

The Black Female Messiah in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*

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ABSTRACT

The Africanfuturist novel *The Book of Phoenix* by Nnedi Okorafor (2015) centres on a paradoxical black female messiah, whose story embodies the contemporary woman's *ofo* (a sacred Igbo symbol of worship and conjuration that establishes her cause as just). In this prequel to the award-winning *Who Fears Death* (2010), Phoenix is the redemptive creator-destroyer who leaves the page blank for a womanist rewriting in the sequel. Phoenix, who precipitates the apocalyptic event, is represented as a beacon and a purifying fire. Through Phoenix's recording, *The Book of Phoenix* is transcribed and becomes the Great Book. Applying African/Afrofuturist and womanist theory as an etic observer, I establish how the text performs the work of recovering an occluded history by creatively re-visioning theological frameworks.

Keywords: Africanfuturism, Afrofuturism, *ofo*, jujuism, speculative fiction, Nigerian diaspora, womanist texts, Naijamerican author, decolonisation.

The sky is vast enough for all birds to fly without colliding – Yoruba proverb (Nkealah 2016:61-74).

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Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* belongs in the genre of Africanfuturism, which is a subgenre of speculative fiction, by the self-styled Naijamerican (Okorafor 2011b) author, which includes Nigerian components in its myth and milieu explored. *The Book of Phoenix* (Okorafor 2015) decolonises speculative fiction in that this Africanfuturist prequel to *Who Fears Death* obliterates Western oppression by precipitating an apocalyptic event that leaves the page blank for the rewriting that occurs when the black protagonist, and her readers, acquire agency through the aspirational message of both books. Phoenix is thus, paradoxically, a creator-destroyer in *The Book of Phoenix*. The focus of this article is the liberation of black people through a reimagining of familiar scripture and mythology using the concept of an *ofo* as powerful juju that demonstrates that the hero's cause is just. The novel also utilises Greek mythology alongside religious allegory. Okorafor's revisions of the representations of Western religion and mythology through the female deity, Ani, demonstrate how familiar allegories can function to empower and liberate when they are reconstructed in an inclusive narrative, to offer an aspirational ideal for readers.

The novel tells the story of Phoenix, who is a redemptive creator/destroyer. Phoenix's name is apt because she becomes a 'beacon' (Okorafor 2015:36) and a purifying fire. *The Book of Phoenix* is found by a man named Sunuteel who transcribes Phoenix's recording and uses it to write the Great Book's story that illuminates the deconstruction of Western hermeneutics and the reconstruction of scripture using an African lens. In this way, the text seeks to 'recover the lost history of [black] women in that tradition, and finally, a hermeneutic of reconstruction that seeks to revise the core theological categories at work in the tradition' (Gonzalez 2007:88 quoted in Schneider & Trentaz 2008:796). Through this reconstruction, the novel embodies the contemporary woman's *ofo* and the audacious womanist hero's journey as a 'just cause', but also the decolonisation of the text by a black female writer and protagonist. I agree with Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's (1996:90) view expressed in her book titled *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*:

The novel has become the contemporary woman's *ofo*. In a showdown, the *ofo* is the sign of conjuration that identifies the holder as protected and on the path of victory because the cause is just. This is akin to the traditional setting in which Igbo men display their *ikenga* (two hands, or horns), while Yoruba men refer to their contestation as *agbomeji* (two rams battering each other to the death for territory or the ram's horns filled with juju – protective or adversarial potions), symbols of their masculinity and authority. Juju is powerful as a sign, for, at its most potent, it can empower its owner or disempower the adversary; it plays a vital role in establishing justice.

Further investigation into the concept reveals that *ofò* is integral to Igbo life. Jacinta Uchenna Ikegwu (2018:329) states that ‘All the post-colonial indigenous scholars unanimously believe that *Ofo* stands for truth justice and authority’. The word can refer to justice, dispute-settling, oath-taking, prayer (by putting the *ofò* stick in the ground), authority, sealing covenants, decision-making, and magico-religious uses (Ikegwu 2018:332-334), but this is not an exhaustive list. Ikegwu (2018:328) translates *ofò* as follows:

Ofo is the symbol of truth, justice, power of leadership, freedom, prayer that reaches God’s ear, reserved power for the men and strength in kinsmen and *Ofo* is the symbol of truth, justice, righteousness, power of leadership, worship and prayer to God and the spirits.

Even though the word *ofò* has many abstract meanings, as aforementioned, it is also tangible, often embodied in a ‘twig of the *ofò* tree (*Delarium Senegalese*)’ (Nwoye 2011:314). According to Chinwe Nwoye (2011:314), ‘[t]hese twigs represent the authority of a man to control his wives, and children’. By claiming that the novel ‘has become the contemporary women’s *ofò*’ (Ogunyemi 1996:90), Ogunyemi draws these powerful concepts together and challenges the claim that these concepts around justice and decision-making should be reserved for men. Ogunyemi’s (1996:90) assertion is that the novel fights for the women ‘on the path of victory because the cause is just’, and this article will demonstrate that Okorafor’s novel does exactly this through Phoenix.

