

An Afrofuturist Africana Womanist Affair

The Sexy Part of the Bible

Kola Boof

Akashic Books, 2011

It's easy to assume that Kola Boof's 2011 novel *The Sexy Part of the Bible* contains long-lost messages from ancient sages, and perhaps it does, but not in the way one would think. The title, according to an audio recording of Boof discussing the book, comes from seventeenth century sermons delivered by priests of the Church of England and other churches to remind sailors and traders who were taking African women as wives that "white women are the virtue in the bible, her hand is fair; but the black man's mother is the sex in the bible, her hand was wicked" (Boof). The title serves as an assertive reclamation of African women's bodies against the back-

drop of colonial history. Reclaiming oneself, or a group of people, pushing back on the dominant cultural hegemonic narrative and reappropriating discourse as a way to not only name yourself, but place yourself in a space that upends the dominant narrative is powerful. What Boof does, in titling her novel, is confront the historicized devaluing of Black women and their bodies. She also challenges the notion of the binary construction of Black womanhood versus white womanhood. In *The Sexy Part of the Bible*, Boof uses an Afrofuturist and womanists metaphorical constructs to contest and up-end the notion that Black women, and thus their bodies, are wicked.

Afrofuturism engages in a "critique [of] not only the present-day dilemmas of people of color, but also... interrogate[ing]

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and re-examine[ing] the historical events of the past” (“Afrofuturism,” 2011). I contend that Boof’s novel is an Afrofuturistic vision of west Africa that is a warning to readers about what can happen when colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, colorism, homophobia, patriarchy, and misogyny go unchecked and unchallenged. Academically, Afrofuturism has roots in the black American experience. However, with the spread of the American brand of blackness across the diaspora, its definition— “[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture—and more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (Dery 182)—is also not only applicable to Africa, but wherever Africans have been dispersed across the globe. Afrofuturism both in the academy and in the arts utilizes speculative fiction as a framework, and the end goals are also political in that they seek to “recover lost black histories,” “think about how those histories inform a whole range of black cultures today,” and “think about how these histories and cultures might inspire new visions of tomorrow” (Yaszek 2). In *Sexy Part*, Boof pursues the routes of Afrofuturism and Africana womanism to reclaim a space for black women, position them in a location of power, and envisions a tomorrow where black women are not objectified, or externally constructed as the other.

Womanism positions black women at the center, the norm. It allows her

to engage in the process of individuation, which positions her as a full human, worthy of all the rights that come with humanity. Womanism respects her as an individual and by centering black women, womanism also removes the white gaze, the lens through which much of the Western world is viewed (Phillips, 2006). While womanism is a space to begin to explore Boof’s work, Africana womanism, which was coined by University of Missouri professor Clenora Hudson-Weems in the late 1980’s, Hudson-Weems writes:

The first part of the coinage, Africana, identifies the ethnicity of the woman being considered, and this reference to her ethnicity, establishing her cultural identity, relates directly to her ancestry and land base—Africa. The second part of the term Womanism, recalls Sojourner Truth’s powerful impromptu speech ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’, one in which she battles with the dominant alienating forces in her life as a struggling Africana Woman, questioning the accepted idea of womanhood. Without question she is the flip side of the coin, the co-partner in the struggle for her people, one who, unlike the white woman, has received no special privileges in American society. (22-23)

Kola Boof, herself, is an Afrofuturistic womanist and this is reflected in *Sexy Part*. Born in 1969 as Naima Bint Harith in Omdurman, Sudan, Boof’s parents “were

murdered in her presence for speaking out against atrocities in Sudan” (Boof). After being taken to London, she was eventually adopted by an African American family in Washington, DC. Boof’s renaming allowed her to claim a space for herself in a world where she became alien. In a foreign land, amongst foreign people, she was able to create a black womanhood for herself that was pieced from past histories—Sudanese, Egyptian, and African American.

