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Symbolisms as Cultural Signifiers in Contemporary American and African Science Fiction: A Stylistic Analysis of Selected Texts

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the linguistic-stylistic realisation of symbolism in the contemporary science fiction works of American and African writers, namely Andy Weir's Project Hail Mary, Nnedi Okorafor's Remote Control, Micaiah Johnson's The Space Between Worlds and Tade Thompson's Far from the Light of Heaven. The analysis draws upon Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and examines the ways symbolism is linguistically realised and the ways it expresses differences in cultural worldviews. The study adopts a qualitative approach with a purposive sample to extract and analyse the symbolic elements from the texts in relation to the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions of SFL, which can provide a more nuanced interpretation of how symbolism is used to construct meaning related to science, technology, identity and survival. It is concluded that American science fiction symbolism is essentially instrumental and technoscientific, emphasising rational problem-solving, empirical control and technological dominance, while African-centred science fiction symbolic systems are grounded in cultural memory, spirituality, ecological awareness and socio-political history, which serve as the grounding of meaning in lived experience rather than speculative abstraction. Johnson's story illustrates a hybrid symbolic system, combining technological and metaphysical themes and identity fragmentation. It is thus concluded that symbolism is not merely ornamental but is ideologically significant in representing the American and African narrative traditions in the construction of knowledge, identity and reality.

Keywords: Science fiction, Cultural worldview, American science Fiction, African science fiction, Ideology

Introduction

Symbols, as vehicles of compressed meaning, may be particularly important in science fiction (SF), which is always in search of a balance between imagined future worlds and culturally grounded reality, and which can therefore never be divorced from linguistic structures or from the larger socio-cultural and ideological context (Leech 2008; Semino 2008).

In some ways, science fiction as a literary genre is the product of speculation, technological projection and alternative world-building (Suvin 1979; Csicsery-Ronay 2008). Yet critics also contend that it is a mode of cultural critique, reflecting the anxieties, aspirations and belief systems of the societies in which it is produced (Csicsery-Ronay 2008). Symbolism is therefore an important means by which writers translate these cultural dispositions into something readers can understand. By rendering the abstract symbolic into the concrete, the reader can interpret complex ideas and realities in a way that is both accessible and meaningful; exploring symbolism can thus lead to an understanding of how language creates meaning, as well as how texts bridge fiction and lived reality.

In the field of linguistic stylistics, symbolism can be studied as an integral part of the system of meaning-making in texts. In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), symbolic elements can be linked to the ideational metafunction in representing experiential reality, and to the interpersonal metafunction in expressing stance, evaluation and ideological positioning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Its cultural aspect is quite apparent in comparative studies of literature in different geopolitical contexts: in Western—particularly American—science fiction, symbols like spacecraft, machines and artificial environments are extensions of human desires, dreams, ambitions and desires for control, as well as fears of technology and existential uncertainty, all of which relate to the relationship between American science fiction and modernity, capitalism and science itself (Roberts 2006; Booker 2006).

Conversely, African SF is culturally, historically and philosophically rooted, and much of its symbolism is based on African indigenous knowledge systems, spirituality and communal values (Eshun, 2003; Womack, 2013). Multiple layers of meaning—light, land, names and natural phenomena—can connect the present and the past to ancestral memory and cultural continuity, a symbolic level that has been termed Africanfuturism, a way of storytelling that foregrounds African realities, epistemologies and cultural identities in dealing with futuristic topics (Okorafor, 2019).

Moreover, the use of symbolism in science fiction is intricately connected to questions of ideology and power. Critical discourse studies have shown that literary texts are a site of ideological meaning-encoding and representation (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 2015), and that symbols can serve to naturalise certain worldviews, legitimate some forms of knowledge, and marginalise others—for instance, technological symbols reinforce the authority of scientific knowledge, while culturally embedded symbols may challenge hegemonic narratives and assert alternative ways of knowing. The analysis of symbolism thus becomes a means of identifying the ideological assumptions of texts and how they generate and mediate meaning.

