

The Harmonization of Identities and the Roots of Resistance through an Africanfuturist Lens in Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti*: *The Complete Trilogy*¹

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Abstract:

Africanfuturism is organised around a covert debate between interrelated concepts: deep-rooted African cultural elements, and the multifaceted notion of intersectionality. This subgenre of science fiction highlights the experiences of black women marginalised by race and gender, who continue to face systemic discrimination. Therefore, the work of the Africanfuturist author Nnedi Okorafor interrogates and challenges the dominant representations of black womanhood in science fiction. This exploration aims to reveal why intersectional narratives provide black women with reflections that dismantle the constraints of racist and patriarchal systems. Besides, the essay explores an African-inspired setting where characters actively cultivate a deeper connection with their African heritage. These roots serve as a potent support network, fostering resistance and empowering them to navigate the challenges they confront. The inclusion of black female characters, whose heritage is often stereotyped as primitive, offers a powerful opportunity to reimagine the future presenting a black afro-descendant woman actively shaping her own destiny. Through these narratives, Okorafor offers a compelling vision of empowerment and resistance, showcasing the profound impact of African cultural elements and intersectional perspectives in reshaping science fiction narratives.

Keywords: Africanfuturism, black women, harmonizer, intersectionality, resistance.

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1. Introduction: Africanfuturism as a Tool for Black Women's Visibility

A history of confronting interwoven systems of oppression motivated black women to engage in political activism. In this fast changing world, black women have faced significant barriers to achieving equal rights, especially regarding the inclusion of black women's experiences within the feminist movement, which has been a historically under-addressed issue. In fact, "the black woman has experienced and been excluded from mainstream feminism because of her race and also from black liberation movements because of gender" (Hashemi, et al. 49). For instance, the powerful message "Ain't I a woman?", from Sojourner Truth at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention of 1851, sought to challenge the exclusion of black women within the feminist movement, and to defeat the racist stereotypes surrounding them in the pursuit of equality. Moreover, this lack of black female representation on the forefront in the endeavour of gender and racial equality resulted in the launch of their own suffrage organisations such as the Boston National Association of Colored Women in 1896, giving voice to suffragists such as Harriet Tubman (Bailey, Megan). These activists who advocated for the abolition of slavery and the right to vote for women were resilient since they faced the discrimination suffered throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and they also defied "the stereotypical categorization of Black womanhood into a definite maternal/reproductive/domestic role or space" (Chowdhury 20). Throughout centuries of striving for equality, black women have consistently found themselves relegated to the private spaces, rendering their contributions largely unseen within the current equality campaigns at that time.

Invisibility and oppression against the black female are still prevalent in the public arena, it is fundamental to redefine the concept of what it means to be a black woman. This redefinition requires an in-depth analysis to effectively address the marginalisation of black women within political movements vindicating equality and the various societal constructs that contribute to their exclusion and the ways in which these constructs define their experiences. Firstly, black women have faced a long history of identity oppression since they have been considered slaves, being deprived of

autonomy, and subjected to the control of another. Secondly, the oppression of black women in the United States extended throughout the twentieth century, manifested in their hypersexualisation through the Jezebel stereotype within advertising campaigns, where black women were considered sexual objects and immoral in contrast to the puritanical definition of white women (Olisa, Mariana). As Evelyn Simien states about the experience of marginalisation, “black feminist consciousness is the product of this experience with intersecting patterns of race and gender discrimination” (325). In consequence, to achieve true equality, a fundamental first step involves acknowledging and merging the two key identities that systematically have marginalised this group: race and gender. In addition, these identities do not converge at some point, nor do they operate independently, but overlap as multiple experiences acknowledged in the black woman inner self. The so-called “intersectional experience” (Crenshaw 140) will bring to the fore the oppression suffered both for being women and for being black. Furthermore, the allusion to the different ways black women have been marginalised accelerates the achievement of the ending of a patriarchal and racist system of domination. The case of Anita Hill in 1991, for instance, illustrates how black women have been historically forced to choose between either fighting for their race or fighting for their gender. Nonetheless, she embraced her intersections and denounced her sexual harasser Clarence Thomas, her supervisor at the United States Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Despite facing potential criticism for going against a prominent black figure and being considered a traitor to her race, Hill drew strength from her intersecting experiences as a black woman, and bravely spoke out against him (Gross, Terry). Considering all this, although discrimination still imposes barriers to black women’s enjoyment of a safe life and acknowledgement, the recognition of intersectionality has opened the way to deconstruct the twentieth-century identity narratives and generate new memories within an equitable framework for them.

Black women not only have recurrently faced significant challenges in making their voices heard in political movements, but also in literature, since black female writers have been excluded from the ongoing development of new narratives. To

address this critical issue, fostering dedicated community spaces of narration is essential. These spaces would empower black women and serve as a platform to rectify their current underrepresentation within the literary canon as writers and main characters.

