A PROJECT ON

AN OVERVIEW OF AFRO-FUTURIST LITERATURE

Submitted as a Project Work for Partial Fulfilment of

B.A.-English (H)

Submitted by

Sourav Nayak

AJU/211150
SEM II

Submitted to
Dr. Manoj Kumar Pathak
Department of English
ARKA JAIN University

2021

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the project entitled, “An Overview of Afro-futurist Literature” is a bonafide work of Mr. Sourav Nayak of B.A.-English (H), SEM II, bearing Regn No. AJU/211150 submitted in partial fulfilment of the Project Work of SEM II, B.A.-English (H).

M.K. Pathak

Internal Guide

(Dr. Manoj K Pathak)

R Ghosh

Program Coordinator (BA-English (H)

(Ms. Rajkumari Ghosh)

University seal

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is a genuine pleasure to express my profound gratitude and deep regard to my guide “Dr. Manoj Kumar Pathak” for his exemplary guidance, monitoring and constant encouragement.

I would like to thank “Ms. Rajkumari Ghosh”, the Program Coordinator of the Department of English, AJU who encouraged doing this wonderful project on the topic “An Overview of Afro-futurist Literature”, which helped me in getting understanding about research and I came to know about so many things.

Raina Basak

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the project entitled, “An Overview of Afro-futurist Literature” done at “Arka Jain University”, has not been in any case duplicated to submit to any other university for the award of any degree. To the best of my knowledge other than me, no one has submitted to any other university. This project is done in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Project Work to be submitted as second semester project as part of our curriculum.

Sourav Nayak

An Overview of Afro-futurist Literature

Afrofuturism refers to a flourishing contemporary movement of African American, African, and Black diasporic writers, artists, musicians, and theorists. Afrofuturism comprises cultural production and scholarly thought—literature, visual art, photography, film, multimedia art, performance art, music, and theory—that imagine greater justice and a freer expression of black subjectivity in the future or in alternative places, times, or realities. It also offers speculation about a world wherein black people are normative. Afrofuturism can also imagine dystopic worlds to come, with contemporary injustices projected into, and often intensified in, the future. However, Afrofuturist works do not always look to the future but, rather, often unsettle notions of linear time. More broadly defined, Afrofuturism reimagines not only new forms of temporality but also new black experiences and identities via science and speculative fiction or other artistic and intellectual means. It often does so by exploring both the potential and the pitfalls of technoculture and posthumanism. Although the movement has certainly exploded in recent years, especially since 2000, its intellectual and aesthetic underpinnings can be traced back to mid- and late-19th-century African American novels that imagined alternative realities and communities for black people.

The movement is relatively young; there have been, to date, few comprehensive overviews of Afrofuturism. However, a number of key works do provide effective introductions to the movement's tenets, aesthetics, significance, and history. Dery 1994 coined the term Afrofuturism and offered an early introduction to and definition of the movement. The Afrofuturism special issue of the journal *Social Text* (Nelson 2002) represents a watershed moment in the development and theorization of Afrofuturism. Together, the essays in the issue

represent essential reading on Afrofuturism, covering topics from the late-19th- to early-20th-century antecedents of the movement to the revolutionary possibilities created by an Internet community of color. Akomfrah 1996 likewise offers an indispensable overview of Afrofuturist thought and cultural production, especially music, from the African diaspora. Eshun 2003 offers an important theorization of the complex temporalities of Afrofuturism, with a focus on African and African diasporic artists, musicians, and writers. Womack 2013 provides a more popular and accessible introduction to Afrofuturism. Jackson and Moody-Freeman 2011 is among the most useful collections for providing an overview of the movement; it includes eleven scholarly essays that consider speculative and science fiction and futuristic poetry, film, comics, and television in relation to blackness and race. Dubey 2003, although not specifically focused on Afrofuturism, nonetheless offers strong analysis of the theoretical significance and political power of science fiction by African American writers. Similarly, Iton 2008 does not focus on Afrofuturism but establishes strong connections among politics, political activism, and black popular culture.