Another pivotal term that Okorafor defines in her blog is ‘Africanjujuism’, which she categorises as a subgenre of fantasy ‘that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with regard to the power of words, and concepts of truth and justice already expounded upon’. According to Ogunyemi (1996:90), the celebration of juju ‘can empower its owner’, in this case, the audacious womanist hero in Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix* (2015), the eponymous Phoenix who functions as a heroic black female messiah. Miriam Pahl (2018:215) states that ‘[t]he genealogy of the Great Book is described in *The Book of Phoenix* and offers a critique of the alleged supremacy of writing and its claims for truth’, which are overturned by Onyesonwu in the sequel. The reader discovers that the Great Book is nothing more than an extract from Phoenix’s memory, which Sunuteel imperfectly transcribes, mediating it through the lens of his own marginalisation and bias because ‘his transcription that divides the Nuru and the Okeke, a distinction that was not included in Phoenix’s memory’ (Pahl 2018:215).

The inspiration for characters who can fly over societal constraints can be traced back to Okorafor’s own reading. She was so enthralled by Octavia E Butler that she

named her daughter Anya, 'after Anyanwu, a character from Butler's book, *Wild Seed*' (2008b:241) who could fly. Okorafor (2015:241) says that 'Octavia's character [Anyanwu] was the first African, Nigerian, Igbo fantastical being that I ever came across in fiction' and 'the most amazing black woman I'd ever read about'. Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death* is able to shape-shift and fly, as can Phoenix in *Book of the Phoenix*. This has metaphorical relevance for the young readers of these novels, especially like the young Okorafor, who recognised the potential in the African characters she read about in Butler's stories. Okorafor (2015:227) thus explores how fiction can foreground issues of race and gender, especially because 'Once the author wrote the story, the author became irrelevant'. The author implicitly asks her readers to ponder, and this commentary takes on a life of its own as it exists beyond the story, in the same way as Butler's stories inspired Okorafor.

In a talk she gave about her novel *Binti: Home* (2017a), Okorafor expresses her concern with African hegemonies in answer to speculative fiction that does not often even acknowledge Africa's existence (Okorafor 2017b). There were no people like her in the science fiction books she encountered, except the 'bad aliens' (Okorafor 2017b). The genre seemed inaccessible to her, and so she started writing speculative fiction herself, partly because of her trips to Nigeria as a girl. Furthermore, in an interview for the BBC, Okorafor contests her categorisation as an Afrofuturist writer, a label she feels is problematic as she states emphatically that her 'literary roots aren't here in the United States, they are in Nigeria' (John 2018). The post on her Facebook page with a link to the BBC article entitled 'Black Panther spin-off author Nnedi Okorafor's African inspiration', both dated 1 August 2018, states that she prefers the term 'Africanfuturist'. In a post on her blog on 19 October 2019, Okorafor defines Africanfuturism as 'directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West' (Okorafor 2019a). Okorafor (2019a) emphasises that Africanfuturism 'is concerned with visions of the future' that are 'rooted first and foremost in Africa'. Furthermore, it is 'less concerned with 'what could have been' and more concerned with 'what is and can/will be' (Okorafor 2019a), suggesting that her narratives are fundamentally aspirational.

In this article, first, the allegorical implication of Phoenix's name and the significance of her African descent will be explored. Second, I will explore the novel as a womanist *ofo*, an idea that dovetails with Alice Walker's definition of an audacious womanist (Walker 1983:xi), an exploration of the Big Eye's pursuit of Phoenix in Africa (LifeGen Technologies and their employees) is necessary to understand the novel's primary antagonist. Third, a critical discussion on the significance of the Nigerian female deity, Ani, will be developed in more detail by considering the veneration of female

deities in African ontologies, and the effects of this. Fourth, the allegorical significance of farming black bodies, the flying metaphor and Phoenix's other powers, such as combusting and reincarnating, will be discussed. Fifth, speculative fiction's decolonisation through this text will be considered. In the concluding paragraphs, the significance of Phoenix's paradoxical view of herself as a villain, despite being a purifying fire that seeks retribution, will reaffirm her status as the audacious womanist messiah in this novel. Thus the page will be left blank for Onyesonwu to rewrite the future, just as Phoenix, and, to some extent, although considerably less successfully, Sunuteel do.

