

## **Stop! How Dare Onye Challenge Society While Using Violence!**

By Kaitlin Hathaway

In the novel *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor, there is a strong sense of violence throughout the story. Many of the characters will act out using violence to get some form of revenge on either another character in the novel, or even an entire group of people. One of the main characters who uses revenge to drive her violence is Onye. She has had numerous occasions where she lashes out in violence to get revenge on someone or a whole group of people. When she would act like this throughout the novel, many questioned whether or not the violence was justified. She often times would be scolded by other characters in the story for her violent actions. Mwita, her lover, would constantly remind her that she is acting exactly how the people of Jhawir believe Emu children behave. We know that Onye being an Ewu child has created many problems for her throughout the novel. It causes Onye to be secluded and traumatized at a young age by society. Their society sees her as an issue and sees her as an “other” compared to them. It causes her to lash out and want revenge on others who have suppressed her. Can she really be blamed for her violent acts of revenge or were the idea of violent revenge instilled into their society? She is not the only character who will commit acts of revenge either in the novel. Onye’s violence can be justified throughout *Who Fears Death* because of the role revenge played in their society.

The idea of violence is incorporated into the characters in *Who Fears Death* from the beginning. The characters all know and follow the stories of *The Great Book*. It can be compared to the Christian Bible from our society. They use the *Great Book* to judge how their society works. One of the main stories that we get from the novel featured in the *Great Book* is that the Okeke were punished by Ani for creating all of these buildings and technology that made the

land ugly. In the novel, Onye, Mwita, and Luyu find a cave that seems to have some of the technology the Okeke were punished for. “The Great Book spoke of such places, caves full of computers. They were put here by terrified Okeke trying to escape Ani’s wrath when she turned back to the world and saw the havoc the Okeke had created” (Okorafor 330). She punished them by making them become slaves to the Nuru for the rest of eternity. Ani, the creator of the Seven Rivers Kingdom, is instilling the idea of revenge onto everyone who lives there. The act of revenge that Ani committed against the Okeke was not light hearted either, it was violent towards the Okeke and it oppressed them as a group in society. The story normalizes revenge in their society. It makes it seem as if its okay to commit acts of violence towards others since its already implemented in their society.

Onye’s own father, Daib taunts Onye’s violence throughout the novel creating a lot of fear and angst in her. Ever since Onye turned 11 and went through the Eleventh Rite, Daib began to torture her. He first appeared as the red eye and would haunt her dreams. She even said in the novel the dreams would get so bad that she barely got any sleep. Daib instilled this fear of him into Onye which would cause her to act violently. She most likely had a lot of anxiety revolving around him and the fate that they would come face to face one day. This anxiety would cause anyone to want to act violently. Daib wants revenge on Onye for being born a girl. Her being a girl ruined his plan to have a sorcerer son who would be powerful. It’s Daib’s need for revenge on Onye that causes her to be violent towards him. She does also want revenge on him for raping her mother, but a lot of her hate towards him revolves around him torturing her throughout her teenage years. It is Onye’s drive for revenge on Daib that keeps her moving throughout her journey to the west. She knew she was going to die, but the need for revenge on her father was greater than the value she placed on her life.

Onye has also acted out violently to get instant revenge on those who have crossed her or her friends. The people of Papa Shee were one of the main groups who acted violently against them in the novel. They were saying some cruel things to Onye repeatedly calling her “Eeeeeewuuuuuu” (Okorafor, 239). Binita decided she would stick for Onye telling the town that they would need her to be freed from the Nuru. “What are you doing?! ... Do you all know who this is!” (Okorafor, 240). The town’s people did not like this, and the people of Papa Shee killed Binita by throwing stones at her until one fatal brick crushed her skull. In retaliation, Onye blinded the entire town. Once the people of Papa Shee left the town they would be fine, but Onye would not admit that to them but instead leave them to their own stupidity. In this situation, could the readers really blame Onye for what she did? The citizens of Papa Shee got their revenge on Onye and her friends for being in the town to begin with. Their cruel comments and stoning of the group were their way of getting violent revenge. This revenge can result in Onye being othered in her society.

