

Out of the Darkness: How Relationships Impact Onye's Self-Esteem in *Who Fears Death*

By Linnea Nordstrom

The way that individuals perceive themselves is undoubtedly shaped by their surroundings. In Nnedi Okorafor's award-winning novel, *Who Fears Death*, the protagonist Onyesonwu, or Onye's, self-esteem is drastically impacted by her relationships with the people around her. As a whole, the novel includes discussions of topics that are emotionally intense. From the hard-to-read, graphic descriptions of oppression, assault, and violence, to the dream-like descriptions of love, honor, and friendship, the reader can clearly see that Onye experiences a whirlwind of emotions as time progresses in the novel. The dramatic contrast between her emotional experiences with her relationships certainly contributes to the rate at which her self-perception changes throughout her life, and Okorafor demonstrates this personal growth to show the importance of surrounding oneself with the right people.

In the post-apocalyptic African setting in which the novel is set, Onye's character is not set up to achieve this personal growth so easily. Being *Ewu*, much less being a female *Ewu*, leaves her to expect nothing but discrimination in the hateful society she lives in. Females in Jwahir are generally treated as lesser than men, no matter their ethnicity. However, *Ewu* individuals are automatically othered by Onye's society or treated as inferior, so Onye receives double the hate (Tyson 248). Consequently, Onye is met with a feeling of unhomeliness, meaning she feels like she has no true cultural identity and no real home in which she feels welcomed (Tyson 250). Because of the discrimination she faces, it is easy for the reader to predict that she will be consistently mistreated and filled with self-hate. Of course, those things still happen, but Onye is able to develop close relationships with people that really boost her spirits and help her change the way she is expected to live her life.

The first relationship that Onye forms, much like everyone else in the world, is with her mother, Najeeba. As we find out right away, her mother was brutally raped and tortured. The storyteller later explains that the raping of Okeke women by Nuru men was weaponized. She says, “As I hid, in that room, Nuru men raped my mother repeatedly. They wanted to make an *Ewu* child” (Okorafor 101). The evil men intentionally created children that they knew would be oppressed for the way they were conceived. Society believes that *Ewu* people are evil because they were made from evil. Because of these circumstances, Onye and Najeeba have an interesting relationship. Onye was raised by her mother in the desert for six years without interacting with any other people or hearing a real voice aside from her mother’s whisper. Consequently, Najeeba decides to do what is best for her daughter, regardless of the judgment and backlash that she may receive from the community because she has an *Ewu* child. She knew that Onye needed to be within a civilization to become who she was meant to be (Okorafor 30). As a result, at age six, while living in Jwahir, Onye states, “I was a happy child. People sucked their teeth, grumbled, and shifted their eyes when I passed, but I didn’t care,” which shows that she had fairly high self-esteem at this point in her life, especially since she had a close relationship with her mother (Okorafor 8).

It is not before long, however, that Najeeba decides to share with Onye the way that she was conceived. After learning this information, Onye’s relationship with her mother strengthens even more. The trauma caused by her birth father is not something she takes lightly, either. Carrying this emotional baggage from such a severe issue within her family has a constant impact on the way she thinks. According to Lois Tyson’s psychoanalytic critical theory, traumatic situations like these lead to acts of repression (83). When emotions are repressed, a person may display inappropriate social behavior or engage in unwarranted violent behavior (83). Onye does this as the story progresses because she tends to act out in destructive and

violent ways the more that her community oppresses her. Furthermore, the more she finds out about the stigma surrounding her ethnicity and the way she was conceived, the more her self-esteem deteriorates.

As Onye becomes more unsure of herself, there are more ups and downs in her and her mother's relationship. There were some circumstances in the novel where her mother's actions caused a fluctuation in her self esteem. For example, after Onye decides to follow through with the Eleventh Rite Passage, her mother is so disappointed and ashamed of her that she slaps her, therefore causing her to have feelings of regret and feel bad about herself (Okorafor 47). Overall, however, Najeeba seemed to be one of the primary reasons that Onye was able to think positively about herself during troubling times, and positive relationships within a family during a child's early years are essential for the development of high self-esteem. According to the article "Family Environment and Self-Esteem Development," "the early childhood family environment has a long-term, and possibly enduring, effect on self-esteem that can still be observed in adulthood" (Krauss et al. 2). Additionally, while some people may look at Onye's attachment to her mother and issues with her birth father negatively as an oedipal fixation, there are actually a lot of positives that come from having a positive attachment to a parent in early years. In the same article, the authors report that "a secure attachment to the caregiver contributes to the development of a positive internal working model in the child (i.e., the mental representation of being accepted and valuable)" (Krauss et al. 2). As mentioned before, Najeeba loves Onye unconditionally from the moment she is born, and Onye goes several years without even realizing how different she is from the people around her. That kind of support is what helps her maintain a positive sense of self when she is not given many reasons to, and for that, she is lucky.