For this reason, black women writers at the end of the twentieth century literature employed a diverse range of strategies to carve out a space for themselves, being specially interested in the tools for visibility science fiction and fantasy genres provided them with. In fact, these literary genres have been particularly prominent for their creative expression and the acceptance of their intersections in the last decades (Seow 63). The possibilities within the genre of science fiction to depict social injustices seem largely attractive as it imagines black women impacting the society of the future, for instance, in a technologically advanced setting. One of the main discourses supporting black women's narratives has been the literary genre Afrofuturism, where significant and prolific authors such as Octavia Butler and Nnedi Okorafor have laid the foundation for the intersection between science fiction identity conflicts and raising one's voice against inequality.

Afrofuturism delves into the historical and scientific underpinnings of Africa, and, at the same time, sheds light on the cultural expressions and performances and technological advancements that emerge in the continent (Mougoué 1). Historically, black people have been associated with the tribal or primitive, and until the presence of Afrofuturism, the idea of a black person in technological and futuristic worlds was not conceived: "the term 'Afro' is usually associated with primitive people and backwardness according to European people, and the term 'futurism' refers to modernity and technology" (Djeddaï 213). What is more, not only is the presence of black people claimed within a literary landscape, but also of black women within the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) field (Seow 59) that has been denied to them. In consequence, it is essential to reimagine black female figures in other spaces through Afrofuturistic narratives.

Additionally, the term "Afrofuturism" was conceived by Nnedi Okorafor as the genre anchored more in the past that explores possibilities emerging from the Black

diaspora's history, while the term Africanfuturism, a later one created by Okorafor, places the spotlight directly on the continent of Africa and its rich cultural heritage. While Afrofuturism broadly explores the Black diaspora's experiences, Africanfuturism centres the narratives of African women characters within an African context. As Okorafor argues, *African* cannot be separated from *futurism* since the stories she narrates always incorporate the fusion of both concepts, creating an intersection that frees black female characters from the systems of oppression. Okorafor's motivation in developing this new concept is to reclaim agency over the way she was previously defined so that her work is not framed in a term that does not fully embrace what she writes and thinks (Okorafor, Nnedi).

One of the outcomes of the literary genre Africanfuturism is the portrayal of the evolution of African cultures towards a future where all their members can experience equal treatment with the culture remaining dominant. This cannot be only observed at the sociopolitical level, but it is also reflected in the technological evolution of each of the societies depicted in Africanfuturistic novels. All these converging thoughts and movements allow for solid conversations about futuristic solutions to create safe spaces for black women and their intersections. Consequently, a critical analysis and potential rejection of externally imposed limitations are essential to develop inclusive communities that celebrate African culture. In this way, Donna Haraway suggests with the "cyborg myth" (12) – which "is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (14) – a strategy to embrace the transformative potential of future technologies. Furthermore, the recognition of all cultural identities will allow the female main characters of these stories to be empowered, to strengthen their sense of belonging, to see cultural richness as an advancement and to promote social justice because "bodies are maps of power and identity" (Haraway 65).

In order to create a future that is more connected and inclusive, it is crucial to cross conventional barriers. To begin with, "'women of color' might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of 'outsider' identities" (54). Since these are identities that must be created from scratch, it is essential to reinforce this hybrid identities where, as Sandoval states, "'women of color' have a

chance to build an effective unity that does not replicate the imperializing, totalizing revolutionary subjects of previous Marxisms and feminisms, which had not faced the consequences of the disorderly polyphony emerging from decolonization” (qtd. in Haraway 19). This movement has resulted in the emergence of empowering narratives of survival within narratives that depict black women transcending prescribed roles and boldly articulating their unique journeys towards self-defined identities, thereby enriching the existing literary canon. The weights of all the intersections exacerbate the struggle against systems that still endure violence and oppression against the black community, especially against black women. Nonetheless, the creation of resilient characters who excel in spaces where they could not fit because of stereotypes and unexplored dialogues enables the empowerment of black women that have been forgotten for centuries. Moreover, the foundation of a close community with a rich cultural heritage will be more resilient to any adversity and will progress faster due to cultural exchange. For instance, the struggle for racial equality is exemplified by the resistance to Jim Crow laws. These laws enforced racial segregation, effectively colonising public spaces for the exclusive use of white citizens (History). Black communities, despite facing significant challenges, have consistently fostered a strong sense of community. This enduring commitment to collective action has laid the groundwork for future progress by providing a foundation of resistance.