The mythical phoenix is incarnate as Phoenix, who narrates her story to Sunuteel. Phoenix tells the listener (both Sunuteel and the reader) that she is 'two years old' and 'forty years old' (Okorafor 2015:24). She is an 'accelerated biological woman' (Okorafor 2015:48), one of the speciMen who 'had been created in Tower 7 two years ago from the DNA of an African woman possibly born in Phoenix, Arizona' (Okorafor 2015:39). Phoenix is thus both American and African, as is Okorafor, but Phoenix calls America 'my false home' (Okorafor 2015:92). In this, and in other ways to be discussed in this article, Phoenix's heritage points towards a future rewritten from an Africanfuturist perspective. Her martyrdom in this prequel foreshadows Onyesonwu's death and resurrection and gives an alternative to Western history using an Afrocentric lens to reconstruct black people's marginalisation in an allegorical tale. Centuries of the marginalisation and exploitation of black lives and racism are why Phoenix's captors make the mistake of believing that she would be born 40 years old and subjugated, on a 'leash' (Okorafor 2015:136) of the mind, as though this is a trait that is inherent in one's DNA. However, Phoenix soon proves that she cannot be subdued, and her name signals her potential and becomes prophetic as she does bring about purification through an apocalyptic event. Therefore, the significance of her name, Phoenix, is both tenor and vehicle as her ability to combust and be reborn points to the legendary beast and a literal scorching, as well as the related concepts of purification, renewal and rebirth:

I was naked and covered in dust; I must have looked like a ghost. But I was alive. After I'd died, I vividly remembered dying. My name is Phoenix, I thought. I don't know who named me, but I am named well. I stood up straighter (Okorafor 2015:36).

Early in the novel, the power of names is foreshadowed as Phoenix knows that '[t]hey have a way of becoming destiny' (Okorafor 2015:44). The mythical phoenix is thought to have African roots linked to Egyptian lore:

The phoenix may be a literary descendent of the *benu* or *bnw* of Egyptian

solar myths, a sacred bird, which through association with the self-renewing deities Rê and Osiris, became a symbol of renewal or rebirth (Hill 1984:61).

The first mention of a phoenix 'is attributed to Hesiod in a c. 700 BCE riddle of longevity, derived from oral tradition' (Nigg 2016:xvii). In Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, the phoenix is said to live five hundred years, and then the 'aging bird builds its nest of spices in a palm tree, and from its body a new bird rises' (Nigg 2016:xvii). The poem, *De Ave Phoenixe*, believed to have been written by Lactantius, helps establish 'the element of fire in the bird's death' (Nigg 2016:xviii). In this fiery death, Phoenix incinerates dominance by Western powers, and space is left for Onyesonwu's story to be imagined using an Afrocentric lens.

During a sojourn in Africa, Phoenix is given another name, 'Okore, which meant eagle' (Okorafor 2015:87), which carries connotations of a predator's strength and ferocity. The emblem of the eagle is also apt as she becomes 'a harbinger of violence' (Okorafor 2015:85) intent on destroying the ironically named LifeGen Technologies. The company treats the lives of people of colour with callous cruelty, in the same manner that slave masters were wont to do in the antebellum South. Phoenix is experimented upon and burnt with hot needles and 'broader instruments' on her 'face, belly, legs, arms', which 'burned every part of [her]', and she 'knew the smell, sound and sight of [her] cooking flesh' (Okorafor 2015:66). These experiments demonstrate how people of colour are commodified and treated in much the same way as slaves were, except they are not merely used for their labour; their bodies are literally *mined* for their *wealth* in the same way that Africa has historically been mined for its mineral and oil wealth (Okorafor 2015:198). Ellen Eubanks agrees with the view that science fiction can reconfigure the future in that 'Nnedi Okorafor uses a combination of the forms of indigenous futurism and what Isiah Lavender terms meta-slavery narratives to challenge the hegemonic ideologies of Western science fiction' (Eubanks 2018). Eubanks also proposes that LifeGen Technologies is a vehicle for Okorafor to draw 'attention to the continuation of the racist ideologies that informed slavery and colonialism into today's systems, thus highlighting the modern exploitation of people of color' (Eubanks 2018).

To counter this evil, Okorafor utilises religious allegory, but instead of favouring Western belief systems, foregrounds the female Nigerian deity, Ani, and the 'Author':

I decided to leave it all up to what Saeed called The Author of All Things, for Saeed had stopped believing in Allah long ago, and I had never believed in any gods or religions (Okorafor 2015:44).

