

Change: The Goal That Everyone Should Strive For

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Deserts, darkness, and danger; when one hears these words, a lot comes to mind. If you add post-apocalyptic to that list of words, those ideas become very specific. A few titles come to mind: *Mad Max*, *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Maze Runner*. A new title has been added to the repertoire. *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor is a post-apocalyptic story and Okorafor calls it Afro-Futurism. *Who Fears Death* takes place in a post-apocalyptic Africa that is in the midst of conflict. In the book, Okorafor intertwines many topics and real events into the plot. Most of these topics will be intertwined: race with gender, gender with magic/religion, and magic/religion with race. Within *Who Fears Death*, these topics are so intertwined, it is hard to untangle. Onyesonwu (Onye) is a part in all three topics, she is a woman, an *ewu*, and a sorcerer.

The reason that the book is so similar to reality is because of Okorafor. Okorafor wrote *Who Fears Death* based on real events and real cultural beliefs. Nnedi Okorafor was born from two Nigerian parents who had escaped from a civil war, known as the Nigerian-Biafran War. Her parents were a part of the Igbo culture and were able to make a home here in the United States. She grew up learning about the Igbo culture of her parents and it was very important to her. The Igbo culture is what she incorporated most into the book. She also read an article about weaponized rape in the Darfur Genocide and incorporated that as well. These real events were enough to inspire her to incorporate it into her book. When she incorporates the topics, she is trying to say something about those traditions. She is trying to say that if traditions are not changed, then the people who practice those traditions will be left behind in time. Culture, and the traditions that stem from it, must change with time or else those traditions will be seen as archaic.

Magic in *Who Fears Death* is intertwined with gender. Onye is a woman who is a powerful sorcerer. Her teacher, Aro, refused to teach her at first because she was a woman. The only reason he decides to teach Onye is because she is hard-headed in the fact she wants to learn. “I’ll teach you the Great Mystic Points, if it is willed,” he said. ‘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). It is also pointed out that because she is a woman and she could get pregnant, she is much more dangerous. Onye is in a relationship with Mwita, and Aro tells them to remain abstinent. “Once we start, you’re to keep him off of you. If you became pregnant while still learning, you could get us all killed.” (Okorafor 118). The fact that she is a woman learning magic is a dangerous concept to the male sorcerers. In Igbo culture, magic and religious ceremonies are reserved mostly for men. A woman named Margaret Green did quite a bit of research on the Igbo culture. “Men are the chief owners of magic, and a man will keep his medicines in a place apart in his own house..., to prevent their being contaminated by the presence of a woman in a taboo condition” (Green 177). Later in time, there became a difference in “male magic” and “female magic”. Magic is an area where there is equality. Men have their expertise and women have their expertise. John S. Mbiti wrote a book called *African Religions and Philosophy*; this book covers a great deal of factors in African religions. “There are both women and men in this profession [medicine-man]. Their personal qualities vary, but medicine-men are expected to be trustworthy, upright morally, friendly, willing and ready to serve, able to discern people’s needs and not be exorbitant in their charges” (Mbiti 163). When it comes to medicine-men, it is their ability and their personality that matter. Their gender comes into play very rarely.

Religion and magic are intertwined in many African cultures. They are seen as almost or are the same thing. In *Who Fears Death*, the Great Book is seen as pure truth, just as the Bible is

today to some Christians. The Great Book is filled with stories that show how people are supposed to feel. According to Ani, the chief god in the Great Book, the Okeke, the oppressed people, are supposed to be slaves and to be killed in many cases. The Nuru, the oppressors, were sent by Ani to put down the Okeke. Both the Okeke and the Nuru accept their roles. “‘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 tried die for it!’” (Okorafor 94). That was said by an Okeke man. The Okeke have accepted that they are scum and they are to be killed. These people have accepted their religion, even though they are people who are to be looked at like slaves and people to be killed. Onye has a goal to change the Great Book. Her goal is to change the world, by moving the religion forward in time. She wants to change the religion so that they are more “civilized” as people.

Religions in Africa are tied to nature most of the time. Spirits and gods are tied to natural things, like plants and animals. Parents would often enter their children into being a part of these spirits. *Osu* are that kind of people. The *osu* are children, usually, dedicated to deities. These people soon become outcasts, *osu* literally translates to outcast. They are also seen in a dual light. “Their anomalous position of being ‘horrible and holy’ in the eyes of society does not necessarily make them into people of authority, but it does mean that they are or may be a part of the mechanism whereby law and order are preserved” (Green 50). This sort of tradition in religion compares well to *Who Fears Death* on the topic of twins. Twins are seen as good luck. “‘Twins aren’t expected to have normal lives,’ he said” (Okorafor 216). *Osu* and twins in *Who Fears Death* aren’t allowed to live like normal people because of what tradition says. Tradition, in many ways, hold people back because people are expected follow the traditions. If tradition is pressed on people from a young age, those people might not go against it, even if it looked down on in a modern time.