Having established communities of resistance and secured their presence in public spheres, the next frontier for these movements have become the realms of literature and technology. In consequence, the Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor in reconceptualising the role of young black women in her novels raises awareness of the challenges that they may encounter in the real world. Okorafor is a speculative fiction writer who was born in Ohio in 1974. Her Nigerian parents came to the United States after fleeing the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War, that broke out in Nigeria from 1967 to 1970. After Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960, deeply rooted disparities in economic opportunities and competition for resources further strained the fragile unity of the nation. The crisis reached a boiling point in 1966 with a military coup and ethnic violence. However, Okorafor is a frequent

visitor to Nigeria and maintains a close relationship with her relatives, whose stories have inspired the setting for her critically acclaimed novels. A life-changing experience challenges her to express herself through writing. Okorafor's work celebrates African cultural identity and its traditions, and it confronts adversity head-on, and even incorporates fantastical and technological elements. The depiction of her female characters “projects an alternative representation of Black womanhood and a celebration of Black womanhood outside the assigned conventional roles forced” (Chowdhury 63). Ultimately, they serve as a powerful call for social justice since promoting social and behavioural transformation requires the creation of platforms for open and unrestricted discourse. This brings together all the intersections that enable effective action to be taken against the underrepresentation of black women in science fiction.

Although other writers' science fictions can be put into similar fruitful dialogues, this essay focuses on Nnedi Okorafor's work because it creates “alternative pathways for Africa's post-crisis development and economic prosperity, enabling one to focus on astonishing future possibilities, rather than the excruciatingly painful present.” (Oku 85). This essay will focus on Okorafor's *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* because the main character, Binti, is a strong, independent, and empowered black woman who knows what she wants even though it comes at a high price: “(she) defies gender stereotypes that cast women and girls as emotional, lacking decision-making ability, and weak” (81). The examples extracted from this novel illustrate the author's successful attempt to elaborate an empowered black female identity capable of meeting the challenges of the future despite being conditioned by the stereotypes of race and gender for many years.

2. Mastering the Intersection Harmonisation

Nnedi Okorafor's work is distinguished by its commitment to centring black female agency within speculative science fiction narratives. For this purpose, Okorafor reimagines them in fictional futures where they are not constrained by racial and gender stereotypes, and they have the power of decision over their bodies and their destiny. In her compilation entitled *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*, the author recreates a scenario

where the main character, Binti, is more than a science fiction prototypical heroine because she is attributed the quality of mediator of conflicts, which is a fictional role given to her to preserve the peace of the universe. In addition, the novel is characterised by its incorporation of African cultural elements delivered through Binti's narrative voice. Binti is a sixteen-year-old black female character raised in a futuristic Namibia and a member of the Himba, one of the last terrestrial human races. At the beginning of the story, she achieves acceptance into Oomza University, which ranks as one of the most prestigious institutions of higher education within this universe, which is primarily populated by extraterrestrial life forms. Furthermore, she is granted the gift of Mathematics since she comes from a family of "Bitolus" (Okorafor 15), people who "know true deep mathematics", can "control their current" and harmonise the communication and identification systems (20). Therefore, since this iteration of Namibia serves as the primary wellspring of technological advancement within the fictional world, she becomes a key piece to sustain the communication and people's identities of that fictional future.

A historical disparity exists in western cultures regarding black women's access to STEM education and careers in contrast to white people. That is the author's main reason to include a character like Binti who holds the power of Mathematics, a scientific field totally inaccessible to black women outside fictional worlds: "Okorafor presents mathematics and knowledge of futuristic science as a way that empowers her protagonist and gives her voice, power and identity" (Hashemi, et al. 86). Through Binti, she reimagines a technological future for young black girls to be provided with referents. In addition, Binti is an excellent harmonizer, "the best in the family" (Okorafor 16), learning the job since she was thirteen years old as a legacy from her father. Being a harmonizer allows her to create the best "astrolabe[s]" (3), which are the communication and identification devices of the future that the author creates for this story. Since Okorafor puts the focus on black womanhood within a technological future, astrolabes will assume a central role. An astrolabe is an artefact for measuring the position of stars and for calculating the ship's position ("Astrolabe"). Dating back to the eighteenth century, its origins highlight the progress made in the ancient Islamic world

as it “is said to be the invention of a Muslim woman named Mariam Al-Astrulabi” (Hashemi et al. 87), which might illustrate how the prevalence of dominant groups does not allow knowledge to progressively intersect. Nevertheless, in *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*, the astrolabe is the tool to communicate at long distances, to identify the inhabitants of that universe and to predict their futures. Okorafor utilises the astrolabe to dismantle traditional narratives by recentring black women as the creators of this pivotal technological advancement.