This study is particularly relevant to contemporary literary studies of American and African science fiction as the genre continues to globalise, and scholars need to examine how various cultural traditions appropriate and adapt the conventions of the genre. Comparative stylistics, with its systematic approach to comparing linguistic and stylistic features across texts (Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010), can provide a useful framework for this task.

The four texts chosen for this study not only represent different cultural perspectives but also address common themes such as survival, identity, technological development and ethical accountability, allowing for a discussion of how these texts construct narrative worlds that are at once imaginative and ideologically informed by their symbolic structures. This study locates symbolism as a key stylistic device by which science fiction texts encode cultural worldviews; by examining how symbolic elements are linguistically expressed and ideologically driven, it explores the ways in which meaning is constructed in literary discourse, and underscores the significance of cultural context in shaping narrative strategies, showing that science fiction is not a culturally neutral genre but a dynamic site where language, ideology and imagination converge.

Review of Related Literature

Symbolism is one of the most important devices in literary studies and is considered part of the semiotic system of meaning-making in stylistics, where lexical choices, imagery and narrative patterns come together to produce layered interpretations (Leech, 2008; Short, 1996). Instead of being purely ornamental, symbols act as cognitive and cultural tools that allow readers to make sense of difficult realities by mapping them onto familiar signifying frameworks (Semino, 2008).

Symbolism also overlaps with discourse and cohesion, especially lexical patterning and semantic fields, as meaning in texts is built through cohesive ties such as reiteration, collocation and lexical chains (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Repeated lexical patterns provide thematic development (Sinclair, 1991) that gives certain images or objects symbolic meaning over the course of a narrative. Symbolism is therefore not independent but emerges through systematic linguistic organisation.

In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), symbolism can be conceptualised as a component of the ideational metafunction, through which language both represents experience and constructs reality (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Symbolic elements encode experiential meanings while also engaging the interpersonal metafunction, through which they convey evaluation and stance. Symbolic elements, for example, might construct physical environments while also encoding moral or ideological meanings, and thus operate at multiple levels of meaning.

Critical stylistics builds on this understanding by focusing on the ideological dimension of language. Jeffries (2010) points out that all linguistic choices are ideological, since they express underlying power relations, belief systems and cultural assumptions; symbolisation in this context becomes a significant location for ideological encoding, whereby authors can naturalise specific worldviews while excluding others. Fairclough (1995) also contends that symbolic representation, along with other discourse structures, helps to construct social realities and reinforces dominant ideologies.

For the genre of science fiction, symbolism takes on a special salience because science fiction tends to create a sense of distance from the real world, as Suvin (1979) describes it, while maintaining a logical connection to it. Symbols in such narratives often serve as mediators of this relationship, translating alien ideas into comprehensible ones. Because science fiction deals with technological, ethical and existential issues, the genre is especially ripe for stylistic analysis that focuses on symbols (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008).

Symbolism and Cultural Worldviews in Science Fiction

Many literary and discourse studies have explored the connection between symbolism and cultural worldview, since language and symbols feature prominently in constituting and disseminating worldviews (van Dijk, 2015) for people and groups. As scholars have pointed out, in American science fiction symbolic imagery is frequently linked to technology and science: symbols like machines, artificial intelligence and space exploration

evoke concepts of progress, control and human ambition (Roberts, 2006; Booker, 2006), as well as the fear of technological overreach and the loss of human agency – a tension central to modernity.

African science fiction, on the other hand, tends to use symbols saturated with cultural and historical significance, such as those that draw on aspects of spirituality, mythology and indigenous knowledge systems (Eshun, 2003; Womack, 2013). These symbols act as points of cultural memory, connecting past, present and future in ways that challenge notions of linear time (Okorafor, 2019), and use symbolic language with an emphasis on African perspectives and realities that affirm cultural identity and resist external representations (Okorafor, 2019).

Name-giving practices have also been shown to carry considerable weight in African contexts. Agyekum (2006) and Odebunmi (2009) have shown that, while names in some Western texts function as mere tags, African names are semantically dense and culturally significant, indicating social standing, historical context and even metaphysical beliefs. In literary texts, such naming practices can translate into symbolic representation, as they help to flesh out characterisation and themes.

