



image- screenshot from ongoing film project *Ningwasum*

# Adivasi Futurism

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*Homage to memories you will create.*

It was in second year of my MFA (late 2015 to mid 2016) I began to experiment with sound and music and performances related to it. Before that, apart from making videos, installations and performative works, I mostly painted. I used to record sounds of protest even before experimenting with sound art, so I started using those recordings. Then, I also started using recordings I made by reading passages from the writer’s work I discovered around the same time, Octavia E. Butler.

*There’s nothing new  
under the sun,  
but there are new suns.*  
- Octavia E. Butler (1998). “Parable of the Talents”, p.432

Octavia Butler’s work was different from science fiction I was familiar with like Asimov, Clarke, Herbert or mainstream space wars saga with laser-toting spaceships. A futuristic world as told by black writer or say people of colour, was very refreshing and a great window to see and imagine future scenarios and redefine my own practice. Storytelling, indigeneity, my love of science and science fiction, it all needed to somehow come in a place and space. As an indigenous artist interested in socio-political issues, I always wanted to work on indigeneity but was not sure on ways to approach it. Octavia’s storytelling inspired me to imagine and speculate my own indigeneity in future timelines. Although I was aware of Afrofuturism, it was Octavia Butler whose writings made me appreciate it much more than I did earlier and needless to say my current practice owes a great deal to Afrofuturism.

“Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation,”(Womack, 2013) writes Ytasha L. Womack, an author, filmmaker and afrofuturists, in her book “AFROFUTURISM, The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture” This intersectionality, I think was a place and space I was looking for to further my practice. She adds, “Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-

*Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques.”(Womack, 2013)*

I began incorporating science fiction with indigenous lens on my artworks, mainly digital art and sound works- using my indigenous scripts, songs and symbols. I even designed a mothership (illustrated above) based on *Silamsakma*, a ritualistic object commonly used and also unanimously accepted as a symbol of identity among our indigenous Yakthung (Limbu) Nationalities in Nepal. Without knowing, I was touching upon another movement of creative practice that draws on Afrofuturism (Gaertner, 2015). It did not take long but it was only later, I cannot remember the exact time, I came across Indigenous Futurism and got enchanted straight away. Anishinaabe professor Grace Dillon, professor in the Indigenous Nations Studies Program at Portland State University, coined the term Indigenous Futurism in 2001 (Gaertner, 2015). She is also the editor of one of the most important books on the movement, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*.(2012)

In *Unreserved* radio interview with Rosanna Deerchild, Grace describes Indigenous Futurism as “a area where Indigenous writers can create thought experiment in scientific sense and centre Indigenous people within that world, as Helen Haig-Brown who is from the Tsilhqot’in Nation and has created the film *?E?anx (The Cave)* in her own language, she has called it taking the fiction out of science fiction and in the process of that sharing the values and ethics that connected to science, which is ceremony, singing, dancing, all forms of art along with growing plants, developing medicines, creating space rockets.” (From growing medicine to space rockets: What is Indigenous futurism? | CBC Radio, 2020).

Indigenous Futurism gives Indigenous writers, artists, filmmakers and other creative practitioners to imagine and carry out thought experiment and see themselves in the future practicing Indigenous knowledge, ideas along with science and technology. Like Afrofuturism, it shifts the narrative from colonised, oppressed and marginalised to representation, progress and liberation, from tokenism to leading voices, from vanishing races to hyper-advanced nations.



As far as I know, the word Indigenous in Indigenous Futurism mostly refers to indigenous people of North America and sometimes South America. Most indigenous people around the world, for example, like us in Nepal shares similar history of colonisation, oppression, dispossession and marginalisation, but having said that I am not saying indigeneity is a monolith though as an indigenous artist imagining futures, I find Indigenous Futurism movement very inspiring. But unlike in North America, we do not have history of futurism in art and literature let alone in indigenous context. There might be few artists or writers working in similar genre, and I am not claiming to be the first one to practice in Nepal, but I have not heard of anyone till date.\*

Although I am comfortable to call my sf practice as Indigenous Futurism, (in fact I have already been using this term when people are confused and do not know what to make of my indigenous sci-fi), I also believe that it would make the movement rich and vibrant if we contribute another dimension to it. So, paying sincere homage to Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurism, I have recently started to call my practice regarding indigeneity with science, speculative fiction, fantasy and sf elements as Adivasi Futurism, not as a separate entity but nurtured and facilitated by Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurism. Adivasi is a Nepalese word for indigenous but also widely used as collective term for indigenous people in Indian sub-continent. Among many names, we mostly use *Adivasi Janajati* (Indigenous Nationalities) for ourselves in Nepal. So, for me, Adivasi Futurism could be a space where Adivasi artists, writers, musicians and filmmakers can imagine and speculate future scenarios from their perspective where they have agency, technology, sovereignty and also their indigenous knowledge, culture, ethics and storytelling still intact, of course with upgraded codes.

Acknowledging the struggles, solidarity and legacy of friends and allies from the sub-continent and beyond, Adivasi Futurism could be a domain for imagining futures that we currently assume as impossible. When I say friends and allies, I mean Dalits and Madhesis of what is currently known as Nepal, and black and indigenous people around the *Iksaty*\*\*. Also, like Ytasha says, “*any sci-fi fan, comic book geek, fantasy reader, Trekker, or science fair winner who ever wondered why black people are minimised in pop culture depictions of the future, conspicuously absent from the*

*history of science, or marginalised in the roster of past inventors and then actually set out to do something about it could arguably qualify as an Afrofuturist as well.*” (Womack, 2013), I would say, any sci-fi fan, reader, writers and artist actively trying to carve a space for Adivasis and their allies co-existing on an equal footing, self-determination, and with an agency on science and technology in the future would also qualify as Adivasi Futurist.

Finally, amidst the current nation states’ capitalist neoliberal world view where indigenous people are wrongly seen as an obstacle to progress, we are making our voices heard more louder in recent decades, may it be in Dakota, Amazon, Kathmandu or in my Yakthung territories, we are challenging the Western idea of ‘development’. In times like these, spaces like Adivasi Futurism could be a portal to re-view and re-define progress, de-link the idea of nation states and contrary to colonialist narrative of indigenous people as ‘primitive’, it could be a space to re-imagine ourselves as not only the storytellers of the past but also as creators of interplanetary and interstellar civilisation of the future.

*In the future, Adivasis, Dalits, Madhesis, Indigenous, Blacks and all currently marginalised people will have formed constellation of knowledge, science, and culture connected by empathy, kinship and shared interest of cosmic exploration. The current nation states that were built on foundations like greed and exploitation will give way to something new and just. And should there be any remnants of colonial and capitalist retrogrades, they will be dealt with appropriate measures.*  
-“*Miksam’s Dream*”, p.227

\* I may be completely wrong in here, and If anyone who reads this know of any Indigenous artist practising similar themes or genre in Nepal or Indian sub-continent, which I bet there are, I would be more than glad to update the essay and your suggestion will be much appreciated.

\*\* *Iksaty* - from Iksa (earth, land in Yakthung) and city; a concept of earth as a city.

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