Referring to the 'Author' identifies Phoenix, the fictional author, and Okorafor herself as empowered and authoritative narrators of their experiences and views. In summary, it rejects imported religions that teach 'a nasty form of hatred of one's self' (Okorafor 2016:306) as Okorafor (and Phoenix) reject other religions in favour of this 'Author'. However, as I have discussed, Phoenix also explicitly acknowledges the Nigerian female deity, Ani, and that '[a]ll things come from the land, Ani' (Okorafor 2016:219). Phoenix narrates the creation story that Sunuteel transcribes. Ani made all the bodies of water because 'water is life' (Okorafor 2016:219). While she rested, 'human beings sprang from the sweetest parts of the rivers and the shallow portions of the lakes' (Okorafor 2016:219), but they 'were aggressive like the rushing rivers, forever wanting to move forward, cutting, carving, changing the lands' (Okorafor 2016:219). The creation story tells about the 'seven mighty towers' (Okorafor 2016:220) they built at the 'apex of their genius' (Okorafor 2016:220) wherein 'they performed impossible feats' (Okorafor 2016:220), reminiscent of our own ascendance and the Towers of Babel. In these towers, they 'built juju-working machines' (Okorafor 2016:220) and 'fought and invented amongst themselves' (Okorafor 2016:220) as they 'bent and twisted Ani's sand, water, sky, and air' (Okorafor 2016:220). They 'sought to make themselves just like Ani: immortal, all powerful manipulators of earth's lands' (Okorafor 2016:220). Aside from this creation story, subverting and revising the book of Genesis, other significant biblical references are reimagined and rewritten, affording special attention to the strength and deification of the black goddess, Ani, but also the black author, Okorafor, and the audacious black protagonist, who is Phoenix. One of these biblical references simultaneously functions as an allegorical reference to George Orwell's germinal dystopian novel, *1984*. The Towers run by the Big Eye, which attempt to 'prick Ani' (Okorafor 2016:219), could also refer to the biblical Towers of Babel in Genesis 'as well as to *1984*, and the concept of a panopticon-style 'Big Brother' society, 'because they were always watching and experimenting on us' (Okorafor 2016:70).

Ani is 'image[d]' in the text as 'immortal' (Okorafor 2016:220) and all-powerful. The female creator deity is a mother-goddess, with humans springing from the water as she slept, is in contrast to the traditional Western view of God as an all-powerful man. In 2017, 'Afro-Cuban, Chicago-based painter Harmonia Rosales showed us that the possibilities are in fact endless and transcendent' (Kiunguyu 2019) by painting God as a black woman, acknowledging the maternal characteristics of God's nature. However, the veneration of female deities in African ontologies is yet more pertinent. Diedre Bádéjọ writes about the strength of African femininity:

Through the lens of our definition of African feminism, we confirm that inner strength and femininity are cultural norms derived from ancient

African philosophy and cosmology that, in the words of an Akan okyeame [sic], recognizes that through the womb of woman all humanity passes (Bádéjò 1998:95).

Thus, 'African women remain at the center of the social order' (Bádéjò 1998:95) and in Nigerian culture, this points towards matrifocality. Bádéjò (1998:95) states that the marginalisation of African women is 'largely the result of external factors'. She includes 'Western hegemony, paternalism, and sexism', as well as 'enslavement and colonialism' (Bádéjò 1998:95), all of which are deliberately overturned in *The Book of Phoenix* to return the reader to an understanding of matrifocality in the social order. Bádéjò (1998:96) also focuses on mythical-religious icons, for example, the female Yoruba deity Ọṣun:

Ọṣun is the giver of children and a renowned healer of women's and children's ailments. As an African woman, Ọṣun plays many roles that emanate from her central role as woman and mother.

These feminine roles foreground the matrifocal attributes of Nigerian goddesses: particularly, her role as a woman and a mother. However, Bádéjò (1998:101) argues that 'Western male sexism confused the relationship between women and nature by demanding that women be virginal and motherly at the same time'. In doing this, they relegated women to less powerful roles in order to serve patriarchy. To remedy this imbalance, she believes that African manhood needs to be revitalised; concurrently, she argues for 'a reinstatement of the philosophical practices and tenets of queen mothership, female rulership, and a healthy priestesshood' (Bádéjò 1998:101) to curb the influence of Western feminist battles on Nigerian culture and values. These 'dominating' male-centred Western 'systems' are overturned in *The Book of Phoenix*, making the story both a religious text and a contemporary *ofo* through the book's aspirational message.

Ani, also named Ala, 'controls the coming and the going of ancestors' (Salami-Boukari 2012:78). Ani 'recognises women's skill as creators/mothers and as mediators in essential matters (Salami-Boukari 2012:78). However, these mediating and maternal roles do not necessarily mean that liberation by female protagonists is unambiguous. On the one hand, Julia Hoydis (2017:188) in her chapter, 'A Darker Shade of Justice: Violence, Liberation, and Afrofuturist Fantasy in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*', argues that texts such as *Who Fears Death* (and, by extension, this prequel), acknowledge 'female oppression and, at the same time, [affirm] women's abilities to liberate themselves and others'. On the other hand, the narrative may feature female heroes and goddesses, yet Hoydis (2017:193) notes that it is interesting that we are 'confronted with a narrative in which this option [forgiveness and reconciliation]

is ruled out completely'. This is certainly also true in *The Book of Phoenix*, where the proverbial slate is wiped clean: perhaps Okorafor's message is that it is necessary to undertake a complete revision of the past. Speculative fiction facilitates this revision in feminist and womanist writing, once again embodying the contemporary woman's *ofo*.