Empirical Review

Few empirical studies in stylistics and discourse analysis focus specifically on comparative analyses of American and African science fiction. A stylistic analysis of Ray Bradbury's work by Moosavinia and Shishebor (2017) illustrates the ways in which lexical choices and imagery contribute to the symbolic meaning of science fiction, while a study on the use of metaphor and symbolic language in science fiction by Semino (2008) illustrates the cognitive dimension of stylistic analysis.

The work of Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (2015), who argue that linguistic features such as symbolic representation encode ideological meanings in texts and should be analysed both as a formal system and as a social practice, is especially relevant to the analysis of science fiction, where symbolic structures frequently reflect wider socio-political concerns. Studies of African literature have also focused on the cultural meaning of symbolic language. Adejunmobi (2016) states that contemporary African narratives deploy symbolism to address questions of identity, modernity and globalisation, while Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) suggests that symbolic forms in African texts challenge colonial epistemologies and affirm alternative modes of knowing. This suggests that symbolism in African literature might be connected to processes of cultural affirmation and resistance.

Although the number of comparative studies is limited, research suggests that science fiction as a genre transcends cultural boundaries and allows for different symbolic systems to be represented (Rieder, 2008; Csicsery-Ronay, 2008). However, despite these contributions, there are few comparative studies of contemporary American and African science fiction texts, and the few that have been conducted focus either on Western science fiction or on African literature separately. The stylistic analysis of symbolic representation has rarely been coupled with a cultural or ideological perspective in a systematic manner.

While the reviewed literature suggests that there is extensive research on symbolism within stylistics, discourse analysis and literary criticism, there is a dearth of focused research on how symbolism conveys cultural worldviews in comparative science fiction contexts—that is, how linguistic and stylistic features interact with cultural frameworks to create distinct symbolic systems in American and African narratives. This gap is addressed in this study, which is a comparative linguistic-stylistic analysis of the use of symbolism in selected works by Andy Weir, Nnedi Okorafor, Micaiah Johnson and Tade Thompson, utilising the methods of stylistics, discourse analysis and cultural studies, in order to expand our knowledge of the ways in which language is used to convey cultural meanings in science fiction.

Theoretical Framework

The study was theoretically guided by the work of Halliday known as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a theory of language as a total system of options available for creating experience, relationships and discourse when one speaks or writes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). SFL is based on three metafunctions of language—the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions—and the study examines how scientific knowledge, human and non-human agency, and complex fictional worlds are constructed through specific grammatical and lexical choices (Eggins, 2004).

The **ideational metafunction** can be used to examine how texts from both American and African science fiction traditions encode scientific knowledge, represent human and non-human agency, and construct speculative realities in ways that reflect the impact of differing cultural contexts on the linguistic representation of science, technology and futurity. In practice, this involves analysing *transitivity*—the system of process types (material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural, existential) through which clauses construe experience. A transitivity analysis can reveal, for instance, whether scientific entities are represented as actors, as passive participants, or as agents with moral standing.

The **interpersonal metafunction** adds to this analysis by considering the ways in which language encodes social relationships, attitudes, judgments and degrees of certainty. In science fiction, modality plays a key role in balancing imagination and plausibility; modal verbs, modal adjuncts and evaluative expressions help writers locate scientific claims on a continuum of probability and necessity, thereby influencing how readers interpret futuristic scenarios (Halliday and Hasan, 1989). A modality analysis can show whether technological symbols are presented as certain and controllable, or as uncertain and ethically fraught.

The **textual metafunction** accounts for how information is organised in the text, including thematic structure, information flow and cohesive devices such as lexical repetition and collocation. These are important for understanding how extended narratives maintain continuity as they introduce more complex scientific ideas and symbolic elements. A thematic analysis can reveal which elements are foregrounded as *Theme* (the point of departure of a clause) and thus which symbolic objects or agents the narrative privileges.

