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Teenage Identity in the Face of the Other in Nnedi Okorafor's Organic Fantasy

ABSTRACT: The present paper aims at discussing *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* by Nnedi Okorafor as a fantasy novel for children and young adults focused upon the question of self-identification. In the framework of fiction for younger audiences, the fantasy mode becomes a tool which allows to examine the topics important to young readers, such as identity and their place within the society, by providing a confrontation with the Other. The example of Nnedi Okorafor's book, known in the USA as *Akata Witch*, shows how the instrumentation of a fantasy novel enables an exposition of the process in which the protagonist grows on the intellectual, emotional and cultural levels. In other words, the fantasy mode aids in the exploration of Sunny's American-Nigerian origin, her albinism, coming of age and the comprehension of her identity. Simultaneously, as additional topics emerge from the analysis, it becomes visible that the question of the Self cannot be separated from the concept of the Other, with the lesson of empathy and respect for what is different.

KEY WORDS: young adult, fantasy, organic fantasy, juju fantasy, Nnedi Okorafor, albinism, identity, the Self, the Other

“What I’d like you to think about, though, is who you are.
Because within that knowledge is the key to how much you
can learn”

(OKORAFOR, 2016: 271)

Non-mimetic modes have grown to become frequently coupled with children's and young adult literature. They seem to be a perfect vehicle for themes that fuel the educative function of fiction for younger audiences. Melissa Ames (2013: 3) points to the incredible popularity of young adult dystopia, which has been recently offering a safe space to reflect upon the political and social issues of the post-9/11 period. Apparently, younger readers use imaginative fiction to tackle the most challenging issues they have to face on the threshold of adult-

hood. Marcus Haynes, on the other hand, claims that “fantasy is one of the cornerstones of children’s and young adult literature” (2018: 45), whereas Maria Nikolajeva stresses the fact that the readers have seen the increasing numbers of “YA novels written in non-mimetic modes, such as fantasy, dystopia, science fiction, and magical realism,” with “strange-worldliness” as “a powerful defamiliarisation device” (2014: 93) being the reason for their expansion. In this particular context, it is essential to underline the fact that children’s and YA novels were traditionally concentrated on more down-to-earth issues (NIKOLAJEVA, 2014: 93), accompanied by a moderate number of fantastic elements.

As Catherine Butler observes, in the 1960s, fantasy for children was focused upon “real-world settings, usually rural or suburban, inner cities being generally the preserve of realist writers” (2012: 224), while at the center of the plot would lie an encounter of the underage characters with a mystery in the form of a creature, place or object. Such a model can also be discerned earlier in the history of children’s fantasy literature, as it brings to mind, for instance, Edith Nesbit’s classical works, such as *Five Children and It* (1902), where the protagonists come across a sand-fairy called Psammead, a magical being that anchors the story in the canon of fantasy for the young audience. In reference to Nikolajeva’s observations, it seems clear that the complexity level of such fantasies was not as advanced as in the texts from the 21st century. Nonetheless, the presence of fantasy and other non-mimetic modes in stories for young readers has increased significantly, perhaps because “fantasy is (...) sensitive to more general shifts in attitude” (BUTLER, 2012: 226).

Following the above examples of how non-mimetic modes accompany the learning process of young readers by becoming the vehicle for YA literature themes, it could be argued that the use of fantasy, included among the mentioned imaginative fictions, opens a path to the better understanding of teenage identity in the specific reference to the Other. The Other should be perceived in simple terms as something different, distinct from what is known, but also from the real-life experience. Relatedly, the Other seems inscribed in the nature of fantasy literature. The genre rooted in the sense of wonder represents the insight into what is extraordinary and contrasting with the known, especially in terms of world-building, presented societies, creatures, and the characters’ abilities. The concept of exploring the Other could be further developed, because fantasy, apart from allowing for the impossible to happen, makes the familiar feel surprising and novel (ATTEBERY, 1980: 3). Hence, in the genre, the different refers not only to the contradiction of what is deemed plausible in the extra-literary reality, but also to the familiar, which is transformed and processed in such a way so as to show the unusual element in what seems to be common.