Astrolabes disrupt the established hierarchy of knowledge by reattributing the creation of a crucial technological advancement to black women. In doing so, it challenges the traditional perception of value associated with artefacts and knowledge typically ascribed to dominant cultures: “There is a reason why our people do not go to that university. *Oomza* Uni wants you for its own gain, Binti. You go to that school and you become its slave” (Okorafor 4). Consequently, Okorafor elevates the contributions of marginalised groups to the field of STEM, fostering a more inclusive and representative portrayal of scientific innovation. Furthermore, one key aspect of the significance of this technological device lies in its portrayal of Binti as the intellectual force within Okorafor’s universe. Secondly, Binti’s exceptional mathematical aptitude is underscored demonstrably challenged by her achievement because it is a field traditionally dominated by white men. As she proclaims, her “planetary exams in mathematics” scores were so high that *Oomza* University not only offered her admission, but also pledged to fully cover her attendance costs (4).

In addition, Binti’s family’s gift is to design the best astrolabes and the burden of being the future heir to the family business falls on her as her sister firmly states: “You can’t go,” my oldest sister said. “You’re a master harmonizer. Who else is good enough to take over father’s shop?” (14). The confluence of Binti’s exceptional mathematical talent and the resulting opportunity to study at *Oomza* University defies the limitations imposed upon her. Therefore, the preconceived ideas of what black women can do is portrayed also on the protagonist’s struggle with the social obligation of marriage, as Haraway agrees with the “the informatics of domination” where women are just considered an element exploited and integrated in a “world system of

production/reproduction” (33). Leaving home requires sacrificing the fulfilment of this expectation, a source of significant internal conflict as can be seen when Binti regrets: “My prospects of marriage had been 100 percent and now they would be zero. No man wanted a woman who’d run away” (3). Nonetheless, the author grants her main character the agency to forge her own path, subverting the traditional narrative that imposes such traditionally imposed values upon black women.

Another characteristic that challenges mainstream representations of black women in literature is Binti’s mathematical prowess, which serves as a source of resistance in the face of adversity. The fact that she finds solace and composure through a meditative practice known as “treeing,” a state induced by mathematical calculations (Okorafor 10) supports the author’s intentional portrayal of Binti as the literary redemption of the historical lack of black women’s roles within the scientific fields: “Before the realization hit me, I knew to drop into meditation, treeing out of desperation” (49).

On the one hand, Binti’s proficiency in Mathematics, a field that thrives on identifying patterns within complex systems, might hold the key to understanding her paradoxical relationship with the world. This mathematical world, perceived as chaotic by others, offers Binti a unique structure with its own set rules: “I stopped treeing and the clarity of mind retreated like a loss of confidence” (17). Therefore, treeing is a way for Binti to identify and utilise patterns such as the repetition of the number 5 or the fractals, transforming the chaos into a source of order and refuge: “Five five five five five five. I calmed” (88). On the other hand, the act of treeing can also be related to her inner deep roots as the fact of climbing a tree may allude to how her ancestral heritage intersecting all her other identities. In addition, Okorafor reimagines Mathematics as a tool for African empowerment, solidifying her Africanfuturist narratives as deeply connected to African traditions, independent of any Western ideal (qtd. in Hashemi et al. 50), eliminating the need for reference points within a western norm. In consequence, within Binti’s world, both interpretations converge, creating a unique intersection that reflects this Africanfuturistic framework.

Okorafor's masterful character development is demonstrably evident in Binti's response to conflict through the incorporation of identities. Rather than remaining a bystander, Binti actively seeks a path toward mediation between the warring factions of the dominant ethnicity "Khoush" (Okorafor 3) and the oppressed ethnicity "Meduse" (11). This active role is of vital importance to understand the weight of the intersections separately, and how the union of all of them can help to end the systems of dominance and repression. The first expansion of her identity takes place after the Meduse siege or "moojh-ha ki-bira" (12) on the Miri 12, a living spaceship, on the way to *Oomza* University. After having survived the massacre, Binti begins to communicate through the "edan" (6), an ancestral object, with a Meduse member called *Okwu*. Through this character, she manages to contact the Meduse chief leading to a peaceful resolution upon arrival at the university.

This approach to conflict resolution resonates with contemporary movements such as *Gathering for Justice*, advocating for Kingian non-violence (Belafonte, Harry). This philosophy emphasises achieving social change through non-violent resistance. Binti embodies this philosophy in her pursuit of peace, consistently convening meetings to reconcile warring ethnicities through dialogue as when she claims to the Meduse chief: "Let me speak for you, let me speak to them. So no more have to die" (Okorafor 37). Furthermore, to get the Meduse to trust her, Binti has to lose her Himba hair and acquire the blue tentacles, or *okuoko*, that characterise the Meduse. This intersection would likely foster trust with the Meduse, establishing Binti as a critical intermediary in the Khoush conflict. This constitutes a successful act of harmonisation because the stolen sting, a central grievance in the conflict, is returned by the Khoush members of the *Oomza* University to the Meduse leader, thereby achieving a temporary resolution.

