

## **Influential Ideologies:**

### **An Examination of the Justification of Hate and Power in *Who Fears Death***

By Max Barrows

Oscar winning director Michael Haeke once said “It's impossible to consider living without ideals. However, when ideas lead to ideology, that's a very dangerous thing. Ideology then leads to creating the image of an enemy, and it leads to the murder and massacre that we've seen since the beginning of time.” At its core this quote speaks to the effect that destructive accepted ideologies can have on a society. The novel *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor demonstrates how powerful and damaging these ideologies can be. Throughout the novel Okorafor demonstrates how ideologies, societal norms, and traditions, which often stem from religious or political beliefs, often function as justification for the ruling class within a society to discriminate against the lower classes and that these ideologies are often the single most difficult entity to defeat.

In an interview, Okorafor once said “You would be surprised at how little of this book I had to make up (Alter).” There is perhaps no clearer example of this than the way weaponized rape is used throughout the novel. The way that rape is used throughout the novel clearly mirrors the real-world conflict in Dufur, Sudan which occurred in 2004. The conflict in Darfur was a result of long ethnic tensions between nomadic cattle and camel herders, who view themselves as Arabs, and the more sedentary farmers, who see their ancestry as African. Rape was used by the Janjaweed, an Islamic militant group, as a systematic campaign to humiliate the women, as well as their families, and to weaken tribal ethnic lines. In Sudan, and in many Arab cultures, a child's ethnicity is attached to the ethnicity of the father. One victim of this terrible trauma recounted her

experience: "They said, 'Dog, you have sex with me. The government gave me permission to rape you. This is not your land anymore, abid (Slave), go.'" (Wax)

In *Who Fears Death* nearly identical scenes are seen throughout the novel. Nuru men rape Okeke woman in hopes of impregnating them, thus destroying Okeke families at the root. While in real world Sudan, the Janjaweed justify using weaponized rape because the government allowed for it, the fictional Nuru justify their actions using the Great Book. In *Who Fears Death* the Great Book serves as the foundational belief system for most of the society in which Onye lives. It is from the Great Book that the Nuru draw their power. The Nuru also run the government, so actions are both institutionalized and sanctioned by all of those in power. When Onye confronts her father Daib, who is a high-ranking Military officer, the reader learns that it was in fact his idea to weaponize rape. "I let my men have their way and leave most of the Okeke woman alive. Turning them loose is like sending a virus to tall those eastern communities. {...} I brought that plan to the 7 river council head myself." The Nuru soldiers not only justify their actions because the goddess Ani deems it okay, but also because their leaders encourage it. During one rape scene in the beginning of the novel, the Nuru men sing a song showcasing their justification for their actions. "*The blood of the Okeke runs like water/ We take their goods and shame their forefathers/ We beat them with a heavy hand/ then take what they call their land./ The power of Ani belongs to us/ and so we will slay you to dust/ Ugly filthy slaves, Ani has finally killed you!*" (Okorafor 25) Both the fictional Nuru and the real-world Janjaweed exemplify how acts that seem so utterly repugnant can become justifiable within a culture. This is just one of many examples seen throughout the novel that demonstrates how cultural ideologies can lead to atrocities. The Nuru are only able to treat the Okeke like this because the ideologies within the Great Book, and their own society allow them to do so. When an idea, no

matter how radical or unjust, is accepted by a large enough group of people that idea becomes a source of power.

As mentioned, the artifact that plays the single biggest role in the novel in the formation of dangerous ideologies is the Great Book. The reader learns through expositional dialogue from Onye at the beginning of the novel about some of the ideologies taught in the Great Book “It is well known that the Okeke were born slaves of the Nuru... Long ago during the old African era, they had done something terrible causing Ani to put this duty on their backs (Okorafor 23).” Story such as this through the Great Book work to reinforce the ideals that the Okeke are inherently less than the Nuru. It is these few lines of text within the Great Book that make way for all of the injustices that the Okeke have to face at the hands of the Nuru. The way in which Okorafor uses the Great Book in the novel to justify the mistreat of the Okeke, seems to greatly reflect how parts of the bible were often used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to justify slavery. Slaveholders often justified slavery by citing the Bible (Tyson). They would chose specific versus for their justification such as , "slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling" (Ephesians 6:5), or "tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect" (Titus 2:9). However, slave owners in the 1800's were nowhere near the first to sight religious ideology as justification for otherwise immoral actions. Writer Karl Thompson points out many times throughout history when religious ideologies where abused by the ruling class. For example, in Medieval Europe Kings ruled by the 'divine right of God'. Devine Right is a political ideology that essentially states that since a King or Queen is born into power, it was God's will for that person to rule. Ruling under the idea of Divine Right made it so that a monarch was subject to no earthly authority (Thompson). The Nuru use this same tactic to assert their dominance over the Okeke. According the Great Book, the Nuru were made to rule over the

Okeke. Since the both the Okeke and Nuru believe that it was Ani's will for the Okeke to be ruled by the Nuru the Okeke never question the oppressive system they are trapped in.