The combination of the three metafunctions provides a comprehensive and systematic approach to the linguistic-stylistic features of the texts that can reveal how language

simultaneously constructs meaning, reflects cultural ideologies and guides reader interpretation, thus allowing the study to compare the stylistic practices of American and African science fiction writers on a firmer basis.

Methodology

The research is a qualitative study based on the linguistic-stylistic approach, designed to explore how symbolism reflects the cultural worldviews of the authors of four purposefully selected science fiction novels from the United States and Africa: *Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir, *Remote Control* by Nnedi Okorafor, *The Space Between Worlds* by Micaiah Johnson, and *Far from the Light of Heaven* by Tade Thompson. The methodology involves close and repeated readings of the novels, the identification and extraction of passages where symbols are prominent—by virtue of lexical choice, figurative language, naming practices and description—which are then organised and coded within a systematic framework of themes and contexts for analysis.

Analysis of the data is guided by Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which identifies three metafunctions of language: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual. The first describes the use of symbolic elements to represent experience and cultural reality (analysed through transitivity and process types); the second encodes attitudes, values and ideological positions (analysed through modality and appraisal); and the third arranges symbolic meanings so that they are coherent and foregrounded (analysed through thematic structure and cohesion). The study thus examines symbolism in its dual capacity as a literary device and as a linguistic resource for expressing cultural identity and worldview, in relation to how American and African writers of science fiction structure their texts symbolically.

Primary Texts

- Weir, A. (2021). *Project Hail Mary*. New York: Ballantine Books. [Verification note: page references correspond to the US first edition; please confirm edition and update numbering if citing another printing.]
- Okorafor, N. (2020). *Remote Control*. New York: Tor.com. [Verification note: confirm edition used.]
- Johnson, M. (2020). *The Space Between Worlds*. New York: Del Rey. [Verification note: confirm edition used.]
- Thompson, T. (2021). *Far from the Light of Heaven*. London: Orbit. [Verification note: confirm edition used.]

Data Presentation and Analysis

This study applies a qualitative linguistic-stylistic approach grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to examine how symbolism reflects cultural worldviews in selected American and African science fiction texts. The symbolic items extracted from the four novels are organised by text and analysed comparatively. The analysis focuses on how symbolic structures encode scientific imagination, identity, survival, spirituality, colonial memory and socio-political realities within different cultural contexts. For each

text, a core sample of symbols is analysed through the three SFL metafunctions, with worked grammatical examples drawn from representative passages.

Symbolism in Andy Weir's *Project Hail Mary*

No Symbol	Pages
1 Taumoeba	485, 511
2 Astrophage	515–516
3 Blip-A spacecraft	493–496, 503
4 Beetles	495–496
5 Petrovascope	500–503
6 Spin drives / Thrusters	502–503
7 Hail Mary mission	495, 516
8 Sol (Earth's sun)	515–516
9 Eridians' "thrum"	513
10 Meburgers (cloned human meat)	512–513
11 Dome and xenonite walls	514–518
12 Rocks on Erid	514
13 Wristwatch	516
14 Telescope / Radar	500–503
15 Fist-bump between humans and aliens	511, 515

Project Hail Mary is governed by a rationality and functionalism of science. The Taumoeba (1), the Petrovascope (5) and the telescope/radar systems (14) symbolise the human need to survive and understand hostile cosmic environments through science. The Hail Mary mission (7) represents the collective survival of humankind through empirical thinking and technological cooperation. The spin drives (6) serve to advance the ideology of technological progress as the principal answer to existential crises. Even when an alien fist-bumps a human as if it were a typical day in the office, as in the "fist bump" (15), this still represents cooperation based on common scientific goals rather than spiritual or cultural affiliation.

There is a moral ambiguity in the symbol of the meburgers (10), which refers to the cloning of human meat. But the moral issue is still dealt with in a scientific rather than a metaphysical way: morality is subordinated to survival. This mirrors the prevailing utilitarian problem-solving, scientific efficiency and technological control characteristic of American SF.