AFORFUTURISM IN LITERATURE:

Science fiction and fantasy often serve as way to examine and cope with societal issues, past or present. Given how prevalent the idea of "otherness" is within genre (from monsters to aliens), it's no surprise that writers of color would choose to use SFF as a vehicle to access their own thoughts about race and feelings of otherness in predominantly white societies—and so spawned the sub-genre called Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism, a term coined in the 1990s by Mark Dery in his article "Black to the Future," describes music, literature, and art that contains elements of science fiction, fantasy,

magical realism, historical fiction, Afrocentricity, and non-Western cosmologies. The genre primarily critiques past and present dilemmas faced by people of color, while also imagining futures for those groups that stem from the experiences of cultures formed as a result of the historical African diaspora.

The creation of the term Afrofuturism in the 1990s was often primarily used to categorize "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture,but was soon expanded to include artistic, scientific, and spiritual practices throughout the African diaspora. Contemporary practice retroactively identifies and documents historical instances of Afrofuturist practice and integrates them into the canon. For example, the Dark Matter anthologies edited by Sheree Thomas feature contemporary Black science fiction, discuss Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man in her introduction, "Looking for the Invisible," and also include older works by W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles W. Chesnutt, and George S. Schuyler.

Lisa Yazsek argues that Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, should be thought of as a predecessor to Afrofuturist literature. Yaszek illustrates that Ellison draws upon Afrofuturist ideas that were not yet prevalent in African-American literature. Ellison critiques the traditional visions of black people's future in the United States, but does not provide readers a different future to imagine. Yaszek believes that Ellison does not offer any other futures so that the next generation of authors can. *Invisible Man* may not be Afrofuturist in the sense that it does not provide a better – or even any – future for black people in the United States, but it can be thought of as a call for people to start thinking and creating art with an Afrofuturist mindset. In this

sense, Yaszek concludes that Ellison's novel is a canon in Afrofuturistic literature by serving as call for "this kind of future-historical art" to those who succeed him.

A number of contemporary Black science fiction and speculative fiction authors have also been characterized as Afrofuturist or as employing Afrofuturist themes. Though she adamantly resists this label and strongly labels her work as Africanfuturist, many have still inaccurately labelled Nnedi Okorafor's work as Afrofuturist, both for her Hugo Award-winning Binti novella series,and for her novel *Who Fears Death* are Africanfuturist.Nancy Farmer won a Newbery Honor for her afrofuturist young adult novel *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm.* Steven Barnes has been called an Afrofuturist author for his alternate-history novels *Lion's Blood* and *Zulu Heart*. N.K. Jemisin, Nalo Hopkinson, and Colson Whitehead have also been referred to as Afrofuturist authors. Octavia Butler's novels are often associated with Afrofuturism; this association has been somewhat controversial, since Butler incorporates multi-ethnic and multi-species communities that insist on "hybridity beyond the point of discomfort".However, the fourth book of the science fiction Patternist series, *Wild Seed*, particularly fits ideas of Afrofuturist thematic concerns, as the narrative of two immortal Africans Doro and Anyanwu features science fiction technologies and an alternate anti-colonialist history of seventeenth century America.

ART: MUSEUM AND GALLERY EXHIBITIONS

In recent years, there have been many museum exhibitions displaying art with Afrofuturist themes.The Studio Museum in Harlem held a major exhibit exploring Afrofuturistic aesthetics from November 14, 2013 to March 9, 2014. The exhibit, called *The Shadows Took Shape*, displayed more than sixty works of art that looked at recurring themes such as identity in relation

to technology, time, and space within African-American communities. Artists featured in the exhibit included Derrick Adams, Laylah Ali and Khaled Hafez. As a part of the MOMA's PS1 festival, King Britt curated *Moondance: A Night in the Afro Future* in 2014. From noon to six p.m. on April 13, people could attend Moondance and listen to lectures, live music or watch dance performances in celebration of Afrofuturism in contemporary culture.

