Re-imagining Superheroes: Afrofuturism in the Animation Movie *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*

Chandamita Basumatary

Abstract

America today is still not a post-racial space and the phantoms of the past continue to haunt the descendants of the African American community in the form of micro-aggression or misrepresentations in media and otherwise. The binary of Orient and Occident is evident in the stereotypical narratives, and the lack of proper representational figures in media might lead to a distorted cultural identity. Afrofuturism addresses this lack of representational figures and acts as an intersection of history, culture, technology, and the future for the coloured. It, as a trans-disciplinary philosophy, re-imagines the subaltern position of the African American diasporas and stresses the exploration of race through technology. Media today plays a major role in shaping one's identity, with the capacity to reach a wider range of targeted audiences. In the present paper centering on the Afrofuturist representation in the animation movie titled 'Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse' in a post-colonial space, an attempt will be made to study the importance of a superhero from a Black Hispanic heritage in identity formation and its attempt at deconstructing the narrative of the 'Other'.

Keywords- Afrofuturism; Animation; Identity; Other; Post-colonial; Superheroes.

Afrofuturism: An Introduction

Imagination, as pointed out by Butler, is what invites an individual into the speculative. It acts as a source for taking the present condition with grave seriousness and perhaps re-configure it, assisting one in looking forward to what's in the future (Butler 1). This very seed of imagination was

placed in the minds of the African ancestors during the horrific middle passage, who were then exposed to a long history of systematic oppression, violence, and exploitation. The collective experience of slavery functioned as a founding trauma that compelled the diasporas to channel the futurologist and bring the visions of the savage mind to justice in a space free of hegemonic power relations. The aesthetics of Afrofuturism has been around for decades, as pointed out by a school of scholars, but it's very terminology came into existence with Mark Dery's 1993 essay 'Black to the Future', where he engages in an interview to explore the prospects of the genre and manages to define it as a " Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of the twentieth-century techno-culture…might for a want of better term be called Afro-futurism" (Dery 180). This vision of the autonomous techno-laden future of the once-owned black body raises thoughtful deliberations of the long-standing struggle at overcoming the systematic attempts of erasing their past and exposure to what Dery points out as a sci-fi nightmare of being the other in an alien land and subjection to non-inclusion, marginality and forced technological modifications on their body (Dery 180).

Afrofuturism, then, is all about reclaiming the African American's past, decolonising the narratives of the present, and giving shape to an autonomous future in an alternate space through storytelling about the African motherland, its cultures, traditions, and technology. Afrofuturist scholar Alondra Nelson, in 'Afro-futurism: Past-Future vision' presents her understanding of it as vital in the digital space for it envisions utopic and sometimes dystopic future, which acts as a necessary alternative to unbalanced and neocolonial developments in the modern world and defines it as African American voices with their own stories to tell, stories about their own culture, technology and the future (Nelson 35-47). Surpassing the limited scope of Dery's definition is Ytesha Womack who in 2017 furthers Afrofuturism as "a way of looking at the future and alternate realities through a Black cultural lens" (Womack 2017). This cultural lens incorporates all the black bodies irrespective of their geographical location, enabling them to indulge in the act of reclaiming their subjective agency through the very act of imagining themselves in the future, a storyline of which historically they were not considered a part. Womack also refers to it as a process of " soul retrieval as it is about jettisoning into the far-off future, the uncharted Milky Way, or the depths of the subconscious and imagination" (Womack 2) and analyses how several 21st-century artists get seamlessly drawn into the flow of Afrofuturism. The multiple definitions, as Damio Kareem Scott in "Afro-futurism and Black Futurism:

Some ontology and Semantic Considerations", points out, did not invent the genre but rather contributed towards extending an already extant historically-conditioned phenomenon (Scott 140).

While navigating the early engagements with the Afrofuturist aesthetics to the present times, cultural thinkers and critics have pointed towards the collective attempts of the Afrofuturism enthusiasts, be it the 1970's astral jazz explorations of Sun Ra's music to Butler's literary worlds or the multiple media collaborations to overcome the narrative gatekeeping and place the black body beyond the restrictions of the white-gaze. As observed by Erika Hardinson the very purpose of engaging with Afrofuturism is to decolonise the young black minds and their science fiction. The essence of the genre lies in the forward-thinking concepts and ideologies through multiple mediums that are accessible to them (Hardinson 2022).