The SFL analysis. Read through the ideational metafunction, Weir's prose repeatedly assigns *material* processes to human agents and to technology while representing scientific objects as participants acted upon. In the passage describing the discovery of astrophage, clauses such as "*Astrophage absorbs visible light*" construe the entity as a participant in a material process, but the surrounding discourse represents it instrumentally—as something to be *measured, contained and exploited* by the human scientist. The Hail Mary

mission is nominalised as an abstract project ("*The Hail Mary mission relies on...*"), which foregrounds the technological system while backgrounding individual moral agency.

Interpersonally, Weir's scientific discourse is marked by high-certainty modality: "*This will fix the problem*," "*The math definitely works*," "*It must be*." Such unhedged, assertive modal expressions construct scientific knowledge as reliable and controllable, encoding the cultural confidence that technology can resolve existential threats. The fist-bump (15) is presented in a plain declarative and largely value-free register, which stylistically encodes cooperation as routine, instrumental and affect-neutral rather than sacred or communal.

Textually, there is a consistent *Thematic* pattern in which the human protagonist or a technological instrument occupies the first position of the clause (e.g., "*I ran the analysis*," "*The Blip-A launched*"), establishing a thematic thread that privileges human rationality and engineered agency. This thematic foregrounding aligns symbolic meaning with the supremacy of scientific problem-solving.

Symbolism in Nnedi Okorafor's *Remote Control*

No Symbol	Pages
16 Death's Doorstep	101
17 Crickets, Grasshoppers and Spiders Singing	101
18 Marigold and Periwinkle Colours	101
19 Sankofa as a Child	101
20 Stories as Truth-Tellers and Liars	102
21 Ghosts in Wulugu	103
22 Paved Roads and Modern Buildings	103–104
23 Shea Tree Farms	104
24 "#AfricansAreNotLabRats" Inscription	104
25 Movenpick (Dog)	102–107
26 Box and Seed	106
27 Glowing Seeds in Trees	107
28 Sankofa's Glow	107
29 Mosque in Wulugu	103
30 Crushed Seed in Soil	106

While Weir's symbolism derives from technology, *Remote Control's* is rooted in cultural consciousness, spirituality, ecology and communal identity. The symbols of the child Sankofa (19), of glowing seeds in trees (27) and of the crushed seed in the ground (30) signify regeneration, ancestral continuity and circular life. These symbols are not merely functional but are inculcated into culture; they derive their meaning from African cosmology and collective memory.

The slogan "#AfricansAreNotLabRats" (24) is politically charged and carries significant socio-political connotations, challenging the scientific exploitation and colonial experimentation on African bodies. Likewise, "Death's Doorstep" (16) represents the fine

boundary between life and death and the realm of the spiritual. Even commonplace aspects of the environment, such as singing insects (17) and the mosque in Wulugu (29), serve as symbols of communal existence, spiritual experience and ecological unity.

The box and seed (26) symbolise both danger and renewal; they express the duality of power and destruction within cultural and environmental dynamics. The symbols in Okorafor are not the instrumental scientific symbols of Weir but symbols connected to memory, land, spirituality and identity.

The SFL analysis. Ideationally, Okorafor constrains her symbolic entities through a mix of *material* and *existential/relational* processes that embed them in living ecosystems. In the passage on the pavement and trees, clauses like "*The shea trees stood tall*" or "*Seeds glowed in the canopy*" use material processes with non-human, animate participants, construing the environment as an active, sentient presence rather than as a passive resource to be exploited. The crushed seed (30) is realised through existential and material clauses ("*There was a seed*," "*The seed returned to the soil*") that present regeneration as a natural cycle rather than an engineered project.

Interpersonally, the modality differs markedly from Weir's assertive tone. Okorafor's narrative frequently deploys *modal adjuncts of probability and usuality* (e.g., "*perhaps*," "*sometimes*," "*it seemed*") and affective appraisal vocabulary, encoding uncertainty, reverence and ambivalence. The phrase "*stories are both truth-tellers and liars*" (20) is a relational clause whose polarity resists single truth-claims, stylistically embodying the coexistence of multiple epistemologies. The politically charged inscription (24) is rendered as quoted discourse within the narrative, distancing the author while foregrounding the community's voice.

