

دراسة الأفروفيوشريزم في رواية "راقصة الماء" لتا-نهي سي كوتس د. اشراق بسام العموش*

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الملخص

يستكشف هذا البحث الدور الهام الذي تلعبه الأفروفوتيرية في رواية تا-نهي سي كوتس "راقصة الماء". يستند جزء كبير من رواية كوتس إلى الأفروفيوشرية، وهي حركة أدبية تدمج سمات الخيال العلمي والفانتازيا والخيال التأملي مع مواضيع وقضايا تتعلق بثقافات الشتات الأفرو-أمريكية. يهدف البحث إلى دراسة كيفية تعميق جوانب الأفروفيوشرية لتطور الحكمة واستكشاف موضوعها. كما يدرس الطرق التي توفر بها جوانب الأفروفيوشرية مساحة للأصوات الضعيفة لخلق واقع بديل ومستقبل مُعاد تخيله من خلال بطولة الخيال العلمي. يمتلك بطل الرواية ذاكرة قوية خارقة للطبيعة تُمكنه من نقل نفسه والآخرين عبر مسافات شاسعة. يُظهر البحث كيف تُمكن قوة الذاكرة البطل من الوصول إلى قواه وتحقيق انتقال فعلي من العبودية إلى الحرية - وهو أمر ممكن فقط من خلال تذكر الماضي بالكامل. يوضح كيف تُسهم الأفروفيوشرية في رواية "راقصة الماء" من خلال تعزيز العمق الموضوعي للرواية وأهميتها الثقافية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأفروفيوشرية، الشتات الأفروأمريكي، الحرية، الذاكرة، الخيال العلمي

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Examining Afro-futurism in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*

Abstract

This paper explores the significant role Afro-futurism plays in Ta-Nehisi Coates's novel *The Water Dancer*. Much of Coates's novel is based on Afro-futurism, which is a literary movement that integrates features of science fiction, fantasy and speculative fiction with topics and issues related to Afro-American diasporic cultures. The paper also aims to examine the way Afro-futurist aspects deepen the plot's development and the exploration of its theme, and explore the ways through which aspects of Afro-futurism provide a space for disempowered voices to create an alternative reality and a reimagined future through science fiction heroism. The novel's protagonist possesses a supernaturally powerful memory that enables him to transport himself and other people over great distances. The paper shows how the power of memory enables the protagonist to access his powers and to have an actual transition from slavery to freedom-only possible through fully remembering the past. It clarifies how Afro-futurism contributes to *The Water Dancer* through enhancing the novel's thematic depth and its cultural significance.

Keywords : Afro-futurism, Afro-American diaspora, Freedom, Memory, Science fiction

1.Introduction:

The term 'African-Americans' is most commonly associated with the descendants of "the native west and central Africans who were enslaved and shipped to the Americas via the Atlantic slave trade between the 16th and 19th centuries." (*Ade Ajayi, J. F*) It can also refer to other African groups that migrated out of Africa to different parts of the world. In fact, issues such as racism, slavery, oppression and resilience stem from the experiences of those marginalized groups who struggle with shaping their identity; hence, the African diaspora emerges in the literature of so many African-American authors. Thus, whenever we think of the African diaspora, one should remember the "people of native or partial African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union" (African Union).

Like Alice Walker, James Baldwin, and Langston Hughes, Ta-Nehisi Coates depicts the African diaspora through exploring Afrofuturistic themes such as racism, freedom and resilience in his literature; he aims to portray characters with a hybrid identity and others either enslaved or marginalized. These authors shed light on the ways through which the protagonist can find a path to put an end to his/her dilemma through integrating aspects of Afrofuturism. In fact, Afrofuturism "explores the intersection of the African diaspora culture with science and technology. It addresses themes and concerns of the African diaspora through technoculture and speculative fiction, encompassing a range of media and artists with a shared interest in envisioning black futures that stem from Afro-diasporic experiences." (Yaszek 40-61) In 1993 the term "afrofuturism" was first coined by Mark Dery in an essay titled "Black to the Future." It is defined as "speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of the twentieth century technoculture." The term can also include a wide

comprehensive meaning to describe diasporic experiences from the cosmologies of black civilization up to the present day, in an attempt to envision the futures and possibilities of black people all over the world and to create an alternative reality. In her "Afrofuturism: the World of Black of Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture," Ytasha L. Womack (2013) states "At its heart, Afrofuturism stretches the imagination far beyond the conventions of our time and the horizons of expectation, and kicks the box of normalcy and preconceived ideas of blackness out of the solar system. Whether it's sci-fi story lines or radical eccentricity, Afrofuturism inverts reality." (Womack, p16) Thus, the term Afrofuturism is a way of finding an alternative reality for the marginalized groups through combining "elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques (Womack, p9).

