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AFROFUTURISM AND DYSTOPIA IN *WHO FEARS DEATH* (2010), BY NNEDI OKORAFOR

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Abstract: This article analyzes Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Who Fears Death: Onye and the Prophecy* (2014) based on the connections between Afrofuturism and dystopia, with an emphasis on black female protagonists and the representation of violence as a historical technology of domination. Set in a post-apocalyptic Africa, the narrative mobilizes mythical, magical, and speculative elements to problematize the persistence of race, gender, and power relations projected into the future. Far from presenting the future as a neutral or redemptive space, the work highlights how historical inequalities continue to structure subjectivities, bodies, and regimes of belonging. The research, which is qualitative and interpretive in nature, is based on studies of dystopian fiction and young adult literature (James, 2009), Afrofuturism understood as aesthetics and political practice (Womack, 2003; Nelson, 2002), and black feminism, with emphasis on the contributions of Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Audre Lorde (1984), Saidiya Hartman (1997), and Octavia E. Butler (1979). These theoretical contributions allow us to understand Onyesonwu's trajectory as traversed by multiple layers of oppression and resistance, in which body, memory, language, and ancestry play a central role. It is argued that the novel reinscribes the black female body as a simultaneous space for the inscription of historical violence and the production of agency, displacing readings that reduce it to passivity. By articulating magic, writing, and collective memory as forms of knowledge and intervention in the world, *Who Fears Death* affirms Afrofuturism as a narrative strategy of resistance and reimagination of possible futures in the field of contemporary young adult literature.

Keywords: Afrofuturism. Dystopia. Contemporary young adult literature. Black female protagonism.

INTRODUCTION

This study analyzes the young adult novel *Who Fears Death: Onye and the Prophecy* (2014)[1] , by American writer Nnedi Okorafor, translated into Brazilian Portuguese by Mariana Mesquita, from the perspectives of Afrofuturist literature and dystopia. Published in Brazil by Editora Geração, the work falls within the field of contemporary speculative fiction and stands out for articulating mythical, magical, and futuristic elements in the construction of a narrative set in a post-apocalyptic Africa. It is a future marked by violence, ethnic conflicts, and cultural erasure, in which issues related to the body, identity, and the imagination of other modes of existence are tense. The novel's relevance lies, above all, in its contribution to contemporary debates on black women, violence, historical memory, and the projection of possible futures in literature.

The daughter of Nigerian immigrants from the Ibo ethnic group, Okorafor creates characters who often occupy positions of displacement and marginality, situated between different cultural, spiritual, and identity worlds. Her literary production is widely recognized for critically addressing issues related to race, gender, corporeality, and prejudice, especially in the context of the African diaspora. *The Book of My Fathers* received significant international recognition, winning the *World Fantasy Award* for best novel in 2011, as well as being among the finalists for *the Nebula Award* and the

1. Original title *Who Fears Death*, published in 2012 by DAW, an imprint of Penguin Books.

Tiptree Award, reinforcing its relevance in the contemporary speculative fiction scene.

The narrative follows the journey of Onyesonwu, a young protagonist tasked with fulfilling a prophecy that involves rewriting the Great Book, a central symbolic element of the plot. The novel features recurring descriptions of ritualistic spaces, magical practices, visions, and supernatural characters, intertwined with scenes of extreme violence. Among the most delicate aspects addressed by the narrative is the instrumentalization of the body as a means of imposing power, revealing dynamics of coercion that refer to historical and social continuities in which violence is used as a mechanism of control in contexts of conflict.

The approach to traumatic themes, such as sexual violence and female genital mutilation, is a significant feature of Afrofuturist literature written by women. As Womack (2003) observes, collective memory and trauma occupy a central place in these narratives, being mobilized both as aesthetic devices of denunciation and as possibilities for elaboration and confrontation. In this sense, Okorafor's work challenges simplistic readings by reinscribing the black female body as a space traversed by pain, but also as a locus of agency, resistance, and transformation, dialoguing with reflections of black feminism, such as those of Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and Saidiya Hartman, as well as with the tradition of speculative fiction by authors such as Octavia E. Butler.

Based on the theoretical contributions of Womack (2003) and James (2009), in dialogue with black feminist studies and cultural criticism, this article aims t ly understand how Afrofuturism and dystopia are articulated in the construction of the plot of *Who Fears Death: Onye and the Prophecy (2014)*. Specifically, it seeks to analyze the Afrofuturist and dystopian elements of the narrative, investigate the construction of the black female protagonist, and discuss the representation of sexual violence as a technology of power. This is a qualitative, interpretive study based on a literary analysis of the work. It is argued that the novel constructs Afrofuturism as a narrative strategy of resistance linked to black feminism. Next, the theoretical basis, analysis, and final considerations are presented.