Phoenix is the audacious woman who must fly above societal constraints where Western powers persecute African nations, but Okorafor's African lens, where African magic (referred to as 'juju') is prized, distinguishes her work from Western history texts that have focused on the benefits of colonisation'. Ogunyemi (2007:91) writes that Bessie Head 'employs jujuism to dismantle an African colonial system'. A similar decolonisation of the text using jujuism is also evident in Okorafor's novels. Okorafor's Afrocentric lens advances the decolonisation of speculative fiction by foregrounding African people's oppression by Western governments who want to steal African magic and power; to harvest it and use it for monetary gain without acknowledging Africa. Metaphorically, Okorafor points to the exploitation of labour and mineral wealth from Africa over the centuries. Still, one might argue that the theft of juju and power through subjugation is literal too, and refers to the exploitation of black people as chattels through slavery.

It is significant that when Phoenix escapes from Tower 7's torture, she stops to tell a story of her time in Africa, where she enjoys a time of peace before the Big Eye begins searching for her. Upon returning to Africa, she enjoys a time of restoration and love, pointing to the significance of returning to her mother's soil. The breaking of the fourth wall using second-person narration places the reader in the story as the 'storyteller starts it again' (Okorafor 2015, 61). Phoenix 'couldn't have been gladder to see the coast of Africa' (Okorafor 2015:58). It is apt that she returns to her ancestors' home to seek solace and recover physically and emotionally. Phoenix also reburies the alien seed that The Backbone had offered to her when she escaped from the tower. With this seed comes abundance for the Ghanaians of Wulugu, and the villagers recognise this and are generous in return, building her a house and garden. Phoenix enjoys a time of peace and prosperity in Africa, falling in love with a doctor name Kofi Atta Annan, whose 'father had named him after the UN diplomat who spearheaded the riots in Nigeria and Ghana over a century ago' (Okorafor 2015:63). Unfortunately, her happiness does not last, and the Big Eye arrive (known in Ghana as 'Red Eyes') (Okorafor 2015:69).

The Red Eyes are white men from America who come to Africa and take advantage of their wealth and privilege: an age-old tale of the exploitation of people and

resources. Women are paid for sex and subservience, and their lack of agency and resources make it impossible for them to make other choices besides 'being publicly handled by these men like prostitutes' (Okorafor 2015:70). One night, Phoenix sees a Big Eye 'mashing' (Okorafor 2015:71) a young woman's face into the ground: 'This was rape' (Okorafor 2015:71). Phoenix cracks his skull with one hard slap after he calls the woman, Sarah, a whore. Sarah believes that she has 'betrayed God's messenger' (Okorafor 2015:76), alluding to Phoenix's angel-like wings and role as her messiah. Phoenix considers herself an angel of death and retribution, but the truth is more complicated as she is also an angel of rebirth and renewal. Her ambivalent role as a creator-destroyer is reminiscent of the Hindu goddess, Kali, who is 'an expression of the universal Earth Goddess as archetypal Mouth of Hell' (Evans 2018:331). Kali's form is described as 'similar to that of Tlaltecuhli in the Aztec tradition, who was depicted as a fierce Eagle Goddess inhabiting earth, considered to be the middle-world between heaven and hell' (Evans 2018:332); the comparison is apposite because Phoenix is also named Okore, or eagle. By self-combusting, Phoenix 'destroys the order of earth, thus creating the chaos of hell' (Evans 2018:332), but by scorching the earth in this way, she also leaves a blank canvas for a more redemptive story to be told in the sequel, *Who Fears Death*. The encounter with the rapist signals the end of Phoenix's short-lived happiness in Africa as the Big Eye track her down. Kofi is shot and dies in Phoenix's second death and rebirth by fire, and this foreshadows the dénouement that requires a complete destruction before renewal can occur.

The Big Eye cannot leave her in Africa, nor can they risk having her talk, because 'stories travel and germinate', and 'sometimes, stories evolve into trouble' (Okorafor 2015:90), signalling the power of storytelling, especially the stories of a woman with Phoenix's power. Despite agreeing to follow them back to her 'false home' (Okorafor 2015:92) in America, she refuses to return on the ship they want her to board, again asserting her independence and ensuring that she is not sent to America on a ship the way her transatlantic slave ancestors once were. Phoenix again decides that she will begin to write her story and leaves the ship she is being forced to follow. Phoenix escapes the Big Eye by slipping through time and space to Tower 1, known as 'the nexus' (Okorafor 2015:97). Tower 1 is 'where the Big Eye created their first abomination' (Okorafor 2015:97): 'Lucy', a ten-year-old Ethiopian girl who was programmed never to age:

They believed that she was a traceable direct descendant of 'Mitochondrial Eve' and thus carried the complete genetic blueprint of the entire human race. On top of this, the girl was afflicted with hyperthymesia, an extremely rare condition that made her able to remember every moment of her entire life. They gave her the code name, 'Lucy' (Okorafor 2015:98).