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture held a seminal group show of Visual Afrofuturists focusing on unambiguous science fiction and fantasy based art. The show, titled 'Unveiling Visions: The Alchemy of the Black Imagination' ran from October 1, 2015 - January 16, 2016. The closing night coincided with the Schomburg Black Comic Book Day. Unveiling Visions was curated by artist John Jennings (Co-founder of artist duo, Black Kirby w/Professor Stacey Robinson) and Afrofuturist Scholar, Reynaldo Anderson (founder of The Black Speculative Arts Movement).The show featured artists such as Tony Puryear, Sheeba Maya, Mshindo Kuumba, Eric Wilkerson, Manzel Bowman, Grey Williamson, Tim Fielder, Stacey Robinson, and Shawn Alleyne. Unveiling Visions liner notes state: "exhibition includes artifacts from the Schomburg collections that are connected to Afrofuturism, black speculative imagination and Diasporan cultural production. Offering a fresh perspective on the power of speculative imagination and the struggle for various freedoms of expression in popular culture, Unveiling Visions showcases illustrations and other graphics that highlight those popularly found in science fiction, magical realism and fantasy. Items on display include film posters, comics, T-shirts, magazines, CD covers, playbills, religious literature, and more."

In April 2016, Niama Safia Sandy curate an exhibit entitled "Black Magic: AfroPasts / Afrofutures" at the Corridor Gallery in Brooklyn, New York.The multidisciplinary art exhibit

looks at the relationship between magical realism and afrofuturism through the Black diaspora. In a description of the collection, Sandy stated: "There's a lot of looking back and looking forward happening in this work... [and there's a lot of] celebrating those journeys whether they are intentional or forced journeys."

The exhibition *Afro-Tech and the Future of Re-Invention* is running from October 21, 2017 until April 22, 2018at Dortmunder U in Dortmund, Germany and "looks at speculative visions of the future and current developments in the field of digital technology by artists and inventors from Africa and the African diaspora...."

The exhibition,'Black Metropolis: 30 Years of Afrofuturism, Comics, Music, Animation, Decapitated Chickens, Heroes, Villains and Negroes' is a one-man show focusing on the career of cartoonist and visual afrofuturist, Tim Fielder." The show, designed to travel over multiple gallery spaces, opened at New York Gallatin Galleries from May 23-May 30th, 2016. Curated by Boston Fielder, the exhibit featured both published and unpublished work ranging from independent comics art for alternative magazine, *Between C & D* and mainstream comics work done for Marvel Comics. Black Metropolis, revived at The Hammonds House Museum in Atlanta, GA for the museum's 30th Anniversary October 12-November 25, 2018."

AFROFUTURISM IN THE WORLD OF MUSIC BY NEIL

Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation. ‘I generally define Afrofuturism as a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens,’ says Ingrid LaFleur, an art curator and Afrofuturist.”

One of the most exciting genres emerging in science fiction, film, art and music at the moment is Afrofuturism. But whilst this dynamic and rather fabulous genre is having a real explosion of creativity, it's by no means new. Indeed especially in the world of music Afrofuturism has a long and distinguished past, commonly accepted as emerging in the music world in the 1950s. This blog is a very brief look at some of Afrofuturism's key musical proponents both old and new. One of the first musical explorers in this universe was the legendary jazz musician Sun Ra. In the late 1950s Sun Ra created his own new synthesis of jazz, designed to reflect and link both the leading edge of the space age and African culture–especially that of African Egypt.

His ideas were taken up in the 1970s in the funk world by George Clinton's funk outfits Parliament and Funkadelic. Reggae and hip hop also embraced these ideas, with artists like Lee "Scratch" Perry, Scientist and Afrika Bambaataa. And in the world of rock, Jimi Hendrix was also regarded by some reviewers as an Afrofuturist.