Gender is a topic today that fuels many arguments. In *Who Fears Death*, gender is a topic that comes up quite often. It isn't the main thing, but it is very important. Onye is a powerful woman and most people look down at her. In the Igbo culture, women are treated a certain way. Many women, although very important, aren't given what they are due. When it comes to working, women are given the lion's share. "In Umueke [a place in Nigeria] and its neighborhood the women are the chief breadwinners" (Green 170). These women are hard workers and yet they hardly allowed to talk in public situations; they are expected to be quiet most of the time (Green 169). In the Igbo culture, agriculture is very important. Farming and livestock are the main sources of food and trading options. This is also where half of a woman's work is. "...the women are occupied in weeding, planting, tending the crops. They it is, also, who fetch food from the farm and who do the hard and tedious work of pounding and cooking it" (Green 171). The only comparison I can make in this situation, is that these women are basically work horses. They do work in the fields and then they are expected to come home and do all the house work as well. In *Who Fears Death*, women's work isn't gone into in depth. There is, however, a definite show of separation of men and women.

There is a great separation when it came to men and women. In many situations in the book, women are looked down on just for being themselves. In a scene in the book, Onye and Binta are having an emotional moment, and another character comes in and proceeds to judge them for it. "For goodness' sake,' Fanasi said coming out of his tent, 'Women.'" (Okorafor 227). Women, throughout history, have been judged for their capacity for emotion. Women's roles have just been assumed for thousands of years and those roles are often seen as inferior. If women even attempted to do "man's work," they were and are still looked down upon. For women to do "men's work" is seen as taboo. In certain parts of Igbo culture, there are

circumstances like these. “On the other hand, certain provinces were, so far as I observed or learned, exclusively male. Only men climbed palm trees, whether to cur nuts or to tap for wine. The idea of a women climbing was unthinkable. In some parts of Ibo country it is taboo as an offence against *Ala*, the ground” (Green 175). It is almost not thought of, women doing work like that. It just doesn’t occur to some of the Igbo that women can do things that men can. There are roles women are given, and after hundreds of years, it is very difficult to break out of those roles. In *Who Fears Death*, one character, Mwita, makes his feeling on gender roles very clear. “He brought his face close to mine. ‘I should be the sorcerer, *you* should be the healer. That’s how it’s always been between a man and woman” (Okorafor 253). Mwita, the one who is speaking, has traditional gender roles so deep in his head that he can’t even make an exception for the one he loves, whom he is speaking to. In a book called, *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, research was done on the Igbo. In this book, Nkiru Nzegwu came to a conclusion about the status of women; “Women’s disadvantaged position, could directly be traced to two important features of the colonial government: its economic and social policies that effectively marginalized women; and the asymmetrical political structure that arrogated to male officials the power to make decisions for women” (Nussbaum 445). This boosts men up and knocks women down.

There is something confusing about Igbo culture in the fact that although women are put down, they are still a powerful force. As I stated above, women are often the hardest workers and they control what happens in the household. In *Who Fears Death*, a character called Nana the Wise is a key female in the beginning of the book. She is a powerful woman in her own right, but the fact that she is a woman, inhibits her in some way. When it comes to the power of women, most know not to upset them. Incurring a woman’s wrath is quite a topic. “It is interesting to note

that other men in the village hardly ever came to the rescue or defense of one of their own. *'Nya mad!'* (It's the persons own business), they would say. *'O kotelu okwu umunwnayi!'* (The person brought the wrath of women on himself)" (Nussbaum 446). Even though women are looked down on, their rage is not taken as a joke. Sometimes, women would often go on a type of strike so their needs would be met. Some Igbo women left their village, leaving their men to take care of everything; they would end up getting what they wanted (Nussbaum 447). Slowly but surely, over time, gender equality is coming to fruition. The fight for women is getting stronger and stronger in Africa. The fact that the culture is moving with the times, shows that cultural advancement is a good thing. If culture does not change with the times, it will be left behind and seen as archaic.

Now, in *Who Fears Death*, the conflict is inspired by the Darfur Genocide in 2003. In the Darfur Genocide, Arab-Africans were slaughtering and raping Black-Africans in the west of the country of Sudan. The main parts of the Darfur Genocide that Okorafor used was the Arab/Black dynamic and the weaponized rape. The Nuru are the Arabs and the Okeke are the Blacks. The weaponized rape was one of the most powerful things that effected Okorafor. It effected Okorafor in a way that, when she read about this, she was so shocked that she had to write about it.

