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DEMOLISHING RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN NNEDI OKORAFOR'S WHO FEARS DEATH

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Abstract

This paper explores the Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* with focus on racial discrimination and sexual violence against women. The theoretical framework adopted for this study is African Feminism. The eponymous narrator who discovers the ugly truth about her conception begins to piece together the history of her people and the purpose of her future. The discovery that she has inherited magic with which she may fight against the injustice of her heritage and the problems associated with racism begins a journey of discovery. Onyesonwu's gender places her at a disadvantage in her society but even more pressing, is her label as an *Ewu* child. Okorafor's novel shows that the power of racism and gender discrimination can be dismantled by the use of comradeship as a tool for resisting racial discrimination, the termination of sexual violence as a weapon of war, the no-violence philosophy and rewriting of the Canon. The protagonist of *Who Fears Death* is transformed from an insecure adolescent to become a character with messianic qualities among her people. Her resilience in overcoming every obstacle that arises against her, uplifts her personal development and her acceptance as an integral part of the erstwhile hostile community. Like a true heroine, she struggles against many adversaries and emerges victorious to achieve mythological proportions for the oppressed people of her community. Through the lenses of African feminism, Okorafor's novel reveals that gender roles can be reconciled if there is unity of purpose, complementarity and a reworking of old traditions.

Keywords: Discovery, Mythological, Proportions, Oppressed People & Community

Introduction

Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* is written in the mode of magical realism. Therefore, a quick search about the novel and author will reveal descriptions such as Afrofuturism, SciFi and Speculative fiction. This is an appropriate description of the kind of stories that the author writes. A close reading of Okorafor's novels reveals her oeuvre embraces themes such as feminism, ecocriticism, climate change, African mythology, etc. Lester Malgas' study approaches Nnedi's *Who Fears Death* and *Lagoon* by taking as its point of departure, a critique by Amitav Ghosh which suggests that literary realism presents shortcomings concerning the depiction of climate change in literature:

My assertion is that African science fiction should be seen as prominent among the radically new modes being called for. Its use of deep-time mythical figures as employed in magical realism in combination with the far future extrapolations of science fiction renders it able to contain the *longue durée* associated with climate change impacts...I intend to show how African science fiction provides innovative techniques for responding to a range of environmental concerns, particularly those ensconced within discourses of postcolonial ecocriticism (32).

This study departs from Malgas' approach by using African feminism as its theoretical

foundation. Other voices are Robert Sum, J.K.S Makokha and Prof. Speranza Ndege who assert that Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, *Akata Witch* and *The Book of Phoenix* appropriate elements of the Gothic tradition, offering fresh ways of highlighting Africa's complex reality. These authors believe that aspects of the Gothic tradition which include monstrosity, villainy and morality are applicable to Nnedi's writings. According to them:

Okorafor's fiction does indeed portray many monsters and fantastic beings in a positive light. There are many monsters in Okorafor's fiction – masquerades shapeshifters and mutants yet only a few of them have villainous traits...it would seem that Okorafor chooses to design her villains by tapping more into their latent, innate monstrosities than manifest monstrosities (27).

These scholars note that Okorafor's female protagonists are strong, brave and self-confident, which contradicts their portrayal in early Gothic works as weak, sentimental and prone to having fainting attacks. This type of stereotypical depiction of women in literature has been challenged by many female writers. The advent of feminism in literature has often been misunderstood as a theory where all or many of its adherents are radically anti-men. Goredema explains that African feminism invites more theorization in its tenets. This scholar explains that:

In an effort not to be overwhelmed by issues of heterogeneity, African feminism returns to iconic categories that put a spotlight on the differences between African and Western feminisms initially – they are the following 1.) Culture/tradition, 2.) socio-economic and socio-political issues, 3.) the role of men, 4.) race, and 5.) sex and or sexuality (35).

