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Reflective Indices of Africanfuturism in Ibi Zoboi's *Nigeria Jones*

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Abstract

Racism and segregation against the Blacks in the Diaspora paves way for Africanfuturism as a concept coined by African, Nnedi Okorafor, to anticipate the future of Africans or the Blacks in the Diaspora. Previous studies focused on Afrofuturism and the theme of race, identity, and violence as a way to address racism. However, this study investigates reflective indices of Africanfuturism in Ibi Zoboi's *Nigeria Jones*, as Africanfuturism work with the aim to restore lost identity and negotiate new identity as a means of survival in a strange land. It uses African history, African belief system and worldviews to restore the future of Africans in the Diaspora. Decolonial theory is used for this paper. The template of Ato Quayson and Ankhi Mukherjee's Decolonial theory serves as the analytical tool for this study. This study reveals instances of African history in Ibi Zoboi's *Nigeria Jones* such as *Sankofa* of the Akan people of Ghana, Malcom X's struggles, and Mau Mau's resistance. It also reveals African belief system such as *Ubuntu*, *Uhuru*, and the coming of the dead of African ancestors as a therapy to their people during the birthday of the child, Freedom Sankofa. African worldviews such as the concept of family in Africa, and not forgetting one's root are also depicted in this research. Diaspora literature can, thus, adopt African history, African belief system and world-views to anticipate a better future for Africans both at home and in the Diaspora.

Keywords

Africanfuturism, Decolonial theory, Ibi Zoboi's *Nigeria Jones*, African Americans

Word count: 239



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Introduction

From time immemorial, people have been in search of better standard of living which motivates them to move from one place to another. In their new environment, they are often rendered homeless and treated as outsiders. For Africans in diaspora, Afrofuturism gives them a platform to reclaim identity. Afrofuturism is a concept coined by Mark Dery in 1993. It seeks to reclaim black identity through art, culture, and political resistance in their new home. For Africanfuturism, the concern is for both Africans in Diaspora and Africans in the continent. The concept, Africanfuturism was defined by Nnedi Okorafor in 2019, pointing to African history, culture and point of view 'as a sub-category of science fiction'. She stresses further that Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism are similar in the way the blacks in the continent and in the diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future (2020). To her, it is African-based with mystical elements from African cultural beliefs and worldviews that Africanfuturism is one word which must not be separated as African and her future are inseparable and the 'f' in 'futurism' must not be capitalised. The study is premised on Ibi Zoboi's *Nigeria Jones* as Africanfuturism text. Hence, in an attempt to analyse the novel, Ato Quayson and Ankhil Mukherjee's Decolonisation theory is used to investigate history, African beliefs and worldviews in Ibi Zoboi's *Nigeria Jones*. In clear terms, Africanfuturism is used as an investigative tool to explore the experience, history and identity of Blacks in the Diaspora.

Decolonial Theory

Decolonial theory states that historical patterns shape people's intellectual, political, economic and social life. Its tenets include reevaluation of social, political, economic and judicial structures of the colonized people. This theory can be traced to scholars such as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his essay titled *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) which refers to the idea of intellectuals decolonising the idea of colonisers. Also, Frantz Fanon's position shall be considered in his work titled, *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004) with series of points to liberate the colonised. In this study, Ato Quayson and Ankhil Mukherjee's decolonial theory is used. Ato Quayson and AnkhilMukherjee (2023) quote Bandung Conference in the introduction of Mignolo and Walsh that decolonisation is important and that coloniality and modernity have been planted in human beings. It is in line with this research because this work depicts coloniality as history and modernity as enlightenment of the Blacks to explain who they are through their history.

Frantz Fanon (2004) considers both colonised men and women that their 'twoness' always feels the hotness of the colonisers and argues that the colonised must learn the act and resist the recklessness melted towards them as the colonisers or assumed to be colonisers.

The need for this change exists in a raw, repressed state
in the lives and consciousness of the colonised men and women.
But the eventuality of such a change is also experienced as a
terrifying future in the consciousness of another 'species' of man
and women : the *colons*, the colonists.