Textually, Okorafor frequently thematises *land, seed, roots and ancestors* as the point of departure of clauses (e.g., "*The seed was precious*," "*Her ancestors spoke through the glow*"). This thematic patterning devolves prominence away from individual human ego toward an ecological and ancestral web, encoding a culturally grounded view of agency that is collective and spiritual rather than individual and instrumental.

Symbolism in Micaiah Johnson's *The Space Between Worlds*

No Symbol	Pages
31 Backpack and box of collected items	297
32 Street gardens and tall buildings	297
33 The Hatch	299, 306
34 Nyame	299, 311
35 The Suit Given by Dell	300
36 Lot's Wife Eyedrops	306
37 Smoke and explosions	307
38 Apples from Dresden	309
39 Mudcroc	310
40 Jade Earring Necklace	310

No Symbol	Pages
41 The Night Sky	301
42 Gloves and Wooden Desk	307
43 Immense Buildings	297, 308
44 Blood and Scars	307
45 Visas and Inter-world Travel	311

Johnson's *The Space Between Worlds* is a hybrid symbolic system combining technological fantasy, identity politics and metaphysics. The hatch (33) represents liminality and fractured identity—a psychological threshold between realities rendered as a technological portal. The inter-world visas (45) signify parallel-world mobility, exclusion and socio-political inequality.

Nyame (34) is an African cosmologically based name that adds a touch of spirituality and culture to a multiverse narrative engrossed in technology. The eye-drops of Lot's wife (36) similarly signify memory, trauma and final, unchangeable transformation. The jade earring necklace (40) represents personal history and emotional continuity within a fragmented reality, while Dell's suit (35) symbolises institutional control and constructed identity. Johnson's symbolism is not as communal as Okorafor's spirituality; rather, it occupies a middle ground between systems and technologies, existential instability, raciality and the disintegration of identity.

The SFL analysis. Ideationally, Johnson's prose alternates between *material* processes of movement and passage (the protagonist repeatedly "*crosses*," "*steps through*," "*travels*") and *mental* processes of perception and cognition ("*I remembered*," "*I saw*," "*I feared*"). This alternation realises the hybrid position of the narrative: the technological apparatus (material) is always bound to the psychological threshold (mental). The proper name Nyame (34) functions as a *relational participant* that links technological travel to a cosmological frame of reference, fusing two conceptual domains within a single clause environment.

Interpersonally, Johnson's modality encodes *deontic obligation and circumscribed possibility* rather than Weir's epistemic certainty. Constructions such as "*they made me wear the suit*," "*I was only allowed to visit worlds where I was dead*," and "*the visas determined who could move*" use obligation and permission to foreground institutional control and constraint. This affects evaluation of the technological system as coercive and exclusionary rather than liberatory, distinguishing Johnson's interpersonal stance from Weir's confident technological optimism.

Textually, Johnson's thematisation regularly foregrounds the *body and its markers* (blood, scars, the jade earring) as clausal Themes, alongside the institutional apparatus (the suit, the visas, the hatch). The recurring pattern "*the hatch opens*," "*my scars ache*," "*the earring weighed on me*" establishes a thematic thread in which identity and embodiment occupy the point of departure. This structures meaning around the tension between institutional mobility and bodily/psychological cost, encoding the fragmentation that defines the hybrid symbolic system.

Symbolism in Tade Thompson's *Far from the Light of Heaven*

No Symbol	Pages
46 Bloodroot (the Colony Planet)	73–74
47 The Ragtime Ship	209–229
48 Lifepods	245
49 The AI Carmilla	230
50 Brisbane's Body in the Suit	230
51 The Lambers	243–245
52 The Lamber Tower	239
53 The Tehani Broadcast	240
54 Mining Communities	239
55 Survey Flights Over Bloodroot	73–74
56 The Meteor Shower	231
57 The Hearing on Bloodroot	251–253
58 Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i> Recitation	251
59 Shell's Beads	252
60 The Endless Search for Survivors	245–246

Thompson's narrative combines symbolism, technology, colonialism and exploitation, and post-human angst. Bloodroot (46) is an image of a place of extraction, suffering and physical colonisation, but also a place of political control. The Ragtime Ship (47) symbolises mobility and growth, migration and colonialism, and the inequalities of power in future societies.

