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Heritage of Violence: Women's Dystopian Reality in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*

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Abstract. The present article aims at analyzing dystopia in *Who Fears Death* (2010) by Nnedi Okorafor as a means of interpreting real-life issues, namely violence targeted at women in the context of war. Based upon clear references to the Darfur conflict, the novel combines elements of different genres and folklore to showcase several types of violence, whereby sexual aggression seems to condition any other act of coercion. Outlining the context of the story, i.e. the Sudanese Civil War, weaponization of rape, and the dystopian perspective, introduces the examination of how the accumulation of various forms of violence, presented through the lens of imaginative literary modes, contributes to reflecting the women's reality as seen in vulnerable periods of history.

Key words: dystopia, Nnedi Okorafor, *Who Fears Death*, female perspective, violence, Darfur war

1. INTRODUCTION

As it can be concluded from observing the available examples, imaginative modes serve literature not only as a means of providing a channel for escapism or entertainment, but also as a form of assuring a different perspective on a diversity of themes. These may include questions concerning society and its history as well as the individual and their identity. Among the indicated variants of storytelling, dystopia enables an exposition of real-life issues, in a slightly deformed or exaggerated shape, thus referring to the extra-literary world in its current state. It is worth noting, however, that the period of a narrative can be extended to the past, which allows for reference to the previous time in order to show the foundations of the here and now. Such a relationship between the genre and the real is possible, because "dystopian narratives are … historically aware, responding to present conditions and informed by knowledge of historical events and traumas" (Stock 2020, 2). In this way, dystopia, its elements or characteristics, may be

used to process selected parts of reality, even those related to the past, and thereby assume the role assigned to historical fiction or fantasy. Furthermore, as Adam Stock (2020, 3) points out, dystopian conventions offer a tool for investigating concerns of the 20th and 21st centuries in various types of discourses, such as critical discourse. Hence, one could assume that the possibilities provided by the dystopian mode are the reason of numerous authors using it to highlight issues crucial to the functioning of the society or specific groups within its framework.

A case in point may be *Who Fears Death* (2010) by Nnedi Okorafor, a novel that showcases the employment of dystopia as an instrument complementing other modes of the narrative, such as those based on folklore, rituals, and magic. While it could be further debated what genre dominates the novel and whether it might be fantasy, the dystopian component seems to be inherent to the book's characterization. For instance, Miriam Pahl (2018, 209) claims that "*Who Fear Death* blends magical realism and science fiction by creating a world that is constituted by mythological elements and advanced technologies." In other terms, dystopia, if considered as the SF subgenre, can be recognized in Pahl's depiction of Okorafor's work as mediated through the parent category. Apparently, by counterbalancing references to tradition and history, used here to confront the reader with the distressing episodes of the collective past, dystopia makes the novel more modern and grounded in the current moment. This is possible because the influence that the genre exercises on the narrative results from the common perception of it being a critique of the present and not a projection of the future. Dystopia also seems to lend to the story its major characteristics, so mainly focus on the concepts of oppression, conflict, and control through the creation of divisions, which all three coordinate with the topic of violence. It may be then assumed that the choice of the genre enables placing the women's theme in the center of Okorafor's novel while the general reflection does not become overwhelmed by the factual accounts that the book indirectly addresses.

2. RECURRING THEME OF VIOLENCE

In the acknowledgments at the end of the novel, the author (Okorafor 2010, 420) admits that she was inspired to write her story after reading a *Washington Post* press article published in 2004, where journalist Emily Wax discusses rape in the context of the Darfur conflict in the west of Sudan. The genocide period of 2001-2004 falls within the framework of the Sudanese Civil War and stems indirectly from the postcolonial grievances that have been generating further ruptures since the area's "independence from the Anglo-Egyptian Mandate in 1956" (Biswal 2021, 1). The causes of the conflict, apparently rooted in the colonial times, seem to comprise ethnic animosity, disputes over resources, unequal wealth distribution, and injustices regarding boundary lines and governmental decisions. Apart from regular warfare activities, the ensuing violence was manifested not only through killing, but also through other actions such as destroying the property, maiming, and raping (Biswal 2021, 4). Indeed, the Arab militia, intending to eradicate African Muslims from the region, used sexual violence mainly to destabilize the enemy and claim territory, but also to conceive children of lighter complexion, thus influencing the upcoming generations. This strategy, similarly to acts of racism and dehumanization, is visible in the testimonies of rape victims who cite their tormentors' words: "'You slave. This is not your area. I will make an Arab baby who can have this

land'" (Wax 2004). Pinpointing sexual violence as a tool of warfare is clearly part of the adopted perspective in other analyses concerning the Darfur conflict. For instance, in her study of female-targeted aggression in Sudan, Oluyemi Fayomi (2009, 180) speaks of "degrading treatment of women as a deliberate instrument of war," which determines the position of rape and other forms of sexual violence as central in the context of the Darfur atrocities. At the same time, Doris E. Buss (2009, 148) compares women to "the embodied boundaries of the nation-state" and, therefore, sees aggression towards them as "directed against a national collectivity."

