Othering

Simplistic representation of societies radically different from the dominant culture enables the dominant culture to claim superiority over others they find less advanced. These depictions often minimize cultures other than the dominant culture to nothing more than a simple foil that can be used to test the dominant one. This kind of over-simplification of oppressed and disadvantaged societies and individuals is referred to as "othering" (Hall, 1997, p. 248).

> The Spectacle of the Other," that othering is an expression of dominance by the dominant culture over a minority or marginal culture, but indicates that “power has to be understood here not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion,

but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms including the power to represent someone or something a certain way. (Hall, 1997, p. 249).

Okorafor addresses the inclusions and embodiment of these very practices in a futuristic context. Moreover, “othering” remains a very important theme in the novella Binti. After reaching the space station, Binti highlights her sense of feeling "other" than the dominant majority "the Khoush" by expressly saying "*I was an outsider, I was outside*", (p. 13). Throughout this scene, Okorafor draws attention to the omnipresence of marginalization and cultural dominance in this fictional universe before Binti even gets onboard the ship. By writing for an actual oppressed community and by dramatizing the racially patriarchal custom of "othering" in this imaginary future, Okorafor confirms that this vision is not a utopia in which the grace of time alone has overcome the current ills of oppression and cultural hegemony. (Shannon Payne: Afrofuturism, 2016). However, this time the Himba are not simply people with no advantages or valuation, they are artisans who are very intelligent and with numerous skills. Among these skills is their creation of astrolabes which enables all races to communicate and understand each other and without them they would be lost. Also, the fact that they are Master Harmonizers (using knowledge to create peace). Binti not so different from her people used her traditions and values to not only save herself, but also save others. She achieved popularity and her sense of “otherness” was gradually disappearing. In conclusion, despite all the assumptions about Binti as a Himba and a colored woman, succeeded in paving her way in a place far away from her home. Even though she was different and considered as “other” she gained their trust and saved their lives, all while maintaining her cultural identity.

III.7. Race and Racism

In Okorafor's Binti, race is a theme that is treated with great care exposing the assumption that the dark skin is unattractive or merely "evil", and the idea that people with dark skin are inferior in any way. From the beginning, readers see the harsh way Binti is regarded by the Khoush and perceived for her dark skin and ethnicity of Himba. The Khoush are looking down on the Himba, they think they are primitive and savage creatures. Even though the Himba are the creators and sellers of astrolabes, the very technology that they rely on, the Khoush continue to believe that the Himba are somehow lesser. When Binti arrived at the launch port to leave for Oomza University for the first time, Khoush women touched her hair and remarked about her otjize covered skin. “*I hear it smells like shit because it is shit*,” A khouch woman

said about Binti's hair "*these dirt bathers are a filthy people*" (P.16). Okorafor emphasizes how stereotypes and prejudices are inherited or taught and explains that even when Binti becomes part meduse, she still refered to herself as a desert woman because the Himba community had taught Binti this prejudice. This issue of race is not only portrayed in Binti but also in Okwu. The Khouch see the meduse as dangerous and inferior as well, and the hate between the two races is well exemplified through Okwu. Okorafor tried to expose the fact that people from different races and ethnicities are raised on certain beliefs and stereotypes that encourage the hate and misunderstanding. When the Khouch saw Binti and Okwu they saw the "one who'd abandoned her people," and a "violent Meduse,". Despite the tension between their peoples, these people from different races gradually unlearn their prejudices and eventually become friends.

III.8. Connection to Culture and Heritage

Okorafor through Binti tried to prove her ideology that one cannot achieve anything if one does not assimilate his or her heritage and culture. The writer created a character that could connect to all Africans in Africa and the diaspora. All the characteristics of Binti spoke of African pride and cultural heritage. Okorafor's depiction of hair can be read as a pushback against current Western beauty standards and the often-racist rhetoric around black and African hair types. The writer highlights the fact that it should not be revolutionary to characterize Binti and her family's hair as beautiful, just as a science fiction heroine who happens to be an African girl should not be. Himba women have a tradition, which is to cover their face and hair with red clay because they think it is beautiful, and it represents who they are, and even when the Khouch think of it as dirty, Binti continues to wear it and treasure it all along her journey. Her close relation with her traditions and culture saved her life and helped her with the Meduse. Binti's hair indeed has a deeper meaning in the story; it symbolizes her culture and bloodline and is braided in codes of symbols thought by her mother and aunts as it represents her connection to her beloved family and community. At last, when Binti discovers tentacles in her hair and her connection with the Meduse, she could no longer braid her hair into the history of her people and feels disconnected from her identity as a Himba. Binti depicted the sense of belonging and culture not only in her hair, but also in her Otjize, style of clothes, her Edan and many other cultural items, and each play a significant role in her self-discovery and her journey in an intergalactic world.