Fwangyil illuminates some distinguishing features of African feminism: "African feminism emphasizes female autonomy and cooperation, addresses issues peculiar to African women such as the oppression of barren women and widows, female genital mutilation, child-bride and the resultant vesico-vaginal fistula and other forms of oppression (227)." Therefore, according to Fwangyil, African feminism is more focused on liberating the African woman from the chains of the past that have hindered her from reaching her full potential as a productive individual in society.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research and basically, a textual analysis of Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*. The inclusion criteria for this study is based on aspects of the novel which are used as tools of oppression against the major and minor characters. The exclusion criteria involve aspects of the novel in which the characters willingly submit themselves to the power/influence of those tools of oppression.

Discussion

Comradery as a Tool for Resisting Racial Discrimination

The theme of comradery is depicted in Okorafor's Who Fears Death from the vantage point of young Onyesonwu. She finds filial love in the arms of her mother and stepfather, the blacksmith of Jwahir. But outside the home, she is called by the derogatory name *Ewu* which marks her difference in skin tone, hair type and origin. Many people react towards Onyesonwu by sneering, cringing or pointing at her. Psychologically, she feels guilty for her own existence, therefore; she wants to gain acceptance from her society. Her attempt in this regard is voluntarily offering herself for female genital mutilation. This ritual is not necessary for her but she thinks of it, as a sure way to break away from the ostracisation. She meets more than she bargains for, as she understands that she will eventually share a lifelong bond with the girls with whom she performs the rite. Therefore, Diti, Luyu, Binta and Onyesonwu perform the rite together and also attend the same school. Very soon, two boys are included in the group: Mwita and Fanasi. These boys accompany the ladies out of a sense of duty and love as their partners in order to protect them and

enjoy their companionship. The friends follow her as she intends to find her biological father and seek out the sorcerer with whom it was prophesied that he would rewrite the “Great Book” (*Who Fears Death* 110) and change the relationship between the Nuru's and the Okekes. The friends are told by an older and more experienced sorcerer, that their journey together could lead to their deaths. Although the journey begins physically, it also has spiritual dimensions as liminality is crossed intermittently. Onyesonwu's leadership among her friends also means that whatever happens to her in the spiritual realm also influences what happens in the physical. Their commitment to this friendship makes them continue on the journey until Binta and Mwita are killed. Diti and Fanasi abscond after an initially turbulent relationship. Mwita's relationship with Onyesonwu is romantic. Diti and Fanasi are betrothed, while Luyu is sexually adventurous. Binta is portrayed as a victim of incest by her biological father. Initially, she is timid, but as her character develops, she poisons her father's tea and later dies trying to defend Onyesonwu from a mob of haters. The ages of the friends range from nineteen to twenty-one.

The relationship between Mwita and Onyesonwu gradually gains stability after he accepts that Onyesonwu may be his partner, but her gender does not restrict her from leadership abilities. Onyesonwo and Mwita had to struggle through their relationship, simply because Mwita felt that it is his rightful place to occupy the position of leadership. According to Onyesonwo: “Those old beliefs about the worth and fate of men and women, that was the only thing that I didn't like about Mwita. Who was he to think he was entitled to be the center of things because he was male? This had been a problem with us since we'd met (284).” Occasionally, he has to fight off the feeling of envy when she succeeds in areas in that he has failed. Sometimes Mwita understands issues before she does. But his passion and dedication to Onyesonwu always conquers his envy. As their journey progresses, it becomes much more than a hunger for revenge. It becomes a quest to liberate the Okeke people and the Nuru's from their stereotypical views about each other. They realize that the source from which this philosophy of supremacy of one over the other, emanates from the Great Book in which a creation story is told about the goddess Ani and her reason for placing the Nurus above the Okekes:

Thousands of years ago, when this land was still made of sand and dry trees, Ani looked over her lands. She rubbed her dry throat. Then she made the Seven Rivers and had them all meet, making a deep lake. And from this lake she took a deep drink. 'one day,' she said, I'll produce sunshine. Right now, I'm not in the mood.' She turned over and slept. Behind her back, as she rested, the Okeke sprang up from the sweet rivers. “They were aggressive like the rushing rivers, forever wanting to move forward. As centuries passed, the spread over Ani's lands and created and used and changed and altered and spread and consumed and multiplied...she was horrified by what she saw. She reared up tall and impossible, furious. Then she reached out into the stars and pulled a sun to the land. The Okeke people cowered. From the sun Ani plucked the Nuru. She set them on her land. That same day, flowers realized they could boom. Trees understood that they could grow. And Ani laid a curse on the Okeke. “Slaves,” Ani said. (*Who Fears Death* 111).