Lucy is the first instance of the Big Eye 'mining' black bodies for their 'wealth', in this case, DNA that does not age. This elixir of youth is more valuable than minerals and metaphorically represents the mineral wealth and wealth through labour plundered from Africa over the ages. Crucially, it also demonstrates how black lives are less important than the (Western) lives that are extended through farming African DNA. This points towards Africa's pillaged knowledge and wealth, despite the view that some writers have historically often viewed Africa as the 'dark' (unenlightened) continent (Phillips 2003). Okorafor reimagines this narrative in this speculative setting, using allusion and allegory by representing Africa as the very place where enlightenment can be and has been found, but at a high cost to liberty and life. Some of these allegorical captives are released by Phoenix, but many are barely recognisable as human:

Most have mechanical limbs, some more than others. One woman has a mechanical lower body, but with human legs. I see three people in the same room with skin that glows a soft green. At first I think they are what I used to be, but when I look more closely, I see that their skin is embedded with millions of miniscule screens (Okorafor 2015:101).

As a result of these events, Phoenix comes to view herself more as an angel of vengeance than a messiah figure, although I argue that she is both. She tells herself that this is 'the second time in my existence, I feel that if there is a God then I am doing God's will' (Okorafor 2015:101). This uncertainty about God's existence is resolved in the final pages when the story concludes with Ani's creation story and reference to the 'Author' (Okorafor 2015:44). Although Phoenix is never directly referred to as an angel of vengeance, the reader is invited to view her in this light because of the retribution she seeks and her otherworldly form. The concept of a destroying angel is another biblical allegory:

The destroying angel is explicitly mentioned twice in the Bible (II Sam. 24:16; I Chron. 21:15). In addition, there are several other passages in the Bible and rabbinic literature that refer to destructive supernatural forces. The idea of the destroying angel as an independent force, acting of its own accord, is foreign to the Hebrew Bible, which emphasizes that God is in control of these destructive forces so as to negate polytheistic beliefs. The angel can do nothing on its own initiative and must only act in compliance with the will of God. It is He alone who deals death and gives life (Bar 2014:259).

Phoenix does not rely directly on God, even if she believes she is doing his will. Instead, the author is in control of her destiny and determines her path. This ambivalence about whether or not there is a God or a higher power is familiar from *Who Fears Death*, and is conveyed in the tension between the religious allegory

and traditional Nigerian religion elements, including references to Aní and jujuism. In the end, the book suggests that the author is all-powerful in the narrative and implies that the reader can decide to harness this agency in her own life.

Phoenix continues her quest to destroy the Big Eye by taking down Tower 4 next. In it is a six-year-old accelerated being named HeLa: a character based on Henrietta Lacks, who died of cervical cancer at 31. The real Henrietta Lacks's cells were harvested by doctors at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, without her consent, and this exploitation is another example of 'farming' black bodies:

In the laboratory, her cells turned out to have an extraordinary capacity to survive and reproduce; they were, in essence, immortal. The researcher shared them widely with other scientists, and they became a workhorse of biological research. Today, work done with HeLa cells underpins much of modern medicine; they have been involved in key discoveries in many fields, including cancer, immunology and infectious disease. One of their most recent applications has been in research for vaccines against COVID-19. (*Nature* 2020:7)

The real Henrietta Lacks was a mother of five, but '[n]one of the biotechnology or other companies that profited from her cells passed any money back to her family' (*Nature* 2020:7). Because of this, the creation of the character of HeLa in *The Book of Phoenix* functions again to point to the lack of agency in black lives, but it also suggests a novel lens for considering agency and power, in that the wealth or juju in her cells brings immortality to the 'vampires' who steal it. Okorafor's manipulation of historical events in the novel cleverly foregrounds the aims of the #BlackLivesMatter movement:

Now, the extraordinary events of 2020 – the #BlackLivesMatter movement for racial justice, and the unequal toll of COVID-19 on communities of colour – are compelling scientists to reckon with past injustices. Some have called for a reduction in the use of HeLa cells in research, or even an end to their use entirely (*Nature* 2020:7).

The effects of the character, HeLa, being life-giving instead of cancerous is particularly noteworthy. HeLa is 'harvested' (Okorafor 2015:169) for her blood that brings with it immortality, and so far, 'Seven deadly sinners' (Okorafor 2015:217) have benefitted from it and 'will never die' (Okorafor 2015:187). Her DNA is the African wealth being stolen without her consent: her body is literally being plundered. HeLa is tormented by the power these seven deadly sinners wield because of their immortality, and aptly names the Big Eye 'vampires' (Okorafor 2015:187). The implication is that these seven deadly sinners indulge in lust, greed, envy, anger, pride, gluttony, and sloth. Nothing else is said about them. Phoenix knows that she has to save HeLa, and

soon realises that the only release HeLa will know is in death, as ‘when she died, she was allowed to leave’ (Okorafor 2015:190).

The gift of immortality bequeathed by HeLa’s blood is also an expression of a woman’s ability to procreate, and, indirectly, her menstrual cycle, which signals her fertility. In many cultures, women are viewed as unclean when they menstruate. In particular, the Torah’s third book, Leviticus, states ‘that a woman undergoing menstruation is perceived as unclean for seven days and whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening (Leviticus 15:19)’ (Mazokopakis 2020:78). Still, this section of the novel skilfully challenges these biases, simultaneously mirroring the Western patriarchal plundering of Africa and African people. HeLa, a woman, has blood that brings life in much the same way that a mother’s blood nourishes and brings life. It recalls motherhood as an important aspect of the Nigerian female deities I have previously mentioned. Phoenix’s victories bring about change, and the slaves in the other towers begin to mobilise:

*We were slaves. We were born that way. But we have escaped.
Now we are the Ledussee. [Let-us-see.]
Let us see what happens now that we have freed ourselves* (Okorafor 2015:192).

