

Sisterhood of the Traveling Women: The Impact of Groups of Women in *Who Fears Death*

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Although one person may seem powerful on their own, they are typically strengthened by the people around them. This is especially true for women who are supported by other women. In *Who Fears Death*, Nnedi Okorafor crafts a story telling the tale of Onyesonwu (Onye) Ubaid-Ogundimu, a woman born with sorcery abilities who is destined to change her world. Although the use of a female protagonist is commendable enough, Okorafor's work is even more influential through the secondary characters and other women that she showcases throughout the work. These characters not only influence the story as individuals, but also as powerful groups of women. Onye finds support in her Eleventh Rite sisterhood, but other groups in the story also function in similar ways outside of her story. Despite their circumstances and the world around them, these women manage to thrive and survive. The sisterhoods present in *Who Fears Death* bring power to their members and provide a support system for the women. These groups of women mirror the patterns and behaviors of women from our own world and provide an avenue for Okorafor to share her views on sisterhood.

It is imperative to note that world of *Who Fears Death* is worse than the current reality that readers face every day. The novel takes place in the future, located roughly around present-day Sudan. Although Onye's world is more advanced than the present, they still struggle with societal issues like racism and slavery. The book references two ethnicities: Okeke and Nuru. The Okeke are the "created ones," and Okorafor describes their skin as being the color of night (black) because they were created before the day; the Nuru, however, come from the stars and have sun-like skin (Okorafor 16). Contextually, readers are to assume that the Okeke people are derived from Sudanese cultures, and the Nuru people are influenced by modern Middle Eastern

peoples. However, these two groups do not live in peace. The Great Book is the source of parable and religion that most people in *Who Fears Death* subscribe to. This book tells them that the Okekes are to be the slaves of the Nuru people because they had done something terrible, or so the goddess Ani says (Okorafor 16). This causes the Nuru people to mistreat and abuse Okekes, even to the point of strategic, weaponized rape. This rape can result in a mix of the two ethnicities in their offspring: an Ewu baby. Beyond being seen as ugly to both Okekes and Nurus, there is also an understood assumption about Ewu people that follows them through life. Although Ewu children could technically come out of loving, healthy relationships between Okeke and Nuru people, they are typically children of violence and rape, and the connotation around that history leads people to be wary of them (Okorafor 31). The others believe that Ewu people are prone to be angry or dangerous, as they are children of pain and violence begets more violence (Okorafor 31). Although Onye's mother and stepfather, Najeeba and Fadil, love and respect her, Onye faces scrutiny from her community. Throughout the book, readers see growing conflict between the Okekes and Nurus, and they also understand the struggles that Ewu people endure through Onye and Mwita (her lover and companion). Unfortunately, race is not the only factor that creates divides within Onye's world.

Much like in the present, the patriarchy still largely controls society's interactions and limits the power of women in Onye's world. Lois Tyson defines a patriarchy as "any society in which men hold all or most of the power...by promoting traditional gender roles" (141-142). This is true of Onye's world; women are seen as the property of their fathers or husbands, and they are not to act without their permission. In Jwahir's organized leadership, only one member of the Osugbo Elders, Nana the Wise, is a woman (Okorafor 72). Thus, a woman's perspective has less weight in their society than a man's because they have less representatives to advocate

for them. The gender roles that Tyson discusses only strengthen the patriarchy; these gender roles paint women as emotional (which gets taken to mean irrational), thus needing the guidance of men and requiring the women to be submissive to them (Tyson 142). These unbridled emotions and “irrationality” are exactly why Aro does not accept female students. Onye realizes that a woman’s emotions make her sorcery more wild or powerful, and that scares Aro and makes it harder for him to teach a woman (Okorafor 105). Not only are women limited in their choices and actions through the governing of their father or husband, but they are also made to restrict their emotions to make men comfortable or face consequences otherwise. This patriarchal society makes it difficult for Okeke (or, for Onye, Ewu) women to lead their own lives or find happiness within Onye’s world.