In the 21st century artists as diverse as Solange, Rihanna, Beyoncé, Erykah Badu, Missy Elliott, Kendrick Lamar, Flying Lotus and the Wu-Tang Clan have been influenced by this movement, with perhaps Janelle Monáe the best known for embracing the genre.That level of enthusiasm for a concept which hadn't been defined until the mid 90s, gives an insight into how far Afrofuturism has come and how many people now identify with its ideas. First coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in an essay called "Black to the Future", Afrofuturism draws together elements of astral jazz, African-American sci-fi and psychedelic hip-hop into an all-encompassing philosophy, imagining alternative visions of tomorrow.

Culturally, Afrofuturism's reach is vast. It encompasses the literature of writers such as Octavia E Butler and Ishmael Reed, films such as John Sayles's The Brother From Another Planet, and the visual art of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Ellen Gallagher. It has been retrospectively applied to the work of musicians ranging from Jimi Hendrix and Sun Ra to Public Enemy and Lee "Scratch" Perry. It has an expansive and pliant musical heritage, which film-maker and Afrofuturist author Ytasha Womack argues stretches all the way back to ancient African griot traditions; she also notes the frequent references to Egyptian astronomy and the pyramids.She describes Afrofuturism as "the intersection between black culture, technology, liberation and the imagination, with some mysticism thrown in, too. It can be expressed through film; it can be expressed through art, literature and music. It's a way of bridging the future and the past and essentially helping to reimagine the experience of people of colour."

A brief – and in no way definitive – breakdown of Afrofuturism's musical lineage might look something like this. The 50s and 60s were dominated by the free jazz and avant garde work of Sun Ra and his Arkestra, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Don Cherry and Alice Coltrane, with some psychedelic input from Jimi Hendrix and Love. The 70s and 80s were when George Clinton's Parliament/Funkadelic and Prince sent funk to outer space and dub innovators such as King Tubby and Lee "Scratch" Perry beamed out cosmic signals from Jamaica. The 90s saw a renaissance and reimagining of Afrofuturism in hip-hop (OutKast, Kool Keith's Dr Octagon alias and RZA), neo-soul (Erykah Badu) and techno (specifically Detroit producers such as Drexciya), with all embracing the philosophy and giving it their own distinctive edge.

Afrofuturism is today, a visit to the Tumblr of LA beat scene stalwart Ras G, who performed at Moondance and whom King Britt calls "this generation's Sun Ra", would give you

a good impression. Record sleeves featuring Sun Ra and Alice Coltrane sit interspersed with stills from Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing and an article about the beauty and importance of the African headdress. It's a wonderful mish-mash of African imagery, sci-fi, free jazz and African-American post-civil rights rhetoric.

Britt – who's now focusing on his own solo project Fhloston Paradigm, which takes its name from a mispronunciation of the party planet of Floston Paradise in Luc Besson's camp sci-fi romp The Fifth Element – has become a de facto leader of the new wave of Afrofuturists, acting as a connecter between artists in his home town of Philadelphia (the Roots), New York (Hank Shocklee, Anti-Pop Consortium), Seattle (Shabazz Palaces), Detroit (Carl Craig) and Los Angeles (Ras G, Flying Lotus). For him, events such as Moondance are essential in order for Afrofuturism to legitimise itself and become more than just a cultural curiosity. "I felt that it was very important to do the MoMA PS1 event because being held in an established museum, that's how you get into the history books," he says.

But what we now define as Afrofuturism wasn't ever just about musical exploration, cool costumes or even academic recognition. The ideas and philosophy of Sun Ra, whose centenary is celebrated this year, were also about improving the lives of black people: he started making music before universal suffrage or the civil rights struggle. Just as Marcus Garvey proposed a "Back-To-Africa" movement for descendants of slavery, Sun Ra felt the future for black Americans could be intergalactic. But however far-out that might seem, Britt argues even Sun Ra's most outlandish claims are rooted in the real, everyday struggle black Americans faced.

"When people said the ozone layer is disappearing and it's our fault, then people began to use less gas and looked into electric cars, so it spawned this consciousness," he says. "So I think

that's what Sun Ra was trying to achieve. Not so much saying, 'Come with me, I'll save you', but, 'Listen and look at what's around you and we can make this better if you pay attention.' He wanted to raise awareness and consciousness."

