

Unraveling the Complexities of Mysterious Suspense in *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* by Nnedi Okorafor

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Abstract

This research delves into the intricate layers of mystery and suspense present in Nnedi Okorafor's novel *What Sunny Saw in the Flames*. Through a comprehensive analysis, the research aims to unravel the complexities that contribute to the enigmatic nature of the narrative. The theoretical framework adopted is the theory of narratology and postulations of Tzvetan Todorov to explain the narrative structure is - equilibrium, disruption and resolution. By examining the author's use of mystery and suspense, this paper seeks to shed light on the mysterious suspense that keeps readers engaged from beginning to end. The research also highlights the importance of understanding the cultural and historical context of the novel in order to fully appreciate the mysterious and suspenseful elements. It is important to consider the African mythology and folklore that are woven into the story, as well as the historical and social elements that contribute to the atmosphere of uncertainty.

Keywords: Mystery, Suspense, Unravel, Complexities

Mysterious suspense.

Introduction

There are speculations about the existence of ghosts, mystic beings and powerful masquerades which is assumed to be the embodiment of half spirit, half human. So many complexities are associated with mystery fused with suspense specially because it

relates to sacred topics and even though not sacred is obscure. The presence of mystery genre in Nigerian literature dates back to when written literature started making waves in the country. From the mid-twentieth century, peculiarly in the genre of fiction, supernatural and unusual events have been part of imaginative creations in Nigerian literature.

This is an interesting connection to make between folklore and Gothic literature. Folklore being a significant part of Nigerian literature can add an element of realism and tradition to a story, making it more engaging and atmospheric. In the case of *What Sunny Saw in the Flames*, the presence of juju practices and references to the past help to create a Gothic atmosphere that is both familiar and unsettling; it explored dark and mysterious themes. The combination of folklore and Gothic elements can make for a compelling, mysterious and unique reading experience.

In different cultures around the world, there are many different versions of the "monster" trope. In Africa, for example, there are tales of ogres, giants, devils, and nameless creatures. Nigerian oral narratives describe these creatures as being voracious, invincible, and capable of returning from the dead to cause even more destruction just as Ekwensu came back to cause more destruction in *What Sunny Saw in the Flames*. The concept of the monster in Africa is thus complex and multi-faceted, with each culture having its own unique take on the idea. This can be a useful tool for examining human fears and anxieties, as well as our desire for power and control.

Nigerian oral narratives are rich with fantastical elements, such as magical creatures, mischievous spirits, and other supernatural beings that live alongside humans. This folklore is often full of mysteries, superstitions, and monsters, which make it well-suited for the world of Gothic fiction. The fantastic worlds created by these narratives are ripe for exploration in the context

of the Gothic, as they provide an intriguing backdrop for tales of terror and the supernatural. Okorafor's novels like *Zahra the Windseeker* (2005), *Who Fears Death* (2010) and *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* (2015) depict a world where masquerades, flying people, invisible people, flying reptiles, magic, shape-shifting creatures, sorcery and battles between humans and spirits all coexist alongside traditional Nigerian societies and modern technologies. The fusion of old myths and legends with futuristic elements creates a unique and memorable setting.

Nnedi Okorafor's article "Organic Fantasy" (2009) outlines her guiding vision for her literary works. She acknowledges that she infuses her life experiences, cultural heritage and personal perspectives into her narratives. She credits her Nigerian and American background as well as her magical world view, as key influences on her writing. Nnedi Okorafor's works have shown unwavering trend towards Gothic genre through her adoption of salient Gothic motifs and conventions.

This concept of re-forming the world through storytelling is seen in Okri's own work, as well as in the work of other African writers such as Nnedi Okorafor. By re-imagining the world through their words, these authors challenge the status quo and create new possibilities. Okri believes that stories have the power to create new realities and inspire change meaning that a story works from the inside out, through the imagination, intuition, and the emotions to re-form a world in the process of telling. This is reflected in his statement to Charles Henry Rowell, in which he said:

Story is more than just a way to pass the time. It is a fundamental part of the universe and of our existence. When lightning strikes a mountain, when the wind blows, when the stars are born and die - these are all stories. We exist within the story of the universe. When we tell stories, we are tapping into something greater than ourselves. We are shaping the world around us and creating a new

reality. We are creating a moral framework, setting boundaries and establishing an ideal world. Every story is an act of creation, an act of shaping the universe itself. (219)

From the above statement it is worthy to note that Okorafor and Okri both believe that stories can do far more than simply entertain; they can change the world by shaping the way we see and experience it. This is similar to what Adichie calls the "danger of a single story," and aware of what Okri refers to as "the framing of a world through narratives" (219). It refers to the idea that when we only hear one perspective or narrative, we miss out on the possibility of more nuanced or diverse experiences. In Okorafor's stories, she uses the limitless potential of storytelling to explore different perspectives and create new worlds.