Despite this oppressive, racist, and patriarchal society, women still find solace and support within one another. Early in the novel, Najeeba, Onye’s mother, shares how the Okeke women of her village would come together for Conversations with Ani. Most women older than fifteen would venture out into the desert together; once there, they would stay for seven days to Hold Conversation with Ani while fasting on water and bread (Okorafor 16-17). Ani looked back on her last Conversation with Ani fondly. She says that she told Ani about her life with her husband, their house, her worries about the nearing violence, and her happiness (Okorafor 17). It is pretty easy for readers to empathize with Najeeba and imagine the relief that comes from sharing joys and concerns in a spiritual way. However, this relief is also scientifically supported. In a 2006 study sponsored by John Hopkins University School of Medicine, Nikeea Copeland-Linder found that Black women in a South African township who participated in formal religion saw that their participation buffered the effects of cumulative stress, “as well as the effects of work stress and experiencing racism on physical health” (577). This study proves that Najeeba

and the other women's stressors were lessened through their participation in formal religion, or their Conversations with Ani. Coming together as a group of women to leave the distractions of home and go connect with religion allows these women an emotional and mental strength. Even though these Okeke women's experience is ruined by invading Nurus, Okorafor includes more examples of strong groups of women to emphasize the power and benefits of women coming together.

In Jwahir, one group of women that holds extreme influence in the community and supports women is the Women of the Eleventh Rite. The group is made up of the respected, older women of Jwahir: the Ada, Lady Abadie (town healer), Ochi Naka (market seamstress), Zuni Whan (architect), Abeo Ogundimu (mother of 15 and Onye's great aunt), and Nana the Wise (Okorafor 35-36). These women all hold esteemed positions within Jwahir and represent the power that women have in the village beyond Nana the Wise's role as an Osugbo Elder. In the Okeke tradition, the Women of the Eleventh Rite guard the transition between girlhood and womanhood, and they are the only ones who can move the females of Jwahir through it (Okorafor 35). This is known as the Eleventh Rite ceremony (which readers recognize as female genital mutilation). In Jwahir society, they are the only ones that can truly mark a girl as an Okeke woman through this ceremony, granting her access to more respect and privileges. As such, every woman who goes through the Eleventh Rite in Jwahir must meet with them.

These women are not just powerful in their ability to transition girls into women. They also use their influence and voice to bring justice to women. During Onye's Eleventh Rite ceremony, Binta, one of the other girls going through the ceremony, reveals that she has been sexually abused by her father regularly (Okorafor 37). Upon this confession and the completion of the Rite, the Women of the Eleventh Rite are finally able to do something about her father's

crime. Onye notes that the Women had known about Binta's father for quite some time, but they could not bring him to justice until she was technically a woman of Jwahir (Okorafor 38). Not only do they give Binta the power to become a respected adult, but they also use their influence to make Binta's father stand before the Obugbo for judgement. These women are also commendable because they act as a support system for the girls. As Binta struggles with confessing her father's crimes, "The other women touched [her] shoulders, cheeks, neck, and softly chanted, 'You are safe, you are safe, you are safe here'" (Okorafor 37). These women understand the necessity of having a safe space, or sisterhood, to reveal your issues in. Through this action, they are able to make Binta comfortable enough to admit what had been happening so that they could help her. The Women of the Eleventh Rite, upon first glance, seem to be shining examples of women supporting women.

However, these older women do have fault in the way that they view "protection." During the Eleventh Rite ceremony, Onye notes that they choose to use a primitive scalpel instead of a laserknife for cutting the clitoris, even though the laserknife is safer and instantly cauterizes the wound (Okorafor 39). Later, Mwita reveals the truth; the Women of the Eleventh Rite use a scalpel from Aro to place juju on the girls. If the girls attempt to have premarital sex or are aroused, the juju will cause them pain and prevent them from having sexual relations (Okorafor 76). The girls have a mixed reaction to this juju and genital mutilation. Diti and Luyu are upset because they want to be able to have sex freely, whereas Binta sees the juju as a blessing because it keeps her father from raping her (Okorafor 79). The girls thus criticize the Women of the Eleventh Rite for condemning the girls' sexuality and preventing them from enjoying pleasures that men receive no punishment for.