DYSTOPIA, SPECULATIVE FICTION, AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Since the 1990s, literature aimed at young adults has increasingly incorporated themes such as environmental crisis, violence, sexuality, and social collapse, which has contributed to the consolidation of dystopian and post-catastrophe narratives in this field (James, 2009). In this context, speculative fiction operates as an articulating axis by projecting possible futures based on a critical reading of the historical and social conditions of the present, combining dystopian and post-apocalyptic scenarios to reflect on the direction of human experience (Atwood, 2011).

In the field of young adult literature, James (2009) highlights that dystopia takes on special relevance by articulating processes of identity formation with social and political conflicts, often intersected by issues of gender, power, and violence. Although set in the future, these narratives do not deal specifically with the "after," but function as critical commentaries on the present, shifting contemporary tensions to fictional scenarios that make their contradictions more visible.

In this sense, dystopia goes beyond representing social ruin and starts to operate as a narrative field of confrontation, in which power relations, historical inequalities, and forms of domination are exposed and problematized. This characteristic allows us to understand why these narratives often mobilize experiences of pain, coercion, and violence as structuring elements of social criticism (James, 2009).

The growing interest in dystopian narratives has also contributed to the emergence of female protagonists who occupy central positions in narrative conflicts. However, as James (2009) observes, dystopia can become problematic when it merely reproduces already consolidated patriarchal structures, reinscribing gender inequalities under the guise of alternative futures.

The distinction between black female protagonists in Afrofuturism and those predominant in Western narratives requires recognition of distinct epistemological assumptions. While Western tradition tends to construct female figures from an abstract and deracialized subject, Afrofuturism elaborates protagonists anchored in situated experiences, in which race, gender, body, and historical memory are inseparable from the production of agency. As Alondra Nelson (2002) proposes, Afrofuturism emerges as a critical response to universalizing narratives of the future, reinscribing black subjects in the horizon of the future and refusing the neutralization of difference as a condition for progress.

This perspective dialogues with the literary tradition of Octavia Butler, whose black protagonists articulate past, present, and future as inseparable dimensions, producing knowledge and action from contexts of structural violence (Butler, 1979). The contributions of Patricia Hill Collins allow us to understand this protagonism as an expression of an intersectional epistemology, in which social experience informs specific modes of interpretation and intervention in the world (COLLINS, 1990). The reflections of Audre Lorde and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí reinforce this rejection of the abstraction of the subject by emphasizing the body, language, and criticism of Western categories of gender as central elements in the construction of resistance (LORDE, 1984; OYĚWÙMÍ, 1997).

AFROFUTURISM, IMAGINATION OF THE FUTURE, AND BLACK WOMEN

Afrofuturism is an aesthetic and political practice focused on imagining possible futures from Black perspectives, articulating science fiction, fantasy, ancestry, spirituality, and social criticism (Womack, 2003). More than a narrative style, it is a field of symbolic elaboration that repositions Black subjects as active agents in the construction of the future.

For Nelson (2002), Afrofuturism operates as a critical response to technological narratives that project a supposedly post-racial future, highlighting that such formulations tend to erase the historical continuity of inequalities. By broadening the concept of technology to encompass cultural practices, systems of knowledge, and forms of memory produced within the African diaspora, Afrofuturism affirms body, race, and historical experience as constitutive elements of the production of subjectivities and possible futures.

Based on a situated reading of black feminism, the debate around body, agency, and resistance is part of a theoretical tradition that recognizes the black female body as a territory marked by historical traces of domination, without reducing it to passivity (Collins, 1990). From this perspective, bodily experience is also a legitimate source of knowledge and political action, in which language and consciousness play a central role (LORDE, 1984).

By highlighting how historical violence has been systematically inscribed on black bodies, this approach does not eliminate the possibility of agency, but reveals tense modes of subjectivation that persist even in contexts of extreme coercion (HARTMAN, 1997). Thus, the black female body is conceived simultaneously as a space of memory of oppression and as a starting point for imagining other futures, in which resistance and reinvention become inseparable.

In Afrofuturism, the notion of time tends to break with Western linearity, articulating past, present, and future as simultaneous dimensions of the Black experience (WOMACK, 2003). This conception of flexible time allows Afrofuturist narratives to operate as spaces of historical rewriting, in which silenced memories are recovered and projected into alternative futures.

Based on this understanding of speculative fiction as a critical practice and of temporality as a field of symbolic dispute, Nnedi Okorafor's writing can be read as heir to this Afrofuturist tradition, which claims the future not as a break with history, but as a territory of contestation, memory, and reinvention.

