

## African American Postmodern Supernaturalism

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### Abstract

African American postmodern supernaturalism is the last stage in the development of African American literature, but also contemporary world literature in general. By embracing one's own African elements and enriching postmodern literature, African American supernaturalism experimented with the syncretism of the past and the future, tradition and futurism. Seeking for a new kind of literary expressionism, the African American writer strives to preserve ancient cultural features by combining them into something completely new and what separates them from the rest of world literature.

**Keywords:** African American literature, postmodernism, supernaturalism, fantasy, epic fantasy, science fiction, magical realism, afrofuturism

### Introduction

"Postmodern" and "Supernaturalism" are two terms that are often encountered in literature. Both indicate a particular literary movement or genre. However, what do we get by combining these two expressions into a single sense? Does such a literary movement exist at all?

In 2005, Amy Hangerford used for the first time the term "postmodern supernaturalism" in her essay "Postmodern supernaturalism: Ginsberg and the search for a supernatural language", writing about the works of the poet Allen Ginsberg. Using magic as a common element of all African American genres of postmodernism, we come to the conclusion that all of them can be classified under "postmodern supernaturalism". In order to clarify this conclusion, we first start from the explanations of both words.

### Classification

Postmodern is the term that first appeared in architecture in 1980, and soon after it was taken over by writers, painters, photographers, musicians, etc. (Bell, 2004:190) According to critic Linda Hutcheon (1988:6), postmodernism takes over the form of "self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something while at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said." The result is emphasis, alteration and knowledge. "Like modernism, postmodernism undermines the traditional grounds for the stability and universality of truth and reality; it also compels us to consider that truth and reality are social constructs, that literature has no meaning, that its meaning exists only in our consciousness, or that its meaning is to be found in the indeterminacy of its language." (Bell, 2004:190) The postmodernism in literature represents the world of intertextuality with diverse themes and genres. Extremely tempting for the reader, the literature of postmodernism is distinguished by the actuality of the topic or expression, with mystical elements that often require the analysis of the reader's own consciousness.

Postmodernism defies the classification of literary movements, but it still features certain characteristics such as:

- irony and black humor
- paranoia
- paradox
- fragmentation
- minimalism
- fabulation (rejection of realism and the use of magic and mythical elements)

- pastiche (combination of verses and genres (science fiction, fantasy, horror, western, detective novels, etc.) to show postmodern chaotic society)
- historiographic metafiction (the term created by Linda Hutcheon denotes works that reveal true historical events or personalities)
- magical realism
- technoculture and hyperreality
- involvement of the reader

Postmodern literature emerged as a reaction to the stylistic and ideological limitation of modernism, as well as to the changes that the world experienced after the Second World War. While the writers of modernism describe the world as separated, full of problems and on the verge of collapse, the writers of postmodernism portray the world as if it had already experienced countless disasters and for it beyond redemption.

The term supernaturalism is also a broad term. According to the definition of SF encyclopedia: "Any story whose premises contradict the rules of mundane world can be defined as supernatural fiction, but a definition so broad would logically incorporate all categories of Fantasy, all nonmundane Horror, all Technofantasy, and all Science Fantasy, and arguably all Science Fiction." (Clute, 1997) According to Eberhard Alsen (1996:134) : "The most common response of a reader to the supernatural in literature is to doubt it and to demand an explanation for it. When not only the reader but also a character in the story hesitates to accept the supernatural as real, then the story in which the supernatural occurs belongs to the genre of the fantastic."

Bulgarian literary critic Tzvetan Todorov (1975:33) gives a more detailed clarification of supernaturalism and supernatural by setting three basic conditions with the help of which we define something within the fantasy.

1. The text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described.
2. This hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time, the hesitation is presented, it becomes one of the themes of the work – in the case of a naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character.
3. The reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations.

Although magical realism can be included in postmodernism, with Todorov's third condition it excludes from supernaturalism, i.e. from postmodern supernaturalism, precisely because of the rejection of allegorical and poetic. While reality and magic alternate in the magical realism to the very end, in supernaturalism, the reader immediately puts the choice to decide what is real, and what is supernatural.

How fantastic elements can contribute to the work?

1. The fantastic produces a particular effect on the reader – fear, or horror, or simply curiosity – which the other genres or literary forms cannot provoke.
2. The fantastic serves the narration, maintains suspense: the presence of fantastic elements permits a particularly dense organisation of the plot.
3. The fantastic has what at first glance appears to be a tautological function: it permits the description of a fantastic universe, one that has no reality outside of language.

The use of fantastic in postmodernism, or in the case of African American literature, magic in postmodernism, emerged from the framework of magical realism. Postmodern supernaturalism gives the reader the knowledge that certain phenomena is supernatural, but with many of its techniques he is in doubt or his attention is attracted by its intertextuality. The reader actively participates in the development of the action, awaiting the final outcome, although he knows consciously that he is in the domain of the supernatural. The world of magic does not coincide with the real world, as is the case in a magical realism where the borders between the two worlds are immeasurable.