Overall, Nnedi Okorafor's narrative strategy of harmonisation tackles the issue of underrepresentation of black women in the STEM field. By crafting scenarios devoid of stereotypical portrayals, she empowers black women to embrace their multifaceted identities within the scientific realm, and, in the case of Binti, to find in intellectual pursuits like Mathematics a source of internal peace and a deeper connection to her African heritage. Moreover, the novel empowers Binti to actively maintain the

universe's balance through her knowledge due to her fundamental role as an astrolabe maker. Finally, Okorafor critiques the pervasive influence of dominant groups, who not only dictate the social framework, but also impose their cultural norms as the Khoush.

3. Reconnecting with the African Heritage

The core principle lies in the integration of Afrocentric elements, creating a narrative foundation distinct from traditional science fiction. Beyond simply featuring main African descendant characters, these novels serve as futuristic mirrors reflecting the realities of the African continent. Therefore, Afrodescendant readers' personal growth thrives on the presence of such reflective narratives in African daily life. As Audre Lorde argues, "Women of colour in america [sic] have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service" (129). In this line, the creation of a literary landscape populated by women of colour, transcending the stereotypical Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) male protagonist is paramount to dismantling archetypes perpetuated by oppressive systems (Crenshaw 43).

These systems seek to maintain racist and patriarchal structures, and Africanfuturistic narratives offer the power to deconstruct them. By presenting positive role models such as Binti, Africanfuturistic novels empower new generations to embrace their identities, ethnicities, and heritage with pride. In addition, the narrative establishes Binti's enduring connection to her ancestry and lineage through a recurring formula. This formula, first employed before her initial confrontation with the Meduse ethnic group, features Binti proclaiming: "I am Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib" (Okorafor 16). This act of self-identification is subsequently repeated throughout the novel, often in whispered pronouncements. These repetitions suggest Binti's ongoing internal struggle; while she embraces her heritage, she also harbours lingering doubts about belonging to an ethnic group marginalised by the dominant Khoush.

Okorafor explores the main character's evolving identity, shaped by her encounters and connections with diverse ethnic groups such as the Meduse. As she

navigates these relationships, she integrates aspects of their cultures, forging a multifaceted self. This ongoing process of self-construction enhances her comprehension of that universe, her position within its complexities, and the strategies for her survival. Nonetheless, these identities that she represents are difficult for her to assimilate due to external pressure to belong to a particular group. Binti, being a mediator of conflicts or “master harmonizer,” ends up not only synergising her intersections, but also seeking to harmonise the intergalactic conflicts that take place between the Khoush and the Meduse. In other words, through acceptance and the effort to understand her new selves, she not only saves herself, but also the future of the universe by always mediating in search of peace.

The exclusion suffered by Khoush shapes Binti’s relationship with her Himba identity, which undergoes a significant transformation throughout the narrative. The Himba people are renowned throughout the universe for being peaceful, traditional, and their harmonising abilities, a talent shared by Binti and her father. Initially hesitant due to its marginalised status within Khoush society, as Binti declares: “My door was secure, but I was Himba and I doubted the Khoush had given me one of the rooms with full security locks” (Okorafor 18), she grapples with embracing her full Himba heritage. A turning point arrives during the confrontation with the Meduse, referred to as the *moojh-ha ki-bira* by the Khoush. Faced with fear and danger, Binti instinctively reverts to her Himba identity for survival.

This experience serves as a pivotal moment, fostering a newfound sense of pride in her roots. Henceforth, her strengthened sense of Himba identity becomes a core intersection of her being and shapes her destiny. In addition, Binti’s journey to self-discovery regarding her Himba identity unfolds during her travel to *Oomza* University since she proclaims: “We Himba don’t travel” (3). In this way, Binti’s departure for the very first time from her futuristic Namibia marks the beginning of her questioning her heritage due to her unfamiliarity with the world beyond her immediate surroundings. This journey exposes her to diverse identities, vastly different from her own, prompting her to explore the multifaceted nature of self. What is more, Okorafor celebrates African heritage through Binti’s character by drawing upon the Himba, a real-world ethnic group

from northern Namibia and portraying them as technologically advanced people who retain their deep-rooted traditions. This portrayal reinforces the ability of African cultures to thrive and innovate while preserving their unique heritage.