While Onye is blessed with the support from her mother, it is still vital for her to have other positive relationships with people her age, outside of a family setting, to lift her up and help her think positively about herself. Luckily, her decision to go through with the Eleventh Year Rite brought her three close friends whose bonds with her were not easily broken. First, Onye was treated more respectfully by her peers at school after going through with the Eleventh Year Rite because she became recognized as both an adult and a child (Okorafor 50). Moreover, upon returning to school after the ceremony, Onye truly realizes how special her relationship with her friends is. She says, “It was now definitely the four of us. Any friends Luyu, Binta, and Diti had before were no longer important” (Okorafor 52). This is a pivotal realization for Onye to make. She realizes that these girls genuinely care to be her friend, regardless of their physical differences. Onye continues to say that “most girls who went through their Eleventh Rite together, though they were “bound,” did not remain so afterward. But the change was natural for us. We already had secrets. And those were just the beginning” (Okorafor 52). Having these natural friendships made Onye seem more confident in herself in a way that the readers had yet to see. Luyu, Binta, and Diti had made Onye feel empowered for the first time in a long time.

Having close friends and a social life does not only change a person’s self-esteem, the self-esteem of each member at any point in time has an impact on the way the group gets along, and the effect is reversible. Julia Bishop and Heidi Inderbitzen of the University of Nebraska wrote in their article “Peer Acceptance and Friendship: An Investigation of Their Relation to Self- Esteem” that “friendships function as a source of ego support, emotional security, and intimacy. In addition, friendships help children develop an image of themselves as competent and worthwhile” (477). This research supports the idea that Onye’s group of friends helped transform the way she sees herself. Another article, however, includes research that shows the

ways that the girls may have had the reverse effect on Onye's self-esteem. In "The Link Between Self-Esteem and Social Relationships: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies," the authors state that "there are likely to be reciprocal effects between individuals' self-esteem and quality of social relationships" (Harris and Orth 1). They further explain that people are known to display specific "cues" that reflect their self-evaluations to the people around them, which tends to have an impact on the way their social relationships function (Harris and Orth 3). Members of a group of friends commonly display behaviors such as confidence, curiosity, initiative, and independence around each other. They also tend to display their reactions to stress and change, and other negative emotions, to their group of friends, which lets each friend interpret the self-esteem of the others (Harris and Orth 3). These observations, in turn, impact the mood and self-esteem of each person, especially if they are spending a lot of time together.

At several points in the novel, Onye's friends' self-esteems were not always a positive contribution to Onye's environment. For example, Binta has low self-esteem rather consistently throughout the story because of her experience with sexual assault. Her low self-esteem makes her pessimistic at times, and for this reason, Onye, as well as Diti and Luyu, feel the need to protect her and uplift her, which can be draining for the girls, as they have to put Binta's emotions before their own. As for Diti, she tends to have a big ego and overwhelmingly high self-esteem. These emotions do not contribute to a positive environment for the group. Tension is caused between the girls because they start to compare themselves to Diti and her experiences-- something that is not good for their self-esteem.

Regardless of the ups and downs of the girls' relationship, the bond is unique because they are all women and form a sort of sisterhood. The three of them share so many experiences that men would not understand, which keeps them close-knit. The article "Narratives of Friendship and Self in Adolescence" includes a discussion on how gender contextualizes

adolescents' friendship ideals and experiences (Azmitia et al. 2). Both sexes value intimacy within a friendship, however, they achieve this in different ways, and females are often intimate through self-disclosure (Azmitia et al. 2). The four girls disclose a significant amount of personal information, specifically because they share the same womanly experiences. They are able to discuss intimately their Eleventh Rite experience and frustrations with the juju used, their sexual encounters, and their love life in general (Okorafor 83). Azmitia, Ittel, and Radmacher state that "romantic relationships become central, but often challenging, themes in adolescents' discussions with their friends," and thus, it is understandable that the girls would rely on each other to have these conversations to boost their self-confidence (24).

