

## **Now You Know Your A.C.Es, Next Time Won't You Chat With Me:**

### **Trauma and Silence in *Who Fears Death* and Beyond**

By Madeline Wilson

Everyone has experienced things in their lives that make existing feel like a burden. Whether that is the loss of a loved one, a diagnosis of clinical depression, experiencing a car crash, going through a hard break up, or something else, there are trying times around every corner. That is simply a part of life. What happens, though, when those trying times turn into something deeper? What happens when those trying times turn into an event that sticks with you forever, always hidden around the darkest corners and living in the deepest parts of you? What happens when this trying time turns into something that affects your mental and physical health, causing you to become more susceptible to heart disease and suicidality? To some, this sounds like some sort of nightmare. For others, this is a reality. This trying time is more than a trying time, it is trauma. Trauma lives and breathes in our society today in multitudes greater than has ever been quantified. Because trauma is woven into the fabric of our society, it is abundantly present in our media that we consume. There is no better place to dig into the hard things that life carries with it than in literature. In Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, trauma is a center piece of what makes the characters who they are. In this story and in the world we live in today, the effects of trauma on a person's character are vast and all-consuming. That being said, the effects can be detrimental if one's society encourages the silence of individuals that go through traumatic events.

Before true analysis of a text or the greater society can be conducted through the lens of trauma, one must have a decent grasp on what trauma is and how it can manifest itself. Trauma, according to the dictionary, is "a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe

mental or emotional stress or physical injury” (Merriam-Webster). This is a general definition that can give a general overview of what this concept is, but a definition that is more useful can be found in a nursing journal. The journal, *Pediatric Nursing*, gives a broader definition. In the article about trauma informed care in a nursing workplace, author Jessica Boles says, “Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (Boles). Trauma manifests itself in many different ways in one’s life.

For the longest time, trauma, specifically in childhood, was left as an unresearched field. There was no tangible research on what it was, how it affected the health of children, and how it could cause physiological changes in the developing body. However, this changed when a group of doctors and scientists started a study on Adverse Childhood Experiences:

Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years) such as experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home; and having a family member attempt or die by suicide. Also included are aspects of the child’s environment that can undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding such as growing up in a household with substance misuse, mental health problems, or instability due to parental separation or incarceration of a parent, sibling, or other member of the household. Adverse Childhood Experiences have been linked to things such as risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions, low life potential, and early death. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

There is a questionnaire that can be filled out to determine your ACEs score. The questionnaire, for you to take when considering the first eighteen years of your life, includes things like, “did a

parent or other adult in the household often push, grab, slap, or throw something at you?” or “was a household member depressed or mentally ill or did a household member attempt suicide?” There are ten questions. Each time you say yes to one of the questions, you add a point to your score. At the conclusion of the questionnaire, the number of points is your ACEs score.

The size of your ACEs score can affect you in many ways and can cause the chances of the risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions, low life potential, and early death to be much larger. Nadine Burke Harris, a leading doctor in the effects of trauma in the health of children, discovered that:

For a person with an ACE score of four or more, their relative risk of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease was two and a half times that of someone with an ACE score of zero. For hepatitis, it was also two and a half times. For depression, it was four and a half times. For suicidality, it was 12 times. A person with an ACE score of seven or more had triple the lifetime risk of lung cancer and three and a half times the risk of ischemic heart disease, the number one killer in the United States of America. (Harris)

This research proves just how detrimental this trauma can be to someone not only emotionally, but physically, as well. Trauma plays a large role in the overall wellness of a person. Onye, the lead character in *Who Fears Death*, has an ACEs score of seven, making her very susceptible to many health risks, physical and mental. This score radically affects her life and overall well-being.

This complicates things, then, when considering the landscape of Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*. The entire story has a backdrop of trauma. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic Africa in which genocide between two tribes causes endless bloodshed and conflict. The Nuru tribe has decided to follow the word of the Great Book, a religious text, and kill the people of the Okeke tribe until they no longer exist. This is done through vicious attacks on the villages of the Okeke. One of the raids is

described when the book reads, “as the scooters drove circles around the women, Najeeba looked back toward her village. She grunted as if punched in the stomach. Black smoke plumed into the sky. The Goddess Ani hadn’t bothered to tell the women that they were dying. That as they had their heads in the sand, their children, husbands, relatives at home were being murdered, their homes being burned” (Okorafor 18). This woman, just like the rest of the women around her, turned from their point in the desert to see their village burning to the ground. The sound of the scooters, combined with the sight of the smoke, was all they needed to understand that the life they knew was over. Their loved ones were dying, and the pieces left behind would not be enough to make a living out of. Their raids did not end with burning down the village and killing whomever came into their path; they also violated the very existence of the Okeke people. The description continues as it says:

All of the Okeke women, young, prime, and old, were raped. Repeatedly. Those men didn’t tire; it was as if they were bewitched. When they spent themselves inside one woman, they had more to give to the next and the next. They sang as they raped. The Nuru women who’d come along laughed, pointed, and sang, too. They sang in the common language of the Sipo, so that the Okeke women could understand. (19)