In contemporary times visual media has played a major role in forwarding Afrofuturist concepts and ideologies along with transitioning the genre to its current form as a mass, multidisciplinary, global movement. Media in contemporary times functions as one of the major cultural tools that have mediated human interaction and thinking of everyday life (Manago Adrians et al., 2021), with movies and social media functioning as the more active agents. While Manago et al in their study of "Social media as tools for cultural change in the transition to adulthood", points out social media as a potent mass-personal communication tool that is most appealing to young adolescents in shaping their identity at the same time using the platform to voice their ideas, beliefs, values worldwide they are also constantly pushing against the power relations, changing laws and building coalitions. That transition to adulthood is the most important period in embracing social transformations, especially for the youths in the diasporic community, as they become the torchbearers for cultural change and bring new ways of viewing the world (Manago et al., 2021). For articulating the scope of Afrofuturism, media representation becomes vital. Hollywood, as a global culture media industry, has provided platforms to address numerous contemporary media culture debates and dialogues of dismantling the dominant stereotypical representation of non-western cultures, with Black Panther being one such media discourse. The movement towards redefining narratives has been stirred on a major scale.

Until recent times, representation of black characters in sci-fi movies on the silver screen has been minimal, and even if there were exceptions, it was not free from stereotypical portrayals. With the comic book adapta-

tion of the Black Panther movie in 2018 in mainstream media, it became the centre of political implications of the Afrofuturist concepts and has initiated discussions on racial representation, cultural as well as narrative decolonization, and further dismantled labelled portrayal. Movies as such direct towards the potential for such works to be "re-figured by non-hegemonic readings – or rewriting – in such a way that they actually produce some kind of cultural change" (Evans 122–123).

The movie became a cultural beacon for the African American diasporas as it placed a black superhero on the pedestal and addressed the thirst for non-white superheroes in the incredibly diverse world. As it is argued that viewers need a superhero that they can relate to, one with whom they share the same history, skin tone, culture, and tradition and can celebrate their longstanding struggles and achievements and develop a sense of self-identity in an environment where they have been continuously stagnant in their position as the 'alien other' (Prabasmoro et al., 2019).

 Negotiating the position of the other and the alien during the same timeline as the Black superhero king T'Challa came another in the world of animation, Miles Morales, a Black Hispanic teenager in the role of the iconic neighborhood-friendly superhero Spider-Man. Although one might argue that its reach has been overshadowed by the scales of Black Panther, its contribution however has been seminal towards the Afrofuturist cause of identity formation and assimilation into the popular culture of superheroes for the coloured minority. Animation went hand in hand with the development of motion pictures and has equal participation in capturing the prospects of the Afrofuturist principles since it has risen in recent times as a dominant informational aesthetic in contemporary visual media culture. (Aynalem 1-2). It is also argued that "comic book movies provide a space where cultural hegemony can meet resistant readings" (Burke 39). Therefore, in the present paper centering around the superhero narrative of the animation, 'Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse', an attempt will be made to analyse its contribution in assisting the assimilation of the young, coloured individuals of the African American diasporic community into the popular superhero culture - a historically white-centric domain and in the process contesting the position of the subjugated other.

Othering and the Contested Change

 The concept of the "Other" gained momentum in the post-colonial literary scene, where the term was understood as the dissimilarity and the illusory inferiority of that which was opposite to the self and often resorted

to its stereotypical representation. The self-reflected colonisers and the colonised were subsequently categorised into the other. The theorising of 'other' became more prominent following the seminal works of thinkers and critics in the likes of Fanon to whom the other is the 'not me', he is the other (Al-Saidi 95). Said's term "Orientalism" describes the Western depiction of the Eastern world, where he concludes that these identities are subjective rather than real (Said 1978). Based on this critique Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak bases her description of Othering' as the process of differentiating the colonisers from those they have colonised, excluded, and marginalised (Ashcroft 171,173).

It stresses the idea that the self and the other function as binary oppositions, where the self has to maintain sufficient identity with the Other to valorize control over it (Al-Saidi 95). The other has always functioned as the foreign- the alien and, by definition, lacks identity, propriety, and purity. It is the unfamiliar, the uncanny, and the improper. In the hegemonic structure, it is the savage who is always in need of salvation from the civilised. Post-colonial novels dealing with the burden of overthrowing the stereotypical representations of their native cultures have often addressed this notion of othering', where the oppressor projected and maintained his insecure negative self in contrast to the oppressed for fear of being discredited as illusory. The systematic process of othering has assimilated into political decisions and cultural practices, and their representation remains one of the areas of concern in the field of post-colonial theory.