It is beneficial to one's self-esteem to be able to discuss these topics openly with other women they are close to because these feelings can be uncomfortable to discuss with just anyone. Still, it is even more challenging to keep them bottled up. In Onye's case, she and her friends have the added benefit of becoming united as friends when they are going through puberty, a difficult transformational phase where young people are known to struggle with self-esteem. Right after the Eleventh Rite, when the girls are going through puberty, is arguably the moment where Onye's self-esteem goes through the most fluctuation because of the added emotions she goes through. Pubertal timing is said to be an indicator of self-esteem, especially in young African girls who are known to go through puberty at a much earlier stage of life than people of other ethnicities (Seaton and Carter 3). Self-esteem and puberty affect each other because "puberty has a social component such that bodily changes alter how adults and peers respond to adolescents as their bodies develop" (Seaton and Carter 3). After the girls go through puberty, they have more sexual experiences, which in turn, leads to jealousy and comparison between the group of friends. For example, when the Eleventh Rite juju is broken for Onye, and she can have intercourse without pain, Diti complains, "If you've mastered all this sorcery, why

don't you cure us? Or are you the only woman here allowed to enjoy intercourse?" (Okorafor 204). This comment causes tension between the women, and it surely makes Onye feel guilty, thus lowering her self-esteem because she doesn't want to damage the special bond that she has with them. Furthermore, Onye begins to stress over this issue because she knows she should be able to break the juju for them too so that they can enjoy intercourse. When she finally thinks that she knows what will break it, she becomes anxious, afraid that something could go wrong, or the process may be too awkward. Nevertheless, she goes through with her plan, breaking the juju for her friends, and reinstalling the closeness of the friendship while improving the self-esteem of each girl.

While the sisterhood with Binta, Luyu, and Diti undoubtedly raised Onye's self-esteem by giving her friends for the first time, her relationship with Mwita was just as much of a boost of confidence for her because she got to experience what it is like to be in love (Okorafor 50). In her society, it is uncommon for an *Ewu* person to be loved by someone who is not also *Ewu*. To Onye's surprise, the day she returned to school after the Eleventh Rite, there was news of their being a new *Ewu* boy joining their school, the first *Ewu* person Onye had seen in person besides herself (Okorafor 52-53). Early on, when the two first meet, Mwita brings so much positivity to Onye, giving her much to look forward to. He becomes another person that she can confide in and share many of her personal stories with while he listens intently (Okorafor 63). The fact that Onye can establish trust in him, and so many others, is heartwarming because she has the chance to escape the oppression she constantly faces for a while.

However, with every romantic relationship comes inescapable hardships. Unfortunately, there are plenty of moments in *Who Fears Death* where Mwita is a person who lowers Onye's self-esteem. For instance, after Onye passes her sorcery initiation, Mwita is incredibly jealous of her, and she is made to feel bad about herself (Okorafor 138). Further, Onye has to remind him

that “just because [he] was born a male does *not* make [him] more worthy than [her]” (Okorafor 139). With this statement, the reader can feel Onye’s disappointment in Mwita, and they can tell that she is desperate for him to be more proud of her accomplishments. This is another example of the reciprocal effects mentioned before. Mwita’s negative self-esteem that results from his insecurity causes Onye to feel bad about herself, even though she has no reason to. Despite this, Onye takes it upon herself to stand up to Mwita and get herself back on track towards feeling good about herself, which is quite admirable.