ONYESONWU AND THE BLACK FEMALE IN AFROFUTURIST FICTION

The trajectory of the protagonist Onyesonwu (a name that means "Who fears death") is constructed from a tension between distinct universes, such as the human and the mystical, acceptance and marginalization, which provokes a reflection on displacement and otherness within Afrofuturist narratives. Along the way, the character develops her identity amid social and symbolic forces that seek to impose limits and predefined meanings on her way of being.

Onyesonwu's trajectory can be read in light of Patricia Hill Collins' contributions, especially the concept of *the outsider within*, which describes the condition of subjects who occupy certain social spaces with ity without being fully recognized as part of them (Collins, 1990). The character circulates between different social and symbolic universes, but her presence is constantly marked by the ambiguity of belonging, which places her in a borderline position between inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, intersectionality, as formulated by Collins, offers an important theoretical tool for understanding how gender, race, and social position simultaneously traverse the protagonist's experience, producing specific forms of vulnerability and resistance. This articulation of multiple markers shows that the otherness experienced by Onyesonwu is not circumstantial, but structural, constituting a central element in the process of constructing her identity throughout the narrative.

In Afrofuturism, the black female body is not only a space of oppression, but also a place of power. In *Who Fears Death: Onye and the Prophecy*, Onyesonwu's body

is permeated by an ancestral magic that serves as both a tool of resistance and healing. This refers to Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's critique of Western gender categories, which often render the female body invisible or reduce it to a mere object of control.

The character Onyesonwu can also be thought of in terms of Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's critique of Western gender categories, especially those that tend to universalize femininity and empty the female body of its political, spiritual, and historical meanings (Oyěwùmí, 1997). By shifting gender from the absolute center of social organization, Oyěwùmí draws attention to modes of existence in which the body is not reduced to a fixed hierarchy, but is articulated to systems of knowledge, religiosity, and belonging. In this horizon, Onyesonwu's body does not conform to Western readings that associate the feminine with passivity or restraint, but presents itself as a space of conflict, transformation, and power. Magic, far from functioning solely as a narrative resource, acts as a symbolic language through which the protagonist rewrites her experience in the world, mobilizing ancestral knowledge that reconfigures both femininity and spirituality. In this way, Onyesonwu breaks with normative female models and asserts herself as an agent of resistance, reconstructing her own narrative of power and existence based on references that escape Western impositions**,** in dialogue with Oyěwùmí (1997).

Furthermore, in the narrative universe of *Who Fears Death*, knowledge is not organized according to strict Western definitions of technology, but manifests itself through practices linked to ancestry, orality, writing, and spirituality. Throughout Onyesonwu's journey, these practices structure systems of knowledge production that guide both her subjective formation and her capacity for intervention in the world. Magic, in this context, does not operate as an escapist element of fantasy, but as a symbolic and political language of e nd confrontation with structures of domination. By accessing historically marginalized knowledge and rewriting it into the narrative, the protagonist shifts the axis of power from modern devices to black epistemologies that articulate collective memory, resistance, and the imagination of possible futures.

> The feather in my hand was soft, delicate. I knew exactly where it would fit. In the empty quill of my wing. This time I was aware and in control. [...] My bones slowly bent, cracked, and shrank in size. It didn't hurt. [...] I flew high. My sense of touch was diminished, as my skin was protected by feathers. But I could see everything. [...] For the first time in my life, I could escape. When things seemed too difficult, too hard, I could seek shelter in the sky. From up there, I could easily see the desert stretching beyond Jwahir (Okorafor, 2014, p.66).

The scene shows that, in the universe of the work, knowledge is not limited to institutional or technical forms, but is built on ancestral, spiritual, and narrative practices. Magic, in this sense, does not act as a break with reality, but as a symbolic technology of confrontation, through which Onyesonwu accesses historically marginalized knowledge and converts it into action. This perspective dialogues with Nelson's (2002) understan-

ding that Afrofuturism broadens the very concept of technology by including systems of memory, culture, and Black historical experience as legitimate forms of knowledge production. By rewriting memory and intervening in the texts that organize the social order, the narrative shifts power from hegemonic models of knowledge to Black epistemologies that articulate the body, language, and imagination of the future.

This articulation between body, magic, ancestry, and imagination of the future corresponds to recurring characteristics of Afrofuturism, as systematized by Womack (2003), for whom spiritual practices, mythical narratives, and black female protagonism constitute legitimate forms of cultural technology and the production of alternative futures.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE, SILENCING, AND RESISTANCE

In *Who Fears Death*, sexual violence is not just an individual event, but a structuring event in the plot. The protagonist, Onyesonwu, lives with the legacy of ancestral violence that resurfaces as a tool of control and oppression, especially in the context of gender and race.