The exploration of the Other entails the reflection on the Self, a term variously defined, commonly associated with the psychological being, including thoughts and attitudes, and linked to various related issues, such as each individ-

ual's comprehension of themselves, or their self-image. In the framework of YA fantasy literature, mostly because of its formative role, the Self could be simply read as "I," referring both to the story's main character and the reader, who gets involved through fiction with the things outside of their experience. In fantasy for teenage audiences, the Self could also imply the presence of the so-called "hidden component" (BAUMEISTER, 1999: 2), making it difficult for a person to grasp their identity and preventing others from seeing its real complexity. An attempt at understanding one's identity brings an individual back to the demarcation between the Self and the Other. The young reader of YA fantasy fiction explores several levels of the Other – first, the protagonist represents a specific viewpoint that should be acknowledged and accepted; second, the story draws from a culture different than the one known to the reader, and this fact also has to be recognized; third, the fantasy layer adds a sense of oddness to the narrative. As a result, the embracing of the Other should inspire the reader to ask questions about their individuality and their relations with the surroundings. As "it has the power to shape our identities" (NIKOLAJEVA, 2014: 89), children's and YA fiction proves to be capable of inspiring such a reflection, which remains one of its most important functions.

Moreover, YA fantasy celebrates the Other by sensitizing its recipients to the heterogeneity of cultures, perspectives, and possibilities. Making the younger audiences aware of the plurality of possibilities through fiction enables fantasy, as well as other non-mimetic modes, caution them against what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009: online) calls "the danger of a single story," understood as the incapability of seeing multiple overlapping threads and perceiving individuals or communities from a single, limited perspective imposed by an arbitrary norm. Furthermore, cultural and ethnic diversity in literature guarantees representation. For young readers inside a particular framework of reference, the inclusion of the themes that are close to them assures the necessary depiction of the generation, which lifts the young minds by pushing them to accept themselves and possibly become achievers in the future. This observation is exactly what Marcus Haynes underlines in the context of Black youth: "Without substantial representation, Black children who engage with fantasy literature are denied seeing themselves as adventurous, heroic, or self-reflective" (2018: 63). For the readers unfamiliar or merely superficially familiar with such a context, an encounter with fiction that approaches the story from various cultural angles may be an experience allowing to see alternatives of what one is accustomed to and to understand that the Self should not dominate the Other.

Such an enriching reading practice is offered by the writer Nnedi Okorafor, who in her fiction draws mainly from Igbo folklore, combined with the American and West African background. Okorafor is an Illinois-based Nigerian-American author, whose work ranges from fantasy and science fiction for adults to comic books, including Marvel series and YA stories, such as her debut novel, *Zahrah*

the Windseeker (2005). Her creative work should be classified accordingly to what she sees it to be, namely as Africanfuturism, spelled as one word, or juju fantasy (THE NATIVE, 2018: online), which refers to West African mythologies and practices. Okorafor explains that the former focuses on the African futures, and the latter, also called Africanjujuism, combines African spiritualties with fantasy (OKORAFOR, 2019: online). Apart from the above-mentioned subgenres, another label describing the author's work is organic fantasy. As Okorafor emphasizes, in her stories, real-life observations lay the ground for the imaginative. Commonly, she does not have to create extraordinary circumstances in order to extract fantasy from reality because the imaginative grows organically from the soil of daily life and from the culture in which it is rooted (OKORAFOR, 2009: 278). A similar approach towards fantasy in any form, not necessarily perceived as organic, is displayed, among others, by the scholar Brian Attebery. He claims that “[t]he best fantasies perform the trick of investing the familiar with [...] touches of the unreal” (1980: 12). In other words, organic fantasy is engaging enough to solicit a strong response from the reader and thus could be deemed a perfect non-mimetic mode for the message of YA stories. An example of both organic and juju fantasy is Okorafor's *Akata* series, with the plot based mostly on what the author has been told or what she has seen with her own eyes (THE NATIVE, 2018: online). Apart from the associations made to the Nigerian folklore and culture, the departure point for an organic fantasy could be observed in the topic of growing up, especially in being part of a minority during one's childhood.