Particularly noteworthy is Binti's resistance in the face of Khoush's denigration, especially when she leaves her homeland. Despite being ostracised for the use of a red clay called *otjize* or skin tone, her anklets, or her braided hairstyle, she refuses to be intimidated. First of all, the use of *otjize* emerges as the most significant African marker of cultural difference. This traditional second skin, crafted from a "mix of red clay" and "oils from local flowers" (Okorafor 46) taken from Binti's homeland, serves as a potent symbol of her Himba heritage. Furthermore, the implementation of *otjize* aligns with one of the most distinctive characteristics of the real-world Himba tribe. The application of *otjize* extends across the entire body, including the hair, serving for diverse purposes. Primarily, it functions as a protective layer against harsh weather conditions of the desert. Additionally, it presents a celebration of Himba women's beauty. However, its significance goes beyond the aesthetic since it also symbolises a profound connection between the Himba people and their land.

In the novel, Binti stresses the deep spiritual bond the Himba people share with their homeland when stating: "people are sons and daughters of the soil" (28), which highlights the cultural bond among the community and within their traditions. In addition, the *otjize* colour red has its own symbolism since it not only represents the land of the desert to which Binti belongs evidenced with her statement: "Otjize is red land" (11), but it also symbolises all the blood heritage that courses through her veins. Consequently, the *otjize*, representing her attachment to her land, helps Binti to overcome numerous adversities, such as including medicinal properties, used to heal Meduse wounds. This will be key to her survival as it will create an alliance between her and the Meduse. Furthermore, Binti's journey to *Oomza* University will be marked by the absence of the authentic *otjize*. The specific clay used in its creation is unavailable at the university, leading to a series of existential crises. This highlights the profound significance of the *otjize* application ritual. Without the familiar tactile experience and symbolic act of applying the *otjize*, Binti grapples with feelings of displacement and

vulnerability. In a nutshell, the *otjize* becomes a tangible link to her Himba traditions, offering a sense of security and grounding in this unfamiliar environment.

Secondly, the presence of anklets will also be a reminder of the current Himba ethnic group. These metal ornaments traditionally function as a protective measure against snake bites, a prevalent threat in her homeland. Once arrived at *Oomza* University, Binti complies with the request to remove her anklets. Nevertheless, the petition betrays a fundamental disregard for Himba cultural practices:

“Why are you covered in red greasy clay and weighed down by all those steel anklets?”

When I told him that I was Himba, he coolly said, “I know, but that doesn’t answer my question.” I explained to him the tradition of my people’s skin care and how we wore the steel rings on our ankles to protect us from snakebites. He looked at me for a long time, the others in my group staring at me like a rare bizarre butterfly.

“Wear your *otjize*,” he said. “But not so much that you stain up this ship.

And if those anklets are to protect you from snakebites, you no longer need them.”

I took my anklets off, except for two on each ankle. Enough to jingle with each step. (Okorafor 8-9)

Okorafor’s portrayal of the anklets can be interpreted as a critique of cultural assimilation imposed by dominant groups on minority ethnicities. Despite the perceived lack of necessity in her new environment, Binti’s decision to keep a pair signifies the enduring connection these anklets represent to her. What is more, Binti’s clothes reminds of African current garments in the use of different colours that catch the eye at first sight, such as her “long red skirt” (3). By preserving these elements, Binti embodies a challenge to the dominant culture’s assimilative tendencies, highlighting the importance of preserving African cultural identity.

Thirdly, Binti's hairstyle further reinforces the significance of African identity within the narrative. The intricate patterns woven into her hair are not merely aesthetic, they represent a tangible connection to her ancestors and serve as a visual representation of her heritage, Binti insisting 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" (Okorafor 10). This emphasis on hair aligns with the broader role it plays in Africanfuturistic narratives, where it is frequently depicted as a sacred element within African cultures. As with *otjize*, her hair also symbolises an earthly connection to her homeland: "our hair is thick and mine has always been very thick. My old auntie liked to call it "ododo" because it grew wild and dense like ododo grass" (2). Beyond its aesthetic and ancestral significance, hair also carries historical weight. During the period of enslavement, women utilised their braiding techniques to encode escape routes from plantation, transforming this act of self-adornment into a powerful tool for resistance. Resistance extends beyond the physical realm. Binti's Afro-textured hair, while functioning as an evolutionary adaptation to the climate, also carries symbolic weight, since it becomes a marker of her identity, yet one that intersects with experiences of racial discrimination:

As I stood in line for boarding security, I felt a tug at my hair. I turned around and met the eyes of a group of Khoush women. They were all staring at me; everyone behind me was staring at me. The woman who'd tugged my plait was looking at her fingers and rubbing them together, frowning. Her fingertips were orange red with my *otjize*. She sniffed them. "It smells like jasmine flowers," she said to the woman on her left, surprised.

"Not shit?" one woman said. "I hear it smells like shit because it is shit."

"No, definitely jasmine flowers. It is thick like shit, though."

"Is her hair even real?" another woman asked the woman rubbing her fingers.