The reading of the narrative also benefits from the contributions of Saidiya Hartman, especially her understanding of violence as a historical technology of domination, inscribed in black bodies and naturalized as part of the social order (Hartman, 1997). In analyzing the regimes of terror that structured slavery and its ramifications, Hartman highlights how certain forms of aggression against black women were repeatedly incorporated into discourses of power, becoming legitimized practices of control and discipline. In this sense, the violence suffered by female characters cannot be understood as an exceptional deviation, but as an expression of a broader historical process of subordination, in which the black female body is transformed into a territory of coercion. By mobilizing this perspective, it becomes possible to problematize how rape operates in the narrative as an instrument of domination that articulates race, gender, and power, revealing the continuity between past violence and its reconfigurations in the fictional horizon. This approach shifts the reading from the realm of shock or sensationalism and reconfigures it as a critical reflection on the ways in which violence structures social relations and produces subjectivities marked by coercion, but also by the possibility of resistance:

> All those Okeke women, young, middle-aged, and old, were raped. Repeatedly. Those men never tired; it was as if they were bewitched. [...] They sang as they raped. The Nuru women who accompanied them laughed, pointed, and sang too (Okorafor, 2014, p.23).

The black female body, within the Afrofuturist narrative, is not presented as a peripheral element, but as a central space for the inscription of historical violence that structures social relations. Far from functioning only as a support for pain, this body concentrates marks of coercion that cut across gender, race, and belonging, revealing how violence operates systematically and legitimately over time. By shifting the reading of individual experience to a broader

historical horizon, the narrative shows that these marks are not accidental, but the result of continuous processes of domination that are updated in the present. In this sense, the body is no longer understood exclusively as an object of oppression, but is recognized as a living memory, capable of exposing the mechanisms that sustain social and racial hierarchies:

> The Nuru men had done all this for reasons beyond simple humiliation and torture. They wanted to produce *Ewu* children. Such children are not the fruit of forbidden love between a Nuru and an Okeke, nor are they Noahs, Okeke who are born without color. The *Ewu* are children of violence (Okorafor, 2014, p.25).

In this sense, the episode goes beyond the individual record of the character and inserts itself into a broader reflection on the ways in which violence structures subjectivities, while at the same time opening up gaps for resistance.

Sexual violence in *Who Fears Death* is treated not only as a traumatic event, but as an opportunity for transformation and resistance. The pain experienced by the protagonist is converted into action through writing, the recreation of the Great Book, and the affirmation of her identity.

Onyesonwu's experience resonates with Lorde's (1980) reflections on the transformation of pain into language and political action. For the author, silenced suffering tends to sustain relationships of oppression, while its conscious expression enables the construction of strength and positioning. In the narrative, pain is not restricted to an accumulation of losses or traumas, but acts as a mobilizing element of the protagonist's voice and consciousness. By converting experiences of violence and exclusion into words, gestures, and creation, Onyesonwu develops forms of resistance that involve self-definition and the refusal of silencing. In this process, language takes on a central role, functioning as a means of confronting and transforming the conditions that produce suffering, in line with the perspective developed by Lorde.

The transformation of pain into language is one of the most significant movements in the narrative, repositioning the experience of suffering as a possibility for political action and self-definition. By being named, elaborated, and rewritten in discourse, pain ceases to operate solely as a silent mark of violence and becomes part of a process of subjective reconstruction. Language, in this context, is not limited to communicating trauma, but acts as a practice of reorganizing the world, allowing historically silenced experiences to be converted into critical force. This shift reinforces the idea that resistance does not emerge despite pain, but precisely from the ability to transform it into expression, choice, and creative gesture. In the narrative, the protagonist undergoes the eleven-year-old ritual, in which girls must undergo genital mutilation:

> I was a trapped animal. Not by the women, the house, or tradition. Trapped by life. [...] Then I thought of my mother. She had stayed sane because of me. She had

> survived because of me. I could do this for her.
>
> [...] When I was halfway through my breath, she cut me. The pain exploded. I could feel it in every part of my body and almost fainted. Then I started screaming (Okorafor, 2014, p.46).

Thus, the scene highlights the tension between tradition, control of the body, and resistance, highlighting female agency in the face of normative systems that regulate African women, without resorting to exoticizing interpretations or simplistic moral judgments.