The position of Fanon here is that aggressive spirit of the colonisers especially cooperation of the two sexes would solve the menace or reduce it to a minimal. Although it may not be put out totally, at least the orientals would have their name changed to acceptable and respectable name anywhere in the world.

Fanon (2004) posits that decolonisation ought to involve protest and always challenge the colonisers from all angles.

Decolonisation is always a violent event. At whatever level we study it—individual encounters, a change of name for a sport club, the guest list at a cocktail members of a police force or the board of directors of a state or the private banks.

It is obvious that the submission of the Fanon proves that the colonisers experience colonisation in their every facet of life ranging from name, sporting events, place of merriments, police stations and even to banks. According to Fanon, violence is the answer for a better society to live in.

Decolonisation,: Fanon (2004) proposes that it is an agenda to set things right pertaining to the colonised. Although he advances that the success of the colonised may not come on a platter of gold, it may cause pain among the colonisers and the colonised but the colonisers possibly feel it more because of their meism or egoism.

Fanon further assumes that 'decolonisation sets out to change the order of the world, which is clearly an agenda for total disorder'. His submission here suggests that decolonisation as a step or struggle to liberation may lead to chaos which is termed as 'disorder'. He finally assumed new world, and better name for the colonised that he called 'creation of new men'.

Quayson and Mukherjee (2023) argue that decoloniality or decolonisation is more recent than postcolonial thought that decolonisation means the continuous struggle and process for reexamining literary curriculum and ideologies. Decolonisation as it is stated above may not mean curriculum in the literal sense but curriculum here means Black people reworking everything around them for the purpose of survival.

Quayson and Makherjee (2023) opine that decolonisation is to introduce new methodologies to the study of literary works especially the thoughts of apartheid and colonisation that have been instilled in people. Ngugi wa Thiong'o quoted in Quayson and Mukherjee (2023) submits that Maori Language is beautiful and serves as politics of language in African Literature. Thus, to Ngugi, the beauty of decolonisation in African Literature is to reject English Language in the writing of African Literature especially in Kenyan Literature. This research does not mean to write in indigenous language but to explicate with the use of words in African worldviews as Africanfuturism projected.

Quayson and Makherjee (2023) argue that the orientation of decolonisation is to resist the ideologies of the Whites against the Blacks in all aspects ranging from colonisation legacies to language use. In addition, they posit that decolonisation paves way for new words or vocabulary because of its nature as a tool that stands for the Orientals before the Occidentals. As it is argued above, this study paves way for new words with the root from African history and worldviews.

Quayson and Makherjee (2023) posit that the racism towards Black people especially the killing of George Floyd in America who a store keeper suspected to have used counterfeit dollar in May 2020 that made a police officer knelt on his neck as he continued with words 'I can't breathe' till he died which later became slogan or words of protest globally as a contribution to decolonisation as a tool. Quayson and Makherjee (2023) portray decolonization to include Black scholars in the universities curriculum in the western world in order to correct hatred towards the Blacks. This research, is premised on the stance that African Americans must be allowed to live and resist strangulation with the help of projecting their culture and beliefs anywhere in the world with the constant use of African history, African beliefs, and African world-views to predict better future for Africans in the Diaspora as well as linking them to their root for better understanding of themselves.

Literature Review

Afropolitanism has been described and decentered in different ways by scholars such as Taiye Selasi and Emma Dabiri. Emma Dabiri (2014) opines that Afropolitanism speaks in the name of all Africans but in truth it covers small group of Africans such as elite. He argues that ‘ the danger of Afropolitanism becoming the voice of Africa can be likened to the criticisms levelled against second wave feminists who failed to identify as white their privilege as white and middle class while claiming to speak for all women’. Emma Dabiri further opines that Afropolitanism centres on Africans in the Diaspora but forgetting the root, the continent of Africa and her people. His stance is, ‘While Afropolitans talk and talk about what it means to be young, cool and African, are many of them concerned with addressing the world beyond their own social realities to the issues that concern other Africans.’ She submits that many of them lack African social realities.

Taiye Selasi (2020) argues that Afropolitanism in Literature is a combination of Africa and cosmopolitanism. She stresses further that Afropolitanism reveals Africans that belong everywhere and move everywhere. The opinion of Emma Dabiri supports Africans in Diaspora moving everywhere but Taiye Selasi’s stance is similar to Africanfuturism; opinion that talks about the ‘social realities to the issues that concern other Africans’.