Alsen Eberhard discerns a clear distinction between magical realism and postmodern supernaturalism and explains their characteristics in his work *Romantic Postmodernism in American Fiction*. It should be noted that Eberhard defines magical realism under the notion of neo-romanticism, and the characteristics of postmodern supernaturalism coincide with Eberhard's neomodernism. He says (1996:150): "While the neo-romantics tend to create what Nathaniel Hawthorne called "a neutral territory in which the Actual and the Imaginary may meet and each imbue itself with the nature of the other", that is, a real world into which they introduce the supernatural, there is no such interweaving of the actual and the imaginary in the fiction of the neo-modernists because they tend to create worlds which are not supposed to be mirror images of the real one we live in. Thus, while in neo-romantic stories and novels we are able to accept the fantastic as real, in neo-modernist stories and novels we do not have that option because the fantastic events are just as obviously contrived as the world in which they occur."

African American postmodern supernaturalism is the latest stage of African American literature in its development process. Although magical realism remains popular, both among African American writers and readers, postmodern supernaturalism appears as the necessary literary product of the new age. The readers of African American postmodern works demand a new theme, which is moving away from their roots and the struggle for identity. As part of the American society, African American readers want to belong to that community.

African American writers strive to fit into genres that were until then ruled by white writers. In the foreground, these are works of fantasy and science fiction. Therefore, a considerable number of African American writers of fantasy appear in the period of postmodernism. However, their African heritage and the use of specific African magic makes them special in the field of American literature of the respective genres.

In terms of fantasy, the most common subgenre among African American writers is Sword&Soul. The possibility of freedom of combining fantasy and historical fantasy produced a subgenre in which the main hero inevitably uses the sword as the main weapon, but the elements of magic and supernatural are also to a great extent represented. Playing with imaginary worlds mainly leads to the creation of a fantasy world that metaphorically represents Africa itself. Charles R. Saunders, who is also considered to be the founder of the African American Sword&Soul subgenre, began in 1981 *Imaro* series - a series about the African warrior Imarou who is constantly encountering supernatural dangers. In 2008, Saunders published *Dossouye*, a novel about the female African warrior, after he was inspired by female warriors from the ancient African kingdom of Dahomey. Milton Davis is the second giant of this sub-genre. His most famous works include *Meji* (2010), a story about the fate of sacred twins from the imaginary continent Lihuru (which is so similar to Africa), who must master the basic principles of magic, but also come into conflicts with those who use it in wrong way; *Changa's Safari* (2011), a story about a 15th-century Swahili mercenary who experiences unusual adventures across Africa; *Woman of the Woods* (2013), a story about the African warrior Sadatina (Shoshi) who must protect her people from demonic enemies; *Griots* (2011) a set of fantastic stories full of magic, myths, sorcery, and brave African warriors.

Balogun Ojetade, a writer of science fiction, horror and fantasy, was celebrated with the novel *Once Upon a Time in Africa* (2012) and the story of a princess warrior from the ancient African kingdom of Ojo. Contrary to African American fantasy writers who place their events in Africa or imaginary worlds resembling Africa, Wendy Raven McNair compiles African motifs and magic within the urban African American community. Her most famous novel *Asleep* (2009), with which she started her own series, deals with the magical flying powers with whom the main characters of the novel, African American teenagers, meet. Science fiction has also been among African American writers before the fantasy. Proof of this are the works of Samuel R. Delany, published since the 1960s, and the works of Octavia Butler.

### **Samuel R. Delany and afrofuturism**

Samuel R. Delany, although he holds the title of an international science fiction writer, and although his works are full of universal futuristic characters, occasionally reveals his African trait. His novel *The Stars in My Pocket Like the Grains of Sand* (1984) is considered one of the most representative works of afrofuturism. The term was first used by Mark Dery in 1993, combining elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, afrocentrism, magical realism with non-western cosmology to portray and criticize the dilemmas of blacks, but also to investigate and re-examine historical events. The main feature of afrofuturism is the presentation of various topics related to the African Diaspora through technoculture and science fiction. Afrofuturism can not be called a movement, because it does not exist for itself outside of certain literary genres. Therefore, afrofuturism can be seen as a sociocultural critique that explores the potential of the African diaspora to the foreseeable future.

Delany's works of afrofuturism are metaphorical critiques at the expense of social opportunities and the racial immaturity of American society located in the imaginary future. However, what the authors of the African-American postmodern supernaturalism, and especially in afrofuturism, are trying to find, Delany was best illustrated by his novel *Nova* (1968:54-55): "In most of my futures the racial things have changed and changed for the better. As a young writer I thought it was very important to keep an image of such a possibility before people. I don't ever remember subscribing to the idea that 'being black doesn't matter'. I wanted to write about worlds where being black mattered in different way from the ways it matters now."