It was therefore believed and accepted that by reason of the record narrated in the Great Book, the Okekes must remain slaves to the Nurus. The greatest embodiment of this status quo is found in the person of Daib, Onyesonwu's biological father. Despite the power that he wields, the unity of purpose which is found in Onyesonwu, Aro, Sola, Mwita, unites to weaken him significantly. Looking critically at this chain of command, it can be inferred that there must be a collective approach to dismantle the hierarchy of supremacy of men against one another. The philosophy of supremacy is shown in *Who Fears Death* as being institutionalized and transferable from generation to generation through tutelage. Mwita proves that a new generation can receive tutelage from the extreme ideas of supremacy to choose their own preferred path. Mwita hates

Daib's tutelage as his former student but respects Aro as the only father figure he can emulate. He teaches Onyesonwu that they can map out their path without bloodshed. He therefore chooses self-defense and sacrifice instead of anger and vengeance.

Okorafor positions magic and supremacy as concepts that are discoverable and teachable. By eleven years, Onyesonwu discovers that she has special magical abilities to mutate or shape-shift into different animals, she discovers that this ability is a heritage from the unpleasant history of her conception. Just as the Okeke and Nuru people also discover that they live in a segregated community for a reason: "The Okeke people have skin the colour of the night because they were created before the day. They were the first. Later, after much had happened, Nuru arrived. They came from the stars and that's why their skin is the colour of the sun (*Who Fears Death* 25). It is significant that it is not through magic or supremacy alone that equality will be achieved for the people of the Seven Rivers but through the rewriting of the Great Book.

In the narrative, this group of friends begin their journey by pursuing the prophecy of a Seer who foretold that a tall, male, Nuru sorcerer would come and rewrite the Great Book, and bring about change for both peoples. They soon discover that it is Onyesonwu that is to fulfil that which was prophesied. This realization, although heavy to bear; is manageable with the comrades that follow her through the actualization of this epic event. Okorafor through her characters, implies that comradery is essential to achieving success in their quest to change the message of the Great Book. Okafor's description of the Great Book suggests that it is popular and available for all citizens to read. More importantly, the book is respected and is instrumental to the attitudinal orientation of the people living around the seven rivers.

Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* presents Onyesonwu's quest as a complementary effort between the sexes. There is no denial about issues pertaining to sexuality, envy or personal insecurities but despite these challenges, their support for one another is more significant than the battle for dominance among the sexes.

Termination of Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War

The sexualization of war has long been an ugly occurrence in the history of warfare. In *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor graphically depicts the horror of sexual violation and explains the philosophy behind this heinous act:

They wanted to create Ewu children. Such children are not children of the forbidden love between a Nuru and an Okeke, nor are they Noahs, Okekes born without colour. Ewu are children of violence. An Okeke woman will never kill a child kindled inside of her. She would go against even her husband to keep a child in her womb alive. However, custom dictates that a child is the child of her father. These Nuru had planted poison. An Okeke woman who gave birth to an Ewu child was bound to the Nuru through her child. The Nuru sought to destroy Okeke families at the very root (*Who Fears Death* 29).