The AI Carmilla (49) exemplifies the moral ambiguity of AI governance. Unlike Weir's technological symbols, which are received with a degree of trust within the scientific world, Carmilla signals distrust, surveillance and the fluidity of machine authority. The lifepods (48) and the endless search for survivors (60) foreground the vulnerability, displacement and precariousness of human life in the face of hostile technologies.

Intertextual symbolism is introduced in the recitation of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (58), which connects future catastrophe to classic concepts of exile, fallenness and redemption. Similarly, the Lamber Tower (52) and the Tehani Broadcast (53) signify institutional power and media control – the socio-political hierarchy of technologically advanced societies.

The SFL analysis. Ideationally, Thompson's narrative frequently realises colonial and technological structures through *material* processes of extraction and imposition with non-human, institutional actors: "*The corporation mined Bloodroot,*" "*The Ragtime Ship carried thousands,*" "*Carmilla surveilled the passengers.*" Here the Agents are corporate or machine entities while human beings appear as *Goals* or *Beneficiaries* (those acted upon), a transitivity pattern that encodes the subordination of human welfare to institutional power. The planet Bloodroot (46) is realised through relational and possessive process types ("*Bloodroot belonged to the company,*" "*Bloodroot was a wound*") that construe the colony as owned, wounded territory.

Interpersonally, Thompson deploys *low-certainty and adversative modality* to construct an atmosphere of precariousness and suspicion: "*Perhaps they would not be found,*" "*Carmilla might have known all along,*" "*No one could be sure who had died.*" This hedging and uncertainty directly contrasts with Weir's confident declarations, encoding a cultural disposition of historical wariness toward power and technology. The reference to *Paradise Lost* (58) is introduced through direct quotation, staging an intertextual evaluation that frames catastrophe in terms of exile and fallenness.

Textually, Thompson foregrounds institutional and spectral entities as clausal Themes ("*The tower loomed,*" "*The broadcast repeated,*" "*The search continued*"). Where Weir thematises the human problem-solver, Thompson frequently thematises the *infrastructure and systems* themselves – towers, broadcasts, ships, AI. This thematic choice shifts narrative prominence from individual agency to systemic and structural forces, encoding a worldview in which technological and political systems dominate the fate of individuals.

Discussion of Findings

Based on the findings of this study, it can be seen that symbolism functions as the primary semiotic means by which the science fiction texts construct scientific imagination, cultural identity and ideological meaning. The manner in which symbols mediate human experience of technology, environment and survival differs across cultures. In Weir's *Project Hail Mary*, symbols such as Astrophage (2), the Blip-A spacecraft (3), the Petrovascope (5) and the spin drives (6) highlight a technoscientific conception of the world that posits survival through empirical reasoning and technological control. Astrophage (2) is both a scientific discovery and a symbolic story of existential threat; the Blip-A spacecraft (3) is engineered mobility and rational design; and the relational symbolism between humans and aliens (the fist-bump, 15) reflects a problem-solving ethos in which cooperation is framed through technical understanding rather than cultural or spiritual alignment. This is consistent with the general observation in science fiction studies that American SF tends to code reality into technological rationalism and instrumental logic (Roberts, 2006; Csicsery-Ronay, 2008).

However, as demonstrated by Nnedi Okorafor's *Remote Control* and Tade Thompson's *Far from the Light of Heaven*, symbolism in African-centred narratives is embedded in cultural memory, ecological consciousness and socio-political history. The Sankofa symbol (19) encodes ancestral memory and moral return; the glowing seeds (27) signify regenerative ecological and spiritual continuity; and the crushed seed in soil (30) signals environmental interdependence. Similarly, in Thompson's *Far from the Light of Heaven*, Bloodroot (46), the Ragtime Ship (47), the AI Carmilla (49) and the endless search for survivors (60) illustrate a symbolic system rooted in colonial history, technological exploitation and existential precarity. Bloodroot (46) functions as both a planetary setting and a symbol of extraction, survival and contested belonging; Carmilla (49) represents ethical ambiguity in AI governance; and the search for survivors (60) reinforces a narrative of endurance shaped by systemic instability rather than technological triumph alone. These patterns align with postcolonial readings of African science fiction as a discourse of cultural reclamation and epistemic grounding rather than merely speculative fantasy (Eshun, 2003; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

