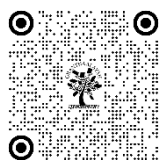


# AFRICANS QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN NNEDI OKORAFOR'S THE BOOK OF PHOENIX

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## ABSTRACT

Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* (2015) explores the complex and multifaceted journey of identity formation for Africans in a dystopian future. Through the narrative of Phoenix, a genetically modified being with extraordinary abilities, Okorafor delves into the theme of a quest for identity against oppressive systems. Phoenix's quest for identity is emblematic of a broader struggle faced by African descents, grappling with the remnants of colonialism and enslavement. The novel intertwines reality with futuristic science fiction, offering a unique perspectives on the survival and growth of African identities. Okorafor's work challenges the readers to reflect on the enduring impacts of historical injustices while celebrating the rich cultural heritages that persistently influence and alter the African identity in a globalised world.

**Keywords:** Enslavement, Colonialism, Struggles, Injustice, Self-Discovery

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Africans are a distinctive and highly esteemed people in global society. Despite the enduring impact of colonialism, slavery, and exploitation, Africans have preserved a vibrant cultural history that greatly enriches the diversity of the African people. Africans culture is diverse, rich and has profound significance for the people who inhabit them. Such African cultural identity has been obscured by the Western societies through the practices of slave trade and colonialism, resulting in a diminished sense of self determination.

Colonialism and slave trade had a significant detrimental effect on the mental health of Africans, leading to the gradual loss of their traditional identities, the emergence of internalised racism and inferiority complexes, generational trauma, and the perpetuation of systemic racism. Africans were portrayed as less human, primitive, and uncivilised by Western powers. So African people try to quest for their identity and it is based on the principle that every being has their own inherent identity that defines their essence. In this circumstance, more African and African American writers are aroused

with the notion that the African people's identity needs to be defined, preserved and maintained to avoid the phrase that the Africans are living as an inauthentic existence.

One of the African American writers Nnedi Okorafor often explores the themes of identity and self discovery in her works both on the continent and in the diasporic writings. Okorafor's works encourage the African people to reclaim or defend their true African identity, despite the lasting effects of colonialism and the influences of globalisation. The protagonists of her work endeavour to embark on journeys of self identity that involves reconnecting with their cultural heritage, traditions, and ancestral knowledge. Her characters in the work navigate the tensions between adhering to their own traditional identities and accumulating new African identities to shape their own alternate futures.

In Africa, numerous African people face a variety of issues such as cultural preservation, political instability, migration, economic challenges, racial discrimination, gender disparity and the impact of colonialism. Okorafor addresses the communal issues of Africa and endeavours to promote diversity, empowerment, environmental conservation, post colonialism, and social justice through her novels. Her intentions extend beyond her own nation or people, as she aims to foster diversity among all groups of people and nations. And this article examines Okorafor's work, *The Book of Phoenix* which explores the protagonist's quest for her own identity from the pathetic situation. Furthermore, the novel challenges the traditional representations of suppressed and oppressed African young people by creating new and empowered characters.

In *The Book of Phoenix*, the protagonist Phoenix is an accelerated speciMen who is genetically engineered as a human experiment created by a company named LifeGen Technology. In this novel, speciMens are referred as, "advanced and aggressive genetic manipulation and cloning" (Okorafor 8). The LifeGen technology has established seven towers in America, serving as scientific research and experimentation that operate independently from government oversight which allows for unethical practices to occur. Phoenix resides in Tower 7 which is located on the island of Manhattan in America. Each speciMens in the tower 7 is modified, fabricated or altered. Moreover, some speciMens are deformed or mentally ill and either dangerous or not dangerous. These speciMens are governed by the LifeGen technology members and they are referred to as Big Eyes. This Big Eyes are, "scientists, lab assistants, lab technicians, doctors, administrative workers, guards, and police" (7).

In Tower 7, Big Eyes specifically subjects the SpeciMen into severe mistreatment and unscrupulous practices. Big Eyes confine the SpeciMens in Tower 7 facility, an essentially incarcerating them there. They are constantly under Big Eye's surveillance and have no freedom to go out or engage in conversations with others. Big Eyes has utterly deprived the SpeciMen they created, viewing them as an abomination and nothing more than tools and weapons to be exploited. And any speciMen raises their one's voices against Big Eye, the organisation that controls the speciMen, leads that particular speciMen to severe repercussions. So the SpeciMens in the tower are aware of their speech and action, which allows them to avoid severe punishment, including physical harm or even death. As Eubanks says, "LifeGen's reach is so pervasive that there is no avenue to even the limited freedom of modern, liberal subject for speciMen"(51). The majority of the speciMens in the Tower 7 are either African or have African ancestry. And it resembles the real history account of African people's enslavement during transatlantic trade. This transatlantic trade period is a profound and tragic chapter in African history, characterised by the forced displacement, dehumanisation, and exploitation of countless individuals.

