

## **Feminism and Violence in *Who Fears Death*: Embracing the Fear in the Classroom**

By TillieAnn Boliard

Nnedi Okorafor's 2010 novel *Who Fears Death* might be a futuristic, post-apocalyptic, and magical science-fiction story, but it is also a very real and serious book that discusses mature and important topics like rape, sexism, racism, religion, and more. The novel follows Onyesonwu (Onye) (whose name translated means "who fears death"), a young woman who is training to be a sorcerer and her journey to get revenge on her birth father who raped and impregnated her mother. The novel has quite a bit to say regarding gender and feminism, topics that are important for us as a society and an education system to discuss and dive into. While the society within the novel is quite anti-feminist, from the sexist treatment of Onye and the other female characters to abjection<sup>1</sup> of the female body, the book itself is very much a feminist text. As a future high school English teacher, I value novels like this that make us question the patriarchal views of society and believe that they have a place in the forefront of the classroom, regardless of if they have violent and graphic material or not. Okorafor has created a novel rich with feminist characters and a patriarchal society for them to fight against, but she has also created a novel worthy of teaching in the classroom despite its graphic visuals and content.

*Who Fears Death* would be considered, technically, a patriarchal text because it embodies characters who conform to normal gender roles, the objectification of women, and sexist characters and norms. The society of the world Okorafor has created runs on patriarchal views. Men are in power in all aspects, from the Seven Rivers Kingdom and Darfur in the east, to the Okeke villages throughout the west. You can see However, as Lois Tyson points out in *Using Critical Theory*, it is important to remember that "a literary work can illustrate patriarchal

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<sup>1</sup> Abjection, an idea introduced in Julia Kristeva's 1982 essay "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection," is the state of being cast off because something or someone is seen as disgusting or horrific.

ideology in order to show us what's *wrong* with that ideology" (Tyson 140). Three characters who showcase the Okeke and Nuru's<sup>2</sup> patriarchal views are two of her friends, Luyu and Binta, and Onye herself.

Luyu is, I would say, the second most feminist character within the novel, right behind Onye. When Onye, Luyu, Binta, and their other friend Diti were all eleven years old, they decided to undergo the Eleventh Year Rite. The Eleventh Year Rite is a ritual in which a scalpel infused with juju cuts off their clitorous so that they could not enjoy sexual contact and feel pain if they engage in sexual contact before marriage. Luyu becomes the closest to Onye out of the three girls that Onye went through her Eleventh Year Rite with. Luyu's feminism comes into play with her sexuality. Luyu, prior to the ritual, is made to admit that she has had intercourse many times. Luyu shows a lot of frustration and anger afterwards when she realizes that trying to have sex causes her immense pain and she finds it completely unfair: "I tried [to abstain from sex], but I enjoy it. I've always enjoyed it! Why shouldn't I?" (Okorafor 78). While on their journey together, Onye lifts the juju from her friends and Luyu ends up becoming sexually active again by having an affair with Diti's fiance/husband Fanasi. During the group's time with the Vah<sup>3</sup>, Luyu explores her sexuality even more with the men of the sandstorm community. Even with the open sexuality within the Vah community, the sorcerer Ssaiku, when saying goodbye to Onye and her group before they continue their travels, says to Luyu, "Ting tells me about you. In many ways, you're like a man in your bravery and your ... other appetites. Again, I wonder if Ani is testing me by showing me a woman like you" (Okorafor 323).

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<sup>2</sup> The Okeke and Nuru are the two races most present within the novel.

<sup>3</sup> The Vah, or the "Red People," is a community that live within a moving and magical sandstorm, first introduced in chapter 41 of the novel.

Binta is the example of Onye's group of a woman who falls into the gender norms set by their society. Binta is very timid and soft-spoken throughout almost the entirety of the novel. While Onye, Luyu, and Diti become angry that the Eleventh Year Rite causes them pain when they try to engage in sexual intercourse, Binta sees it as a gift. Binta claims that the pain from sex is a gift from Ani, not a curse like the other girls believe. When Luyu snaps that she doesn't want this protection from boys by Ani, Binta responds that she does want the protection: "You don't know what's good for you. You're lucky that you aren't pregnant! Ani protected you. She protects me. My father..." (Okorafor 79). This is the moment that Binta accidentally lets it slip that her father has tried to sexually abuse her again since having been forced to stop after their Eleventh Year Rite. She sees the juju as a form of protection from her father because "he understands now" and "he won't touch me anymore" due to it causing her immense pain (Okorafor 79). If you stopped there you might believe that Okorafor is saying that because Binta has fallen into typical gender norms and follows the patriarchy that everything is working out for her. However, later in the novel Binta's father no longer lets Binta's pain stop him from taking her by force and sexually abusing her (Okorafor 157). Instead, Okorafor is showing the readers that by falling into line with what their society wants from her, Binta has become a victim.