The title *Akata Witch* refers in the USA to the novel known in Nigeria and the UK as *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* (2011), intended for teenage and young adult audiences. The twelve-year old protagonist, Sunny Nwazue, is an albino American-Nigerian and an Igbo. Already facing the difficulties of being different than most of her peers, the girl experiences a frightening vision of the end of the world and learns that she belongs to the community of the Leopard people, a group of individuals from all over the world, who stay in contact with the spirit plane, thus accessing the knowledge incomprehensible to the rest of the society, called Lambs. Sunny goes through the stage of initiation and embarks on her studies of the Leopard heritage and juju magic while continuing her regular school education. Together with her friends, the already-initiated Chichi, Orlu, and Sasha, she is burdened with the necessity to oppose a dangerous juju practitioner and ritualistic killer, Black Hat. In the meantime, however, the configuration in which Sunny gets entangled forces her to face important questions regarding her identity, cultural background, and relationships with people. In other words, apart from being entertaining and innovative, the novel serves the purpose of bringing attention to the concepts of the Self and the Other through fantasy, which exaggerates and stresses the concerns of the characters. Apparently, by closely watching the interweaving of fantasy and a young adult story,

with the focus on teaching oneself and accepting the differences visible in comparison to other individuals, it is possible to indicate several levels on which the novel's protagonist, influenced by various outside forces, constructs her identity. Furthermore, the analysis of the changes that occur in the girl's way of thinking and perceiving herself in relation to the rest of the world should point to the role of organic fantasy in outlining the process of forming Sunny's identity. Indeed, fantasy seems to confront the protagonist with the Other, construed as a magical and social concept. She can grow psychologically thanks to the engagement with the unknown or the unfamiliar.

On the most basic level of the narrative structure, Sunny struggles with being American, Nigerian, and an albino. At the very beginning of the novel, she asks: "You see why I confuse people?" (OKORAFOR, 2016: 12). Nevertheless, it also seems that the girl herself, having different nationalities and speaking various languages, feels disoriented, with albinism contributing to her alienation in relation to her peers and the cultural heritage she has never suspected being part of. Sunny needs time and support from her friends in order to comprehend the complexity of her identity and cultural roots. Born in New York to Nigerian parents, she comes back to their and her brothers' motherland to spend there the rest of her childhood. Despite her Nigerian upbringing, including the Igbo language, the protagonist is perceived as an American, mostly because of her American ways and accent. Sunny's nationalities are visible in other characters as well – Orlu and Chichi represent Nigerian Igbo, whereas Sasha, their new friend, evokes associations with the USA, where he grew up: "Everything about him said 'America.' His baggy jeans, his white T-shirt with a logo on the chest, and his super white Nike sneakers" (59). Similarly, the children's teacher, Anatov, elicits stereotypical correlations with Americanness, while epitomizing traditional values. Thus, Okorafor seems to announce both to Sunny and the readers that "it is possible for an individual – and, by extension, a community – to reach both extremes of the spectrum, to encompass the values of both traditional African culture and western civilization" (AIYETORO, OLAOYE, 2016: 237). Something that for many goes without saying needs to be explicitly articulated for the young generations: a person should not be determined by the labels nor stereotypes, whether they concern their nationality, culture, or individual traits; diversity does not only mean the existence of various ethnicities but also the ability to embrace differences between people and contradictions within oneself. Fantasy offers here the space for removing or transgressing boundaries, which aims to accept fluidity, escaping rigid categorization. The heroine, being torn between two mindsets, has to accept the fact that she cannot choose because her choice would significantly constrain one side of her personality.