III.9. African Womanhood in The Afrofuturistic Novella Binti

As a Black African woman, Okorafor succeeded in exploring the world of Afrofuturism projecting to her readers a futuristic Africa, and a future where a Black woman from an African heritage is the hero. She challenged all stereotypes of what a science fiction novel should be and invaded a world that was once dominated by white male superheroes. The author shifted science fiction to the future to shed light on certain themes such as othering, race, gender inequality, science and technology, fantasy, and bringing back past experiences, however in such a context where everything is possible. Moreover, the writer's focus was the reclamation of Black womanhood. For her and many other writers, women did not only face socially established dilemmas such as racism, but also the fact that they were the most neglected only because of their colour and gender. Okorafor's interpretation of African history and culture through the scope of "fantastic elements" has characterized her brand of science fiction under the umbrella of "Afrofuturism,". She introduced readers to an African viewpoint of science fiction, its applications and her legacy as opposed to ideologies that have always felt challenged or threatened by it. Afrofuturism is a concept that allows people to imagine beyond everything they know and ask questions such as what if Harry Potter was Black with an afro? Alternatively, what if the protagonist of the story is actually a Black woman who has to wander a world she has not been allowed to shape or take part in? Such questions have been answered by writers such as Okorafor who brought light to the African culture mainly in the Diaspora, and re-opened certain issues that they faced in the past to reclaim these people's and mainly Black women's identity and their contributions to the world.

Historically, the popular fantasy book worlds have not featured Black women heavily. Nonetheless, with the success of Black authors, black women and girls continue to have a constant presence. This success ignited new inquiries about characters in black fiction books and Afrofuturism. Because Afrofuturism offers a way of keeping hold of the future, particularly in this case of the Black Women, it provides another means of reclaiming African diasporic identities, subjectivity and humanity. Given the insufficiency of women of color's roles in the history of science fiction, manifestations of their identities are especially significant. Visualizing their identity leads to their normalization: it un-other them, honors their otherness and ultimately de-marginalizes them (Grace Gipson, the future is Black and female, 2017). Binti is a Black character that has many potentials and powers. Her story offers an alternate perspective that disrupts the idea that "female, disadvantaged, and dark bodies are supposed to be reliant, imperfect, fragile, and incapable bodies ... portrayed as powerless week, and needy."

Binti's storyline conflicts with these ideologies and superhero myths that have implied that Black women are any less than any other white male. This Afrofuturistic exploration offers a new way used to correct past racist and perplexing experiences specifically for Black female characters, and imagine new narratives with the Africana woman in the forefront.

Afrofuturist science fiction novels are also influential in exposing young Black girls to science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Black women have always been underrepresented in the field of sciences as men always dominated it. Therefore, Okorafor insists on the importance of education as a way for colored women to reclaim their womanhood, which was portrayed in her protagonist who celebrated her intelligence on many occasions. In Binti, Okorafor is embracing the routes of Afrofuturism and Africana womanism to restore a platform for black women, place them in a power venue, and envisage a world where black women are not objectivized or created externally like the others. Hudson weems wrote in the late 1998 when she talked about Africana womanism:

> The first part of the coinage, Africana, identifies the ethnicity of the woman being considered, and this reference to her ethnicity, establishing her cultural identity, relates directly to her ancestry and land base—Africa. The second part of the term Womanism, recalls Sojourner Truth's powerful impromptu speech 'Ain't I a Woman?', one in which she battles with the dominant alienating forces in her life as a struggling Africana Woman, questioning the accepted idea of womanhood. Without question, she is the flip side of the coin, the co-partner in the struggle for her people, one who, unlike the white woman, has received no special privileges in American society. (Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves, p.22-23)

This definition applies to the character Binti who is very attached to her land and ancestral and refused to let go of her traditions and the values of her tribe. However, instead of living in as an immigrant in America, Okorafor put her in a very futuristic world and placed her among the Khouch who saw her as an outsider and a stranger.