In the contemporary age of media culture, the mass media plays a vital role in not only spreading information according to the understanding of the ones in power but also in the formation of the human subject itself. In such a hegemonic space representation of the 'other' again poses to be vital in the formation of identities and knowledge as well as in framing their perception of the world. As it functions not only as a primary source of information for a broad audience, but it can also be a source of prejudice, stereotyping, and alienation.While placing this phenomenon in the context of 21st-century American society, it is understandable that the nation is still not a post-racial space and 'othering' of the coloured minority especially the African Americans, based on their race is not recent. Rather, it stems from the historical dynamics that they share with the nation. It is a given fact that America as a nation was built by slaves. The African slaves were considered no less than a commodity and were denied basic human rights. In the present-day scenario, not much has changed since the anti-bellum and the stereotypical prejudices even exist to date. In such a scenario of socio-political unrest, black artists resorted to the

blaxploitation genre of storytelling that explored an entire gamut ranging from musical to horror to comedy as their cultural mouthpiece. Functioning as a predominantly black genre targeting a specifically black audience, its reach has been wider and proven inspirational to the community of illustrators down the line and solidified the spirit of black storytelling in the caricatures of black superheroes as well as sidekicks widely in the twentieth-century comic books. As the spirit of this movement is also visible in the predominantly black movie, with King T'Challa as the perfect black superhero for averring larger cultural ideas that the audiences could relate to.

Irrespective of the politics behind the creative process, the character was broadly celebrated, and messages of inclusive and social causes were imparted to other minorities as well. In the context of Afrofuturism, these defined caricatures of the coloured superheroes in the post-colonial space provided a window to the subjugated group to not only decolonise their narratives as the 'other' but also reshape the once distorted image of the self and the collective culture, by presenting images on the screen that are relatable and vital in the transitioning stage to adulthood, at the same time feel welcomed, accepted and at home by the young African American diasporas.

> ''We have tried to create a movie that is disruptive, that is different. And there was this narrative that we had been saying and we were saying it even when we were making the movie, that we wanted to usher in a new era in the DC universe,'' Dwane Johnson during a global press conference.

In light of the statement by the actor, it can be understood that steps towards bringing a new wave of change in the representation of the superhero culture in contemporary media have emerged. This need to bring about a change in the superhero narrative has become pressing, for in the entire gamut of comic book adaptations of the superhero characters exists an archetype that typically adheres to the taste of the majority White. The heroes are allegorical representations possessing characteristics that are considered common to the Euro-centric standards, leaving little to no room for the coloured minority to be able to relate to them. In such a space where cinematic storytelling makes a major contribution towards cultural change, the lack of relatable characters leads to cultural dissonance among the African American youths. Waves of slave narratives that appeared in the form of literature noticed an uprising of the voices of the black community by forwarding the lived experiences of the slaves that were vital in

eighteenth and nineteenth-century American literature as well as foundational in the formation of the cultural identity of the future black community. In the twentieth century, this narrative of cultural identity formation is taken a step further by fusing black history and culture with speculative fiction, science, or other artistic means. Works focusing on Afrofuturist concepts, be it in the medium of art, music, literature, or media, presented the black body in a techno-human condition, often in another dimension where they are central to their own stories. This Afrofuturist narrative of power is explored through the creative storytelling medium of animations, which often takes inspiration from or are adapted from comic books. Although black superheroes in comic book narratives have often made appearances at some of the revolutionary political and cultural movements in the history of African American struggles, the motion picture and anime adaptations have out shadowed their reach in the context of the 21st century. The present superhero narratives have furthered the context of black storytelling from the traditional blaxploitation despite facing criticism as a more hybrid process where multiple creative forces have joined hands to promote the Afrofuturist superheroes.

Rethinking the 'Other'

Media representations of heroes have often followed the canonical standards that mostly satisfied the expectations of the majority of white consumers. The characters displayed physical features as well as character traits that were more common to Euro-centric mass audiences. Even if characters from the coloured background were given some screen space it was not without stereotypes, with black characters often presented as servants and slaves or as the hero's sidekick, with exaggerated physical traits or in-comprehensive linguistic skills. These stereotypical portrayals furthered the master/ slave narrative into the medium of sci-fi fantasy as well. It created a superhero culture with which the African American diasporas were unable to relate, nor in the social scenario were they allowed to put on the superhero costume without being reminded they did not possess the looks for it.

The arrival of Afrofuturism allowed the black community to turn the course of these narratives by negating the stereotypical outlook of Euro-centric American storytelling. In this context of subjugating the black community as the inferior other, the introduction of a young Black Hispanic superhero presents an opportunity to retaliate against such fixated narratives. The animated movie 'Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse' situates a young Miles Morales within the spectrum of dilemmas often faced

by the canonical superheroes, from discovering the sudden grant of superpowers to saving the world from evil while at the same time struggling to maintain a normal family life. This representation of a Black Hispanic superhero within the framework of Afrofuturism furthers the context of black culture and delivers a message of inclusiveness to black youths and other minorities.