While there is optimism for cultural change, the past remains an important tool for interpreting the present in Nigerian literature. Many Nigerian writers believe that it is necessary to look to the past in order to understand the present and prepare for the future. This re-validation of the past demonstrates the importance of tradition and heritage in contemporary Nigerian culture. Okorafor brings about the ambivalence of juju practices as opposed the way people describe everything juju related as evil.

There has been a lack of serious academic study of mystery fiction in Africa, particularly in Nigeria to the best knowledge of the researcher. Additionally, the genre of mystic literature has yet to be fully explored or appreciated in Nigeria. Villains in mystery fiction are often characterised as having antisocial, self-centered, and sexually perverted tendencies. These traits are not typically associated with heroes in literature, and it's interesting to see how these qualities can be used to create complex and engaging characters.

The novel unravels the mystery behind some transcendental practices; it goes beyond unraveling the mysteries

to simplify the actions of the Leopard people. Nnedi Okorafor through her story telling explained that although the culture of the Leopard people seemed complicated, it is quite easy if one can follow the rules. Everything that occurred in the spiritual realm of the Leopard folks had a cause and an effect attached which made them apply caution. It is quite risky that one might die from the failed attempt of a juju trial manifestation.

Mystery and Suspense

Mystery refers to something that is unknown or not fully understood (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). It can also refer to a genre of fiction that involves a problem that needs to be tackled. Mystery can be anything is not easy to comprehend and difficult to explained. Mystery and suspense go in pari passu; sometimes it becomes difficult to distinguish them. Suspense is vital to mystery because the author in trying to make things appear mysterious will hold back some information thereby making the readers follow up the story in a bid to unravel the mystery. One cannot successful write a mystery genre without suspenseful moments.

Mehriniso Ochilova views suspense as “an intense feeling which an audience goes through while waiting for the outcome of certain events” (168). He is of the opinion that without suspense, readers would quickly lose interest in a book because there is nothing to make them hold their breath in want for more information. Ochilova classifies suspense depending on the strength of it; hidden suspense is the suspense that is not easily noticed or felt. The micro suspense is the one that starts from few pages of the novels and ends shortly after. The macro suspense which is assumed to be the strongest suspense starts from the title of the novel till the last paragraph of the novel.

Suspense is a feeling of anxious uncertainty about what will happen next. In fiction, suspense is usually created by raising questions or presenting obstacles that need to be overcome.

Suspense is often found in stories that involve a race against time, magical beings and creatures, a hidden danger or a threat that is not yet known. It creates a feeling of excitement and interest and can keep the readers captivated. Nnedi Okoroafor employs the macro suspense in writing of her novel - *What Sunny Saw in the Flames*, readers were lost and needed to find out what Sunny actually saw in the flames. When they finally obtained the information, they kept reading to see if her visions finally turned into reality. The phrase “mysterious suspense” is used to describe the creation of an atmosphere of tension, anticipation and uncertainty in a story usually fiction by introducing elements of mystery and intrigue. It is often used to describe stories or movies that keep the audience guessing, with twists and turns that keep them anxious. There is a prevalence of enigmatic situations, characters or events that keep them guessing and eager to unravel the truth.

Complexities in Literature

Complexities in literature refers to the nuances, intricacies and layers of meanings in a text that give a text depth and richness. Complexities serve several purposes in a story. First, it makes the characters more realistic and relatable. Complex characters are often more interesting and engaging than flat characters. Second, complexity creates tension and conflict, which drives the plot forward. Third, complexities in a character's thoughts, actions and speech often reflect the story's central themes and messages. Finally, the complexity of character helps the audience understand them more deeply. When the audience understands the motivations behind a character's actions, it helps the audience feel empathy for the character and understand how the character impacts the story as a whole.