All and all, between Onye’s ability to stand up for herself to ensure that she’s getting the treatment she deserves from the relationship and Mwita’s overwhelming kindness towards Onye that outweighs his negative remarks, Onye’s self-esteem is heightened. According to Zeigler-Hill et al. in a study about self-esteem and romantic love, “there is research demonstrating that individuals with high levels of self-esteem report more positive evaluations of their romantic relationships than individuals with low levels of self-esteem” (118). So, the more that Mwita disrespects Onye, the more he destroys the relationship. It seems like he recognizes this and tries to change the way he expresses his emotions to protect his bond with Onye because he genuinely loves her. He loves her enough to use the term *Ifunanya* with her. The word is said to only have meaning when spoken by a man to a woman, and it is wholly binding if the emotions are truly reciprocated (Okorafor 239). Furthermore, a man can only use this word one time in their life, and very few women have the honor of hearing this word from their partner (Okorafor 239). That fact alone is what makes it clear that Mwita has an immensely positive effect on Onye’s self-esteem. *Ewu* women are made to feel ashamed of who they are, what they look like, and where they came from, yet Onye is one of the few women in Jwahir that is loved so deeply that she gets to hear these words. After hearing them, she forgets for a while how much she is oppressed and sees her self-worth better than she ever has before.

After observing this realization of Onye's, the reader can begin to feel more at peace with her self-esteem. It is so easy for an individual to feel sorry for her, wishing they could make her community see the good in her and treat her with more love and respect. It is also easy to get frustrated with the people she is close to, but after analyzing her relationships with those people, it is clear to see that the most toxic relationship Onye has is her relationship with herself. Since the novel is written from Onye's perspective, the readers are faced with several of Onye's personal thoughts, unlike any dialogue from the other characters. Often, her inner thoughts are harsh and hurtful. One moment that illustrates this is when Onye sees Mwita for the first time. She thinks to herself, "It was like looking into a mirror when you've never seen your reflection. For the first time, I understood why people stopped, dropped things, and stared when they saw me" (Okorafor 53). This is the moment where Onye begins to believe that the way she looks is despicable. Although it seems, at first, that this thought is meant to be offensive toward Mwita, it is actually a turning point for Onye's self-esteem. She needed to see another *Ewu* person in person to be able to truly understand what made her different from the rest of the world, and upon doing so, many of her positive feelings about herself diminished.

Onye also shows that she has a negative relationship with herself when she communicates with her friends. After she had used her sorceress powers at Fadil's funeral, her friends had spent a significant amount of time avoiding her. When they finally speak again, Onye is clearly filled with negative thoughts of herself because she decides to scold Luyu, saying, "Was it your father who made you to stay away from me? Does he not want his beautiful daughter being seen with her ugly evil friend anymore?" (Okorafor 125). Though Luyu did not deny this, it is still unfortunate that Onye has to think about herself so negatively in the first place, regardless of what any person has said about her.

Thinking positively would have helped Onye avoid several conflicts throughout the story, and finding a healthy balance of positive and negative thinking is crucial. In a journal article about positive and negative thinking, authors Julie K. Norem and Edward C. Chang state that “Optimism and positive thinking can derail us if they lead us to ignore or discount important cues and warnings” (998). So, in part, it is good that she can think rationally and understand that there are moments where she needs to prepare for the worst to happen. However, there is no reason for her to be so harsh when thinking and speaking about herself. In the same article, the authors state that “optimism is correlated positively with extraversion, self-confidence, self-esteem, repression, self-deception, and positive affect” (995). If Onye had more optimism towards herself when she couldn’t rely on the support from her relationships, her self-esteem would be so much higher. Unfortunately, Onye does not always have as much optimism as she should, however, in the moments that she does, her confidence and self-esteem is unbelievable. The reader can see Onye’s strength and passion that turns her into the powerful sorcerer that she was destined to be, even after all of the trials she has faced.

Overall, Onye’s relationships have a profound influence on her self-esteem. Despite the many harsh words that she hears during her lifetime, whether they be from her general community or the people that care about her, she is given the most incredible support group to lift her up and make her feel loved. Like many people in the world today, Onye is not set up to be successful in the world and achieve maximum happiness. Okorafor seems to have created the characters that become a means of comfort and support for Onye to show the importance of developing strong relationships to avoid the detriments of an oppressive society. The theme of oppression in *Who Fears Death* is parallel to what many people experience in society today. Whether individuals are discriminated against for their race or culture like Onye, or whether it is for their gender, sexual orientation, religion, or socioeconomic status, many people in the world

today are not set up to live the life they imagined. Through every relationship that Onye forms in the novel, Okorafor demonstrates the importance of taking control of circumstances that cannot be changed and finding a means of support when it seems like the world is against it.

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