The Spider-Man origin story which has been told repeatedly becomes a part of the greater representation with the appearance of Miles Morales- a Black Hispanic teenager who in the larger cultural milieu is serving as an agent in introducing new life into the old narratives. Miles, an awkward New York teenager attending a boarding school just like any other teenager in their rebellious stage of life is struggling to meet the expectations of his family. While exploring the abandoned subway station he gets bitten by a radioactive spider and gains power similar to Spider-Man. In a series of events following his newfound abilities the original Spider-Man of his universe dies and now the responsibility falls upon him to save the city from a collider built by Wilson Fisk who wants to bring back his family to life from a parallel universe. Morales later realizes that the portal has somehow brought other spider people from alternate dimensions and together they help Morales to bring an end to the abnormality unleashed upon them by the antagonist Fisk and restore everything to the way it was.

With creative storytelling having a wider reach audience, movies as such contribute to the building or strengthening of cultural as well as self-identities. Youths of a diasporic minority often feel isolated and alienated in a land that refuses to claim them as their own. In addition to that, being left out of the trends of popular culture might be another cause leading to a sense of identity crisis in them. In such a scenario, the introduction of a relatable superhero may further the cause of racial inclusiveness among the subjugated black community. However, one cannot overlook the fact that while introducing a new black Spider-Man in the said animated movie, the original Peter Parker has not been replaced. Instead, the black superhero is placed in another ultimate dimension away from the original Marvel world which is core to the movement of Afrofuturism, to place the black body in an alternate dimension where they are the centre of their own story.

This need to remove the black body to a place away from the canonical and the fear of the minority challenging that which is considered the norms in the superhero culture is rightfully observed by Albert S Fu in

his paper 'Fear of a Black Spider-Man: Race bending and the colour line in superhero (re)casting'. Based on the social media uproar on the possible suggested recasting of the white superhero character of Peter Parker with a black actor, he notes that for the white majority attempts to keep superheroes intact to their Euro-centric standards is a matter of maintaining the essence of the characters and not an act of racism. The very essence stems from the history of racial hierarchy and supremacist ideology. The binary of savage and civilised has always existed in the colonial space, with whiteness being associated with the civilised, with the duty of rescuing the coloured savages. This binarism is evident in the bulk of literary and media produces which justifies that whiteness is associated with heroism. In such a compact artistic space, the representation of black individuals as iconic superheroes must be taken to an alternate universe where the characters as well as the artists can comparatively exercise more freedom, without having to rely on the canon.

Morales's Black Hispanic heritage functions as powerful imagery for young viewers especially of the minority and serve as a declaration that anyone can be a superhero, including people who aren't the white man (Gomez 2018). However, the gatekeepers of the Afrofuturist might be critical of the inconsistency in placing the African diasporic black body on the front. Morales having to share not only his ethnicity but also his universe with multiple other spider creatures and an already existing history of a white Spider-Man in his universe itself might hamper his centrality, reducing his position to the secondary or the 'other' spider-hero. Further, its adherence to the already existing narrative of the white Spider-Man might run the risk of whitewashing the black history of struggle against racism and slavery. Although Morales's character argues for self-determination and overcoming one's past, it does not do so directly from an African Diasporic context. Irrespective of the criticism one must look on the brighter side and take into consideration the impact it has had and will have on the African American youth in identity formation.

The recent recasting of Black actors in the iconic Disney character has stirred a cultural debate about going against the canon; however, in the face of the globalisation of a hybrid culture, this representation of Black characters in the global platform will prove to be revolutionary be it Afrofuturist or not. Many critics think that since these representations are not in tune with traditional blaxploitation, their authenticity is questionable for being another whitewashed, commercially exploitative movie in the name of Afrofuturism. However, it is non-negotiable that the arrival of coloured superheroes in the popular culture aided by the afro-futurist con-

cepts has complimented in shattering the stereotypes against the African Americans. This wave of re-imagining superheroes in the mediums of art, music, literature, and media has provided the coloured minority to contest their positioning of them as the other in the colonial and postcolonial. Irrespective of the use of alternate or outer space, clad with technology and extraterrestrial features which remove them in a way from that which is considered human, with a coloured superhero in media, the marginalised African American diasporic community is rewarded with the much -awaited representation.

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