Furthermore, young adult novels in general, by touching upon the themes like "establishing identity, seeking wholeness, negotiating two or more worlds, [...] learning to construct a cohesive identity out of disparate [...] elements

[...] speak directly to the mixed-identity experience” (REYNOLDS, 2009: xx). Indeed, with her Nigerian-American roots and albinism, Sunny exemplifies a complex identity that she attempts to dismantle. She also remains a model for those who may want to ask questions about their mixed heritage, which is especially important in the context of YA fiction, as books featuring characters similar to the one created by Okorafor give the “‘multiculti’ readers the validation of seeing their images reflected in fiction” (2009: xix). It also points to the significant role of literature for teenagers and young adults in highlighting the necessity of diverse representation in culture. Fantasy seems to additionally improve the image of a protagonist from an underrepresented group, with special powers symbolically upgrading the character’s natural talents and boosting the reader’s confidence.

Apart from Sunny’s double nationality, another factor convolutes the matter of her identity, as she considers herself as marginal with respect to the rest of society. The girl pertains to African Americans and Black Nigerians or Nigerian Americans, but she is seen as incongruent due to her albinism. As Ken Junior Lipenga and Emmanuel Ngwira observe in their 2018 study of albino characters in the African novel, the perception of albinos remains twofold. On the one hand, the stereotype and traditional beliefs generate superstitions, accusations of witchcraft, and violent attacks on albinos, viewed as individuals who cheat death by disappearing instead of ceasing to live. On the other hand, they are appreciated for the magical properties that their body parts are deemed to possess. This is the reason for which brutal persecutions against albinos take place, even from the moment of birth, when certain members of society assign demonic traits of an incarnated devil to a new-born. Albino babies herald abnormality or “a fissure tear in the fabric of normalcy” (LIPENGA, NGWIRA, 2018: 1482), a deviation that triggers fear-driven discrimination, manifested through the use of derogatory names, such as ‘ape’ or ‘living dead.’ Clearly, the main obstacle to the normalization of albinism concerns the perception of this condition not as a disability, but rather in terms of prejudice, misconceptions, and obsolete convictions.

Consequently, the role of fiction is to draw attention to the existence of albinos and teach empathy. This particular objective can be achieved, for example, by the normalization technique, “where the novel accords agency to the albino figure by making him/her the narrator and/or protagonist of the story” or by “imbuing an albino figure with otherworldly characteristics,” which serves the purpose of conceptualizing “a positive albino subjectivity” (LIPENGA, NGWIRA, 2018: 1474). Nevertheless, it is crucial for the accuracy of the representation that the reader does not forget that albinism is a part of who the characters are and that the story does not become blind to the problem which is expected to be understood instead of overlooked. Okorafor never dismisses the issue of Sunny’s albinism, attempting to instill in her protagonist comprehension for her condition and acceptance of the fact that it remains a piece of her existence.

The author portrays her with the anxieties and insecurities caused by the social rejection in order to show to the readers what a different point of view might bring into the discussion. By offering the perspective of an albino character, with a voice and strong personality, in search of answers to the essential questions regarding self-acceptance and the relationship with society, the novel contributes to the fight with the misleading image of the condition. Furthermore, fantasy guarantees the mentioned “otherworldly characteristics” being assigned to the protagonist, making her a magical, almost superhuman individual and a role model to follow. The fantasy component of the story also plays a functional role in the progression of the plot.