As the aforementioned source of inspiration anticipates, Okorafor's novel focuses upon violence against women and makes it the point of departure for the entire story. Aggression in various iterations, construed as physical force or psychological oppression, seems to condition many of the characters' decisions and actions, molding by consequence the tissue of the narrative. The progression of the plot gradually reveals different forms of violence that arise as a result of existing struggles and divisions. In fact, this is sexual violence that becomes a crucial factor in the shaping of female characters and their agency in the further part of the story. The protagonist's mother, a representative of the enslaved Okeke people, is attacked by a commander of a militant group from the light-skinned Nuru tribe and, in the desert, gives birth to a daughter named Onyesonwu. After their return to civilization, the girl, identified with the aggression from which she grew, experiences discrimination for the first time in her life. Her mother's rape conduces to verbal and psychological violence, amplified by widespread disrespect for women, manifested especially by men in position of power. To better adapt to the community and respond to discrimination, eleven-year-old Onye chooses to undergo the ceremonial of circumcision, despite her mother's reluctance towards the procedure that she deems barbaric and cruel. The decision initiates an act of ritual violence inflicted on her body, which restricts the girl's sexual urges and subjects her to the dominance of masculine pleasure. However, once Onyesonwu is trained to become a powerful sorcerer, she ceases the efforts to adapt to the requirements of society and seeks confrontation. Moreover, given the opportunity to face her biological father, the girl aims to refrain from aggressive actions so that violence is not propagated as the act of vengeance. Since it has grown over years as a response to a brutal crime perpetrated much earlier, this particular version of violence can be categorized as reciprocal.

The stated forms of violence – sexual and the resulting psychological, ritual and reciprocal – constitute the main thread of the characters' oppression in the novel, at the same time reflecting the abuse endured by real women in the historical context of the Darfur war. Their uncovering and understanding should lead to dismantling the configuration of influences determining the grim reality of Nnedi Okorafor's book as presented from the female perspective. Moreover, revealing the dystopian features of the narrative and establishing a link between the real-life past and the imaginary transformation of extra-literary events may contribute to indicating the role of the intertwining of imagination with reality. In this context, dystopian elements are employed to stress the repressive nature of the real projected onto the canvas of fiction, whereas the historical reference enhances the emotional and intellectual impact of the novel. The two facets of the story can be further related to the notion of violence: both the allusion to the past and dystopia, defined by different variants of abuse, for example forced obedience or fear-inducing threats from those in control, help anchor the acts of brutality in the

realistic context. Characterizing violence as an indicator of dystopian worlds should thereby make it easier, at least partially, to examine the nature of painful heritage of women, both real and fictitious.

3. RAPE AND THE THREAT OF SEXUAL AGGRESSION

The protagonist's way into the existence impacts her actions almost from the beginning of her conscious life. At first, when her mother Najeeba rejoins civilization after six years in the desert, the unforgiving force influencing Onye's relationship with the outside world eludes her comprehension while remaining physically visible in the reaction of the surroundings. Nevertheless, once Onye experiences a supernatural connection with her biological father, who is searching for the offspring that may become a threat to him, the truth about the girl's conception is revealed, both to her and to the readers. A minute description of the unspeakable act of aggression recounted by Onye's mother appears in the text closely to the beginning of the novel, where it can contribute to establishing the necessary context. Regarding the understanding of rape in the relationship between a person and a group as "a crime against humanity or genocide by targeting a community of people through the commission of the individual act" (Buss 2009, 150), Okorafor moves from general to specific, setting the scene and creating an introduction to a personal drama. She writes: "All of the Okeke women, young, prime, and old, were raped. Repeatedly. Those men didn't tire; this was as if they were bewitched" (2010, 19). Moreover, as the unadorned form of short bursts of meaning appears to convey the message in a direct and transparent manner, the choice of words and structures can also be considered important in adding significance to the perception of the circumstances being described.

The same approach applies to the individual case of Onye's mother, who must succumb to the will and strength of the rapist: "He grabbed Najeeba by her thick black braids and dragged her several feet from the others … He pulled her legs apart and kept singing as he bore into her" (Okorafor 2010, 19-20). The physical oppression visible in the example echoes the dystopian power dynamic, which features limiting the victim's scope of action and exercising control over them by using the tormentor's advantage, be it tangible or intangible. According to Athira Unni (2022, 142), in dystopias focused on women, "power over the body – in its creation, usage, and disciplining – is a central theme." Furthermore, such focus allows the text to reflect the relationship between the dystopian society and the authorities, where the state objectifies its citizens by imposing its perspective on them and by depriving them of any degree of self-determination. More than anything else, the topic of body control through violence contributes to the labeling of *Who Fears Death* as a dystopian novel – the thematic area explored by the genre visibly dominates the book's fantasy and magical realism components as well as its references to folklore.