"I don't know."

"These 'dirt bathers' are a filthy people," the first woman muttered. (Okorafor 5)

In her works, Okorafor's portrayal of Afro-textured hair can be interpreted as a resistance of the societal structures that contribute to the marginalisation of people of African descent. This is exemplified by Binti's internal conflict during her stay at the *Oomza* University: "My hair was braided into the tessellating design of my family, and not one person on this planet would be able to decode, read and understand the great weight of its importance" (74). Binti's lament emphasises the disconnection she feels within this new environment, where her hair, a symbol of cultural heritage and identity, goes unrecognised and unappreciated.

After the three main Himba features that the author displays as a part of the African culture heritage, the "Enyi Zinariya" (Okorafor 59), described as nomadic small clans and "old old Africans" (182), also illustrates the historical legacy of marginalisation within African societies. The Enyi Zinariya exclusion by the Himba, despite co-existing in the terrestrial desert, exposes a historical tension between established cultures and those perceived as outsiders. This tension is further illustrated when Binti talks with Mwinyi, a Zinariya-born character, about the discrimination against this part of Himba society:

"I saw how you looked at us," he said. "Just like every Himba I have ever encountered, like we're savages. You call us the 'Desert People,' mysterious uncivilized dark people of the sand." I wanted to deny my prejudice, but he was right" (Okorafor 179).

Moreover, as an Enyi Zinariya as well, Binti's grandmother echoed historical narratives of prejudice, revealing the enduring challenge of achieving cultural understanding. The novel emphasises the transformative power of embracing one's heritage against the norm. Therefore, Binti's marginalised Enyi Zinariya background, initially a source of shame, becomes a catalyst for personal growth. The revelation of her Enyi Zinariya lineage, since she is the "daughter of Moaoogo Dambu Kaipka Okechukwu Enyi Zinariya" (171), awakens dormant abilities within Binti, signifying strength and power. While the multiplicity of her identities may present challenges, she finds immense pride in each

facet of her identities: “I was Himba, a master harmonizer. Then I was also Meduse, anger vibrating in my okuoko. Now I was also Enyi Zinariya, of the Desert People gifted with alien technology. I was worlds” (203-204). This newfound connection empowers Binti to navigate the complexities of her identity because this marginalised group possesses a rich cultural legacy, and the most advanced technology:

“And contrary to what you all believe, we have technology that puts yours to shame and we’ve had it for centuries.” . . .

“We didn’t create it, though,” she continued. “It was brought to us by the Zinariya. Those who were there documented the Zinariya times, but the files were kept on paper and paper does not last. So all we really know is what elders read and then what the elders after those elders remembered and then what the next elders remembered and so on.

“The Zinariya came to us in the desert. They were a golden people, who glinted in the sun. They were solar and had landed in Earth’s desert to rest and refuel on their way to Oomza Uni.”

I couldn’t control myself. “What?” I shrieked.

She chuckled. “Yes. We ‘Desert People’ knew of Oomza Uni before other people on Earth even had mobile phones!” (182-183)

Consequently, all preconceived notions framing them as primitive are rendered invalid. Furthermore, beyond its ornamental façade, the “edan” (6), an old artefact made by the Zinariya from a strange metal, embodies a profound connection to Binti’s ancestors. This seemingly mundane device serves a critical function, facilitating communication with *Okwu* before Binti’s transformation. The reliance on ancestral intervention underscores the dire threat posed by these enigmatic creatures. The edan’s origins trace back to a pre-drought era when Enyi Zinariya ancestors acquired alien technology for communication purposes. The Zinariya, entrusted with this technology, developed the edan as a practical application. Notably, *Oomza* University’s inability to unravel the edan’s secrets highlights the fundamental role of the Zinariya in revealing her identity

to Binti through it. In consequence, by acknowledging the marginalised identity of Enyi Zinariya within a broader racialised community, the Himba, Okorafor demonstrates the critical role of embracing one's heritage in fostering resistance. Binti's complex identity serves a potent symbol, illustrating how forging connections across seemingly disparate groups can empower individuals and communities to transcend societal limitations.