When Onye discusses this issue with the Ada, she is unapologetic for her actions but feels bad for the way it impacts Onye's friends. In the same way that Binta views it, the Ada rationalizes that the Eleventh Rite juju is beneficial because it protects girls (Okorafor 86). She reveals that she experience an illegitimate pregnancy and the social and emotional issues it gave her, such as getting disowned and being disconnected from her children. The Ada tells Onye, "Girls need to be protected from their own stupidity and not suffer the stupidity of boys. The juju forces her to put her foot down when she must" (Okorafor 87). Thus, she and the other Women of the Eleventh Rite see the juju as a necessary protection, even if it causes discomfort and frustration before marriage.

Overall, the Eleventh Rite juju is a point of contention for the women of Jwahir. The Women of the Eleventh Rite view it as an essential part of womanhood and do not regret their choice to control the women of Jwahir. When a woman is married, the juju is finally removed, and she can enjoy sex again. Luyu bluntly sums up this idea with her statement, "We're tricked into thinking our husbands are gods" (Okorafor 80). Because a woman's first pleasurable time having sex after the Eleventh Rite is with her husband, she is bound to attribute the success to him and associate the positive feelings with him, even though their pleasure was previously restricted against their will. This is another instance in which the women of Jwahir are bound to see their husband as superior, both to other men and their own abilities to achieve pleasure. Although they may provide support and power for the women of Jwahir, the Women of the Eleventh Rite still end up supporting patriarchal ideas through their use of juju. Nonetheless, these women still represent a powerful sisterhood within their Okeke society. Additionally, the trauma of the Eleventh Rite Ceremony also serves as a channel to bring women together through mutual pain and experience.

When she turns 11 years old, Onye decides to partake in the Jwahir tradition of the Eleventh Right Ceremony. As previously mentioned, the ceremony is traditional for girls of Jwahir to undergo at that age to transition into womanhood through circumcision. Onye chooses to participate (even though she is not a native of Jwahir) because she does not want to bring further shame and bad luck to her family through being uncircumcised (Okorafor 33). She already struggles in Jwahir as an Ewu girl among Okekes, so she believes that going through the Eleventh Rite will improve her own social standing and take criticism off of her parents. Only three other girls are also of age to undergo the ceremony with Onye: Luyu Chiki, Diti Goitsemidime, and Binta Keita (Okorafor 36). In their culture, the ceremony brings more meaning into their lives beyond the circumcision. The Ada tells Binta, “After tonight, all in this room will be bound... You, Diti, Onyesonwu, and Luyu will protect each other, even after marriage. And we, the Old Ones, will protect you all” (Okorafor 37-38). Going through this shared experience together allows the girls to form a bond that is unlike any other relationships they have formed. Through the shared traumatic experience of genital mutilation, they come together as unlikely friends.

After the ceremony, the girls are still united in their bond. Onye first notices this as no one revealed that she accidentally turned invisible during the ceremony or that Binta’s father was sexually abusing her (Okorafor 47). Onye did not expect these girls to honor the secrets revealed during the ceremony, but she was pleasantly surprised that they did not break their silence. They also develop their bond into an actual friend group. For the others, this was nothing to scoff at, but this was Onye’s first time having real friends (Okorafor 49). In this way, Okorafor sets up Onye with her first support system outside of her family. When Mwitá suggests that this connection is not valid, Luyu, Diti, and Binta all have negative, yet silent, reactions to his

statement, proving how they feel about the bond (Okorafor 135). Throughout the course of the novel, it becomes evident how much Onye depends on their support and how they embolden her to follow her path.

This sisterhood has clear benefits for not only Onye, but the other members of the group. Okorafor's portrayal of this sisterhood and its benefits is supported by findings on the effects of sisterhood and community in today's society. In general, supporting other women is actually mentally healthy for women. Research done by Sarah E. Valentine from Boston University's School of Medicine and her colleagues suggest that in female college students "with higher scores on a measure of agreement with liberal feminist beliefs—reported higher levels of psychological well-being; however, women who endorsed a less advanced feminist identity reported lower levels of well-being" (Valentine et al 3). Onye and her friends all experience this as they gain a sense of belonging within their Eleventh Rite group. Additionally, creating this strong support system, or "village," allows them to better face further challenges. A study done by Sannisha K. Dale and Steven A. Safren of the University of Miami found that black women (specifically those living with HIV, or BWLWH) depended on social support from their "village" to "overcome their adversities and focus on their health and well-being," building their resilience (18). With Luyu, Diti, and Binta in her village, Onye is able to develop her resilience and lean on the support of her friends as they go on their journey to rewrite *The Great Book*. Onye's sisterhood is a foundation and driving force for her journey.