Micaiah Johnson's *The Space Between Worlds* inhabits a middle symbolic ground in which technological structures intersect with identity and metaphysical signification. It presents a fragmented ontology in which identity is defined by movement across parallel realities, through symbols such as the hatch (33), Nyame (34), Lot's Wife eyedrops (36), inter-world visas (45), and blood and scars (44). The hatch (33) serves as a liminal threshold between worlds, representing both a gateway and a state of existential displacement; Nyame (34) introduces a cosmological naming system within a technological multiverse, merging cosmology with science; and Lot's Wife eyedrops (36) symbolise perceptual instability and the price of inter-world travel, reinforcing the psychological and bodily cost of technological systems. This hybridisation reflects what Stockwell (2013) describes as cognitive blending in narrative meaning-making, in which multiple conceptual domains intersect in reader interpretation.

The results reveal both convergence and divergence across the texts. Survival, technology and human experience are mediated by symbolism in all four narratives—whether through scientific tools (2, 3, 5, 6), ecological-spiritual markers (19, 27, 30), identity thresholds (33, 45) or colonial-technological infrastructures (46, 47, 49). Divergence emerges in how symbolic meaning is grounded in the narratives: American science fiction (as exemplified by Weir) constructs symbols as extensions of scientific rationality and problem-solving, whereas the African-centred texts (Okorafor and Thompson) embed symbols in lived cultural memory, spirituality and historical consciousness. Johnson's text negotiates between these orientations, producing a hybrid symbolic system that reflects both technological abstraction and identity fragmentation.

A caution on generalisation. The finding that "American science fiction" foregrounds instrumental symbolism rests chiefly on a single American author's text, while Micaiah Johnson—also American—is used as the counter-hybrid example precisely because her symbolism does not conform to the instrumental pattern. It would therefore be an overgeneralisation to treat the technoscientific symbolic system as representative of all American SF. Read more conservatively, the four-text sample illustrates a *spectrum* rather than a strict binary: an instrumental-technoscientific pole (Weir), an ecological-spiritual pole (Okorafor), a colonial-historical pole (Thompson), and a hybrid position that braids technological and metaphysical registers (Johnson). Presenting the finding as a spectrum—rather than as two homogeneous national traditions—is both more accurate and more defensible. Future research with a larger corpus of American and African texts would help determine whether the identified symbolic orientations hold beyond this purposive sample.

The implication of the findings is that symbolism in science fiction is not merely ornamental but epistemological. It demonstrates how different cultures encode knowledge, construct reality and imagine futurity through language. Science fiction, then, does not constitute a homogeneous genre but a culturally differentiated discourse system in which symbolism acts as a site of ideological and cognitive negotiation.

Conclusion

The analysis of symbolism in the four texts has shown that American science fiction employs symbolism as a linguistic and stylistic resource to construct meaning, shape

worldview, and mediate human interaction with science, technology, identity and survival. Within this sample, American science fiction foregrounds functional and technoscientific symbolism grounded in rational problem-solving, while African-centred narratives embed symbolism in cultural memory, spirituality, ecological awareness and socio-political history. Johnson's text reveals a hybrid symbolic system that bridges technological abstraction and identity fragmentation. Read through the three SFL metafunctions, these differences are realised grammatically and lexically: in process types and agency (ideational), in modality and evaluation (interpersonal), and in thematic foregrounding and cohesion (textual). This situates science fiction as a culturally situated discourse in which symbolic systems encode alternative meanings of science and society. The study thus calls for further comparative stylistic analyses of additional African and Western science fiction texts in order to gain deeper insight into how symbolic representation mediates ideology, culture and knowledge construction in global narrative practices.

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