This passage is brutal. The language is simple and unflinching in its description of the graphic scene displayed. To be violated in this way is to be violated so that you cannot wait for those bruises to heal. The scars from rape stick to you forever. Unfortunately, the Nuru have weaponized rape in this world. They rape Okeke women and impregnate them. The children born from this act are what society calls Ewu people, children born from violence and expected to live a life full of violence, accepted by neither the Nuru nor the Okeke. The book describes this situation when it reads, “the Nuru men, and their women, had done what they did for more than torture and shame. They wanted to create Ewu children. Such children are not children of the forbidden love between a Nuru and an Okeke, nor are they Noahs,

Okekes born without color. The Ewu are children of violence” (21). A living war zone full of violent acts of hate is the breeding ground for ugliness, anger, pain, and trauma. This is where the story is set and where our main character Onye, an Ewu woman, exists. This is why she is so susceptible to the abundant trauma in her life.

Onye’s life is blanketed with trauma. As an Ewu woman, she is a child of rape. Growing up, she knew that she looked different than everyone else, but she did not know exactly what the implications were behind that. When she turns eleven, her mother decides to explain to Onye her origin story. This causes Onye to experience a wide range of emotions all at one time. Initially, Onye responds with anger. She expresses a desire to kill someone after her mother concludes telling her this story. Quickly from there, she turns to self-loathing. She says, “I was poison” (32). From there, she turns back to anger. She thinks to herself about her biological father that raped her mother, “if I ever find you, I’ll cut off your penis” (32). Then the pain leaked into her existence. The final lines of the chapter say, “she [Najeeba, her mother] stood up and wrapped me in her arms. We cried and sobbed and wept and bled tears. But when we were finished, all we could do was continue living” (33). All of these emotions unfold within a single page. The way in which she reacts is quick, without thought, and emotionally charged. This sort of reaction started at age eleven and only continues to develop. Her reactions, manageable here and less so later on in life, stem from the trauma within her narrative. Trauma causes your brain to go into survival mode. The longer one stays in survival mode, the more difficult it is to exist in a world in which the brain relaxes (Harris). This is Onye’s triggering moment into that survival mode brain. Her survival brain, in this moment, pushed her through a wide range of emotions. As we will see later on, Onye’s survival brain can have more consequences. This story shared with Onye begins her descent into her extremely traumatic experiences.

The pieces of trauma that live within Onye manifest themselves as core issues. According to the psychoanalytical literary theory, a theory in which we understand characters and their motives by looking at what causes their dysfunctional behavior, a core issue is “a psychological problem that is the underlying cause of some sort of recurring self-destructive behavior, whether that behavior is something as seemingly mild as being habitually late for important appointments or something as serious as being habitually involved with abusive romantic partner” (Tyson 84). Onye quickly evolves into a self-destructive and generally destructive person, and the roots of those behaviors belongs to her trauma and the core issues that make her who she is. The effects of Onye’s core issues range widely in severity, but the fact that they are present at all is enough to take note of.

As an Ewu woman, Onye faces discrimination every day that impacts her negatively. She is constantly surrounded by people that see her as lesser because of her skin color. Ewu people are seen as lesser not only by the Nuru, the tribe with political power, but also by the discriminated against tribe, the Okeke. They are treated differently by everyone in society and live a fundamentally more difficult life. people scoff in the direction of any Ewu person and can disagree to provide them basic human rights. They are the first people to be targeted in aggressive moments in society. The hateful language thrown at Onye becomes internalized. This internalization brings with it shame, hatred, and ugliness. This shame, hatred, and ugliness manifests itself within Onye as a poor self-image and a struggling self-esteem. According to the psychoanalytical theory, low self-esteem is an “unwarranted belief that we are less worthy than other human beings and, therefore, don’t deserve attention, love, or any other form of life’s rewards. In fact, we often believe we deserve to be punished by life in some way” (Tyson 84). This is seen when Onye cries out to her parents, after deciding to participate in a ritual her parents did not agree with, that “Mama, Papa, I bring shame to you...my existence is shame! Mama, I’m pain to you...since the day I was conceived” (Okorafor 48). It is clear that Onye, even

from a young age, is aware of the shame thrust upon the Ewu people. The ideals of the rest of society that has decided that Ewu people do not deserve anything good has implanted itself into what makes Onye who she is. This is why she feels like she needs to be punished in order to fit into the box that society is ready to put her and all of the Ewu people into. It is this feeling that she must be punished that brings her to participate in the eleventh rite, the ceremonial female circumcision. These self-esteem issues continue on into the unconscious world. When describing her nightmare, Onye says, “I couldn’t tell him about how a giant red-eyed brown cobra slithered up to me and rose up to my face. And then how I was suddenly hit with a self-loathing so deep and profound that I started raising my hands to gouge out my own eyes! That I was then going to tear my own throat with my nails. I am awful. I am evil. I am filth. I should not be!” (59). These words and thoughts did not originate within her, but they have become internalized. This core issue of a lack of self-esteem causes Onye to have self-destructive tendencies and also tends to cause her to take her frustration out on others.