Describing Coates' style in *The Water Dancer*, *Publishers Weekly* mentions that "In prose that sings and imagination that soars, Coates further cements himself as one of this generation's most important writers, tackling one of America's oldest and darkest periods with grace and inventiveness." (*Publishers Weekly*) On his part, David Fear (2019) describes Coates' use of techniques that expose the novel's themes of suffering and enslavement saying,

What's most powerful is the way Coates enlists his notions of the fantastic, as well as his fluid prose, to probe a wound that never seems to heal. [...] There's an urgency to his remembrance of things past that brims with authenticity, testifying to centuries of bone-deep pain. It makes *The Water Dancer* feel timeless and instantly canon-worthy (12)

2.Objectives and methodology:

This study analyzes Coates's novel, *The Water Dancer*, through an Afrofuturist lens. It explores how Coates utilizes themes of technology and science fiction heroism to envision futures of Afro-Americans liberation and to convey an expansive image of the black experience. To achieve that, the paper uses a critical formalistic critique and analyzes the novel's structure, plot, symbols, and themes in a way that exposes its Afrofuturistic elements. Furthermore, it investigates symbolic significance of the story's setting and its nonlinear narrative and their relevance to the cultural context.

As an accomplished explorer of Afrofuturism, Coates is capable of integrating science fiction, fantasy, magic realism in an attempt to demolish prejudged thoughts about power, Afro-American diaspora, and identity. Speaking about Coates' *The Water Dancer*, Annalisa Quinn states, it is

a surrealist story set in the time of slavery and centers around a superhuman protagonist named Hiram Walker who possesses a photographic memory but who cannot remember his mother. Walker is also able to transport people over far distances by using a power known as "conduction," which involves folding the Earth like fabric and allows him to travel across large areas via waterways (Quinn, 2019)

The paper shows that examining afrofuturism as a critical methodology is possible, since the integration of its aspects within the historical and cultural of *The Water Dancer* highlights significant themes and conflicts with which Afro-American writers are concerned. Kodwo Eshun, describes Afrofuturism as "a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro-diasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken." (Eshun, 2003, p.288) More importantly, it is regarded as an "interdisciplinary approach to understanding themes and concerns of techno-culture

and science fiction ... with a shared interest in exploring how people of color negotiate life and envision particularly Black futures that stem from Afrodiasporic lifeways." (Holbert et al., 2020, p. 4) For the future of the Black, afrofuturism helps to create knowledge for liberation, thus, it "is concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional" for Black liberation (Eshun, 2003 p. 293).

3. Afrofuturism in *The Water Dancer*:

1.1. Slavery vs. Memory:

The Water Dancer, which is written in the form of a slave narrative, is told from the point of view of an enslaved protagonist, Hiram Walker, who describes his journey from slavery to freedom through a supernatural power that he possesses. The story is told in the first-person perspective and based on authentic historical facts. Slave narratives are not merely autobiographical; they are "a source for reconstructing historical experiences." They are as much important as history itself. Ernest John (2014) states that, "memory and history come together." The novel opens with the protagonist who is a slave in Virginia on a declining antebellum. At first, Walker seems to be incapable of recalling specific things and events from the past especially those associated with his mother, Rose, yet he could do so through a mystical supernatural power called 'conduction' which is connected to water. In fact, 'conduction' alone doesn't work appropriately; it is triggered by the strong memory of his mother, thus the more he remembers her, the more he is able to move himself and others over distances. Hiram says

I had always avoided that bridge, for it was stained with the remembrance of the mothers, uncles, and cousins gone Natchez-way. But knowing now the awesome power of memory, how it can open a blue door from one world to another, how it

can move us from mountains to meadows..... knowing, too, how I had pushed my memory of her into the "down there" of my mind, how I forgot, but did not forget, I know now that this story, this Conduction, had to begin there on that fantastic bridge between the land of the living and the land of the lost (Coates, 2019, p5).

In *The Walker Dancer*, memory and slavery contribute to the protagonist's inner conflict; slavery is seen as a blocking element that prevents Walker and other enslaved people from remembering the past and escaping slavery. As the story moves on, it is noted how Hiram's fears of slavery repress his memory. He says, "All my life, I had been subject to his whims...The apparitions now steadied before me, and I focused on my mother, who was no longer dancing, but instead kneeling before a boy. And she put her hand upon the boy's cheek, and she kissed him on his head, and she placed the shell necklace in his hand, and closed his hand around the thing." (10) Hiram also remembers the moment his mother was sold when he was only nine years old saying, "It had happened when I was nine years old, the day after my mother was taken and sold. I awoke that cold winter morning knowing she was gone as a fact.... I searched for a fully fleshed memory, and found only scraps. Screams, pleading—someone pleading with me." (12) Thus, slavery prevents Hiram and other characters from accessing their repressed memories and is considered as the real antagonist in the novel, yet the author depicts a situation where slavery can be completely forgotten through integrating elements of science fiction with an important theme such as slavery; Hiram goes on a quest for freedom using his magical memory where he and others could access their repressed memories and fight slavery.