It is still important to note that this sisterhood has its faults at times. After Onye's father dies, the other girls do not reach out to her as they fear and do not understand the sorcery that Onye performed at the funeral. Onye is hurt that they do not immediately come to comfort her in her time of hurt and grieving. However, Luyu helps mediate the situation and makes the others

admit that they wronged Onye by keeping their distance (Okorafor 116). Additionally, despite their obligation to her, her friends still sometimes revert to biased or racist opinions of Onye and Ewu people. On their journey west, when Diti and Binta run off to a tavern in Banza, Diti encourages and prompts the men's racist remarks to Onye, calling her "An ugly *Ewu* woman" (Okorafor 203). In this way, Diti and Binta go against the solidarity that they formed as a result of their Eleventh Rite ceremony. They allow men (the patriarchy) to demean their fellow sister, abandoning her a woman in favor for their identities as Okekes. Despite this incident, they are able to come back into the fold and be part of the group once again.

Throughout the course of the journey, the sisterhood undergoes trials that pushes their boundaries. Binta ends up dying for the cause while trying to reason with the crowd that was trying to stone Onye and Mwita (Okorafor 240). As a result, Diti (and Fanasi, her fiancé, by extension) decides to depart from the journey before seeing it to completion to return home. However, this should not be assumed as a break in the sisterhood. Diti does not claim to hate the sisterhood or wish to break her bond with them; she simply chooses to prioritize her relationship with Fanasi and life with him over the sisterhood and the likelihood of death (Okorafor 313). This leaves Luyu as the only remaining member of Onye's sisterhood for the end of the journey. Luyu's devotion to Onye and her cause could be read as an example of an even deeper form of sisterhood and support: the woman-identified woman. Tyson's research on the woman-identified woman shows that it is not so "cut and dry" to claim that Luyu is gay. Rather, this claim focuses on Luyu's attention and emotional energy that is placed on Onye. Luyu identifies with women exclusively, and her primary relationships are with their Eleventh Rite group, defining herself as a woman-identified woman (Tyson 176). This deeper, long-lasting form of sisterhood proves to

be the most empowering to Onye, as Luyu lasts even beyond Mwita in their journey to rewrite *The Great Book*.

Overall, Onye's friends, or her metaphorical sisters, provide her with a level of support that helps her achieve her goals while also being true to herself over the course of the novel. After Luyu forces them to clear the air, the girls support Onye after her father's death. As Onye sobs, she remembers that "Binta put her arm over my shoulder and hugged me close to her... And that was how the tension broke between my friends and me. Just like that. Even at the moment, I felt it. Less weight. All four of us must have felt it" (Okorafor 117). Okorafor characterizes their bond as a palpable force, one that Onye depends on. Although she has her mother and Mwita for support, Onye still needs her friends to be in her corner as part of her healing process. She also feels comfortable sharing her secrets with them, as she believes that they will support her. Although Mwita disagrees, Luyu insists that, as their Eleventh Rite mate, Onye should not keep secrets from the group (Okorafor 134). Throughout the novel, groups of women and Onye's sisterhood repeatedly prove the strength of women in numbers and show the impact that female support has on other women.

Okorafor's message on and support for sisterhood is evident throughout *Who Fears Death*. Onye would not have been able to overcome her trials and rewrite *The Great Book* without the help of her friends. The combined power and support of women is shown to overpower the evils of patriarchy and oppression. But what does this mean for readers? Although audiences may not have to go on a quest across the Sudan, they can still find ways that sisterhood benefits them in their personal lives. M. Elise Radina of Miami University finds one way that it can be useful in modern society: sorority and Greek Life. In her research, Radina found that "college women who are part of Greek campus subcultures can authentically engage

with one another around issues and experiences of common concern” (Radina 126). In this way, these women use their bonds to create women-only spaces where members feel that they have a “physical and intellectual ‘safe space’” to discuss their personal issues (Radina 126). Following this example and the lessons from *Who Fears Death*, more women could find support in women’s groups and have a healthy outlet for sharing stress with others. Okorafor’s message is a subtle, yet powerful claim: there is no trial that a sisterhood cannot overcome.

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