Continuing this reflection, Onyesonwu's recreation of the Great Book can be understood as a gesture of resistance that operates simultaneously on the symbolic and narrative levels. By rewriting the prophecy and intervening in the text that legitimizes the existing order, the protagonist not only shifts the meanings of the official history, but also redefines her place within it, straining patriarchal structures and inherited regimes of domination. In this movement, what initially functioned as an instrument of control and silencing is reworked as a force for confronting and reconfiguring the past. The rewriting thus becomes a central point in her journey, in which the experience of violence ceases to be merely a mark of subjugation and takes on a decisive role in the construction of a critical memory and a possibility for the future.

The reconfiguration of the historical narrative emerges as a central gesture of resistance, shifting the power to define the past and future from hegemonic structures to historically subalternized subjects. By directly intervening in the records that organize collective memory, the protagonist breaks with the logic of the immutable legacy of violence and affirms the possibility of historical transformation. This movement does not erase the trauma, but reinserts it into a critical perspective, in which the future is no longer understood as an automatic continuation of oppression. Thus, Afrofuturism consolidates itself as an aesthetic and political practice of temporal dispute, affirming that imagining other futures is also a way of acting on the present:

> My hand grew warm, and I saw the symbols on my right hand break in half. The duplicates fell from the book, where they nestled among the other symbols, forming writing that I could not read. I could feel the book sucking from me, like a child does at its mother's breast. Taking, taking. I felt something stirring in my womb. I stopped singing. As I watched, the book grew dark, darker and darker. But not so dark that I couldn't see it. It hid there, in the corner, while the men came in and found me (Okorafor, 2014, p.400).

In this gesture of rewriting, the body, memory, and language converge as instruments of rupture, allowing history to cease to be merely inherited and become actively transformed.

The centrality of violence in the narrative also dialogues with James' (2009) re-

flections on dystopian literature aimed at young adult audiences, in which suffering, loss, and social collapse do not operate as a spectacularization of trauma, but as critical devices that strain power structures and invite the reader to reflect on the present. In this sense, Onyesonwu's experience is part of a dystopian tradition that uses the future to problematize contemporary relations of gender, race, and domination.

The narrative of *Who Fears Death* establishes a consistent dialogue with the tradition inaugurated by Octavia Butler, especially with regard to black female protagonism and the understanding of the future as a space of dispute. As in *Kindred* (1979), the future does not appear as a neutral or redemptive horizon, but as a territory traversed by unresolved historical conflicts, in which black women occupy central positions of transformation and resistance. By placing her protagonist in this field of tension, Okorafor reinforces a literary lineage that attributes to black female characters not only survival, but the ability to critically intervene in the course of history, questioning inherited power structures and those projected for the future.

In this sense, in both Butler and Okorafor, the black female body takes on the function of a historical archive, bringing together memory, violence, and the possibility of reconfiguration. The body is not limited to a space of suffering, but preserves marks of silenced collective experiences and acts as a place for the elaboration of new narratives. This approach contributes to understanding Afrofuturism not as an isolated deviation, but as a literary tradition that articulates past, present, and future from the Black experience, mobilizing speculative fiction to revisit histories of oppression and affirm alternative forms of existence and resistance.

This literary lineage, marked by black female protagonism and an understanding of the future as a space of dispute, corresponds to what Womack (2003) identifies as one of the central axes of Afrofuturism as a literary and cultural tradition.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study analyzed Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Who Fears Death: Onye and the Prophecy*, based on the articulations between Afrofuturism and dystopia, with special attention to black female protagonists and the ways in which violence is narratively elaborated. Throughout the analysis, it was demonstrated that the work is part of a speculative tradition that rejects conceptions of the future dissociated from the historical legacies of oppression, affirming the centrality of the Black experience in the struggle for the future.

The results show that Afrofuturism operates in the novel as a critical tool capable of challenging naturalized social, cultural, and historical structures. The narrative constructs a future marked by persistent racial and gender conflicts, moving away from techno-utopian or post-racial readings. In this context, black women occupy a central position, not as passive figures, but as an active force of resistance, memory, and transformation, articulated with bodily experience, displacement, and ancestral knowledge.

Violence, particularly in its gender dimension, is presented not as a sensationalist element, but as part of a historical process of domination, while at the same time becoming a turning point in the construction

of the protagonist's subjectivity. By transforming pain into language, action, and symbolic rewriting, the novel proposes a critical reflection on the possibility of resistance even in extreme contexts of coercion.

In this way, the article contributes to the field of young adult literature by highlighting the political and aesthetic density of Afrofuturist narratives aimed at this audience, broadening the debate on representation, identity, and resistance. It also contributes to gender studies and Afrofuturist criticism by highlighting the role of black female authors in the elaboration of imaginaries that reconfigure the past, present, and future from non-hegemonic perspectives.

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