The rape of Onyesonwu's mother was particularly cryptic because as he forces himself into her, he sang sweetly, recorded the act and willed her to conceive a son. Najeeba, counters the attack using her power to "alu (345)" by praying that she conceives a daughter instead. This change of her choice of gender, makes Onyesonwu a foe instead of an accomplice to her biological father. According to a UN report about atrocities committed in Ethiopia, Haiti, and Ukraine, there exists a "horrifying use of sexual violence to torment civilian populations; punish ethnic, political or cultural rivals to assert and maintain control (np)". The report states that international law provides protections against sexual violence but the enforcement of the provisions is weak. The UN proposes that "International organizations need to build a framework for developing country-specific, survival-focused responses – centered on investing in local organizations

when possible – that can provide resources and avenues to justice for victims (np)”. In *Who Fears Death*, justice is meted out to Daib, through the daughter he conceived and the apprentice he scorned. His downfall comes through their collective effort. Mwita applies some inscriptions he had received from a Ssoli sorcerer, and sticks it on Daib's neck. While the physical scuffle is going on, Mwita is fatally injured. Onyesonwu finds the power within herself to continue the fight after it is clear that Mwita cannot survive the injuries. She does not kill Daib when he is most vulnerable but he sustains crippling injuries before his final retribution. It can be deduced that Okorafor is suggesting that dismantling sexual violence against women must be strategic, collective and local in its approach.

The No-Violence Philosophy

Onyesonwu's partner, lover, healer, and only other Ewu character in the novel, is called Mwita. He epitomizes the philosophy of no-violence. He patiently explains to Onyesonwu that the circumstances of her birth is not the same for all people who share her skin colour. In his case, his biological mother was not raped. He is ostracized simply because his parent's love was forbidden by the society in which they lived. Mwita tutors Onyesonwu to control her emotions of anger and vengeance. He explains that Okeke rebels who had staged a rebellion against the Nuru's also committed heinous crimes. Mwita tells Onyesonwu: “It's not as you think... there is sickness on both sides. Be careful. Your father sees things in black and white, too. The Okeke bad, Nuru good. (*Who Fears Death* 177)”. Mwita's uncle and aunt were murdered by the Okeke's just because they were Nuru's but they were not guilty of any wrongdoing. In the novel, genocide is portrayed as a weapon that is blind to justice. Conversely, Onyesonwu does not kill Daib when she has a chance because she remembers what Mwita had taught her. The logic of reasoning is that the cycle of vengeance would continue endlessly until a different kind of retribution is allowed to take its course. Onyesonwu deliberately goes “alu” to conceive for Mwita releasing the potent power of a sorceress. She tells Luyu “I don't know how far it went. I don't think it touched the other towns. But where there are dead men, there are pregnant women”. (414). This action simultaneously eliminates the army that Daib had prepared to march over to the East, an army, brainwashed by his philosophy of violence, torture and rape. Daib himself had confessed that:

I let men have their way and leave most of the Okeke women alive. Turning them loose is like sending a virus to all those eastern communities. The disgraced women run there to give birth to their Ewu babies. I brought that part of the plan to the Seven Rivers council head myself. I am her greatest general and my plan was brilliant. Of course, she listened. She's a weak puppet. (*Who Fears Death* 407).

Resorting to magic to execute judgment against violent male oppressors instead of physical force becomes a counteracting action. Daib's method is what he calls “easy juju (407)” so that his soldiers sexually and incessantly attack the women without getting exhausted. The use of magic was put into motion even at the very conception of Onyesonwu. Mwita explains that:

Your mother knew exactly what she was doing when she asked that you be a sorceress once you were born and a girl. It was her revenge. Your mother can travel within, she can alu. The word from the mythical creature we know of as the Alusi comes from the actual sorcerer's term 'to alu' to travel within: (*Who Fears Death* 345).

The fact that Onyesonwo was born a female, is a fact that Daib greatly regrets. He plainly tells Onyesonwu: “Why are you a girl (407)?” An interpretation of events in *Who Fears Death* reiterates the idea that justice for the victims of sexual violence should come through non-violent means. This is demonstrated when Onyesonwu herself was almost raped by some young men in Banza town. She had been angry enough to summon powers to work violently against the men who were attacking her, but she was constrained by Mwita's reminders not to employ any form of violence.