Those things readers consider as complexities are purely techniques employed by the writer to make the story fascinating so as to hold the attention of the readers. When dealing with suspense laced with mystery, people get to read or witness weird characters and situations beyond realities of human existence. Now, to

unravel those extraordinary situations, one has to think beyond human comprehension to understand the occurrence of mysterious suspense. Mysterious suspense often occur in fiction because the twists sometimes go beyond what was expected.

Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted in this study is the The narrative theory of equilibrium derives from “[narratology](#)” (Felluga). Tzvetan Todorov analysed the structural properties of narratives and developed a general theory that could be applied to all stories. He called this new approach narratology or science of the narrative. Todorov was a literary critic and theorist who developed his theory of narrative structure in the 1970s. His work was influenced by structuralist and semiotic theories which focus on the underlying patterns and structure of texts.

This theory suggests that all narratives follow a three-part structure: equilibrium, disruption and resolution. In a mystery novel, the equilibrium will be calm, the normal state of affairs at the beginning of the story. The disruption would be the event or events that upset the balance and create suspense. The resolution would be the final outcome of the story, where the mystery is solved and the equilibrium is restored. He avers that this pattern is found in all stories, from mythological tales to modern novels.

Unraveling the Complexities of Mysterious Suspense

In *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* (published under the title *Akata Witch* outside of Nigeria and the United Kingdom), Okorafor writes the coming-of-age story of Sunny Nwazue, a thirteen-year old albino born in New York who relocated with her family to live in Aba, Nigeria. Her American background, coupled with the pigmentation of her skin, makes her an easy target for ridicule by her classmates. In Nnedi Okorafor's novel, mysterious suspense plays a significant role in shaping the story and captivating readers to keep reading till the end. The narrative follows the journey of Sunny Nwazue, a young girl with magical

abilities, as she navigates a world filled with supernatural forces, ancient traditions, and hidden dangers. Through the use of mysterious suspense, Okorafor creates a sense of unease and curiosity that propels the plot forward and keeps readers on the edge of their seats.

One of the key aspects of mysterious suspense in *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* is the enigmatic nature of Sunny's powers and the world she inhabits. From the opening chapters, readers are introduced to Sunny's unique ability to see into the future through the flames. This mysterious gift sets the stage for a series of cryptic visions and prophetic dreams that drive the narrative forward and raise questions about Sunny's destiny and the events that lie ahead.

Prior to each chapter, there are short descriptions that give insight into what will happen next. These descriptions are like encyclopedic entries. The prologue at the of chapter four reads, “Now that you are a Leopard Person, know that your world has just become more real. Creatures are real. Ghosts, witches, demons, shape-shifters, and masquerades, all real. Masquerades are always dangerous. They can kill, steal your soul, take your mind, take your past, rewrite your future, bring the end of the world, even. As a free agent you will have nothing to do with the real thing, otherwise you will face certain death” (39).

One who knows only the denotative meaning of free agent will be confused on why they will face certain deaths; this is because free agent simply means one who can act the way he/she wants as he/she is not responsible to anyone or for anyone. The contextual meaning is a Leopard person who is not privileged to be born of parents with Leopard's bloodline; they are at disadvantage because they probably will not get to know about their identity on time which makes it difficult for them to find a mentor. In a conversation with Chichi, the mystery behind the name “Lambs” and “Leopard people” was cleared. Chichi said to Sunny “Lambs are people who have no juju. You were never a

Lamb, but you have to be initiated to become a functioning Leopard person” (40). Leopard people are people who possess supernatural gifts and powers which is meant to be used for positive things although some do misuse it.

The readers see signs of Sunny's magical nature before her initiation, For example, when she sees strange images in the fire. When she finds solace staring in the flickering candle flame, she sees the vision. This mysterious and curious vision is a doorway to a magical universe and it foreshadows her journey throughout the novel. Her character is a combination of things that seem to oppose each other: she is both visible and invisible, possible and impossible, and has a mixture of traditional Nigerian and modern Western values. This mirrors the state of Nigeria, which is both traditional and modern.

