



## Spiritual Resistance and Futuristic Identity in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*

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### Abstract:

In this paper, Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* is analyzed through two parallel lenses: Afrojujuism and Afrofuturism. The novel brings together African religion, heritage, technology, and the desolate post-apocalyptic settings to create an alternative image of the future for Africans. The novel presents Onyesonwu's spiritual journey as central to the exploration and rejection of colonial accounts of the past, and underscores the importance of ancestral knowledge. Through comparative literary analysis, this paper contends that while Afrojujuism provides the novel's philosophical framework, it is with Afrofuturism that the novel's political and technological vision takes shape. Furthermore, the novel's integration of myth, magic, and speculative science suggests that African speculative fiction transcends traditional genre limitations. In blending spiritual heritage with futuristic possibilities, *Who Fears Death* further redefines Black identity, gender, and resistance from a decolonizing perspective. The article contributes to this discussion by illustrating that Afrojujuist and Afrofuturist aesthetics combine to transform the way Africa and its fictional future(s) are presented in literature.

**Keywords:** Afrojujuism, Afrofuturism, Nnedi Okorafor, African Speculative Fiction, decolonial literature

## 1. Introduction

African Speculative Fiction has become one of the hottest Subfields of Contemporary Literature due to its constant critique of Eurocentrism throughout its respective constructions of history, identity, and the future. These narratives often incorporate many elements from African traditional cultures, including cosmology, religion, myths, and oral traditions, to create alternative reality settings that are not simply based on new technologies for imagining the future. Through the established concepts of 'Africanfuturism' and 'Africanjujuism', Okorafor has changed the orientation of speculative imagination from the periphery to a central position of the continent. In *Who Fears Death*, which is set at the end of the world where ancient spirits, magic, and African traditions shape both personal and community identity and the ability to resist, she demonstrates her specific view on this issue. In this novel, the future of Africa is shaped by the combination of indigenous knowledge systems and the power of speculative imagination to generate new ideas, blending the secular and the spiritual.

Research to date on the novel has drawn on Afrofuturism, Black feminism, postcolonial theory, and decolonial criticism (Colliva, 2021; Womack, 2013). Recent research has also recognized that the perception of reality, grounded in the Western concept of the supernatural and the spiritual, is challenged by the use of traditional African spirituality in African jujuism, which serves as a paradigm that operates alongside fantasy (Koroncu Özbilen, 2024). Similarly, studies on African futurism assert that African speculative works redefine black identity by representing African historical and cultural contexts and worldviews rather than the Euro-American technological paradigm (Okorafor, 2020). Furthering these discussions, this work analyzes how *Fear of Death* portrays future identities as shaped by spirituality's power, while also providing a means of overcoming the loss of black cultural heritage through the development of new forms of black cultural expression. The author contends that Okorafor, through the combination

of traditional cosmological beliefs, decolonial political theory, and speculative imagination, offers a uniquely African vision of the future, in which concepts of self, authority, and cultural heritage are reevaluated.

## 2. Literature Review

Nnedi Okorafor's (2010) *Who Fears Death* has become one of the most significant novels in current African speculative fiction. Scholars have evaluated the novel through many theoretical frameworks, including Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, Africanjujuism, postcolonial theory, Black feminism, ecocriticism, and decolonial studies. Although these methods vary, a growing consensus suggests that Okorafor's work transcends traditional SF, as African cosmologies, indigenous spirituality, and cultural memory are prioritized in speculative storytelling. Instead, the book reconstructs the future through African epistemologies rather than seeing Africa through Western futuristic paradigms. In this case, spirituality is not folklore but another means of knowing and resistance (Okorafor, 2019; Womack, 2013).