Possibly the most extreme example, however, is in the ancient Egyptian belief which held that Pharaohs were both men and gods at the same time, giving them near limitless power (Thompson). This is yet another example that demonstrates the dangers of religious Ideologies. People are conditioned to never question a given gods will. So whether it be the ancient Egyptians clamming to be gods themselves, or the fictional Nuru clamming it is Ani's will for them to murder the Okeke, religious ideologies that are spun to give power from a God to a specific group have constantly worked to keep the lower class oppressed. Throughout the course of human history, terrible things have been done in the names of Gods from countless religions. *Who Fears Death* mirrors this unfortunate truth. The Nuru believe that the Goddess, Ani, created them to be superior to the Okeke so therefore it is their right to treat them any way they see fit.

Throughout the novel, *The Great Book* not only uses its ideologies to keep the Okeke complacent, it also justifies racism. The creation story of the Nuru in the *Great Book* makes it clear that those with dark skin are undesirable.

When Ani was rested enough to produce sunshine, she turned over. She was horrified by what she saw. She reared up, tall and impossible, furious. The she reached 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 bloom. Trees understood that they could grow.

Because of stories like this in the *Great Book*, the Okeke people have fallen victim to internalized racism. Internalized racism is a marginalized groups acceptance of the beliefs pressed upon them. Internalized racism leads to racial groups thinking they are inferior, less

worthy, less capable, less intelligent or less attractive than other races (Tyson). Victims of internalized racism often wish they were of a different race. When confronted with the issues of race, one Okeke man exclaimed “It is written! We are what we are!” It has clear throughout the novel that because of the teaching within the Great Book, the Okeke have fallen victim to internalized racism.

Perhaps no character is impacted more by internalized racism than Onye. Being Ewu, she is the most discriminated against of any other group in the novel. Since her birth, Onye has been looked down upon because of the color of her skin. Because she is neither Okeke, nor Nuru she is discriminated against and looked down upon by all. Even the Noah, who are albinos, and to some extent outcast themselves, look down upon Onye with disgust. Onye herself says “Noah’s looked at me with the same disgust as Okekes of a darker shade.” Because Onye is aware of how all the people around her view her, she struggles greatly with her self-image. This is because she has fallen victim to the sociological concept of the Looking Glass self.

According to published author and professor of Sociology, Dr. Lisa McIntyre, the Looking-Glass Self is a concept that has three major components and is unique to humans. In the Looking-Glass Self a person views himself or herself through others' social perceptions and in turn gains identity. Identity, or self, is the result of the concept in which we learn to see ourselves as others do. The Looking-Glass Self begins at an early age and continues throughout the entirety of a person’s life as one will never stop modifying their self unless all social interactions are ceased (McIntyre). Essentially, because the society in which Onye lives sees her as less than, she has spent her entire life believing that she is less than as a result.

Intersectional racism is another form of racism that can clearly be seen in Okeke society because of not only the Great Book, but also because of societal norms. Interracial racism is

discrimination within a racial community against members of that same racial community (Tyson). Often this is seen by othering. Professor of Law and Professor of African American Studies and Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley defines othering as action by which an individual or group becomes mentally classified in somebody's mind as "not one of us". Rather than always remembering that every person is a complex bundle of emotions, ideas and motivations and many other subtle aspects, it's sometimes easier to dismiss them as being in some way less human, and less worthy of respect and dignity (Powell). Onye is repeatedly Othered by the group of friends she spends the novel with. Although they themselves are Okeke, and subject to discrimination in their own right, they still assert a social dominance over Onye. No friend does this as much as Diti. She refers to Onye as "An ugly Ewu woman (Okorafor 203)" and says "Your used to living like an animal in the sand (Okorafor 196)" Often, She as well as Onye's other do this unconsciously. Diti Herself explains this. "I don't hate you, but I hate what you are. I hate whenever I look at you...It's hard for us, Onye. Eleven years of believing that Ewu people are dirty, lowly and violent people. Then we met you and then Mwita. (Okorafor 229)" Onye's friends make these comments typically not because of a vicious will, but because they been conditioned to believe that Ewu are this way. Even though the girls personally know Ewu who contradict the negative views they have been instilled with, they still can't help but revert back to what they have been taught to believe.

The ideology of superiority becomes even more dangerous when those who are discriminated against and seen as inferior believe that they are, in fact, inferior. Famed Philosopher Karl Marx once said "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. it is the opium of the people.(Brainy Quotes)" Throughout many of his writings Marx identifies countless ways in which religion

plays a fundamental role in keeping certain groups of people oppressed. Many of the problems that Marx identifies can be seen throughout *Who Fears Death*.