On top of her self-esteem issues, Onye also has a major oedipal fixation because of her trauma. According to psychoanalytic theory, an oedipal fixation is “a dysfunctional bond with a parent of the opposite sex that we don’t outgrow and that doesn’t permit us to mature into adult relationships with others” (Tyson 85). Her resentment towards her birth father is quite clear from the moment she discovers how she was conceived. When she finds out that her birth father is the cobra in her dreams making her feel unsafe, she becomes determined to find him and kill him herself in order to put peace to her mind and avenge the pain of her mother and all of the women like her. Onye actively tries to receive training to be able to confront her father but is consistently denied being taken as a student. Her frustration, fueled by her traumatic life, quickly shifts into an insatiable rage, when the text reads, “Rejection. Such things will quietly creep up on a person. Then one day, she finds herself ready to destroy everything” (Okorafor

111). Her rage, from this moment on, lives not deep within her being, stirring rarely. No, her rage lives right under the surface, showing itself at any minor inconvenience. The rage becomes all-consuming when things get especially hard for Onye. This leads to the death of many, including people very important to Onye. This also leads to making an entire city blind. Quickly, Onye's rage gets out of control. Why is this? Despite the trauma that fills Onye's life, never once does someone sit her down and tell her that it is okay to process these feelings. Not one person gives her the tools she needs to work with these feelings and experiences instead of working against these feelings and experiences.

Onye is not the only character in *Who Fears Death* that experiences silence around their trauma. As previously established, Onye's mother, Najeeba, is brutally raped as her village burns down in the distance, all of her family and friends dying. She somehow survives and pulls herself up off the ground to find her husband still alive. After an emotional reunion, he finds out she has been raped and no longer wants anything to do with her. It is described when the text reads, "his eyes grew moist. 'C-c-cover yourself, O!' The look on his face grew more pained and he held his side. He stepped back. He looked at Najeeba again, squinting, and then he shook his head as if trying to ward something off. 'No'" (24). After surviving a night no one else did, Najeeba comes home to be rejected by the person supposed to be her refuge. She picks herself up and takes her unborn baby into the desert, unsure of what is next. During this traumatic experience, Najeeba loses her voice. She never speaks above a whisper after the raid for the rest of her life. much like her daughter, there is no one there to walk her through how to process the trauma that has ensued in her life. While Najeeba is literally silenced, unable to use her voice to speak of her experiences, Onye is systemically and societally silenced. Systematic and social



silence is not as simple as not having anyone to turn to. It also involves the narrative around speaking about one's feelings and experiences in a society.

Sadly, silence around trauma and mental health does not live only in the world of fiction: it is living and breathing right now in our own world. A lot of this occurs because of shame. According to clinical psychologist Margarita Tartakovsky, "shame prevents people from honestly and compassionately acknowledging their difficult situation, she said. This makes it harder to effectively respond to your moods and patterns and realize that you do have choices" (Tartakovsky). Shame lives in the bones of *Who Fears Death*. The Ewu people stay at the bottom of society because shame keeps them there. Characters do not speak out about the injustice they are experiencing because of shame. The piece of shame in which one feels as if they have few choices is abundant in the life of Onye: for her, it seems as if her only choice is to respond in anger and violence. In general, "people feel shame about not being what they perceive as 'normal.' They may feel like they're 'broken' or 'damaged' or 'they'll always be this way,' she said. They judge themselves. They compare their internal lives to others' external lives, which they view as successful" (Tartakovsky). Comparison to the people around her is what fuels so much of the rage within Onye, whether it is because of her skin color or her sex.

Much like in Onye's life, in the real world, shame and silence go hand in hand. Shame and silence, in both reality and fiction, lead to violence. Unfortunately, there is a problem in the United States of America with school shootings. A psychologist, John Van Dreal, wanted to know what leads a person to carry out a school shooting. Unsurprisingly, it was found that "many struggle with psychological problems...we know that mental health issues are very much in the mix...whether or not they've been diagnosed, or whether or not they're severely mentally ill, something is going on that could [have been] addressed through some kind of treatment...but

most never got that treatment” (Chatterjee). These deadly events are executed by people that could have been helped by receiving some sort of treatment. If there was not a narrative of shame surrounding the talk of mental health and trauma, then the 100+ lives lost to school shootings since 1999 (Chatterjee) could have been saved. On the same coin, if there was a healthier dialogue around mental health and trauma in *Who Fears Death*, lives lost to displaced rage and collateral damage could have been saved, as well.

Trauma, when silenced, leads to destruction, both inner and worldly. When trauma is silenced, self-loathing runs rampant, mental health problems go undiagnosed, heavy things remain unpacked, rage multiplies, and people get hurt. Caring about these implications is not an individual issue, this is a societal issue. When we allow people to suffer in silence, we *all* suffer. Pain breeds more pain unless someone cares enough to heal it. How could lives have been saved in *Who Fears Death*? How could lives have been saved in the United States? Maybe there is not yet an answer, but to accept the lack of an answer is to accept perpetuating a society that allows for trauma, pain, and fear live confidently. We must choose to make sure Onye’s reality stays fiction, otherwise our world will become much bloodier.

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