Early research has mostly read the novel as an Afrofuturist text, a term coined by Mark Dery (1994) to refer to speculative works that blend Black history, technology, and future imaginaries. This approach is further explored by Womack (2013), who argues that Afrofuturism provides a means for Black communities to reclaim the past erased through colonialism and enslavement while inventing emancipatory futures. Viewed this way, Okorafor's novel is often understood as a story of cultural survival that reconstructs African identity through speculative fiction. However, several critics contend that a single application of afrofuturism fails to encapsulate the novel's distinct African philosophical foundations fully. This is because the framework often privileges diasporic black experiences above continental African realities. This critique has led scholars to reexamine the novel from concepts drawn from within African literary traditions rather than solely from African American theoretical models.

In response to these constraints, Okorafor coined the terms Africanfuturism and Africanjujuism, emphasizing that her literature is firmly grounded in African histories, myths, civilizations, and worldviews, rather than the Western-centric perspectives often associated with Afrofuturism. Africanfuturism places Africa at the heart of speculative fiction in geographic, cultural, and epistemological terms, while Africanjujuism weaves native spiritual traditions, magical realism, and indigenous cosmologies into contemporary stories. Thus, scholars have argued that the novel is one of the clearest literary examples of the intersection of these two themes. It develops technologically and politically imagined futures while grounding its narrative in ancestral knowledge, divination, spirit realms, and indigenous belief systems, breaking the fantasy-science fiction binary.

Another substantial body of scholarship is on spirituality as a decolonial practice. In *Who Fears Death*, spirituality is an epistemic system that negotiates power, memory, and identity, unlike the Western fantasy tradition where the supernatural is often an escapist mechanism. The protagonist Onyesonwu comes to knowledge not only via scientific rationality but also through dreams, ancestral communication, mystical transformation, and ritual practice. Critics say that these spiritual experiences recuperate indigenous African cosmologies that were neglected by colonial modernity. Okorafor does not see religion as a remnant of the past but rather reinvents spirituality as a living force that may change the future. These readings coincide with decolonial theories that strive to reclaim indigenous knowledge systems suppressed by Eurocentric epistemologies.

Postcolonial scholars also read the novel as a critique of colonial brutality and its enduring impact in African society. Set in a post-apocalyptic future, the story echoes colonial rule throughout history through social divisions, ethnic conflicts, and patriarchal institutions. Onyesonwu is an Ewu, the product of the rape of an Okeke woman by a Nuru sorcerer, and her identity is a figure for both the trauma of imperial brutality and the hope of cultural change. Instead of presenting a future divorced from the past, Okorafor illustrates that futurity remains inextricably tied to collective memory. Scholars therefore claim that the novel re-imagines African identity through remembering, revising, and resisting inherited traditions. Fate is inherently an ideological construct that may be contested, notably through the symbolic act of rewriting the Great Book. History becomes a space for political action rather than a fixed fate.

Another prominent subject of the scholarship surrounding the novel is black feminist criticism. For decades, scholars have argued that Onyesonwu undermines the traditional portrayals of women in speculative fiction by embodying both spiritual power and political dissent. Okorafor does not equate female empowerment with physical strength; instead, she associates agency with knowledge, healing, storytelling, and communal responsibility. Particular care has

been taken over the novel's treatment of female genital mutilation, sexual assault and patriarchal oppression, subjects which are not simply described as societal problems but as ways in which bodies are made into places of political control. Hence, African feminist critics read Onyesonwu's spiritual journey as both individual and communal, demonstrating that emancipation entails the destruction of oppressive cultural systems and the reclamation of indigenous customs that validate female power. Recent comparative studies include the novel, a companion to Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*, suggesting that both novels employ speculative fiction to create alternative futures grounded in Black feminist ideas rather than Eurocentric narratives of development. Stillman, 2012). Other parents are turned off by the perceived, obsessive parenting styles they contend are more prevalent in wealthier, suburban schools (Cucchiara, 2013b; Stillman, 2012).