The Arab attackers in Darfur were raping Black women to create "a light baby". A woman named Emily Wax, who wrote for the Washington Post Foreign Service, wrote an article where she interviewed victims of weaponized rape. Emily Wax interviewed a woman, and this is what she had to say, "They grabbed my donkey and my straw and said, 'Black girl, you are too dark. You are like a dog. We want to make a light baby,' " said Sawela Suliman, 22, showing slashes from where a whip had struck her thighs as her father held up a police and health report

with details of the attack. "They said, 'You get out of this area and leave the child when it's made.' " (Wax). The Arabic militiamen's goal, was to purge the Darfur region of Blacks. Women who are raped are seen as dirty and are usually shamed because of it. They are victims, but many are not treated as such. This "light baby" that is mentioned, has a name in *Who Fears Death*; they are known as *ewu*. *Ewu* are seen as dirty and evil, "People repeated it to each other: *Ewu* children are born from violence and so it's inevitable that they will become violent" (Okorafor 107). She deeply based her book off of the Darfur Genocide and this is a very important detail. The reason it is a very important detail, for the fact that it covers race issues.

Race in Darfur was a large factor. Arabic-Africans versus Black-Africans: those were the two major fighters. Although, in Darfur, race was not based on skin tone alone. A man named Gérard Prunier wrote a book on the Darfur Genocide and he did research on the people, the environment, the genocide itself, and the world's response. "Usually the difference [had] to do with facial features (shape of nose, thickness of lips), although this perception is influenced by what the observer knows of the ethnic background of the person he is confronting" (Prunier 4-5). The way that race played in Darfur intertwined with something else. Earlier, I stated that race would be intertwined with religion. Many in the Darfur area were and still are Muslim. They weren't just fighting those who weren't Muslim, they were also fighting Black Muslims. The leaders of the fighters only used religion to their twisted advantage. "But the men who had come to power (and who are still at the core...) were no longer the thirty-something ambitious radical of the 1960s and 1970s. They had become a staid establishment, a new *tariqa* eager for power, money, and comfort" (Prunier 83). The reason I use religion and religious leaders, is because there is a similarity between this and the book. In the book, the Great Book involves the enslavement and the killing of one race by another. A character, called General Daib, uses his

religion and his magic to gain power and influence over those that follow him. He is a powerful practitioner of magic and he affects his soldiers. “It’s easy juju to work on soldiers. They become like cows, producing and producing milk.” (Okorafor 365). My point is that although battles may start out one way, they can and will end up another. Each of these battles started out because of someone’s belief and it was slowly warped to fit another’s. The way that each of these conflicts warped, they both ended up wanting to exterminate a race they saw as inferior, lower, and filthy. Things like this need to be taught, so that we can change and move on from such beliefs. These kinds of beliefs, left unattended, would have meant the death of an entire ethnic group. We must learn to move with the times, or else race will be an issue forever.

The way that we perceive race now is different, but it was not like that in the past. Many powerful countries were colonizers and saw different races as inferior. There is a literary theory known as postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory is a way for people to understand the trials and tribulations of a colonized people. When it comes to *Who Fears Death*, postcolonial theory applies to not only the colonization of the Okeke, but to the racial difference and tensions of the Okeke and the Nuru. The Okeke are othered, they are seen as something inferior. There are two types of othering, demonic and exotic; the Okeke are suffering the consequences of demonic othering. They are seen as evil and are to be killed or enslaved. The Okeke also suffer from what is called the “colonial consciousness”. Many of the Okeke completely accept that they are evil and are to be killed or enslaved. The fact that Okorafor wrote the Okeke this way is interesting. I think the fact the Okeke accept their fate, makes Onye a much more dynamic character. It makes her stand out for the fact that she wants to change the way that she, other *ewu*, and the Okeke are seen and treated. She wants to be able to change the traditions of the past, so that the Okeke and Nuru are no longer hurting each other. The point is, is that we in reality should change the world

around us just as Onye did the story. By the end of the book, everything changed, and the way people interacted completely changed as well.

Traditions have been a part of the human race for as long as we have existed. The reason we cling to those traditions is because they are so engrained in us, we can't get rid of them very quickly. Traditions are important to the way that we are raised and the way that the culture around us reacts to them. The way that culture and tradition change through time is healthy and wise, but some traditions and cultural aspects don't change. Those that don't change are left behind in the times and are seen as archaic, as I stated before. Okorafor, I believe, is trying to say that through *Who Fears Death*. The people in the book, their beliefs, and their religious texts needed to be changed so no one else would get hurt. Onye accomplished what we should be doing. She was able to change tradition, and that is something we should all strive for.

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