1.1.1. Notions on Slavery:

At the beginning of the novel, Hiram's struggle is seen when he shows his feelings of annoyance towards the white masters since the novel sheds light on ethnicity conflict and the relationship between the white masters and their black slaves; it is

definitely a relationship which is based on subordination and power where the black race is inferior to the white. In an article entitled "Islam, Archaeology and Slavery," J. Alexander (2001) describes a form of slavery, which exists in the novel, saying, "Chattel slavery is a specific servitude relationship where the slave is treated as the property of the owner. As such, the owner is free to sell, trade, or treat the slave as he would sell other pieces of property, and the children of the slave often are retained as the property of the masters." In the novel, Hiram expresses his resentment over slave trade and the bad treatment they received at the hands of his white masters saying, "The masters could not bring water to boil, harness a horse, nor strap their own drawers without us. We were better than them—we had to be. Sloth was literal death for us, while for them it was the whole ambition of their lives." (Coates, 2019. p33)

The impact of slavery is not only confined to the protagonist's personal attitudes to his mother, but to other members of the society such as Thena, another slave and the one that helps in raising him. Walker's memory struggle is seen when he says, "No, only I saw her from the driver's seat of the chaise, and she was just as they'd described her, just as they'd said she'd been in the olden days when she would leap into a circle of all my people—Aunt Emma, Young P, Honas, and Uncle John—and they would clap, pound their chests, and slap their knees, urging her on in double time." (Coates, 2019, p6) Hiram's words reflect his feeling of loss and fear, and due to the horror of slavery, he finds it difficult to remember his ancestral history. Trying to access his past, Hiram goes on saying,

But there was just one on the Street who I knew understood the suffering that was just then compounding in me. Even when she swung her broom at us, I sensed the depth of that loss, her pain, a rage that she, unlike the rest of us, refused to secret

away, and I found that rage to be true and correct. She was not the meanest woman at Lockless, but the most honest. (Coates, 2019. p15)

Being the real antagonist in the novel, slavery is seen as the blocking element that contributes to the suffering of most of the characters particularly those who live in Virginia, Lockless plantation, where more of the enslaved people, children and women are being sold into the deep south. Hiram, meets different enslaved people who are in need of help to flee slavery, Hiram is able to take some people abroad using his supernatural power. As the narrative moves forward, Hiram keeps wandering into Freetown where free black people live up until he meets Georgie Parks and his wife, Amber. Hiram believes that Georgie is connected with the underground and asks for help to escape slavery. Georgie refuses to acknowledge his involvement in the underground and asks Hiram to be content with what he has; the latter's words imply that slavery will continue as long as there is life on earth. Addressing Hiram, Georgie says, "Ain't nobody out, son, you hear? Ain't no out. All gotta serve. I like serving here more than at some other man's Lockless, I will grant you that, but I am serving, of that I can assure you." (Coates, 54) Georgie's words imply that blacks will never truly obtain their freedom back as long as slavery exists on earth, and that they have to be content during their servitude to the white.

Upon hearing these words, Hiram gets more and more frustrated; sometimes he behaves consciously and at other times unconsciously. This drifting in and out of reality and consciousness highlights the impacts of slavery as it is represented by Hiram's consciousness where he touches the suffering of the enslaved characters, while freedom is represented by his unconscious mind and his magical memory that enables him to remember his mother. Whenever he remembers his mother and recalls incidents from the past, his supernatural power becomes much more dominant and powerful.

1.1.2. A Path for freedom:

Hiram's journey of fighting slavery continues as he comes across other enslaved characters at Lockless. There they discussed a matter which is based on a legend associated with Hiram's grandmother, Santi Bess, a legendary character who was able to liberate herself and forty eight other enslaved people through the River Goose leading them back to Africa "... there was this dispute about my mother's mother, Santi Bess, and her fate. The myth held that she had executed the largest escape of tasking folk—fortyeight souls—ever recorded in the annals of Elm County. And it was not simply that they had escaped but where they'd been said to escape to— Africa." (81) Santi Bess' story motivates Hiram to resume his journey, so he would never give up trying to find a path to escape slavery; she possessed a supernatural power called 'conduction' and was able to free a number of enslaved people from Lockless through the River Goose the way Hiram does towards the end of the novel.