Interestingly, juju magic allows Sunny to liberate herself from the most cumbersome aspect of albinism, namely the necessity of protecting her skin for fear of sunburn. When she becomes a confirmed Leopard person, she can forget about the difficulties she has been enduring: “The sunshine felt like a warm friend, not an angry enemy. She didn’t need her umbrella anymore” (OKORAFOR, 2016: 92). Nonetheless, albinism remains inscribed in her very existence. Even the girl’s spirit face, the person’s private image, which she is able to summon after training with Chichi, has a form of bright sun, recalling both her skin shade and her name. Sunny quickly becomes beguiled by the face, mostly due to the precision of representing the protagonist’s regular appearance. Finally, she does not have to adjust to the majority nor to other people’s expectations; she can see instead that distinctness does not equal rejection or ostracism. The girl rejoices by observing that “[h]er spirit face was beautiful. And it was utterly crazy-looking. And it was hers” (OKORAFOR, 2016: 91). However, the revelation about herself does not come easily; “[a]ll through the night she battled herself. Or battled to know herself. She fell apart and then put herself back together, over and over” (OKORAFOR, 2016: 92). Clearly, the process of distinguishing oneself as a separate and fully aware human being requires time and introspection. In this context, magic becomes a device enabling the protagonist to liberate herself from the hurtful representation of albinism as a form of inferiority. Moreover, fantasy assumes the role of a facilitator, permitting to understand the Self through the means of visualization and by giving a particular shape to the girl’s perception of herself and the world. Magical talents allow her to escape the stereotype of a victim, thus empowering her, which she needs, especially in reference to the impact of discrimination on her life.

Naturally, Okorafor’s novel, as a YA book, signals the pressing problem of persecution in a style accommodated to the sensibilities of young audiences. The goal is not to shock the readers but to show them the pain of exclusion and bullying, a relatable behavior on the level of their personal experience. The protagonist’s case exemplifies the view that “to be a young albino in Nigeria is to possess a body that naturally depicts vulnerability” but at the same time constitutes a portrayal of a character who “rises above the stigmatized and misguid-

ed perception of her body through her discovery of her own magical powers” (AIYETORO, OLAOYE, 2016: 233). In other words, fantasy guarantees the protagonist an opportunity to look at herself beyond the stereotypical view of who she is, driven by discrimination and misconception: without magic and the presence of a fantasy realm, organically stemming from the Nigerian folklore, Sunny would not be able to reconsider the person that she has become and to take the reflection upon the plural nature of her Self away from prejudice and unfairly imposed norms. Fantasy also brings challenges, thanks to which the character’s opening of the mind, stimulated by the novelty and newly-gained freedom, progresses. The magical side of the story points to a broader context, depicting a welcoming community which embraces the Other, meaning different from the formulaic model. Furthermore, the study of their magical ways requires the protagonist to adapt to new, completely unusual situations. The initiation also demands her emotional and psychological growth. Apparently, Sunny needs to open to new experiences and knowledge to discover more about her place in the world and, consequently, about herself as an individual. Chichi describes the process in the following words: “It’s more like a mark of beginning my life’s journey. Yours was, too – but it was also the beginning of your true Self” (OKORAFOR, 2016: 67).

Learning remains in the novel one of the most valued practices, rewarded with the Leopard people’s currency, which materializes – to the protagonist’s surprise – from thin air. However, acquiring knowledge should be understood not only as mastering hard skills but as learning life lessons or comprehending one’s true nature. The process, though, might necessitate making difficult choices or sacrificing convenience in the name of access to wisdom and, as a result, one’s inner peace. As one of the minor characters remarks: “There are more valuable things in life than safety and comfort. Learn. You owe it to yourself” (OKORAFOR, 2016: 210). For Sunny, learning means plenty: passing from childhood towards adulthood, embracing two nationalities, admitting that she is “[b]lack on the inside but white on the outside” (OKORAFOR, 2016: 84), recognizing her Nigerian heritage as well as magical talents. It is imperative that she reflect upon her right to exist as an equal to others in a world where “[t]hey think anyone who is different is a witch” (OKORAFOR, 2016: 24). For Sunny, learning encompasses all the factors that constitute her personality and determine her as a member of society. The presence of magic induces her into perceiving the Other as real and accepted instead of ignored or persecuted. As a result, the significance of representation in YA literature is again stressed by the author. The lack of exemplification always leads to the limitation of perspectives, and, consequently, to the narrowing of thinking, whereas Sunny needs the exact opposite.

