

## **Nnedi Okorafor's Re-writing of the Great Book Through Magical Norms**

By Rachel Roberts

*“Witchcraft, sorcery, and magic relate to human encounters with and attempts to control the supernatural and are frequently described as ways to account for experiences and conditions that might not otherwise be explained.”*

-Pamela A Moro

Magic is a common concept in many cultures. Some view it as a fictional entity used in stories and movies to explain the unexplainable, or maybe it is just a very distant part of the past where it was once believed to be a real thing and was persecuted. However, for others magic is very real, it is still used to explain the unexplainable, but it can also act as a sort of religion as a way of belief for people. However you see it, it is undeniably a part of the past of many cultures both Western and Eastern alike, and it is gendered in representation throughout history and literature. Many cultures see magic or the roots of magic as evil. Typically, those who control magic are seen as using it with bad intention. In both Eastern and Western culture magical elements are seen as evil and historically condemned by society, therefore most anyone who has control of magic is deemed evil and typically hunted or at the very least outcasted from society. Both sides present a front against women that says they cannot have power therefore when women do they are either viewed as evil and demonized or they are shit on for “taking” power from a man. The topic of gendered magic representation is much larger than just one simple text, and it may not seem like a serious issue. However, the messages the stories about witches and sorcerers send strong negative messages about women. Historical and Literary representations of magical beings have perpetrated aggressively negative views of women with power that has spread itself across time.

To understand the issues created by attacking women with magical powers, one must understand the basics of feminist theory revolving around the hatred of women in a male

dominated society. Lois Tyson, the author of *Using Critical Theory* defines patriarchy broadly as “any society in which men hold all or most of the power” (Tyson 139). In the context of magic theoretically this gives men almost exclusive power. However, historically this is not the case. Women have been the ones with magical powers and have been persecuted for it. When women hold the power given to them, through the use of magic, the overall patriarchal power is taken away and these women become demonized characters. In the world Okorafor creates in *Who Fears Death* we see a reversal of what is normally depicted in both history and other forms of literature. Okorafor takes this novel as an opportunity to directly oppose the historical accuracies of the area in which she is writing to create her own story of history. Okorafor makes it clear in *Who Fears Death* that women are not supposed to have the ability to control magic. On multiple occasions Onye is confronted in some way or another for being a female sorcerer. Aro, Onye’s master, makes a point in the beginning of the novel, before Onye is able to begin training, to tell Onye that because she is a woman, she will never be able to train in the Mystic Points (Okorafor). Throughout the novel we also see Onye addressed with misogynistic views from male sorcerers specifically. When Onye and her friends encounter the Vah, they meet Ting the only other female sorcerer in the novel. Ting’s master is also a man who very openly recognizes that he has to work extremely hard to address his sexist views of women with magical power despite working with Ting for a very long time. Okorafor is creating her own story and uses this as an opportunity to show the issues of sexism in society and to directly opposes the gendered magic narrative that has existed for hundreds of years.

It is important to keep in mind the overview of *Who Fears Death* while also looking at historical examples of magic and witchcraft and how they were addressed as a society, before diving directly into very specific examples in the novel. It is also important to clarify some of the

differences between different cultures understandings and approaches of magic. The easiest way to differentiate between cultural magic is in terms of race. There is “white” magic specifically American and European. There is also African magic, even though Okorafor’s world stretches beyond Africa itself. One very important distinction between “white” and African beliefs and representations of magic is the role that gender plays in leadership. In African cultures, historically, women were the primary controllers of magic; however, when men were found with magic, they were typically the leaders of the individual groups. Jayeola-Omoyeni one of the authors of the article “Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Magic” states, “witches were said to be mostly women, but men were found, especially at the head of the witches’ guild” (Jayeola-Omoyeni 365). In *Who Fears Death*, even though few of the town elders have magic, there is still a clear sense of patriarchy. The actual elders of Jwahir are composed of three men and Nana the Wise. In chapter 4 of Okorafor’s novel we learn about the Eleventh Year Rite, which is a tradition rooted deeply in misogynistic beliefs. The Ritual is performed by only women; they are some of the most prominent leaders in Jwahir (Okorafor). Despite none of these women having actual magical abilities, there is a clear parallel between this representation and that of African cultural beliefs of magic. However, the Eleventh Year Rite Ritual shows that even though these women are powerful they are only recognized as so by few in Jwahir. Okorafor shows women with power in an almost demeaning way because the town does not recognize it and their “power” is rooted in a ceremony with deeply misogynistic aspects.