When Binta decides to leave with Onye and go on this adventure with the group, she begins to develop her own level of feminism. Before leaving Jwahir, Binta poisons her father as an act of revenge and closure for herself for his repeated sexual abuse to her over the years.

Okorafor writes:

She was extremely lighthearted for a girl who had poisoned her father mere hours ago. She told me about putting the slow acting heart root extract in her father's morning tea. She'd watched him drink it and then snuck out of the house, not leaving even a note. By

nightfall the man would be dead. “He had it coming,” she’d whispered to me, with a grin.  
(167)

This act of revenge is an example of Binta finally pulling herself from the “good girl” patriarchal role she has been forced into for so long, but at what cost?

Onye, since the beginning of the novel, is very headstrong and speaks up fairly regularly. When the old sorcerer Aro is beginning to teach Onye, he instructs her that she must not have intercourse with Mwita at all for the time being. Aro says that it is Onye’s job to refrain from sex, that Mwita has desires and can’t be expected to withhold his urges. Onye becomes extremely frustrated with Aro and Okorafor writes:

“If you’re going to teach me, I don’t want to hear any of that! I’ll stop having intercourse with Mwita. Okay. I apologize. But he and I will both make the effort to refrain. Like two humans!” I was shouting now. “Flawed, imperfect, creatures! That’s what we *both* are, *Oga!* That’s what we ALL are!” (Okorafor 137)

While Aro embodies classic patriarchal and sexist views, Onye is a stark contrast to him with her forward thinking and ideology on equality. Onye continues to be this way throughout the entirety of the novel. This makes her look great to readers, but it causes judgement and mistreatment by other characters within the novel who are stuck in patriarchal ideologies. Even Onye’s female friends sometimes find her feminist viewpoints to be a bit extreme because of the way they have been raised to believe and live.

The novel shows anti-feminist ideologies as well when it discusses the female body. Throughout the novel, Onye is othered because she is not only *Ewu*, but because she is a woman practicing in sorcery. Onye is seen by Aro and others as not just a woman, but a disgusting woman. When Onye first asks Aro to teach her the Great Mystic Points, he denies her because

she is a woman. He then adds, “And furthermore, you’re filthy with woman blood as we speak,” in reference to her menstrual cycle (Okorafor 66). Once Aro finally accepts Onye as his student, he sends her into the desert for her initiation with the old sorcerer Sola: “‘Aro calls me here and a female sits before me,’ he said. He flared his nostrils. ‘One who will bleed soon. Very very soon. This place is sacred, you know’” (Okorafor 125). These moments and patriarchal views from the novel showcase the abjectification of women within *Who Fears Death*.

In Julia Kristeva’s 1982 essay “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,” Kristeva explains that female abjection is when womanly body functions are seen as “pollution,” in a way: Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (Kristeva 71)

In other words, men and society often treat women as disgusting and unnatural for the natural occurrence of their menstrual cycle because, psychologically, it means that women are different and that scares them. Women being different and bleeding from their vaginas is, after all, disgusting and a threat to a man’s societal role, according to Kristeva’s essay. Aro accepts the role as Onye’s teacher only because of the threat of a woman in power when he says, “You’re a danger to us all if I don’t. You’re a danger to us all if I do, but at least I’ll be your Master” (Okorafor 109). Aro continues to participate in the abjectification of women when he talks about the dangers of Onye getting pregnant while apprenticing, “You and Mwita are not to have intercourse. Not only will it disrupt your learning, but if you were to become pregnant, you’d risk a lot more than your own and the child’s life” (Okorafor 137). These quotes show that Aro,

and many others, see a woman's reproductive capabilities (menstrual cycle and pregnancy) as a risk to the balance of life the men have so carefully built.

Okorafor doesn't shy away from these discussions in the slightest. The sexual abuse of Binta, the sexism of Aro, Sola, and Mwita, the judgements of Luyu, and the mistreatment of Onye are in no way hidden in the background. One does not need to read between the lines to see the patriarchal society living within *Who Fears Death*. If you've ever heard the phrase "show, don't tell," then you know the impact writing can have when a writer decides to show the reader something instead of just discuss it within the novel. This is the case when we are shown the rape of Onye's mother, Najeeba, by the Nuru general Daib. This flashback scene is extremely detailed, down to the way he raped her and how she later felt the semen from Daib inside of her (Okorafor 19-21). As a future educator, I understand that the idea of showing scenes like this to our students can bring on an uncomfortable feeling. Even so, it's important to show students texts that include violent and controversial topics like in *Who Fears Death*.