Ishmael Butler of Shabazz Palaces, who along with the Satisfaction has formed an unlikely Afrofuturist cell in the environs of the Sub Pop label, and who worked alongside King Britt in Digable Planets, also sees Sun Ra's teachings as being rooted in the now.

That message of self-awareness, free expression and empowerment still exists in modern Afrofuturism, which has produced one artist credited with taking its ideas into the mainstream. "I think the term has gotten its legs because of Janelle Monáe," King Britt says. "She's in the pop world and what she does reaches so many people. So when she used the term in a few interviews it really resonated."

Ytasha Womack sees Monáe's art as being able to transcend racial boundaries, taking Afrofuturism away from being a purely black concept. "I think that's why a lot of people enjoy Janelle Monáe, because she talks about this android, this 'other'. The symbolism is understood," she says. "A lot of people can associate with this concept of otherness for a whole host of reasons, many of which are not racial, so there's a connection there."

That connectivity has also built bridges not just across races and sexuality, but across the Atlantic, too. Although the two current hotbeds of musical Afrofuturism are LA (with the "beat scene" they're headed up by Flying Lotus, whose aunt is Alice Coltrane, the second wife of John Coltrane and an important jazz artist in her own right) and Atlanta (which has its own mutations from OutKast, Monáe and Future), UK artists are also drawing on Afrofuturism for

inspiration. Throwing Shade's music has been called "cosmic R&B" or "paranormal pop" and fuses ethereal soundscapes with whispered R&B vocals.

"There's a lot of different elements of Afrofuturism that come through in what I do," she says. "I wear a headdress, I have a custom-made dress and wig, but my interpretation of it is probably a lot different to someone with an African-American background. The aesthetic is there but it's a mixture of lots of different ideas."

That level of enthusiasm for a concept which hadn't been defined until the mid 90s, gives an insight into how far Afrofuturism has come and how many people now identify with its ideas. First coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in an essay called Black to the Future, Afrofuturism draws together elements of astral jazz, African-American sci-fi and psychedelic hip-hop into an all-encompassing philosophy, imagining alternative visions of tomorrow.

The message of self-awareness, free expression and empowerment still exists in modern Afrofuturism, which has produced one artist credited with taking its ideas into the mainstream. "I think the term has gotten its legs because of Janelle Monáe," King Britt says."She's in the pop world and what she does reaches so many people. So when she used the term in a few interviews it really resonated."

Ytasha Womack sees Monáe's art as being able to transcend racial boundaries, taking Afrofuturism away from being a purely black concept. "I think that's why a lot of people enjoy Janelle Monáe, because she talks about this android, this 'other'. The symbolism is understood," she says. "A lot of people can associate with this concept of otherness for a whole host of reasons, many of which are not racial, so there's a connection there."

That connectivity has also built bridges not just across races and sexuality, but across the Atlantic, too. Although the two current hotbeds of musical Afrofuturism are LA (with the "beat scene" there headed up by Flying Lotus, whose aunt is Alice Coltrane, the second wife of John Coltrane and an important jazz artist in her own right) and Atlanta (which has its own mutations from OutKast, Monáe and Future), UK artists are also drawing on Afrofuturism for inspiration. Throwing Shade's music has been called "cosmic R&B" or "paranormal pop" and fuses ethereal soundscapes with whispered R&B vocals.

"There's a lot of different elements of Afrofuturism that come through in what I do," she says. "I wear a headdress, I have a custom-made dress and wig, but my interpretation of it is probably a lot different to someone with an African-American background. The aesthetic is there but it's a mixture of lots of different ideas."

FIVE LANDMARKS **IN MUSICAL AFROFUTURISM**

Sun Ra Space Is the Place (1973)

To many this is the definitive Afrofuturism album, without which much of what came after simply would not have happened. On this free jazz touchstone, Sun Ra took his alien metaphor to another level (or another stratosphere?) and immortalised the four-word phrase that has been regurgitated, misquoted and clung to by myriad artists, musicians and thinkers ever since.