### **Octavia Butler and parapsychological realism**

Unlike Delany, Octavia Butler strives to create a world of racial and gender equality, with a strong feminist views. Exploring the influence of race and gender on people in the future, both on Earth and on other planets, Butler creates worlds where rulers are women and blacks. The reason why Butler writes is given in her essay "Why I write" (Stevenson, 1993:210): "I began to write consciously, deliberately, about people who were afraid and who functioned in spite of their fear. People who failed sometimes and were not destroyed... Every story I write adds to me a little, forces me to reexamine an attitude or belief, causes me to research and learn, helps me to understand people and grow... Every story I create creates me. I write to create myself."

In addition to numerous novels placed in the future and on far-off planets, such as *Clay's Ark* (1984), *Dawn* (1987), *Imago* (1989), *Survivor* (1978), Butler returns to the past with *Kindred* (1979), a book that combines elements of travel through time and historical romance located in the South at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and *Wild Seed* (1980) with a combination of historical romance and parapsychological realism, with strong magical elements of the Igbo people's heritage and the appearance of vampires as telepathic beings.

Parapsychological reality is another important part of supernaturalism with many distinctive features such as : telepathy (which transfers information outside of the five senses), precognition (transfer of information about the future), clairvoyance (transfer of information about far away places), psychokinesis (the ability of the mind to influence things outside one's body (matter, time, space or energy), apparitional experience (the attribution of physical events to paranormal), etc. Using these features in literature, the writer creates a parapsychological reality that is at the boundary of unrealistic fantasy and reality. This common literary mysticism also belongs to postmodern supernaturalism.

### **Ishmael Reed and magical parody**

African American postmodern supernaturalism does not have to exist solely in the works of fantasy and its subgenres. The works of Ismael Reed show that supernatural, in the service of social criticism, can exist as a parody element of the postmodern novel. Using supernatural and magic, Reed creates grotesque characters and situations, examining individual historical events, points to the actual and reveals the hidden intentions of an individual or society that are on the verge of good and evil. Magic helps him to bring a certain action to its absurd climax or to induce individuals to think, even to repentance. African mythology in Reed's novels is equally represented. The appearance of legendary African characters and ancient African gods keeps pace with the magic that is still used by African Americans today. The mention of ancient African kingdoms (such as Ojo, Aksum, Egypt, Ethiopia) whose history is still cherished throughout the African diaspora is only creating an even stronger African American identity.

How does Reed manage to combine magic with parody depicting current social problems of the United States? In *The Terrible Twos*, and its sequel *The Terrible Threes*, a powerful American corporation monopolizes Christmas, and one crazy member of the Nicolettian sect tries to thwart their strings using voodoo magic and creating zombie in the guise of Santa Claus. The clash of soulless capitalism with a religious fanatic is more than obvious, but their goals are almost the same; both sides want to rule, not to help the US population. Wiping out the spiritual values of Christmas, and after being reduced to pure buying and selling, the nation remains lost. In the most difficult moments, Black Peter, an assistant to St. Nicholas, arrives from the South, for whom we gradually discover that is none other than Esu, an African deity. Reed's message is more than clear here - discard commercialized holidays and turn to your own roots. Reed does not belittle the culture of white people, but also demands respect for his own. He does not belittle Christmas, but he shows how much commercialism prevails in the greatest Christian holiday. Like in Dickens' *Christmas Story*, or Dante's *Hell*, Reed takes the US President into an American hell accompanied by St. Nicholas, where he encounters historical mistakes and sins of previous presidents. Taking into account all supernatural elements in Reed's works, we find that his creativity is at the border between

magical realism and fantasy. But, precisely thanks to parody, we place it in postmodern supernaturalism. Due to the parody, his works can not be accepted within reality, as is the case with magical realism. Nor can they be regarded as acts of pure fantasy, because Reed constantly introduces historical figures, facts and issues which we must take seriously.

However, even without social criticism, Reed's works are unique. It is a treasure trove of an African American culture in which we can find everything from ancient Egypt, African deities, ancient texts and legends, people who fly, voodoo to hoodoo. In addition to the already mentioned two works, magic is largely represented in *Mumbo Jambo* (1972) and *Flight to Canada* (1976). According to Madhu Dubey (2003:47), *Mambo Jambo* is even considered a representative work of African American postmodernism, as it represents a set of texts and various hyperlinks (including photos, drawings, invitations, posters, and newspaper articles) that helps the action take place in the form of an audiovisual film-like work. Henri Luis Gates (Dubey, 2003: 47-48), moreover, advocates the idea that in this postmodern fashion, Reed successfully alters the representative methods of the African American literary tradition of stylistic techniques of pastiche and parody, because the very dynamics and energy of African American culture can not be tamed by standard literary narration.

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