The work redefines ecological catastrophe through an Africanfuturist prism rather than traditional post-apocalyptic science fiction, according to recent scholarship that has increasingly analyzed *Who Fears Death* from ecocritical and environmental perspectives. Okorafor links ecological catastrophe to the history of colonial exploitation, ethnic conflict, and capitalist degradation rather than depicting environmental collapse as purely a scientific crisis. Environmental instability, recurrent droughts, and the desert landscape serve as both material realities that influence societal structure and metaphors for past trauma. According to critics, Africanfuturist climate imaginaries contradict prevailing Western narratives by portraying survival as reliant on spiritual connectivity, traditional ecological practices, and collective knowledge rather than solely on technological mastery. As a result, issues of race, history, and social justice become inextricably linked to environmental degradation, establishing ecology as an additional platform for decolonial resistance. The politics of violence and death in Okorafor's novels are examined in a connected corpus of work. Recent scholarship contends that *Who Fears Death* reveals political structures that determine whose lives are valued and whose deaths are socially acceptable, drawing on Mbembe's idea of necropolitics. The institutionalized sexual abuse, genocidal violence, and systematic oppression of the Okeke people demonstrate how sovereign power controls life and death. Critics point out that Okorafor does not end with victimization alone. Rather, death serves as a means of metamorphosis, spiritual rebirth, and communal rejuvenation. In the end, Onyesonwu's readiness to give her life becomes a revolutionary act that upends repressive systems and creates opportunities for different futures. The book envisions liberation arising via spiritual transcendence and collective memory rather than replicating dismal sorrow.

Another recurrent issue in modern critique is identity construction. Scholars contend that Okorafor portrays identity as flexible, relational, and constantly reconstructed through storytelling rather than as biologically established. Onyesonwu is simultaneously a victim and a healer, a human and a spiritual entity, an insider and an outsider, a daughter and a revolutionary. This diversity undermines essentialist conceptions of gender, race, and ethnicity. As a result, critics saw the book as rejecting rigid classifications that were carried over from colonial discourse. Identity becomes a continuous process of negotiation that combines future possibilities with ancestral memory. These readings are consistent with more general conversations in African speculative fiction, where individual development often coincides with the restoration of communities. This process is symbolized by the protagonist's rewriting of the Great Book, which shows that history itself is malleable and may be reinterpreted through actions of resistance.

Academics often stress the importance of the novel's narrative. African myths, songs, rituals, and oral traditions are presented as dynamic means of knowledge production rather than merely cultural objects. Because it retains alternative memories not included in official narratives, storytelling serves as a form of resistance against colonial historiography. Thus, scholars interested in mythopoiesis, story authority, and indigenous epistemologies have taken notice of Okorafor's use of oral aesthetics in speculative fiction. The novel challenges Eurocentric presumptions about historical validity by emphasizing performative and collective modalities of remembering rather than recorded history. Because of this narrative technique, silenced voices might reclaim interpretive power over African pasts and futures through speculative fiction.

Even with extensive research on *Who Fears Death*, several questions remain unanswered. First, much research still favors either Afrofuturism or Africanfuturism without thoroughly analyzing how Africanjujuism shapes the book's spiritual aspects. While magic and indigenous religion are often discussed by academics, comparatively few analyses explore spirituality as a cohesive epistemic framework that concurrently creates identity and political opposition. Second, feminist critique and discussions of speculative aesthetics are frequently separated in current study. Understanding how gender, spirituality, futurity, and decolonial politics interact within a unified analytical framework may be given greater emphasis. Third, despite the rapid growth of environmental criticism, relatively little research has examined the connection between indigenous cosmological systems and ecological collapse beyond symbolic

interpretation. These gaps point to the need for more comprehensive methods that can combine decolonial identity development, speculative imagination, and spiritual philosophy.