Despite the rape scene being presented immersively and in its entirety not more than once during the whole narrative, its consequences for the main female characters reverberate through every subsequent stage of the story. Apparently, the memory of violence, indispensable for the protagonist to take specific actions, needs to anchor deeply both in the text and in the reader's consciousness, so that the mere mention of the act, even if devoid of gut-wrenching details, can generate equally intense emotions also

further in the narrative. As it has been already shown, the author does not refrain from offering an extensive account of what happens to Onye's mother, thus accentuating the gravitas of the harrowing encounter with the character's torturer, important in terms of the discussed novel but also in reference to the suffering of real women. To underscore the manner of depicting the situation, it is crucial to highlight the fact that the gruesome act itself is accompanied by the commentary on how the victim suppresses her emotions: "At some point, Najeeba went cold, then numb, then quiet. She became two eyes watching it happen" (Okorafor 2010, 20). Since the "alienation from the body is part of the trauma of sexual violence" (Unni 2022, 140), mental withdrawal in the face of such an ordeal results from a woman's natural response – detaching herself from the agony of the flesh remains the only guarantee of her survival. In the context of these remarks, one may affirm that the mother's helplessness is replaced by the daughter's rage. In fact, such a supposition is confirmed by the bluntness of the description of the rape. As shocking as it may seem to the reader, the literal approach to the portrayal of sexual violence results from the fact that "Okorafor refuses to gloss over the realities on which she builds her fiction" (Kendall 2010, 28). At the same time, this perspective allows to minimize the distance between the reader and the victim, with the imaginative framework of the story changing the context and, through contrast, emphasizing the horror of the realistic experience.

Another instance of the connection between rape in Okorafor's novel and dystopian narratives is provided by Andrea Burgos-Mascarell, whose research serves to examine gender-based violence in young adult fiction. She observes that dystopia enables the audience "to draw parallels between the acts of violence in these novels and in real life" (2021, 52), which facilitates the process of perceiving real-life fears through the prism of fiction. In other terms, a dystopian way of presenting violence, i.e. one based on oppression, control, and imposition of will, may prove more effective in interacting with the reader, who will thus become more sensitive to the meanings associated with the brutal deeds described in the text. Moreover, the choice of literary aesthetics sanctions the interpretation of rape in Okorafor's story as an element stressing the realistic background of the novel in relation to the power play of war. Indeed, the genre in question offers "invaluable insight into very palpable realities and the anxieties of … audiences" (Burgos-Mascarell 2021, 51), simultaneously acknowledging the presented world as dystopian, i.e. one that explores the concerns of humanity. In *Who Fears Death*, the threat of sexual violence is clearly a menace that creates tension in the everyday existence of women inhabiting the imaginary Africa depicted in the story as well as a central factor in determining the decision-making of the female characters. By making rape the point of departure for the narrative, Okorafor puts in focus what Wax discussed in her 2004 article and what researchers examine in reference to the atrocities targeted at women in conflictual situations. Indeed, the concept of attributing the function of a weapon of war to sexual violence "calls attention to rape as instrumental to, rather than a mere by-product of, armed conflict" (Buss 2009, 148). Furthermore, Wax (2004) mentions a government official who considers sexual assaults "as an inevitable part of war," whereas for Buss (2009, 150), the weaponization of rape "refers to sexual violence as having a systematic, pervasive, or officially orchestrated aspect." Again, as in the real world, also in the novel, sexual violence proves to be a wartime strategy and an actual threat to women, thus expressing the dread of becoming victims of sexual aggression that transcends any category of fiction discernible in the text.