There is also the interesting fact of hierarchy in the leadership roles of groups of witches that shows a somewhat opposing side of the idea of leadership. Even though most of the African cultures recognized women almost exclusively as the ones with magical abilities, the leadership at times did not reflect that. In the article titled “Witchcraft in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries in

Nigeria: An Analysis” the authors discuss why in some cultures men were more commonly found to be witches. “The headship of the witch group or society in the northern part of the country was the exclusive right of males, but the most experienced female witch was recognized leader of all female witches” (Jayeola-Omoyeni 368). Even when women are demonized by the concept of magical powers in society, they are still controlled by the patriarchy that does not allow them to have complete control over themselves or power in general. During the Salem witch trials that took place in America during the 1600s, women who were accused of witchcraft were also accused of receiving their powers directly from the devil himself (Schiff). We see this in part in *Who Fears Death*. Onye is our first introduction to anyone but a man with magic; and it isn't until half way through the novel that we meet the only other female sorcerer in the area. Even as women are being introduced into the magical world in *Who Fears Death*, they are unable to even look to another woman as a leader because the only sorcerers that exist up to this point are men because of the patriarchal aspects of magic.

It appears as if Okorafor's novel directly opposes historical accuracies in this way; however, she is actually following a less common thread of history while simultaneously creating her own gendered magic. In some African cultures there was a myth that men were exclusively the ones with power. In northern Nigeria there was something called a “Maya” which roughly translates to a soul eater, and this term exclusively refers to men who were believed to have magical powers and could possess others' souls (Jayeola-Omoyeni 367). However, there was a reasoning behind associating witchcraft with men and not women like in other cultural beliefs. “The reason why a [male] representation was attributed to witch[es] in [northern Nigeria] was because of the belief that many people became witches in their quest for power, position and wealth” (Jayeola-Omoyeni 367). Men were searching to become even more

superior beings and used the power of witchcraft to take control of their individual situations. However, in many explanations of “Maya” the circumstances are seen as understandable. Overall there was less fear associated with male witches because it was less common, so lonely and societally outcast women were feared. Whereas outcasted men were not feared because people assumed the women were or would become a witch that could hurt them; ultimately causing these women to be even more outcasted.

There are some cultures in African countries that treat magic very differently than many others ever have. The article titled “Witchcraft in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries in Nigeria: An Analysis” addresses many of the cultural aspects of Nigerian magical beliefs. This article lends itself well to understanding Okorafor’s use of culture in *Who Fears Death*, especially for an audience that might have very little previous experience with African culture. The authors of the Witchcraft in Nigeria article focus primarily on the Igbo and Yoruba culture and how both understand magic within their cultures. They placed magic in the hands of God, they recognized that it was out of their hands to control. However, the natural order of society started to take place and the Yoruba people started to “find” associations so that they could avoid punishment from these witches. “[T]he Yoruba people believed that witchcraft was a feminine art that had its power from the devil known as “Esu” popularly called the trickery god in Yorubaland” (Jayeola-Omoyeni 366). Typically, this led to the tribe accusing older, outcasted women of witchcraft, however; there were still times when younger women were accused of being witches. Either way witchcraft was seen as an almost exclusively female practice. The patriarchy took control of the situation and demonized women who separated themselves from society. It is easier to blame a woman who already has very little control in society for the issues in life rather than confront anyone else about the issue.

There is an interesting parallel at play in both the Yoruba culture and in Okorafor's novel. Rather early in the novel we discover that Onye is Eshu. Mwita goes on to explain it more in depth for Onye. "You can shape-shift, among other things. I knew this the day you changed into that sparrow and flew into the tree" (Okorafor 60). Learning that she has this ability, helps Onye realize that she should be on the path of learning the Mystic Points and becoming a sorcerer. After learning that she has magical powers of sorts she becomes unbelievably determined to learn from Aro. Okorafor uses this to lead us deeply into the misogynistic aspects of the novel where Aro and other male sorcerers are able to reject Onye's undeniable power purely based on the fact that she is a woman. In the Yoruba culture, as stated previously, there was a belief in a devilish trickery god called "Esu." Okorafor uses her Nigerian background to shape her novels and *Who Fears Death* is no exception. Onye is an Eshu, a shape-shifter, someone who can trick the eye by being something she actually isn't. An "Esu" is a trickery god, closely correlated to a devil that the Yoruba people have basically blamed for the existence of witchcraft. It is no coincidence that these two things are so closely related, and even though in *Who Fears Death* we never see direct fear of Onye's Eshu abilities, based on the culture the novel is written around the fear was undoubtedly there. Also, as the novel goes on and Onye grows more powerful, those around her grow more fearful. Even when Onye is not using her magic for revenge or causing negative repercussions, people are still scared of her because she is a woman with magic and unapologetically powerful.

There are also aspects of the history of magic that have greatly defined the way magic and gender are perceived now. Many Americans are aware at least to some degree of the Salem Witch trials. There were also the witch hunts that took place in the United Kingdom under the reign of King James VI. They lead to nearly 100,000 people accused, most of which were

women. As King James ruled over Scotland, nearly 4,000 people were burned at the stake which was more than double the kill rate of England (Borman). In James' determination to hunt these witches he set out to create *Daemonologie*, which is, literally translated, the science of demons. Since witches were almost exclusively found to be women, James' attempt to rid society of witchcraft turned into a war against women. He used his book *Daemonologie* to corrupt the minds of its readers. King James was not alone in this time to believe that women were an inferior sex and easily susceptible to the powers of witchcraft. He did, however, promote his overwhelming disdain for women in his book *Daemonologie*. In the book, he says, “as that sex is frailer than man is, so is it easier to be entrapped in these gross snares of the Devil, ... [this] proved to be true by the Serpent's deceiving of Eve at the beginning” (Borman). James' hatred for women was the main root for the “white” fear of witchcraft and subsequently the stemming hatred of women in power. Through his creation of the book *Daemonologie* James created a hatred and subsequent fear of women with power through the emphasis of magic.