The fact that Hiram's journey of freedom occurs through the River Goose emphasizes the significant role water plays in *The Water Dancer*. Water symbolizes the freedom that Hiram and other enslaved characters are looking for especially when they were taken from Africa to the Americas; they leaped into water in an attempt to escape the bondage of slavery. As for Hiram, it empowers his memory; the moment he starts recalling his mother, Rose and her sister Emma and their water dancing, Hiram starts using his supernatural power 'conduction' to conduct and travel through space, thus he resumes his journey. As Hiram gets closer to the bridge, his memory becomes stronger and he is able to recall his loved ones, like his mother Rose, who disappeared over the bridge a long time ago. In fact, both the bridge and water can be regarded as a symbol of the power of memory and

freedom that enable Hiram to travel through space, and eventually to escape the bondage of slavery.

Hiram and Sophia try to escape together, and they meet Georgie, yet they are trapped by Ryland's Hounds, slave catchers where they are taken to jail and Hiram is sold again. As the story progresses, Hiram is able to escape drowning in the Goose due to Conduction--the special power which was the same power that helped Santi Bess to lead all those people to freedom. In an underground station named, Bryceton, Corrine's property, Hiram trains to be an agent through studying with Mr. Fields, and he also obtains mastery over Conduction.

So I was trained to be an agent, trained in the mountains at Bryceton, Corrine's family stead, along with other new agents recruited for the Underground. You will forgive me for not saying much about my fellow agents. Those who are mentioned in this volume are either alive and have tendered their permission, or have gone off to that final journey to meet with the Grand Discerner of Souls. We are not yet past a time when scores are settled and vengeance sought, so many of us must, even in this time, remain underground (142).

After his journey in Phildephia where Hiram lives with Otha and Raymond White and shortly experiences Conduction due to eating a piece of gingerbread that prompts a memory from his childhood. Later, Hiram receives a letter from Raymond asking him to return to the Virginia Underground. Before he leaves Philadelphia, Hiram promises Kessia to bring her mother, Thena to her.

Soon afterwards, Hiram returns to Lockless and finds that Thena's cabin has been destroyed, and all the money that she has kept for her freedom is stolen. Hiram and Sophia sleep in Thena's cabin to protect her. At Christmas time, a white woman named Corrine is revealed to an abolitionist; she plays a major role in the Virginia Underground. When Corrine comes to Lockless, Hiram asks her to help him getting Sophia and Thena out. It was an important moment in the story when Hiram feels

that he needs something more powerful than his memory to travel far distances. Thus, he remembers a shell necklace that his mother gave him the moment she was taken as slave. He finds it in Howell's desk. Later on, Hiram fulfills his promise by taking Thena back to Philadelphia whee she meets her daughter, Kessiah, and Harriet. "And now the fog gathered around us, and I felt the bridge disappear under my feet. Thena still had my hand, and I could feel the heat pushing out from the shell necklace all around me, and the waves that once marked the river were quiet and low." (343) Then, Hiram immediately goes back to Lockless.

4. Conclusion:

For marginalized groups such as black people and African authors and novelists, Afrofuturism is utilized as a genre to that exposes the suffering of Afro-Americans and to offer an alternative reality. It is a way of looking at the future through an Afro-American cultural lens; it refers to the people of the African continent and their diasporic experience. For Coates and other Afro-American authors, Afrofuturism is a genre that provides an insight and a look at themes such as identity, power and slavery through a speculative lens. More importantly, it can be regarded as a method of self-liberation or self-healing as it integrates imagination with technology. In afrofututristic works such as *The Water Dancer*, characters are capable of using imagination along with science fiction elements to transform their circumstances. Hiram, as shown previously, utilizes his magical power, Conduction, to travel through space instantly and to recall his great events that depict the rebellion of his ancestors. He too becomes able to rebel against slavery and to escape it.

As a novel that incorporates elements of science fiction within its themes and plot, *The Water Dancer*, shows how those elements can be utilized within literary works to shed light on the characters' cultural conflicts, especially those who had diasporic experiences and could find an alternative reality while living with their while

masters. Douglas (2010) maintains that science fiction is "a genre is not just limited to being a literary sandbox for exploring otherworldly narratives but can act as a vehicle to analyze and recognize a society's past, present, and potential future social relationships with the Other. More specifically, science fiction offers a medium and representation of Alterity and differences in social identity." (Douglas, p20) As a genre in which Afro-American authors utilizes elements of science fiction elements, afrofuturism rejects black people bring regarded as minority groups; on the contrary, it provides a vehicle for exposing the dilemma of afro-diasporic cultures, and offering a path for liberation through its techno-cultural aspects.

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