A novel like *Who Fears Death* would most likely be challenged if an educator wished to bring it into the classroom because of these violent scenes and controversial topics. However, challenging, banning, and censoring books from our students does nothing to benefit them. Contrary to what some parents might want to believe, educators do not introduce these books to negatively impact their children: "Controversial issues do not arise for the sole purpose of us arguing them after we read about them in [a] textbook; they are a part of the cultural dialogue because of real issues that affect real people" (McCartan 18). Many scholars believe that exposing youth to sensitive and controversial material is actually more helpful than not. Teaching feminism, whether using novels with graphic scenes or not, is known to have amazing benefits, like "the reduction in sexual harassment at school," "to help reduce the high rate of teen

pregnancies,” and “to help students ... build positive interpersonal relationships” (Kearl). Exposing students to feminist texts and ideas helps all students, male and female, better understand society and how to support women. Books that are or could be banned also tend to help students understand different viewpoints, expose students to diverse characters and cultures, and teach valuable lessons (Zeiger). Youth are less likely to be tolerant of other cultures and people the more we limit the texts and ideas they are exposed to. These books take almost everyone out of their comfort zone. Parents will be uncomfortable at the thought because of their tendency to want to protect their children; students will be uncomfortable because they won’t have had much exposure to such graphic material; and teachers will be uncomfortable because it’s thin ice to tread at times. It is not suggested to introduce these texts to students at a young age like third grade, but it is important to begin this introduction before the end of their high school careers. These students are “about to enter a world where these issues will appear and what better place to practice being taken out of your comfort zone than in the safety of the classroom or your own home?” (Zeiger). Teachers may be exposing students to sensitive material in the classroom, but they are doing so in a controlled, trusting, and safe way, and for a reason.

Wanting to bring these sensitive and violent texts into the classroom can be a hard journey for educators. These texts are more than likely going to be challenged, at one point or another, by school administration, parents, and/or other educators. That is why it is important to follow advice available on how to do so. In the planning and preparing stages, an educator should choose the novel they want to teach carefully by not looking away from banned/challenged books or books deemed “inappropriate” by others (Anderson). As Jill Anderson explains in her article “Bringing Controversial Books into the Classroom” on Harvard

University's Usable Knowledge online platform, finding books is as simple as taking to the internet and searching through book reviews on websites like Goodreads, Amazon, Commonsense Media, and more, as well as having an open conversation with the school librarian for suggestions they might have. Once an educator has chosen the book they want to incorporate into their classroom, they need to make their case on why they have chosen this book, including being ready and willing to argue for their decision and having any research available to back the decision before officially introducing the book to administration, parents, students, and the community (Anderson).

After the book is approved for the classroom by the school administration, and whatever other hoops the educator needs to jump through to get it into the classroom, educators still need to be careful and aware of how they teach the material. It's important for the educator to create a safe space in their classroom where respect and safety are prioritized for discussions (Anderson). The sensitive and violent material within the chosen book will prompt discussions and reactions from students that one can't always plan for perfectly. Making sure that the classroom is a safe space for these discussions and reactions will ensure a more productive and beneficial learning experience for students. Educators must also remember to keep a stable and clear line of communication open with parents (Anderson). This line of communication will prove useful should parents have questions or concerns regarding the book. Educators should avoid focusing all class time on the parts of the text that is graphic or controversial. It is detrimental for educators to teach the entire book and "be able to connect the book to broader learning outcomes" (Anderson). By making sure to connect the book to as many teaching standards and learning outcomes as possible, an educator can actively build their case as to why they have the book in the classroom.



*Who Fears Death* is a gripping book filled with violent and graphic scenes and topics. Onye's story is filled with things like weaponized rape, a controlling patriarchy, death, revenge, racism, and more. But in the end, we get a glimpse at the utopia Onye was fighting for when we see the lovers meeting on rooftops and children playing in the schoolyard. It's not exciting to show horrific scenes like the one of Onye's mother's rape and Binta's death to students, but without despair, how can we teach them to have hope and fight for a better world? Without knowing the trials and hardships of Onye and the Okeke people, the peaceful life at the end of the novel is nothing special. It's the journey to that change that makes the change important. If we don't teach novels like this in our classroom, whether we choose *Who Fears Death* or a different title, then we are doing a huge disservice to our young adults.

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