The novel causes the readers to critically engage what they know about Africa especially places like South Africa and sub-Saharan continents. Binti as a character is Afrofuturistic embodiment of Africana womanism in that she, in keeping with Weems' definition, "battles with the dominant alienating forces in her life as a struggling Africana Woman, questioning the accepted idea of womanhood." Binti grapples with her identity as woman, African and human. Binti is all about self-growth, Okorofor explained this idea in one of her interviews saying "as

the story progresses, she becomes no other but more. This idea of leaving, but bringing and then becoming more is at one of the hearts of Afrofuturism." (Megan Anderson, 2018). Okororfor proved through her story that it is no longer accurate to question Black authors who writes about Black female characters. She addressed the fact that if the author does not explain what the protagonist of his story looks like or what his / her race or gender is, the expectations are already white and male until the author says otherwise. In less than a hundred pages, Okorafor's use of the pressure of being Himba in a society in which that ethnic minority is viewed as dirty and inferior may be indicative of the fact of being Black in a society where Blackness is associated with technically incompetent and worthlessness. Through comparing new technologies with ancient culture and using Binti to blur the distance between modernity and tradition, Okorafor reveals that womanhood of the future is full of Black African women who are leaders, heroines and professional negotiators who can improve the world.

III.10. Conclusion

Binti symbolizes the pioneer who confronts politics, prejudice, racism, bigotry, social inequality, inequality of ethnicity, classism, otherness, etc. She also faces the intense tug of past traditions, as she is the first member of her family and tribe to join a formal educational institution. Like so many black women before her, Binti is propelled forward by her sheer will to succeed and to survive , and through her journey she set an example for many women like her asserting that no matter how far they venture among the galaxies, everyone has special gifts that they can contribute to the universe. As Roxanne Fequire tells in her article about Binti: "in the future, technology will allow us to connect with a multiplicity of species, meaning that space won't look quite as blindingly white as we've been led to believe as the future is bright, not white". (Fequire, 2018)

General conclusion

Through history, Black women have faced certain conditions that pushed them away from their true self, lost in western perspectives and ideologies about their identity as Black and African. Colored women mainly in the diaspora had to face the consequences of a harsh past, a history shaped by the white civilization assuming that there is nothing to add to a truth told by white people. However, with the rise of Afrofuturism, a concept that relies on Science Fiction as its main premises, African and African American women depended on its imaginative abilities and its selfless borderline nature to help them re-question the past and re-imagine the future.

Even though mainstream Feminism ignored the needs and desires of colored women, it is considered as the fundamental motive that triggered many Black activists to rebel for their womanhood, therefore, the rise of movements of womanism with Alice Walker and Africana womanism with Clenora Hudson Weems. With the emergence of such concepts along with the existence of Afrofuturism, an Afrocentric future was finally possible and certain misleading ideologies previously created and believed were to be re-considered. African heritage creatives, authors and artists joined in sharing their stories from an afro-futuristic viewpoint, creating new universes and visions that predict alternative futures align with the current and even reclaiming the past.

Nnedi Okorofor, a Nigerian American writer, embraced Afrofuturism as a style of writing to shed light on certain issues that Black women faced and are still facing until this day. Through her character Binti, the writer unveils the negotiations between cultural and individual desires, between different types of knowledge structures, and between learning and assimilation. Through the story, Okorafor does not consider giving any answers; she rather raises questions giving an opportunity to the reader to reconsider the truth long ago believed not only about Black womanhood but also about various problems such as race, otherness, identity and gender inequality. The reader is left wondering how Binti is going to be able to create a space of existence at the University of Oomza. The end of the book leaves Binti the chance to establish a new home when she comes up with a way to make an otjize at the university, but the rest of her fate remains completely ambiguous. It is unclear whether she will be encouraged to reshape the university system or if she will be obligated to operate within its

restrictive systems. This research had studied Afrofuturism being the Umbrella under which womanism and Africana womanism falls portrayed in the novel Binti.

The work is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is based on theoretical framework, which gives some definitions to the key concept of Afrofuturism, its origins and the pioneering figures. It also provides the major fields that witnessed a drastic change when introduced to the movement such as music and literature along with other extended concepts related to the key concept of Afrofuturism. The second chapter is an analytical framework that analyses the concept of Black womanhood starting with feminism as the fundamental stone to the creation of purely Black movements such as womanism and Africana womanism in a journey to reclaim the Black identity and womanhood. Finally, the third chapter presents a short biography about the author and a summary of the story in addition to an overview about the major themes and characters, besides that, it analyses the female character Binti and her journey in a world very different from hers.

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