Phoenix is not only an angel of vengeance but ultimately also becomes a winged saint or guardian, inspiring change and revolution, lending credence to my view that she also plays a messianic role in her final sacrifice at the end of the novel as part of her *ofo*.

In *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o writes about African literature and the ‘suggestive magical power of language’ (Ngũgĩ 1992:11). He argues that language carries culture and that exposing a child ‘exclusively to a culture that was a product of a world external to himself’ makes him ‘stand outside himself to look at himself’ (Ngũgĩ 1992:17). Chinua Achebe’s well-known novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), explores the influence of colonialism on the Igbo people. The title of the novel is a quotation from William Butler Yeats’s poem, ‘The Second Coming,’ which Saeed references in *The Book of Phoenix*:

There is a verse in a poem that has always stuck with me. I didn’t have to even try to memorize it. The poem was so powerful that it stuck to my brain the first time I heard it: ‘Things fall apart, the center cannot hold,’ by a man named Yeats (Okorafor 2015:127).

Saeed’s mention of the poem alludes more to Achebe’s commentary on colonialism’s influence than to Yeats’s poem. Even Mmuo’s father understands the danger of the

colonised mind, as he ‘read things by legendary agitating African writers from long ago, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Wole Soyinka’ (Okorafor 2015:114). He understood ‘the meaning of colonialism and about the ‘colonized mind’ from the deep Internet when he was twelve years old’ (Okorafor 2015:114). Mmuo tells his story of the Big Eye invading Nigeria and his experience of colonial subjugation. He recalls robot spiders, ironically created by the Nigerian government’s engineers: ‘Can you imagine? We came up with these things ourselves FOR ourselves. We’re so colonized that we build our own shackles’ (Okorafor 2015:118). The novel suggests that the author is omnipotent, and, like Sunuteel, the reader is invited to consider the power of the pen. The question the novel ultimately poses is ‘Who is writing you?’ (Okorafor 2015:228). Okorafor writes in English, but by writing from an Africanfuturist perspective, she is decolonising speculative fiction. In many novels that are written from a colonial viewpoint, a person is not ‘made to see the world and where he [sic] stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition’ (Ngũgĩ 1992:17), but in this novel, Okorafor’s decolonising of African literature challenges the position of the coloniser by viewing the colonised as the juju-wielding hero. Phoenix’s teacher, Seven, is also her guide: he tells her that she is ‘change’ and informs her that wherever she goes, she will ‘bring revolution’ (Okorafor 2015:180).

Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix* brings revolution to speculative fiction through Phoenix, who views herself as a villain and ‘a harbinger of violence’ (Okorafor 2015:85). Her intention from the beginning is to seek retribution for the horrors committed against her and the other bodies being ‘mined’, but despite using fire to purge the world, she still emerges as a saviour as she leaves the page blank for Onyesonwu:

I’M ALIVE, AGAIN. I am the villain in the story. Haven’t you figured it out yet? Nothing good can come from unnatural bonding and creation. Only violence. I am a harbinger of violence. Watch what happens wherever I go (Okorafor 2015:85).

Phoenix believes that she is ‘a weapon’ (Okorafor 2015:105), or, more specifically, ‘a bomb’, and holds that she is doing what she was created to do. She believes that the author will destroy the planet using a star (perhaps a meteorite) and ‘burn all the evil away, taking all the good with it’ (Okorafor 2015:108), once again reminiscent of the Hindu goddess, Kali. The reader is positioned to view Phoenix as that ‘star’ as even as she tries to avert this disaster, but in the end, she causes it when Saeed is in danger and Mmuo is murdered. In this purifying fire, Phoenix is most formidable, focusing her anger appropriately and catastrophically. In death,

she burns up the evil around her and is reborn. This is similar to Onyesonwu's final role as a martyr, but instead of rewriting her story in a new life, Phoenix is reborn in her current reality, like the mythical phoenix that burns up and is reborn from the ashes. Fire both purifies and obliterates, and is compared to the 'scorched earth' practice in a war that burns up territory to clear the enemy and supplies:

In warfare, there is a military strategy called 'scorched earth.' It is when you destroy anything that might be useful to the enemy as you move through or pull out of their territory (Okorafor 2015:218).