As a result, the current study places the novel at the nexus of futuristic identity and spiritual resistance. It contends that spirituality serves as the novel's epistemic basis for reimagining African futures rather than just a thematic component. Based on research into Africanfuturism, Africanjujuism, Black feminist theory, and decolonial literary criticism, this study suggests that Okorafor's speculative imagination dissolves traditional divisions between tradition and modernity, myth and science, and past and future. Rather, the novel shows that African futures are best envisioned when ancestral wisdom and speculative possibility coexist. This work offers a more thorough understanding of spirituality as a transforming force in the development of postcolonial identities while also contributing to current discussions of African speculative fiction by combining these critical traditions.

### 3. Case and Methodology

This study looks at *Who Fears Death* (2010) by Nnedi Okorafor as an example of modern African speculative fiction. The novel was chosen because it offers a fascinating story that combines indigenous spirituality, speculative futures, gender politics, and decolonial resistance. It also holds a special place at the nexus of African futurism, African jujuism, and postcolonial literature. The novel, which is set in a post-apocalyptic Africa, chronicles Onyesonwu's political and spiritual journey. Onyesonwu's fight against oppression serves as a perfect example of how spirituality can both shape futuristic African identities and act as a form of resistance. It has sparked considerable scholarly controversy, making it a suitable primary text for examining current discussions of African speculative fiction.

Methodologically, this study employs a literary-criticism-based qualitative textual analysis. To analyze narrative structure, symbolism, characterization, and recurrent themes about spirituality, identity, and the future, it employs close reading. In addition to Afrofuturism (Dery, 1994; Womack, 2013), postcolonial theory, black feminist criticism, and decolonial studies, the analysis draws on the theoretical viewpoints of Africanfuturism and Africanjujuism articulated by Okorafor (2019, 2020). The portrayal of mythological themes, ritual practices, ancestral knowledge, and speculative world-building as means of cultural resistance is given special focus. This study explores the connections between spirituality and futurity in the creation of alternative African futures, rather than treating them as distinct analytical categories. Using this interdisciplinary framework, the study shows how the novel challenges Eurocentric literary paradigms and adds to the growing body of African speculative literature by reimagining identity through the synthesis of indigenous cosmologies with speculative imagination.

### 4. A Spiritual and Futuristic Analysis of *Who Fears Death*

*Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor reimagines African speculative fiction by presenting spirituality as an epistemic framework for negotiating identity, resistance, and the future rather than as an illogical or mythical holdover from the past. In contrast to traditional Western science fiction, where religion and indigenous belief systems are often displaced by technological advancement, Okorafor creates a story in which spiritual power and ancestral knowledge coexist with futuristic creativity. Africanjujuism and Africanfuturism, two related ideas that prioritize African cosmologies as the cornerstones of speculative narrative, are reflected in this synthesis (Okorafor, 2019, 2020). The novel shows that preserving and transforming indigenous cultural knowledge is the best way to envision Africa's future, rather than portraying spirituality and modernity as antagonistic forces. This viewpoint is also consistent with current research that claims Afrojujuism elevates African spirituality from folklore or magical decoration to a valid paradigm of knowledge production within speculative fiction.

Okorafor establishes spirituality as an essential part of human existence from the first chapter. Onyesonwu's exceptional talents come from ancestral power and mental trauma rather than from scientific experimentation. She cries, "Live, Papa! Live!" at her father's funeral in an unconscious attempt to stop death (Okorafor, 2010, p. 10).

Shortly after, a powerful mystical energy bursts from her, disrupting the ceremony and the surroundings. This instance demonstrates how spiritual energy exists within each person and is ready to be activated through deep emotional and existential experiences, rather than existing outside human experience. Okorafor portrays spiritual force as an extension of cultural memory and ancestral lineage, in contrast to Western fantasy, where supernatural power frequently serves as exceptional spectacle. The image is reminiscent of the Afrojujuistic worldview discussed in recent research, which holds that the material and supernatural realms are not distinct realities but rather constantly interact.