The critic, Mark Dery (1993) during an interview with Delancy Butler coined the term Afrofuturism to describe the growing of African American themes, style, and techno culture. Gill Santos (2023) argues that Afrofuturism films often centre on Black experiences and explore the themes of race and identity as well as provoking story that links the audiences to their backgrounds. Santos (2023) explores “Space is the place” as a film and introduces audience to a musician called Sun Ra who projects himself as a travelling prophet trying to take Black people away from Earth to another society where they will be free from excesses of the white like racism, oppression, suppression and hatred. Jennifer Slater (2019) defines *Sankofa* as a mythical bird from the history of Africa that has its neck turns backward. She expounds: ‘The *Sankofa*, a mythical African bird that moves forward while its head is turned backward toward a golden egg on its back’. This is symbolic, encouraging Africans to go back and recover the good aspect of their history to better the present and the future. Slater, in her submission, she believes that it is not a taboo to use historical sources to solve problems at hand. Africanfuturism was coined by Nnedi Okorafor, an African American in 2019 in her blog that the concept Africanfuturism “is rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point of view...and does not centre on the west”. Okorafor agrees to some extent with the facets of Afrofuturism but only includes Africans at home and Diaspora while Afrofuturism is centred on the African Americans alone in the diaspora. Okorafor (2020) defines Africanfuturism as “a sub-category of science fiction”. She further explains that Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism are similar in some aspects because “Blacks on the continent and in the Diaspora are connected by blood, spirit, history and future.” The two concepts are similar in terms of root; they both agree on the aesthetics of Africa. Okorafor (2020) opines that Africanfuturism is one word which should not be separated from, African and futurism cannot be separated. She also argued that ‘f’ in futurism must not be capitalised but the concept must be ‘African-based with mystical elements from African cultural beliefs and worldviews.’ However, this study utilised Africanfuturism as the concept or tool in analysing African American characters in Ibi Zoboi’s *Nigeria Jones*.

Results and Discussion of Findings

The results and discussion of findings in this study are explained below especially the aims such as history as tenet of Africanfuturism in the text, African beliefs and African worldviews as tenets of Africanfuturism in Ibi Zoboi's *Nigeria Jones*.

African History as the Findings of Africanfuturism in Ibi Zoboi's *Nigeria Jones*

To survive in life the African worldviews of using symbolic figure of Akan bird *Sankofa* that has its beak turns backward as the view of looking backward to get what someone has lost or to correct the hurdles at hand is essential. Also, during slavery and how Africans were treated during slavery and the importance of using African names over foreign names as the view of the Africans for the purpose of retaining the African identity.

My parents told me since I was little that those shapes are what the Akan people of Ghana call Sankofa. It means to go back and fetch, or the way forward is to return to the past. Sankofa is also the last name my father chose for our family because Jones is a slave master's name, he'd said. But Mama wasn't trying to hear that. She said she didn't want to erase the history that's in our blood, skin, and bones from our names (p.16).

Africanfuturism is evident in the novel *Nigeria Jones* especially the aspect of history and how hybridity is inevitable in the lives of Africans in the Diaspora. This is conspicuous in the character of the protagonist, Nigeria Jones (Nigeria as African and Jones as western) and her father Sankofa Jones; Sankofa is adopted as a name to retain African history and identity while Jones is used in line with the trend of the society she is in. The Yoruba say *orukotobawunilaajeleyinodi*, translated to be 'You bear any name you wish or desire abroad' as Nigeria's family retains their African name, Sankofa. The aim of this is for both Africans at home and in the diaspora to understand syncretism as part of element of survival because it combines past experience with new experience to create better ones.

In the preamble of the novel, Ibi Zoboi uses her eponymous character to defend herself as a black girl and how she is trying to find liberty and posterity for herself amidst racism. The excerpt below reveals the history and suffering of Black people in the Diaspora as well as encouraging, cautioning and educating Africans and Nigerians planning to migrate abroad.