While Sunny, Orlu, Chichi, Sasha with Anatov were on their way to Leopard Knocks, Anatov disappeared like a mist when it was time to cross the bridge which was quite unusual. Chichi seeing how unsettled Sunny was explained certain things about the Leopard people to her. She talked about how she can make mosquitoes stay away, warm her bathing water, call music and send masquerade but what shocked Sunny most was the tale about how Chichi wore her spirit face for seven days when she was born. Sunny assumed Chichi was on drugs and termed her statements as “what a crazy old man would say” (41). It was quite difficult for her to believe and understand such things due to complexities associated mystic beings.

In this magical universe, the Leopard people perform incredible rituals. Sunny explores the leopard people's customs through her friendship with her friends Orlu and Chichi. Although they are different, they still remember and honour their ancestors. So, even in modern Nigerian society, there is still a connection with the past. As Sunny learns more about her identity as a Leopard person after her initiation, she becomes more aware of the spiritual world around her. She sees the connection between this

spiritual world and her everyday life in the society. She also discovers that her skin colour is not just accepted but also celebrated amongst the Leopard people.

Leopard Knocks is a magical place that can only be reached via a bridge that connects to the spirit world to the physical world. This bridge is described as “a 'link' between the two worlds. It is the link that allows the spirits to come to leopard knocks. It is a place where anything can happen. Leopard Knocks is an island created by the ancestor, so you have to call on your spirit face to reach it. “Every Leopard person has two faces - a human face and a spirit face” (41). When the characters call on their spirit faces, they are able to shape-shift and access the magical properties of Leopard Knocks. Many of the magical events in the novel took place within the contexts of the Leopard society.

One cannot talk about the Leopard people without talking about juju. They have a substance called “Healing Hands Powder” (123) which Anatov poured into the hands of Sunny and her friends to help them heal after the injuries they sustained. The powder can heal but can also cause cancer if one holds unto it for long. There was this ominous suspense that will hold readers who will definitely keep reading to know whether Sunny and others will succeed at the attempt to use the powder or if their cases will worsen.

When the researcher started reading the novel, something was quite amiss with Chichi's mother who lived in an old hut amidst better houses. She was unmarried too regardless of being very beautiful and intelligent. Okorafor unraveled the reason through telling that the mother is a Nimm priestess. “Nimm priestess are women who are chosen when they are born and sold to a female spirit who lives in the wilderness” (134). One unfathomable thing is that they are never allowed to marry and they reject wealth too.

Anatov and Sugar Cream, two mysterious scholars who are versed in the knowledge of the Leopard People, perform unbelievable rituals. Anatov is the defender of frogs and all things natural

The characters use strange money called “Chittim”, which they earn by learning the ways of the Leopard People. The Leopard People are shown to be able to use juju, or magic, to do supernatural things as seen in the character, Sasha, who sends a masquerade after three boys for insulting his parents, and the horrible experience traumatised the boys afterwards. Now, it is mysterious that a human can comfortably call masquerade to torture people. What was even more shocking is that Orlu can undo things.

An event occurred in school one day which led to a fight between Sunny and Jibaku, Sunny brought forth her spirit face which scared life out of her opponent who ran away crying. Immediately, a car pulled up to pick Sunny for her punishment. Readers were quite surprised at the level of power the Leopard people wielded. As she entered the car to be driven to the place of punishment, readers were gripped with fear as Orlu mentioned that her action was very stupid coupled with the driver that heightened the suspense by replying “I can’t discuss that with you” (113).

During the wrestling match at Abuja, the commentator brought out her juju knife, it made Sunny scream with horror when she dragged it across her throat. “Then she remembered where she was. There was no blood, not even a cut” (146)”. On that same day, a Leopard person who lost the wrestling died. “He gazed up at the sky as brown feathered wings unfurled from his back. He crouched down and then leaped, shooting into the sky like a rocket” (150). They all claimed that he was still victorious as he will now be privileged to become a guardian angel.

One might be wondering the mystery behind the two varying situations. If one Leopard person can slice her throat and not die, why then will another be capable of dying? To unravel

such complex knits, readers and audience must understand that Leopard people are mysterious and are bound to have obscure circumstances around them coupled with the fact that their abilities differ based on spiritual level, years of practice and certain innate gifts.