Drexciya The Quest (1997)

Drexciya's interpretation of Afrofuturism was perhaps the darkest, with their imagined world of Black Atlantis being a colony for African slaves who had been thrown overboard during their

transatlantic voyage. Later work had some lighter touches, but this was dystopian techno that spoke to the dark truth about African Americans' recent history, and envisioned a fantastic sub-aquatic alternative.

Erykah Badu Baduizm (1997)

Badu created Baduizm just as Dery's theories were beginning to take hold and helped create a sound and aesthetic that would open the door for R&B singers who wanted to question not only the value of relationships but their own place in society. As much influenced by free jazz as soul, it's a modern classic.

OutKast Aquemini (1998)

Before their assault on the pop charts OutKast crafted a triptych of albums that helped to reposition southern hip-hop as a forward-thinking, if slightly strange, outlier. Characterising themselves as Atlanta aliens, they followed up the foundation they'd set with Southerplayalisticadillacmuzik and ATLiens. It seems all the more prescient now Andre 3000 is playing Jimi Hendrix in the forthcoming biopic All By My Side.

Flying Lotus 1983 (2006)

An up-to-date version of free jazz or just a load of electronic noodlings that sound like a toddler throwing a keyboard down the stairs? Definitely divisive, the LA beats scene's figurehead certainly leaned on the free jazz philosophy of his aunt Alice Coltrane on his debut LP, but also managed to forge a distinctive blueprint for instrumental hip-hop that has been continued on his Brainfeeder label.

WORKS CITED:

1. Bould, Mark. "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF." *Science Fiction Studies* 34.2 (July 2007): 177–186. Print.

2. Thomas, Sheree . *Thomas, Sheree (ed.). "*Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora". *Warner Aspect. ISBN 0446525839. 2000. Print.*

3. *Yaszek, Lisa (2005 "An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man" . Man" (PDF). RethinkingHistory. 9 (2–3):29313. doi:10.1080/13642520500149202. Web.*

4. "The Binti novellas are fun, bite-sized stories of interstellar Afrofuturism". *The Verge. 25 January 2017*. Retrieved 14 March 2017. *Web.*

5. *Rosenberg, Alyssa (17 October 2017).* "Excited for 'Black Panther'? We've got four months to brush up on Afrofuturism". *Washington Post*. Retrieved 9 April 2019. *Web.*

6. *Alspach, Ardi. "Defining the Genre: Novels of Afrofuturism". barnesandnoble.com.*

7. Sinker, Mark. "Loving the Alien." *The Wire* 96 (February 1992): 30–32.Print.

8. Kilgore, De Witt Douglas and Ranu Samantrai. "A Memorial to Octavia E. Butler." *Science Fiction Studies* 37.3 (November 2010): 353–361. JSTOR 25746438. Print.

9. Canavan, Gerry. "Bred to Be Superhuman: Comic Books and Afrofuturism in Octavia Butler's Patternist Series." *Paradoxa* 25 (2013): 253–287. Print.

10. "Black Speculative Arts Movement*"*. *Black Speculative Arts Movement*. Retrieved *20* February 2019. *Web.*

11. "Unveiling Visions: The Alchemy of the Black Imagination". October 1st, 2015 - January 16th, 2016, S*chomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The New York Public Library. 2019*. Retrieved 20 February 2019.

12. *"*Afro-Tech Exhibition*"*. Retrieved 20 March 2018.*Web.*

13. *"*Afro-Tech Exhibition Brochure" *(PDF)*. Retrieved 20 March 2018.

14. *"*Tim Fielder: Black Metropolis*"*. *Gallatin Galleries. 4 May 2016.* Retrieved *20 February*2019. *Web.*

15. *"*Exhibitions*"*. *Hammonds House Museum*. Retrieved 20 February 2019.

16. Sun Ra. 1956a. “Jazz by Sun Ra/Sun Song”. *Transition*. Google Scholar. Web

17. http//:www.oxforbibilographies.com

18. http//:www.barnesandnoble.com

19. http//:www.wcl.govt.nz