I, Nigeria Jones, in order to form a more perfect Black girl, establish justice, insure inner tranquility, provide for my defence, promote my general welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to myself and posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the united whole, and complete states of Nigeria Jones (p.13).

History is evident in this text, *Nigeria Jones* especially the segregation and hatred between Blacks and Whites. The Blacks also segregate the Whites especially in a Black dominated environment. KD as a white woman feels uncomfortable during the birthday ceremony of Sankofa Freedom despite being a friend to Freedom late mother. History is adopted here to fight against clannishness of the White against the Blacks; Africans everywhere must learn from history to fight against meism of the white people. Geri....No. I wanted you to have this on Freedom's first birthday, she says. And after you open it find some way to come see me. I have another package for you. Or we can meet somewhere (p.30). As part of history as one the tenets of Africanfuturism in the text, *Nigeria Jones* recalls that despite the history of slavery, racism and hatred the Black people experienced in the Americas in the

past, there are still few whites people that love Black people as demonstrated by KD, a white character as the friend of Nigeria Jones who sincerely gives Freedom as Nigeria Jones brother's a present on his birthday. The purpose of the above excerpt is to teach Africans abroad and at home to love everyone despite colour, race and creed.

History as a belief of Africanfuturism is explored to allow Africans and African Americans have a better future is projected in the speech of Nigeria Jones narrating the story of Malcolm X struggle as told by her father that using African concept, *Uturu* which means 'freedom' is essential. It means freedom as history and struggle of Malcolm X in the history of struggle in America is what Africans and Africans in the Diaspora must key into to have a promising and glorious future that can be termed to be freedom.

He turns up the volume just as Malcolm X says 'Uturu,' the Kenyan word for 'freedom,' the rallying cry of the Mau Mau during their revolution against the British. My father taught me (p.39).

The above excerpt admonishes both Africans and African Americans to always teach their children history of their parents at home and Americas that had African descent particularly the aspect of their struggle such as *MauMau* in Kenya that may likely give them freedom at home and even in the Diaspora while the spirit of *MauMau* is imbibed.

African Belief System and Worldviews as the Findings of Africanfuturism in Ibi Zoboi's *Nigeria Jones*

As Africanfuturism novel, Ibi Zoboi uses *Nigeria Jones* as a novel that takes the readers to their root especially Africans at home and those in the Diaspora. It is evident in the voice of Nigeria Jones as a heroine who recounts her father's story that African souls return as it is Nigerian belief in Africa that *okuolomokii sun*, meaning 'a dead person with living children does not sleep or always have his or her eyes on the children'. This belief is emanated from African beliefs to make life better for Africans and Africans in the Diaspora especially seeing beyond the physical which reveals and predicts African spirituality which may likely speak of African as origin of science and technology with the help of seeing beyond the physical as projected in the narration that 'African souls return over and over again'to reveal things beyond natural to help the living in innovation to better the lives of the living.

We've rented out the community center over in Spruce Street for the birthday party, it is not called a birthday party. In the Movement Nothing is over that superficial. It's a gratitude celebration making the one-year anniversary that Freedom Sankofa Jones chose us as his family. My father says that some African souls return over and over again to make things right, to heal generational wounds, and fight for our liberation. We choose our parents, our families, and the lives we want to live before we ever born (p.15).

Nigeria Jones as a novel of Black Diaspora projects a true Africanfuturism tenets such as using African belief or soul returning of their ancestors as a therapy to fight for the liberation of their living children both at home and abroad.

Africanfuturism as a concept in Diaspora Literature engendered using belief system especially in dressing to tell the future, vision and mission of Africans on the scenes of both Africa and diaspora.

Nigeria Jones, the protagonist narrates that African style and tradition are projected on the wall in their village, Philly, in America that words and moral in dressing from Africans in Americas would work more than never in the future that would improve and sell Africa positively anywhere in the world. That is, if Africans are able to promote their culture through their dressings, this will go a long way in ensuring African unity so much that other races would perceive Africans to be a 'cult.'

Most of us are wearing colorful African print clothes and head wraps. When the members start coming in, a sea of braids, locs, afros, wooden beads, and cowrie shells will extend out to each wall of the community center. My father says that we're like a small African west Philly village in the big, white state of Pennsylvania. And it definitely feels that way, even though some people think we're a cult. Mama always says that the word "cult" comes from culture. We're just proudly celebrating our culture, that's all (p.15).