Likewise, Phoenix burns up everything, much like the biblical flood that washed evil away in Genesis; but in this revision, the powerful purge of evil is through fire (Okorafor 2015:223). In the concluding pages of the novel, Phoenix acknowledges the female deity, Ani, but she also recognises storytelling's power. Phoenix seems to speak for the author when she says that she loves books, 'the feel of the pages on my fingertips' (Okorafor 2015:135) and that they are 'light enough to carry, yet so heavy with worlds and ideas' (Okorafor 2015:135). Critically, she says that books 'make people quiet' while they read them, 'yet they are so loud' (Okorafor 2015:135) because of the powerful ideas that they convey. In this case, the novel describes the strength and boldness of the female hero in an African milieu, connecting with young black readers who can see themselves in her womanist audacity as the protagonist who is 'outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful' (Walker 1983:xi). They want 'to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one' (Walker 1983:xi) and change the landscape for readers who look like them. Phoenix realises that her 'genetic selection' (Okorafor 2015:150) and 'forced fertilization' do not matter as much as the fact that she is a 'child of The Author of All Things' (Okorafor 2015:150). The fictional author is Ani, but the actual author is Okorafor herself, whose story becomes her *ofo* by 'reestablishing justice' for her readers (Ogunyemi 1996:90).

In the final lines of the book, Sunuteel realises that Phoenix is alive and addressing him through the book's pages, in the same manner that we realise that the character has life through what she conveys. Sunuteel finishes listening to her story, and Phoenix's final words express again the power of storytelling to 'scorch the earth' (Okorafor 2015:222) and leave the ground clear for a new story: Onyesonwu's story:

I scorch the earth. Yes, I can do that. I am that. Phoenix Okore blew across the earth. She burned the cities. Turned the oceans to steam. She was the reaper come to reap what was sown. Wherever those seven men lived. Let them die. Let everything die.

Let that which had been written all be rewritten (Okorafor 2015:222).

The paradox contained in these lines is evident. Phoenix is both saviour and villain. Hers is a rounded character that revolutionises the flat superhero trope who can only save the day. Instead, Phoenix both rescues and destroys, and thus, as Amanda Rico (2018:103) writes, she is a more nuanced character:

However, although the Afrocentric superheroines described in the novels I discuss in this chapter do 'write back' against tropes employed within a largely male-dominated, Eurocentric canon, their characterization involves forms of nuance and ambiguity that make them distinctively human rather than flat, reactionary archetypes.

Okorafor frames the paradoxical nature of female heroes deliberately, and in this way 'conveys that diasporic identity is largely a balancing act between multiple intersecting and oft-times competing transcultural modes of knowledge' (Okorafor 2015:106). Phoenix still emerges as the hero as the novel examines 'how black women's bodies are seen, read, and appropriated [which] is a central issue for current discourses on diasporic identity formation' (Okorafor 2015:105). Phoenix both rescues and obliterates, but despite this ambiguous ending, the message is clear that this 'scorching' is necessary to clear the page, as Pahl (2018:214) notes:

In *The Book of Phoenix*, the character Sunuteel openly acknowledges and deliberates the ideas conveyed in Roland Barthes's essay 'The Death of the Author' (227). Barthes outlines in this essay that writing gains meaning in the moment of being read and interpreted, thus distracting the focus from the author toward the text and the reader. Okorafor's writings, in their acknowledgement of different sources and backgrounds as her literary heritage, also evoke a concept of writing as an interweaving of different voices and a text's identity being constituted by the discourse that it draws on.

It is only in the sequel, *Who Fears Death*, that '[through] the character of Onyesonwu, the novel's narrator and protagonist, the Great Book also becomes the focus of resistance and a potential site and source of liberation' (Burnett 2015:142). Sadly, Sunuteel cannot imagine any other story except the one in which the Okeke are persecuted because 'what is in one's heart comes out in one's stories' (Okorafor 2015:229). He fails to seek 'The Seed' for 'real answers' (Okorafor 2015:231) and chooses instead to 'write fiction' (231). Sunuteel's wife narrated The Great Book, and 'in this way, both Sunuteel and his wife become immortal' (Okorafor 2015:230) by taking Phoenix's book, 'digest[ing] its marrow and defecat[ing] a tale of his own' (Okorafor 2015:231). The final line is narrated by the sorcerer, Sola:

Then he and his oracle of a wife spread this shit far and wide. And their Great Book deformed the lives of many until the one named Onyesonwu came and changed it again. But that is another story (Okorafor 2015:231).

Okorafor (2016:306) criticises imported religion because she believes it teaches 'Nigerians to hate their own indigenous traditions, spiritualities, and religions'. It is up to the reader to determine the truth more successfully than Sunuteel does when Phoenix's recorded voice asks Sunuteel, 'Who is writing you?' (Okorafor 2015:228). Readers are invited to ask themselves the same question, and this is where the aspirational value of the text lies as one considers how one can rewrite one's own story. Phoenix's story embodies the contemporary woman's *ofo* because of the aspirational significance of her story that reveals truth, justice and authority' (Ikegwu 2018:329) for readers. Thus, Phoenix becomes a kind of messiah, despite her ambivalence about her role, because she leaves the page blank for Onyesonwu in the sequel, and for young readers inspired by her audacity in her just cause.

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