Alice Curry (2014: 40) draws attention to the “multiple and shifting subjectivities” of Okorafor’s protagonists, with Sunny being “forced to confront her hybridity” (2014: 42). It seems crucial for the author to make the readers aware

of the wealth of identities, voices, and storylines, which become entangled when people cross paths. Different individuals can have varying histories and futures, and each of such individuals can represent divergent concepts, thus precluding any categorization. This context is exactly where a deeper message of Okorafor's prose lies – labelling seems redundant since the complexity of each personality forbids determining people with only several selected epithets or caging them in the limited space of stereotypes. In *What Sunny Saw in the Flames*, similarly to other fantasy books for teenagers and young adults, special attention is paid to those who are easily marginalized, for example, by emphasizing "the validity and worth of underprivileged voices" (2014: 39). At the beginning of the novel, Chichi's mother indicates the novel's central theme by saying: "I'm happy to hear that you have a voice" (OKORAFOR, 2016: 34). In many instances of fantasy fiction, such as C. S. Lewis's classic *The Silver Chair* (1953), characters who believe themselves voiceless embark on an adventure in order to learn how to face their oppressors and, consequently, how to embrace their fear of being different, of being incompatible with the community or society, which sees such individuals as merely unimportant. While the challenges that accompany them in their journey enable their evolution, the newly-gained experience translates to establishing their own form of expression. In Okorafor's novels for younger readers, characters, Sunny among them, also grow psychologically, struggling with the complicated process of developing self-confidence and open up to the possibilities of their hybrid identities (CURRY, 2014: 40).

Regarding the relation between the identity theme and YA fantasy, one could conclude that the latter is the vehicle used to illustrate the mechanisms of the character's growth, as the genre permits the visualization and conceptualization of the protagonist's journey to self-awareness, for example through education, also in the area of responsible decision-making, and anxieties derived from the hardship of the identity-shaping process. After all, the protagonist is pushed to determine who she is by entering the juju magic world and discovering her potential. Spells and natural magical talents are anchored in her culture, so the girl simultaneously acquires knowledge of her heritage and roots. Lessons assigned by the children's teacher are also subject to the fantasy depiction. For instance, the group needs to reach one of the Leopard elders and pass dangerous woods using their cooperation skills, deception, and their juju abilities. Finally, the confrontation between the protagonists and the Black Hat killer constitutes a culmination of the character's fears. The fight requires Sunny to display her newly-earned self-confidence, as she follows her guiding spirit. Still, it also demands her to be selfless, courageously facing the future for others and not exclusively for herself. By the time she battles the enemy, the girl should be able to prove that she has already reconciled different sides of her identity because only at peace and in harmony with herself will she be capable of retaining her calm, necessary to resist the oppression symbolized by the killer. What is more,

the sense of belonging to the Leopard people's magical community provides the protagonist with a context and stability, thanks to which she can benefit from the knowledge of her background.

Her encounter with the Other fuels the further part of Sunny's evolution as a person. In other words, she reaches out towards the unfamiliar to make it her own. The girl's insight into her identity results from exploring the world and the relations with other people, examining her history and cultural heritage, probing the complicated nature of human behavior. It also means investigating the Other as manifested through magic. In short, the Leopard people grant the protagonist access to the fantasy realm sprouting from the character's heritage, which simultaneously opens a path towards knowledge and empowerment, essential in comprehending her identity. As it has been mentioned earlier, authors of YA fantasy fiction willingly explore the genre because "fantasy literature and its adaptations embed themselves deeper into popular culture and the collective consciousness" and, by consequence, have become "even more instrumental in shaping the viewpoints of children, young adults, and those who teach them" (HAYNES, 2018: 63). *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* is an example of such literature, successfully combining relatable questions raised by children's and young adult fiction with inventive fantasy, triggering imagination and curiosity, and providing tools necessary to widen the perspective, which is a key to the better understanding of the Self.

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