Onye’s violence can come from her being secluded from society. There are many different instances where people in her society do not accept her. Onye even said “Just by looking at me, everyone can see that I am a child of rape.” (Okorafor, 7). Onye knew from when she was younger that people looked at her with judgmental eyes. Being an *Ewu*, Onye has to have societal stereotypes such as being violent. Mwita who is also an *Ewu*, would often stop Onye from lashing out on someone else because he did not want her to be what everyone thought she already was. Her own friends would even judge her for being *Ewu*. They have to constantly battle the thoughts in their heads that society has placed in their subconscious versus what they have learned “I don’t hate you... but I hate what you are. I hate that whenever I look at you... It’s hard Onye. Eleven years of believing that *Ewu* people are dirty, lowly, violent people.”

(Okorafor, 226). The quote from Diti shows what the girls are trying to overcome, but it also shows that Onye will still always be an *Ewu* in their eyes. Because of this, she will always be othered in society. According to Lois Tyson, othering is “judging those who are different as inferior, as somehow less than human” (Tyson, 248). This othering can cause her to feel alone and insecure of herself, which in turn could make her angry at the people suppressing her in society. It could be justified that she acts in violence towards others because she is trying to begin change in society. In the village of Banza, *Ewu* are prostitutes. Onye is sexually harassed by some of the men and she is almost raped before she uses her powers to force a wind storm onto them. Before this happens, she says in her head “In Jhawir, *Ewu* people were outcast. In Banza, *Ewu* women were prostitutes.” (Okorafor, 204). Onye knows that anywhere she goes, her society will never accept her. Whether it be her being secluded from society or only being seen as a prostitute, it is clear that society will not accept her. This feeling can be classified as unhomeliness. Tyson describes this as “the feeling of having no stable cultural identity – no real home in any culture” (Tyson, 250). This feeling could cause Onye tremendous amounts of trauma that will affect her everyday life.

Facing the amount of trauma that Onye has, it is easy to assume that it would affect her mental health. According to Meredith Elzy in her article “Adolescent Girls’ Use of Avoidant and Approach Coping as Moderators Between Trauma Exposure and Trauma Symptoms”, children who face trauma are more at risk to have anxiety, depression, and PTSD as adults. Children faced with trauma are negatively impacted in seven domains of development which include: attachment, biological, affective regulation, dissociation, behavioral regulation, cognition, and self-concept (Elzy). It is clear that the trauma Onye has endured in her lifetime would have a negative impact on her mental health. The one symptom that stood out to me was behavioral

regulation. There are many instances in the novel where Onye does not think before she does something. She just lashes out in retaliation within a split-second decision. When she showed the people at the market the visual of her father raping her mother, it was her not being able to control her feelings. As soon as she realized what she had done, she knew she should not have done that. She knew what she did was wrong, but in that moment, she could not control her feelings. Children who face trauma at an early age also have harder times figuring out coping mechanisms when it comes to events that can challenge them in their adult years. The two coping strategies are: approach or avoidance. From reading *Who Fears Death*, many would agree that Onye uses the approach coping mechanism. People who have faced trauma use this to control something around them in hopes to reduce the amount of harmful consequences. Onye has also used avoidance, which is the most common of the two for girls who have experienced trauma. When she would go into different villages, she would hide her face or even make herself invisible. She did so people would not classify her as an *Ewu*. Because once they would, they would instantly isolate her and make comments about her that could force her to lash out at them. It is clear that Onye's trauma has made a lasting impact on her. It can be seen with her reactions and her relationships with the others around her as well. Even other characters who have faced trauma can be seen having the same issues Onye does with controlling her behavior.

Onye is not the only character in the story that commits an act of violence. Binita is one of Onye's best friends throughout the novel. They became friends after sharing the trauma of the Eleventh Rite together. When they were going through the ritual, Binita revealed that her father was sexually abusing her ever since she was young. The elders said they would take care of the situation, but her dad did not stop. Binita decided she would commit her act of revenge when they left to travel west. As she was leaving, she poisoned her father's tea so he would be dead by

the time she got far enough from Jhawir. When reading this, most readers did not have any sense of remorse for her father. They were able to mentally justify her act of revenge because in their eyes, her father deserved it. When Onye does actions to cause revenge on Daib, some question whether or not her actions were appropriate. Readers cannot only judge one character's actions but not another's. Onye does act out more times than Binita has, but it does not change the fact that Binita acted violently also. Both use their violent revenge to bring change to their lives.