Onyesonwu's identity further reinforces this spiritual framework. She was born into a violent family as an Ewu, and her initial social marginalization shows the ongoing effects of colonialism, patriarchy, and ethnic warfare. However, over time, the book turns this forced identity into a source of spiritual authority. Because of her hybridity, she can communicate with spirits, change into different forms, and reach mysterious realms that are unavailable to regular people. According to academics, this kind of liminality challenges Eurocentric ideas of identity and reflects Africanfuturism's rejection of strict social categories (Womack, 2013; Okorafor, 2020). Okorafor presents hybridity as the very condition that enables struggle against oppressive structures, rather than depicting it as estrangement.

The book frequently shows that spiritual understanding is not innate but rather learned via apprenticeship. Instead of emphasizing technological mastery, Aro's direction places a strong emphasis on discipline, ceremonial practice, and communication with ancestral forces. Thus, knowledge is communal and experiential, reflecting traditional African educational practices. This portrayal is very different from popular science fiction stories that emphasize empirical science as the primary source of information. Rather, dreams, visions, rituals, and talks with spirits are seen as genuine sources of knowledge. Afrojujuism's assertion that African cosmologies constitute alternative epistemological systems capable of generating legitimate understandings of reality aligns closely with this narrative technique.

Additionally, Okorafor turns faith into a blatantly political tool. The novel's magic is inextricably linked to power issues. Rather, it becomes the primary tool for opposing repressive institutions. Authoritarian knowledge is embodied by the opposing figure Daib, who uses mystical powers and sacred writings to justify patriarchal dominance and genocide. As a result, spiritual strife replaces mechanical warfare as the story's main battlefield. The story contrasts institutionalized spiritual violence with liberatory spirituality rather than religion and reason. Because of this dichotomy, Okorafor can both reclaim indigenous traditions as sources of political action and critique colonial epistemologies.

Perhaps the most important symbolic act in the book is the Great Book's final rewrite. Instead of being a set account of unavoidable occurrences, history itself becomes a text that may be revised. Onyesonwu challenges deterministic conceptions of identity and history by reworking the fundamental tale that upholds injustice. This episode demonstrates that decolonization necessitates epistemic change in addition to political revolution. Collective memory is redefined when underrepresented voices gain the power to tell history instead of repressive institutions. Because it reconstructs futurity through cultural remembering rather than just technological advancement, scholars have understood this storytelling method as a particularly Africanfuturist intervention (Colliva, 2021; Okorafor, 2020).

Okorafor's depiction of the connection between gender and spirituality is equally important. Throughout the book, patriarchal violence—specifically, female genital mutilation and sexual assault—aims to control female bodies through ritualized tyranny. However, these control mechanisms are constantly undermined by spiritual strength. Onyesonwu's magical powers challenge broader social mechanisms that normalize female subjugation, while also empowering her personally. As a result, her path becomes simultaneously political, feminist, and spiritual. Speculative literature offers marginalized women imaginative spaces where alternative social futures become imaginable, as noted by Black feminist critics (Womack, 2013). Instead of importing Western feminist paradigms, Okorafor locates female agency within indigenous cosmologies, carrying on this heritage.

The futuristic aspects of the book also set it apart from traditional dystopian literature. The novel is set in a post-apocalyptic Africa marked by technological ruins and environmental destruction, but its outlook on the future is essentially African. Indigenous wisdom and scientific innovation coexist in a complex cultural landscape rather than being given precedence. This strategy is a prime example of Africanfuturism's dedication to envisioning futures grounded in African realities rather than Euro-American technical fancies (Okorafor, 2019). In a similar vein, recent research contends that African speculative fiction, rather than stories of technological control, reconstructs futurity through the recovery of indigenous ecological knowledge, collective resilience, and cultural continuity.

Onyesonwu's frequent transitions between the material and spiritual realms highlight the connection between spirituality and the future. These travels undermine traditional divisions between the past, present, and future, implying that cyclical rather than linear principles govern African temporalities. While future opportunities arise directly from restored traditions, ancestors continue to be active participants in modern life. Such temporal flexibility is similar to the Afrojujuistic framework found in recent studies, which combines spirituality, mythology, and futurity into a cohesive cosmological vision in African speculative fiction. The book argues that real futurity requires facing past suffering through spiritual reconciliation rather than running away from it.