Using African belief of Black struggle or African American past heroes to correct the present and project positively the future of Africans both in the Diaspora and at home is one of the arguments of Africanfuturism.

As a reminder, 'Harambee' means 'pull together' in Swahili. Kombat is the same thing in Haitian Creole. Mbongi and 'SimbaSimbi' in Kikongo'. I start to say one of my favorite ones out loud in the Bantu language just to get them motivated, Ubuntu ngubuntu...Then they all mumble, Nga bantu!' They all give different answers, I can't help but to laugh. 'Y' all need to get it together. It's 'I am because we are', I correct them (p.24).

African beliefs as one of the principles of Africanfuturism is employed in the above excerpt that working and walking together as a team contributes to inevitable success which is considered to be *Harambee* in Swahili. Another African belief adopted in the quote is *Ubuntungubuntu* in Bantu Language in South Africa which means 'I am because we are'. This means supporting one's brother in time of trouble or assisting one's brother in time of helplessness. The excerpt reveals that both Africans and Africans in the Diaspora need to learn the concept of kindness or humanity to others as the key to succeed anywhere they find themselves in the world. African worldviews are their attitudes, values, beliefs and thinking that shape their lives and behaviours. This is one of the tenets in Africanfuturism that explain wisdom to negotiate identity with double-consciousness and awareness as a result of white supremacy.

If my father's parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had to carry the weight of all Joneses that ever lived, including the slavemasters, then I had to carry some of that load, too, So that's why I'm Nigeria Jones on my birth certificate instead of Nigeria Sankofa. Or else it would've meant that I was trying to get back to Nigeria for some reason or other, we are not from Nigeria or Ghana. I've never been to any country in Africa. You'd think otherwise by the way my parents and the Movement talk about the mother land, though (pp.16-17).

Nigeria Jones as Africanfuturism novel uses African worldview of bringing Africans together anywhere they are in the world especially using Wakandan in Black Panther as pastiche to explain African oneness of the Blacks in Diaspora. It is in their view of the world that most of them do not know where they belong in Africa but believe Africa is rooted in their blood. This is engraved in the words of Nigeria Jones, ‘the arrow-shooting character’.

A huge banner with the words, “We Are African Not Because we Are Born in Africa, but Because Africa is Born in Us” hangs above the table. In just minutes, the community center looks like a throwback to the Black panther party headquarters. A few more tweaks would make it more like the Wakandan embassy (p.17).

In the novel, *Nigeria Jones*, Africanfuturism and her tenet that states the importance of African worldview is obvious in the text. Nigeria Jones’ thinking and attitude makes her to have split world view or double consciousness; she regrets being in Americas despite of not giving birth to in Africa but believes their root is Africa. As Nigeria Jones’ assertion that the community ‘looks like a throw back to the Black Panther,’ means creating a new and unique world abroad is essential in spite of their ups and downs. The aim of the worldview in the above quote is to rebuild lost self, home or land in both home and the Diaspora which is termed to be restorative nostalgia.

The attitude, respect and love are the components that shape the world view of characters of African descent in the Diaspora especially Nigeria Jones and other characters. All these contribute to their world view and form movement that may unite them and reclaim their African identity in large number. The purpose of the position here is to reclaim those that have lost their origin both at home and abroad. Some lost their genealogy at home which makes them dress, behave, speak and marry wrongly but with the attitude of coming together ushers them into their lost root as the characters of African descent lead and join movement to see themselves through their past and original lens in the text.

The elders who are old enough to be grandparents are called Mama and Baba So- and So, and they get the best seats in the room and are the first to get a plate of food. This is all to remind us that we are a family, that we may have been related way back in Africa, that we were separated during the Middle Passage, and that maybe by joining the Movement, we are finding our way back to each other (p.18).