All of the historical aspects of both “white” and African magic culture have shaped the face of literature for hundreds of years. Heidi Breuer, the author of *Crafting the Witch* makes the point that the depiction of witches has changed over time in Literature. In Arthurian tales female witches were depicted as healers, but eventually the depiction of witches became of the evil-doer intending to cause harm. “[Breuer] contends that such a transformation reflected broader societal anxieties that women, especially young women and widows were gaining an economic power in England by the 14th century” (Seguin 474). She suggests that men were getting nervous that women were starting to take control over their own lives and to “fix” the “problem” the tables were turned, and witches became a source of evil, and being accused of witchcraft was a way to control women. Okorafor presents a different front in her literature compared to many others.

Okorafor uses Onye as way to show the beauty in magic and how it can be used for good like healing those around her. When Onye and her friends travel to Banza they meet The Ada's twin children, Fanta and Numuu. Onye attempts to heal Numuu's scoliosis (Okorafor 225-231). Onye is also in direct opposition to Daib who is basically the only other person we directly see using their magical powers. As a man with magical power he is waging a war, whereas Onye a woman with magical abilities is trying to heal the people. Okorafor intentionally uses these two opposing forces to present the two sides of magic. It is a highly unlikely coincidence that these characters are also different genders. Onye, a woman, even though she is powerful and angry most of the time is still capable of great good with her magic. Daib, a man, on the other hand only ever uses his magic for evil. He wants to destroy and enslave an entire race of people (Okorafor). Okorafor is creating her own story and using her platform to send a clear message about the dangers of correlating power, both magical and not, with gender.

There are many other literary representations of the gendering of magic that either promote gender stereotypes of magic or follow a similar path to *Who Fears Death* by rewriting history to improve the narrative of gendered magic. For instance, in the Wizard of Oz, there is a good witch and a wicked witch. The wicked witch is so alienated that beyond simply having her powers she is depicted as a green monster who ruins lives. On the opposing side the good witch is nothing more than a floating ball who can only assist in some of the least helpful ways possible. She has magical powers but cannot use them in a way that benefits Dorothy or any of the munchkins. In fact, neither of the witches are any help to the people of Oz at all. The only person with magical abilities that can actually help anyone is the Great and Powerful Oz a man who turns out to not actually have any powers at all, but the people of Oz are more than happy to put their faith in a man who claims to help the people. This plot promotes a lot of the beliefs that

have been perpetrated throughout time with representations of magic. The wizard of Oz is nothing more than a token that society simply accepts as a savior primarily because he is a man who claims to have power. The female witches on the other hand are turned into useless women and neither one of them uses their power for an adequate reason. All three representations of magic in *The Wizard of Oz* promote the negative beliefs associated with magic that have existed for a long time and have been internalized over time.

Disney takes a very similar approach in the way they present magical characters. Many of the princess movies present the primary villains with magical powers. There are exceptions that include: bad step-parents, colonizers, invading Huns, losing the heart of Te Fiti, etc. Often these magical villains are women that have been outcast from society and have become vengeful as a result. In *Sleeping Beauty*, Maleficent is scorned by King Stefan and seeks revenge and takes it out on Aurora. Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* uses her powers to take Ariel's voice because she is jealous. Similarly, The Evil Queen from *Snow White* is jealous of Snow White's beauty and uses her powers to hurt the innocent girl. In all of these situations, there is a clear common factor. These evil women are using their magical powers to hurt the antagonists of these stories. These women have immense magical power and were outcast from society because of it. They were turned into villains and act as easy scapegoats for the society within the plot and the writers. When real society sees magic as an evil entity, anyone associated becomes evil as well. By pairing this stigma with women, even in fictional works, we are demonizing women with power of any kind.

There is a lot of history in the belief of magic; paired with literary representations have taken the already distorted history of magic and perpetuated an almost unbreakable cycle of gendered magic at the expense of women. There are different aspects of historical magic because

of the differences between “white” and African magic. African magic has lasted in the culture even to this day. Both “white” and African magic have connected magic with evil and almost exclusively associated magic with women. By seeing magic as both evil and feminine, a war was created against women. Even as the belief in magic exited society in certain areas, literature still reflected the beliefs of the time and those ideas have continued to carry into current society. With the emergence of Feminist Theory, there has been a shift away from the typical representations of gendered magic. However, there is still a lot that must be done to fully stop the perpetuation of these negative connections between magic and gender.

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