Rewriting the Canon

The story about Onyesonwu resonates as a rewriting of the Abrahamic faith in world religion. In the Holy Bible for example, some have argued that the Negroes are cursed because they are descendants of Ham, one of Noah's sons who laughed at his father's nakedness. But this has been a disputed topic for lack of proof that negroes are descendants of Ham. Second, the prediction of Onyesonwo's coming and her mission of bringing change is similar to Jesus Christ. Furthermore, her persecution and public execution are very similar. Onyesonwo's body is buried alive except for her head which is stoned repeatedly until she dies. She is portrayed as a victim of wrongdoing by a majority of haters. She is abandoned by some of her followers, and there is an earthquake or shaking of the ground after she dies. The major difference between her death and Jesus Christ is that Okorafor embellishes its description with more supernatural elements like lights flowing out of her and the melting of the sand around her body. There are however some clear differences, like the twins who cremate her body. The ending of the novel is consistent with the metafictional tradition of writing. There are two endings written for the narrative. The first ending is found in the epilogue of the novel, the narrator is switched from Onyesonwo as the first-person narrator to another first person narrator, who is writing Onyesonwo's story and observing events. This other narrator is a twin from Chassa town who was allowed to see Onyesonwo in her prison cell before she is executed. In the second ending, the narrative voice moves to the third person omniscient where Sola, Aro and Najeeba, three sorcerers witness how Onyesonwo overpowers six young men who had come to arrest her. A blood thirsty crowd of Nuru men and women eagerly await her execution but she changes into a *Kponyungo* firespitter and shoots into the sky.

After her death, major changes begin to manifest: All women, Okeke and Nuru discovered that:

Some could turn wine into fresh sweet drinking water, others glowed in the night, and some could hear the dead. Others remembered the past, before the Great Book. Others could peruse the spirit world and still be in the physical. Thousands of abilities. All bestowed upon women. There it was. Onye's gift. In the death of herself and her child, Onye gave birth to us all. This place will never be the same. Slavery is over (*Who Fears Death* 425).

Even the powers that the women possess are similar to the miracles of Christ as written in the Bible but in reverse. It reads like a literal rewriting of the holy scriptures. According to Setzer:

Women's rights advocates had the same two puzzles to solve as abolitionists did: Jesus' silence on their issue and Paul's (and deutoro-Paul's) verbosity. Although Stanton, Gage and others accuse Christianity for its long standing anti-woman bias, they hold Jesus remarkably innocent of it, preferring to indict Paul. Frances Willard called Jesus "her [woman's] Emancipator", and "Woman's liberator, possessing both motherly and fatherly qualities.... (np)

In Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* the rewriting of the canon places an unlikely individual who is dually colonized as a woman and an Ewu child to carry the burden of being the "messiah" who rewrites the Great Book to bring equality between the Nurus and the Okekes in the Seven Rivers that the goddess Ani has created. These seven rivers can be interpreted as an allusion to the seven continents of the world. Through this, it can be deduced that Okorafor is suggesting that people have the power to redirect and rewrite the social changes that they believe in.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Onyesonwu's insecurities as a child who thought she had brought shame and dishonour to her parents shift to boldness and great renown by the end of the novel. She becomes a living legend to the people of the Seven Rivers. Even though she undergoes daunting challenges, she emerges as a successful heroine no matter the kind of ending that the reader chooses to adopt: either as a staunch believer in fate, or a believer in the unfettered strength of

magical power. The problems of contemporary reality which Okorafor addresses in the novel, resonate with anger and sympathy for the victims who have suffered from the abuse.

Recommendation

This study has shown Okorafor's major thematic concerns as seen through the portrayal of characters and events in the novel. However, there is still room for interpretation and analysis with regards to her portrayal of female genital mutilation in *Who Fears Death*. It is depicted as an accepted norm in the society because of its strong roots in tradition.

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