As Afrofuturism is grounded in speculative fiction, so is *Sexy Part*. The novel is set in a fictional country called West Cassavaland (then later the U.S. and Europe) and is centered around a female character named Eternity Frankenheimer, a pure black girl, whose name is an obvious ode to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. We later find out that she is a clone of a woman named Mother Orisha, who was beaten to death in the streets by a mob because she was an outspoken critic against skin bleaching. Here, Boof is reclaiming and re-examing events of the past—the murder of Eternity’s parents. As Boof was displaced, so is Eternity who has no history to call her own and only knows what she has been taught by the couple who raised her—the white scientists who created her. Eventually, Eternity becomes a supermodel, actress and activist who opposes skin bleaching and later she becomes the partner of a wildly successful rapper turned politician, Sea Horse Twee, who becomes ruler of West Cassavaland.

The novel is strongly Afrofuturistic on several fronts. First, its location, racial makeup, and historical placement: the

novel is set in “West Cassavaland,” where the “white ruling colonialists moved out, and the tiny mulatto elite ... braced in horror at the thought of being ruled by the very blacks they’d been bread to look down upon” (106). Boof confronts what seems to be the constantly recurring postcolonial conflicts on the continent, particularly in West African and Sub-Saharan nations. The novel is grounded in a realism that causes the reader to critically engage what they know about Africa, specifically in places that have had ongoing deadly clashes within its borders such as the genocide in Rwanda where the German government in 1884, then Belgian government in 1919 created a divide by favoring the lighter-skinned, more European-featured Tutsi peoples, thus eventually instigating a war that would ravage Rwanda and surrounding nations (Prunier 23-6). Boof’s ruling class of West Cassavaland, a light-skinned group who are of mixed European and African heritage initially called themselves the “Bastars Elite” then “renamed themselves the Pogo Metis Signare in 1720 and proclaimed their allegiance to some unforeseen Fatherland in lieu of the Motherland (Africa) they felt ashamed of” (112).

Both the Pogo Metis Signare and Eternity speak to a central theme of Afrofuturism—alienation. Eternity’s alienation is derived from the fact that she is a clone, created in the laboratory of western scientists. The Pogo Metis Signare, though elite, are alienated as they are not fully African, nor are they European. In fact, West Cassavaland is a site of alienation as it is populated with distinct groups who

are alien, detached, and inhabit a liminal space—the Ajowan who are killing themselves via the use of toxic chemicals and the “Michael Jackson pill” to bleach their skin, western scientists whose primary duties are HIV/AIDS research, foreign dignitaries, and the Pogo Metis Signare.

Eternity is not only the primary character, she is the narrator and the embodiment of Africana womanism in that she, in keeping with Weems’ definition, “battles with the dominant alienating forces in her life as a struggling Africana Woman, questioning the accepted idea of womanhood.” As a clone who presents as a woman, Eternity grapples with her identity as woman, African and human. As a dark-skinned, world-famous actress/supermodel, she also wrestles with the notion of being regarded as beautiful when the women who are prized in her country are either mixed raced or “boiled orange-colored” from bleaching (108).

In speaking of and for herself and the community that she belongs to, Eternity is practicing Africana womanism—having her say about herself as a Black woman, as well as the collective history of her people. While the language is simple, it evokes immediately recognizable imagery. In referring to herself after being passed up for a role about an African woman which was eventually filled by a lighter-skinned, more ethnically ambiguous actress, Eternity says, “My look, mind you, is not chocolate like Lauryn Hill, Whoopi Goldberg, or Naomi Campbell—it is pitch black shimmering like the purple outer space of the universe. I am the charcoal that creates

diamonds” (41).

Boof told interviewer Jason Page that a white female reader contacted her because the reader identified with the pressure of trying to fit in and being something other than who you are. And that is what womanism does; it begins with the individual Black woman, allows her to be at the center of herself, but then pushes against barriers of gender and race to create a new world.

Once Eternity is free from the constraints of a world mired in racism, sexism, colorism, and corruption, what happens? How does the world work for her and her descendants? Easily, *Sexy Part* could be a trilogy or longer, however, in the end, I am satisfied, but like a gourmand, prepared and willing to overeat.

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