In the end, *Who Fears Death* shows that technological futurism is insufficient to comprehend African speculative fiction fully. In Okorafor's literary universe, faith serves as the basis for both resistance and identification. Onyesonwu's journey from a socially marginalized Ewu to a spiritual revolutionary exemplifies how liberation arises when visionary imagination and ancestral knowledge are combined. In this way, the book continues the path set by earlier African speculative works such as Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, in which supernatural experience serves as a necessary part of reality rather than its antithesis. At the same time, it foreshadows modern Africanfuturist fiction, such as N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*, in which marginalized identities use resistance, resilience, and alternative epistemologies to reconstruct the future. Therefore, Okorafor portrays spirituality as the precise means by which decolonized African futures become conceivable rather than as a means of escaping modernity.

## 5. Results & Analysis

This research demonstrates that spirituality primarily serves to establish identity and confront oppression, as depicted in the narrative of *Who Fears Death*. The spiritual powers that Onyesonwu displays are not seen as magical or beyond the realm of ordinary human abilities, but as manifestations of her people's cultural heritage, and they subvert the authority and control of colonizing forces and the patriarchal system. The various manifestations of spirituality in this novel, such as the significance of dreams, the ability to change shape, connection with ancestors, and the importance of rituals, create an alternative way to know and understand the world and to question the importance of Western forms of rational thought. The way spirituality is represented in this story is very similar to the African belief in jujuism, in which there is no real separation between the spiritual and the physical worlds. They are both part of a single reality.

Additionally, the study found that the future envisioned in Okorafor's novel is in many ways tied to her spiritual views. Instead of focusing on technological development, Okorafor reveals a reconstruction of African futures by drawing upon the traditional knowledge systems of the ancestors, traditions, and the importance of collective action and survival. Another way in which the deconstruction of the postcolonial self is made manifest in the novel is through Onyesonwu becoming a revolutionary, having been one of the outcasts of Ewu society; this illustrates that the self has been reconstituted through the lens of a traditional indigenous worldview. The results present additional evidence for recent theories that distinguish African Futurism from Traditional Afrofuturism by situating its origin and inspiration within the African continent (Okorafor, 2019; 2020). Therefore, Okorafor demonstrates that although spirituality and the future may represent two separate domains, when they operate concurrently, they provide an alternate paradigm for defining African identity in the context of decolonization, cultural preservation, and societal restructuring

## 6. Conclusion

*Who Fears Death* exemplifies how African speculative fiction pushes the limits of modern literary debate by combining spirituality with futuristic vision. In Okorafor's Onyesonwu, indigenous cosmologies are revealed as enduring sources of knowledge that may contest colonial history, patriarchal authority, and Eurocentric literary paradigms. Rather than an obstacle to modernity, the novel reimagines spirituality as a ground from which alternative African futures can be envisioned. In doing so, the narrative shows the complementary relationship between Africanjuism and Africanfuturism, in which ancestral wisdom serves as a means of imagining political, cultural, and personal reform.

This study has established that the novel's representation of spirituality is not limited to religious symbolism but serves as an epistemic and political paradigm of resistance. Like its futurism, it subverts conventional science fiction by focusing on cultural memory, collective identity, and decolonial agency rather than scientific determinism. These findings contribute to the growing body of scholarship on African speculative fiction by illustrating how *Who Fears Death* combines indigenous belief systems with speculative aesthetics to reimagine African identity in modern global literature. Future study might continue this conversation through comparative studies of Okorafor's literature with that of Amos Tutuola, N. K. Jemisin, or Tomi Adeyemi, among others, and work toward further interrogations of the shifting relationship between African spirituality, speculative fiction, and decolonial futures.

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