In this performance of intersectional exchange of different identities where the Himba and the Zinariya represent the African culture, it will raise another identity from Binti's tragic demise in the aftermath of the Khoush and Meduse conflict, struck by an attack of unknown origin. Following her death, her body is transported to the ring of Saturn at the behest of "a vision was calling her there" (Okorafor 304). Moreover, New Fish, daughter of the living spaceship Miri 12 that previously took Binti to *Oomza* University, facilitates this final journey. Within the "breathing chambers" (8) of New Fish, Binti's wounds remain, and a transformation unfolds. She undergoes a last identity expansion, merging with microorganisms of New Fish and comes back to life. These events transcend the human body, echoing Haraway's concept of the cyborg and advocating the dismantling of societal hierarchies that enforce rigid identities. As Haraway suggests, "cyborgs have more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and of most birthing" (67). Through cyborg creation, the narrative suggests the potential for breaking down these oppressive structures because "the cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense" (Haraway 8), challenging the world order. Nevertheless, this amplification comes at a cost. Binti becomes inextricably linked to New Fish and their bodies are capable of interchange. While this grants her the ability to fulfil her dream of space travel, it also restricts her independence. The narrative illuminates the constraints associated with the cyborg condition, but Binti undertakes a path of self-affirmation:

When it did nothing else, I went back to my jar of *otjize* and finished doing my hair. I rubbed a bit more into the five anklets I now wore on each ankle, took a last look at my new edan . . . However, for the time being all I cared about was

finally seeing the Falls with my friends. And when we got there, it really was like witnessing a beautiful dream. (Okorafor 356)

Consequently, Binti not only embraces this new cyborgian identity as a testament of resistance, but also actively celebrates its acquisition.

Throughout this journey into a futuristic Namibia, Binti's engagement with her environment fosters a deeper appreciation for her Himba and Zinariya heritage. This newfound sense of pride in her African roots serves as a potent source of empowerment and resistance. Besides, Binti's multifaceted resistance is further bolstered by her cyborg identity, serving as a powerful act of reclamation. Therefore, Binti disrupts dominant stereotypes that constraint African black women by shaping and integrating this non-traditional identity. Furthermore, her cyborg body becomes a symbol of self-determination that contributes to the wellspring of her resistance. Ultimately, this journey leads her to fully integrate the multifaceted aspects of her identity, achieving a sense of peace within her internal identity conflicts.

4. Conclusion

Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* sheds light on the diverse challenges black women confront in their daily lives due to the intersections of race and gender that marginalise their experiences and locate them outside of the mainstream discourses. Binti's hybrid identity is crucial in understanding the experiences of black women who have been marginalised due to these intersections and continue to experience discrimination based on these characteristics. Her unique background fosters a perspective that interrogates and dismantles the hegemonic representation of black womanhood within the realms of science and literature. Therefore, the inclusion of narratives that portray black women's powerful resources and intellect in the spotlight within a predominantly white and male-dominated field are crucial in confronting the current inequalities. Firstly, Binti transcends the historical underrepresentation of black women in STEM fields, particularly Mathematics, disrupting the stereotype of male dominance in this domain by becoming the most skilled mathematician, proving her

intellectual prowess on a universal scale. Secondly, her *okuokos*, a symbol of her Meduse intersection, serve as a crucial tool for communication with the Meduse, fostering intergalactic peace and dismantling the Khoush oppressive regime. Each distinct facet of Binti's newly formed identities becomes a potent symbol of resistance, highlighting the complex interplay of marginalisation within a hierarchical social structure.

Binti actively cultivates a deeper connection with her African heritage as well because Okorafor proposes through Africanfuturism solutions centred on self-acceptance and African connection, paving the way for a future where black women are considered as equals to white men, white women, and black men. Therefore, her main character embodies the empowerment of a black woman living in a technological and futuristic society. The novel achieves this goal by providing Binti with the remarkable capacity to harmonise her identities. Firstly, Binti's Zinariya intersection grants her access to ancestral memories, finding in the most primitive ethnicity the most advanced technology. The Enyi Zinariya stands as a powerful critique of the pervasive stereotype portraying afro-descendants as primitive. This intersection directly challenges such limited views by reimagining the roles of afro-descendants within society. Secondly, Binti's transformation by incorporating microorganisms from the New Fish transcends the limitations of the human body and allows her to experience life to its fullest potential by having embraced her identities. Finally, her Himba intersection contributes to unifying all her intersections since it is deeply correlated with her harmonizer abilities. Mastering this skill empowers her to navigate the challenges and suffering she encounters because of being black and women. In addition, her Himba identity fosters a sense of belonging within her African cultural roots bolstering her resistance.

Finally, after a DNA test, Binti is intersected by five identities, every one of them under a different yoke. However, she does not consider them to be weights, but accepts that these identities make her valuable. If her parts coexist despite the incoherence, it allows Binti to break out of the constraints she has been subjected to as a Himba, a mathematician and master harmonizer, a Zinariya, a Meduse and a New Fish. Therefore, narratives such as *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* provide black women with mirrors capable of casting a diverse range of identities and selves and offer a powerful opportunity to

reimagine the future and cultivate a space of positive self-reflection. Through the character of Binti, whose African heritage is often stereotyped as primitive, Okorafor presents an afro-descendant black woman actively shaping her own destiny and dismantling the constraint imposed by racist and patriarchal systems of repression.

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