In a verbal power tussle between the audacious Chichi and the arrogant Yao, Yao changed her outfit to gold material which wowed everyone. Chichi in turn created a barrier and locked him up with juju. They both refused to surrender till Chichi dared to call masquerade which frightened the other children; they know the consequences of doing that. “Maquerades are hard to control even when they are successfully called. They can force their freedom” Orlu said, when he advised her not to as she could end if she fails to call it successfully and it can kill humans if it gets called successfully. Mysterious suspense was prevalent during the arrival of the masquerade which scared everyone, it forced them to run helplessly screaming for their lives. Orlu handled the situation well as he had the ability to control masquerade whereas Chichi cannot.

The vision Sunny saw in the flames which held the readers spellbound to the novel was about the “end of the world in its flames, raging fires, boiling oceans, toppled fallen skyscrapers, ruptured land, dead and dying people” (2). She and her friends were tasked with ensuring that her vision which was on its way coming does not become a reality. They kept wondering why the seniors of the Leopard society did not give the task to people more experienced. It was later clarified the four of them representing “Oha Covens” were chosen for the task. They are to rescue two toddlers and stop Black hat (a powerful evil master from the Leopard society) from bringing disaster into the world.

The weakest - Sunny took the bravest decision to stand to challenge Ekwensu, she was ready to pay for victory with her life because she knew that death was inevitable. That was the climax of the novel, she spoke a language she did not even know existed;

she commanded the spirit to return and it did. She met Orlu who restored life to the toddlers that were previously dead. At this point, every mystery and suspense leveled down, readers can now be able to say that they successfully unraveled the ending which was like a gift to those who patiently followed up till the very end. After her fight with Black hat Otokoto, Sunny is surprised to find that school is still the same. She is still interested in normal subjects like algebra, literature, and biology. This is an important part of the novel because it shows how Sunny is able to balance her traditional African identity with her modern, Western education. She is still able to learn and use her special powers to help her friends. This is how Okorafor's mythological story interacts with modern life.

By comparing the idea of traditional initiation to the modern technology of computers, Okorafor shows how traditional African beliefs can co-exist with modern Western values. Anatov, who is an expert in traditional beliefs, is described as having both a traditional Igbo background and a modern American accent. This shows that individuals and communities can have both traditional and modern values. Okorafor shows that it is possible to blend the two without losing either side.

One unique aspect of Okorafor's villains and heroines is their ability to use magical or supernatural powers in their battles. Black Hat Otokoto is skilled at using juju magic. By incorporating Nigerian spirituality and mysticism into her fiction, Okorafor aims to create “a deeply rooted Nigerian cultural perspective” (Wabuke, 27). The use of magic in her characters can be seen as a form of empowerment, giving them access to greater strength and abilities. This serves to add a powerful and memorable element to her work, as well as reinforcing her themes of identity and cultural belonging.

Conclusion

Okorafor uses mystery and suspense to create a complex and fascinating world. The novel is filled with references to

Nigerian culture and mythology, as well as supernatural elements. These create a sense of wonder and curiosity, inviting readers to explore the hidden meanings of the story. The sense of mystery and suspense builds throughout the novel, creating a feeling of anticipation and suspense. This keeps readers engaged and interested in the story, wanting to discover what will happen next. The magical world that Okorafor creates exists alongside the everyday realities of school and family life in Nigeria. This suggests that there are other, unseen realities that exist beneath the surface of daily life. The author explores this idea further in her novel *Lagoon*, which brings together science fiction and African mythology. This fusion of different traditions shows how Nigerian literature can borrow from Western genres while remaining true to its own heritage. Rather than distorting the existing styles of Nigerian literature, this integration creates new possibilities for social critique and commentary.

Juju practices is often associated with evil but Okorafor here finds a way to tell the world that some people with juju powers are not evil as they are being stereotyped but it does not take away the fact that some misuse theirs. Some practice dark and forbidden juju which is detrimental. Sunny with her juju powers and Leopard friends were able to restore stability and balance to the world. By introducing endless possibilities into her style of storytelling, Okorafor creates a new genre: Afro-science fiction. This genre is uniquely suited to Nigeria, as it embraces the future while maintaining a strong connection to the country's past. The Gothic element of nostalgia is particularly relevant to African literature, as oral culture and mythology are still important parts of the cultural imagination. References to traditional beliefs and practices create a sense of nostalgia for the past, when these elements were more present in everyday life. The key elements of mysterious suspense are usually plot twists, a lack of clear information and an underlying feeling of unease or tension.

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