One belief of Marx was that the ‘objective’ truth was that the proletariat (common people) suffer deprivations because of their exploitation by the Bourgeois (Ruling class). However, people fail to realize this because religion teaches them that all of the misery in life is God’s will (Thompson). This is essentially what is seen throughout *Who Fears Death*. The Okeke, specifically the Okeke in the West, have accepted their position at the bottom of societal hierarchy because they believe it is Ani’s will. Throughout the novel the phrase “it is written” is used by characters to justify actions they believe to be right because the Great Book makes it so. When Onye’s village has meeting to discuss what to do about the Nuru moving east one Okeke man says “It’s been written in the great book! We are what we are. We shouldn’t have risen up in the first place. Let those who try die for it (Okorafor 101).” The Okeke often buy into their own suffering simply because “It is written.” Even though they are clearly oppressed, the ideology that has been instilled throughout the society has made it so the Okeke do not question their standing.

Marx also points out that Religion can offer hope of supernatural intervention to solve problems on earth: this makes it pointless for humans to try to do anything significant to help improve their current conditions (Thompson). In the early parts of the novel Onye’s village is concerned that the Nuru will make their way across the desert to attack them. When the people of the village voiced their concerns, Oyo the Ponder, a village Elder, says “Though the plight of our people in the west is tragic, it is unlikely that the hardship will affect us. Pray to Ani for better days.” Praying to Ani is the solution that many Okeke find to be the best method of dealing with

their struggles. Encouraging prayer as the best way to bring about change is another way that the ideologies of religion function to keep the status quo.

The living embodiment of the status quo throughout the novel is Diab, Onye's birth father. As a Military officer, he has made it his life's work to exterminate the Okeke race and keep the Nuru in power. Sola, a powerful and knowledgeable sorcerer shares this with Onye and Mwita before they confront him. "He is the one who will bring death to your precious East. He gathers thousands of men still crazed from the ease of wiping out so many Okeke's in the West. He's convinced them that greatness lies in spreading. Diab, the military giant. Mothers and fathers name their first-born sons after him (Okorafor 322). Diab has become radicalized by the Great Book. He believes that he is on mission from Ani, to destroy the Okeke. Diab is also fueled by a prophecy from a Nuru Seer. The prophecy states "A Nuru man will come and force the Great Books rewriting. He will be very tall with a long beard. His mannerisms will be gentle, but he will be cunning and full of vigor and furry. A sorcerer. When he comes there will be change for both the Okeke and The Nuru." Daib believed he was the Nuru man the prophecy talked about and that the change the prophecy was talking about for the Okeke was the elimination of their race. "I have a plan to complete [...] a Nuru sorcerer will come and force and Great Books rewriting. What a different book it will be once I exterminate the Okeke." Diab is the physical manifestation of the corrupt power given to the Nuru through the Great Book.

Throughout the novel, Onye is on a mission to defeat her father, and what he represents. Her father appears to be the clear antagonist in the novel. After she learns that her father is trying to kill her, she realizes that she must confront him. The novel builds to what seem to be a final show down. However, when Onye and her father do finally meet, their conflict is over in a matter of paragraphs. Okorafor's choice for this conflict to be over so quick implies that Onye's



father may not have been the true antagonist throughout the novel. In. While he is powerful, he is mortal man. Throughout the novel, Diab is painted as an all-powerful entity, but when Mwita, and Onye enter the House of Osugbo, which serves as Diab's headquarters, the reader very much gets the idea that Diab is just another cog on the Nuru machine. He has no evil lair or extravagant hideout, but instead has what appears to be a standard office. He has his first and last name engraved above the door, as is standard in most offices. He is not even the most powerful of the Nuru. He must get permission from other members of the council before he can do anything. On top of this, when Sola recounts the day Diab was born he makes it clear he was born the same as everybody else. "Daib was born on a normal day. There was no great storm or crash of lighting or burning corn cob in the sky." While in the beginning of the novel Daib is made out to be an all-powerful deity, by his death at the end of the novel, Daib is shown to be a mere mortal. While Onye once believed that her biggest enemy was her father, the novel's true antagonist is the Great Book. The Great Book and the ideologies it instills is really the force that Onye was doing battle with the whole time. In this context, the death of quick death of Onye's father symbolizes how defeating a singular person, no matter how powerful, is much easier than trying to change ideologies that have been instilled within a society.

Author of *Who Fears Death*, Nnedi Okorafor, likely makes this point in her novel because as a daughter born to Nigerian immigrants in 1980's America, she was subjected to racism, and other discriminatory ideologies her entire life. In an interview with The African Channel, she recounted some of the racist experiences she encountered upon moving into a new neighborhood in 1980's America. "We were one of the first black families to move into the neighborhood, and it was a little jarring for the residents. We learned what it was like to be called nigger, fairly often. We dealt with a lot of racism in that area (African Channel)." Okorafor has

seen and been subjected to hate filled ideologies her entire life, so it is no surprise that her writings often show the dangers of these hateful ideologies. In a separate interview with *Light Speed Magazine* when asked about the subject of feuds and hate throughout her novels she laments “We just hate and judge because that’s what’s been done before (Coleman).” At its core that is what *Who Fears Death* is addressing. Hateful ideologies are not something that people are born with. They are taught, institutionalized, and propagated to the masses by societal norms, and traditions, which often stem from religious or political beliefs.

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