In this fascinating novel, African worldview is traced to the action and presentation of the heroine, Nigeria Jones as she uses African motto from Swahili; *Harambee*, which means ‘all pull together’ or let us achieve it together as it is engraved in the coat of arm of Kenya as well. Nigeria Jones, the protagonist and champion at the birthday party of her younger brother demonstrates it to unite, inspire, encourage and remind African Americans at the event of their origin. It stirs up the slumbers in the Africa to walk together and have movements that will pull down oppression, racism, segregation and other excesses against humanity. Nigeria Jones chants *Harambee* on her younger brother as emblem of inculcating black struggle from Africa into the baby boy, Freedom, in America.

With Freedom asleep on my back and a few minutes to go before everything starts, I call the Youth Group members to attention with one word; Harambe. I put my hand in the air and pull down with a

closed fist. "Harambe," barely getting the "pull together" hand motion right. We have to organise on the baby's birthday, too (p.23).

Nigerian Jones as a technical voice for the Blacks both at home and in Diaspora voices out that Africans everywhere in their worldview must learn to unite despite the differences, political affiliation, religions and background. Nigeria Jones makes this clear in her speech at the party; doing the struggle as one of the facets of African culture at the birthday connotes oneness, unity and togetherness of African Americans and even Africans at home.

As a reminder, 'Harambe' means 'pull together' in Swahili. Kombat is the same thing in Haitian Creole. Mbongi and 'SimbaSimbi' in Kikongo'. I start to say one of my favorite ones out loud in the Bantu language just to get them motivated, Ubuntu ngubuntu... Then they all mumble, Nga bantu!' They all give different answers, I can't help but to laugh. 'Y' all need to get it together. It's 'I am because we are', I correct them (p.24).

As an Africanfuturism text, the use of drum explains the African worldview particularly therapeutic nature as it was told by the mother of Nigeria Jones. Drumming is part of African tradition and their worldview as it was said to have awakened souls and revealed truth about Africa. Although it was banned during slavery as part of tools for African liberation, African or traditional drums should be allowed among the Africans and African Americans and Blacks in other continents of the world because they make Africans to see their real identity not minding what the world sees them to be. The aim is that African drumming and other forms of African entertainment are essential both at home and abroad because they are capable of entertaining people and uniting Africans anywhere in the world.

Some of the uncles and boys from the youth group take seats in the front of the room and set their djembe drums between their legs. The slap tone and the bass tone followed by a series of syncopated rhythms reach my bones and make the small hairs all over my body stand at attention. I've been hearing African drums since I was in Mama's belly. She always says that African drumbeat rhythms can awaken souls and dig up truths. That's why the drum was taken away from Africans (p.27).

The excerpt above teaches the worldview of the Africans; Nigeria Jones regards her relatives from Africa as uncles as it tells the love and intimacy among people of African origin abroad. The replica of the novelist, Ibi Zoboi, *Nigeria Jones* reveals this in her conversation with a character called, Jasmine that it is in the belief of Africa for Africans to survive 'by any means necessary' or by all means.

"Nigeria, come help us put up these posters", Jasmine says from the front room. She's rolling out the black-and-white photo of Malcolm X holding that rifle while looking out of a window. The words "By Any Means Necessary" are at the top, and that famous picture is my father's whole vibe-rifle and all (p.16).

The above excerpt referenced African belief that African Americans must learn to be above wherever they find themselves. The extract points to design and photograph of Malcolm X as physical aesthetics of African origin or encourager to 'making it by any means necessary' anywhere in the world. The purpose of the world view in the excerpt is that Africans both at home and in the diaspora

should learn to have the fighting and biting spirit of Malcolm X to fight oppression and racism anywhere in the world.

Conclusion

Africanfuturism in Ibi Zoboi's *Nigeria Jones* has been explored to explain Africans and African Americans as people of rich culture and tradition and how history, African belief system and African worldviews can be used to shape Africans and African American societies to be better place. The assertion that: African Americans have their root in African and African beliefs and historical concepts like *Sankofa*, *Ubuntu*, *Harambe* among others can be used to reclaim their identity and liberate themselves from racism and hatred against them in the Diaspora.

Decolonial theory has been used in this work for the data analysis and fixing a better terrain for the black people outside their continent. Persistent use of African history, African belief system and worldviews will make Africans and people of African descent in America live as humans anywhere they find themselves in the world.

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