For most of the novel, Onye is working to bring change. In many ways, the change has to be started with violence. Okorafor says, “[the novel] came out of a very dark time for me. My father passed in 2004. A lot of the rage in the novel was that ... a lot of the rage came from me. It was also the result of stories I'd heard from family members throughout my life. It very much is an angry novel, but it's justifiable rage, a type of rage that brings change.” This quote that Okorafor believes that Onye's revenge can be justifiable. Onye in many ways has to be violent to get her own point across. When the men were sexually harassing her in Banza, she had to use her powers and create a windstorm for them to leave her alone. She tried many times to tell them that she was not interested in sleeping with them, but they did not care. Even when Onye made it to Durfa, she and her friends had to endure violence to rewrite the Great Book. The change would not have happened if Onye did not act with violence. When she made herself pregnant, she killed all of the men in the town and impregnated the women. If she would not have done this, she would not have been able to rewrite the Great Book. Okorafor is using the novel to try and prove to the readers that this rage and violence has to sometimes be used to bring change. She talks about growing up in America came with racism from other Americans and going to Nigeria sometimes to visit. She did not feel like she fit in with either places. “When I was writing about genocide in ‘Who Fears Death,’ I mined from my own family background as well... Just because

I'm happy and comfortable, that doesn't mean everyone else is. And that concerns me.”

Okorafor wants the readers to realize that coming from a comfortable lifestyle, they do not have to be violent to bring societal change. That they could never understand being others like she was, and how Onye was too. They cannot judge Onye for what she did in the novel, because she was doing what she needed to. Most would not understand what she goes through because they have never lived it themselves. It makes them have to challenge their own society.

Okorafor might also want to challenge society with this novel as well. She wants the readers to think about their own society. What does it take to change society? Sure, people can give speech after speech about bringing change, but it is those who act on what they believe are the ones who create change. The violent riots could become a way to “clean house” in society. It is easy to ignore what someone says, but it is more difficult to ignore someone's actions. Another activist who wanted to bring social change to the racially suppressed was Martin Luther King Jr. King was often times against violence. He believed in having peaceful riots to try and bring change. In a quote from King, he talks about how society should look at the root of the violence saying, “I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed, without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government.” Even King who was against violence, said that he would not judge those who are committing violence because they are suppressed. These people are only trying to bring change. Sometimes, violence can be the only way to bring it. Another example of this is the riots in Ferguson, Missouri. After Michael Brown was killed by a police officer, the people of Ferguson demanded that he be charged for murder. Brown was profiled by the police officer for being a young black male. The officer shot and killed Brown because he assumed Brown was armed (“Ferguson”). When the court ruled that the officer did not need to be charged with murder, the

people of Ferguson went into violent riots. The riots received national attention. There were riots in many different towns. The riots brought change throughout the nation. It created the “Black Lives Matter” movement that brought attention to racial injustices happening in the nation.

Whether it be racism from colleges or even from police officers, the riots began a movement to bring change to the racism happening within the country. The riots left an impact on the people in the nation, and a lot of it is because of the violence that was produced from the suppressed.

The riots would not have had the same effect on the nation had they not been as violent as they were.

The novel, *Who Fears Death* is meant to challenge its readers. As they read the novel, they believe that Daib is the antagonist of the novel. That he is the only “bad guy” in the novel, however that is not actually the case. The true antagonist of the novel became apparent at the end of the novel. The actual antagonist is society. The way the Great Book shaped their society, it ruined Onye’s first life. It caused her to be othered and start her own revolution. She had to get revenge on those to suppressed her with violence to make herself heard. If she would not have used violence, nobody would have paid attention to her. There were numerous times throughout the novel when readers might debate whether or not Onye’s violence can be justified. She uses the violence to bring change and challenge her society. It is a violence that is needed, and for that reason can be justified.



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