Slavery has been present in many manifestations throughout African history, especially during the transatlantic slave trade. The transatlantic slave trade which began in the fifteenth century marked a significant transformation towards a system of commercialisation, racial categorisation, and intergenerational transmission. European powers demanded labour in America, which establishes a brutal trade network that forcefully transported millions of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean. This expansion of the trade was fuelled by the lucrative cultivation of cash crops such as sugar, tobacco, and cotton, which required a vast labour force. Powerful local leaders often participated in the trade, capturing the majority of these people from West Africa and exchanging them for goods like alcohol and textiles.

Enslaved Africans endured a harrowing voyage, shackled together in cramped quarters, often lying in their excrement, with limited provisions of food or water. The psychological trauma of this experience frequently tore families apart,

leaving lasting effects on both individuals and society. In *The Book of Phoenix*, Okorafor indirectly conveys this bitter experience, depicting the struggles of individuals under the control of Big Eyes.

In Tower 7, Phoenix's primary task is to engage in extensive reading. Her unique ability lies in her capacity to devour five hundred page books within two minutes as her brain effortlessly absorbs the information and stories like a sponge. Big Eyes believes that providing education to Phoenix helps them to understand and navigate the complex power structures that surround them. Furthermore, Big Eyes believe that the more knowledgeable Phoenix would be more helpful to them for aiding their goals and resistance activities.

However, when Big Eyes murders Phoenix's lover Saeed under suspicious circumstances, Phoenix gradually comes to understand the full scope of Big Eye's immoral actions. Gradually, she began to think about herself and recollect her identity within Tower 7. Despite being a genetically engineered speciMen, Phoenix struggles to understand her own humanity and grapples with existential issues such as her soul, emotions, and moral principles. Her pursuit of self discovery is simultaneously an endeavour to validate her existence and establish her significance in the world. Upon realizing this, she resolves to revolt against the oppressive society, particularly LifeGen technology. She begins to investigate about how Big Eyes exploits the local Africans and the SpeciMen in the Towers for their own gain, with little concern for their welfare. Because of this, she wants to escape from Tower 7 and fight back against Big Eye's oppression. Phoenix says, "I have purpose. I go beyond that which I was made for" (109). Phoenix orchestrates terrorist attacks on Big Eyes facilities in retaliation for their inhumane actions. Phoenix's initial acts of rebellion involve minuscule, deliberate actions to undermine the Tower's authority. Later, her resuscitation comes to an end as she frees more specimens and disrupts experiments.

The destruction of Tower 7 becomes a pivotal moment in the narrative, symbolizing Phoenix's break from oppression and dehumanisation. It represents the struggle for an identity, freedom and justice against a corrupt and controlling system. As Eubanks says, "Okorafor is showing the scale of change that would be necessary to disrupt the current systemic problems within our institutional power structures" (55). The Phoenix act of rebellion not only frees herself but also sets her on a path of self discovery and vengeance against those who imprisoned her. Through her revolt, she asserts her identity, humanity, and autonomy. This transformation marks the beginning of her journey to confront the larger systemic injustices represented by the towers.

Phoenix's rebellious action serves as a catalyst for a more significant transformation. Her revolt draws attention to other speciMens and highlights the systemic injustices within the society depicted in the novel. Through this novel, Okorafor's narrative serves as a powerful call to the action, encouraging readers to consider the injustices in their own world and to take a stand for their own identity in all its forms. James Olney describes the slave narratives as,

The theme is the reality of slavery and the necessity of abolishing it; the content is a series of events and descriptions that will make the reader see and feel the realities of slavery; and the form is a chronological, episodic narrative beginning with an assertion of existence and surrounded by various testimonial evidences for that assertion (53).

And through this novel, Okorafor subtly alludes to the moment of Africans struggle against their enslavement which happened during their trans atlantic trade period. This resistance resembles a testament to the courage, bravery and indomitable spirit of those who battled for their freedom and identity. And also this historical act of resistance not only challenged the institution of slavery but also laid the groundwork for people to identify their own identity, leaving an enduring legacy of resistance and resilience in the face of oppression.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

None.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

None.

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