The fact that the central theme of *Who Fears Death* sometimes overshadows the novel's particular literary tropes does not diminish, however, the importance of the genres making part of the narrative. As it has been previously stated, the author seems to reach for dystopian and post-apocalyptic motives so that she can accentuate the extremity of real-life deeds. The latter is visible thanks to its contrasting with the fantasy of folklore traditions – crimes that exist in reality are distinguished against the backdrop of magical plot points. In science fiction as such, especially in the texts that work towards the comprehension of the principles governing reality, often in conjunction with the questions of morality and the evolving relationship between society and technology, "the familiar … situation is … rationally extrapolated to reveal its hidden norms and premises" (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 2003, 118). Another connection between dystopia and reality is thereby revealed: in addition to the real conflict that forms the point of departure for the plot, the story reflects the social mechanisms of downplaying the problem of abusing women, a standard that avoids being openly discussed. This could be in fact deemed dystopian in nature, especially in the context of the genre's classic *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, a novel focused on the objectification of women, dominated through sexual abuse. In other terms, the imaginative mode serves the purpose of underscoring the interpretations of real-life circumstances, which is clearly also the case in Okorafor's fiction. Furthermore, since it introduces "sexual assault as an inevitable additional threat to women's safety in post-apocalyptic worlds" (Burgos-Mascarell 2021, 49), the genre itself becomes the canvas for the interrogation of the theme of sexual violence. Therefore, one can risk an observation that the imaginative framework is the only one that fits the subject matter: the realistic prose, possibly excruciating for the reader, would have limited the reception scope of the story, whereas the imaginative perspective – regardless of dystopia's historical awareness – offers room for the geographical universality of emotions. In other terms, it allows the narrative's roots to be removed from the soil of specific places and to describe rape as a personal apocalypse of each victim.

The metaphorical conception of the genre may also be extended to the diagnosis of the condition of world society, morally compromised for tolerating sexual violence. The context of the latter includes rape as a weapon of war and the issue of men benefiting from their over women, as is the case of the Darfur conflict, the source of inspiration for Okorafor's book. In the novel, the indifference of people, even in the face of tragic cases of physical abuse experienced by women from the region, becomes one of the key questions related to sexual oppression that pesters the protagonist. Also, this particular point seems to legitimize the comparison of societal divisions in the story with the dichotomy of African tribes between the west and the east during the period of transatlantic slave trade. As Joshua Yu Burnett (2015, 142) claims, the Okeke share an insensitive attitude towards the misery of others with the tribes of the past, and "while they are aware of the violence in the west, they are too complacent to do anything about it." Hence, the most cruel exploitation of women in favor of warfare victory remains without reaction, apparently in the name of a misconceived idea of peace based on denial and the assumption that individuals have the right to refrain from taking action as long as the injustice does not affect their immediate circle. In this way, Okorafor's novel appears to correspond not solely to historical occurrences but also to current social tendencies, with people generally exhibiting a far-reaching lack of social engagement, perhaps caused either by resignation or as a result of focusing on self-interest. Hence, the agenda

behind the story seems to reflect the intentions of "post-1980s dystopian texts that amount to critique of the real world," which makes of it Tom Moylan's critical dystopia, replete with "instances of internal revolt and resistance" (Unni 2022, 137). Examples of such behavior draw attention to Okorafor's protagonist, who – on the basis of her rage – develops a sense of injustice and readiness to rebel against the oppression. On the one hand, it is possible to recognize her stance as an act of reappropriation of the mother's ordeal and a way of counteracting her passivity, on the other – as a response to a prolonged exposure to different types of maltreatment built upon the inheritance of previous trauma and violence.

4. DERIVATIVE FORMS OF VIOLENCE RELATED TO SEXUAL TRAUMA

Since one should see "rape as an instrument of a larger campaign of violence" (Buss 2009, 149), it is crucial to make an overview of other forms of abuse present in *Who Fears Death* that stem from the agony of the protagonist's mother. As suggested earlier, Onye encounters different manifestations of discrimination even when she is unaware of her origins. As she remarks in the course of the story, people from the community that she has entered "sucked their teeth, grumbled, and shifted their eyes when I passed. But I didn't care" (Okorafor 2010, 8). The protagonist's indifference is driven by her ignorance, and as long as she is spared the particularities of the source of her neighbors' contempt, the discriminatory behavior remains for her a hindrance of little significance, distant from the space she has created for herself. However, only when she learns of her being one of the "children of violence" (Okorafor 2010, 21), does she start to fully understand the scale of her and her mother's social exclusion. Clearly, the pressure and silent persecution they are subjected to contribute to Onye's frustration and feeling of guilt, making her a victim of psychological aggression, which can be explained by the conviction that "all forms of hate-motivated behavior meet the definition for violence" (Sugarman et al. 2018, 650). All of the key events in the character's life create a chain of abuse – Najeeba's rape and Onye's birth as a product of oppression are followed by discrimination, also leading in its turn to another form of violence, to which she voluntarily submits, namely circumcision.

As already indicated, the protagonist decides to undergo the procedure in question, despite her mother's condemnation of the practice, in order to reduce the level of hostility towards her in the community. Since in her new home, "to be uncircumcised past eleven brought bad luck and shame to your family" (Okorafor 2010, 35), Onye hopes to eliminate any further adversities and causes of discrimination in her mother's life. Her resolution seems to be also fueled by the sense of guilt resulting from the fact that at some point she has become a conscious part of the trauma of rape. It may be said that the psychological violence that she experiences permeates her and begins to influence the girl's choices, thus lowering her self-esteem, which also introduces negative changes to her self-perception. The dominant idea that seems to determine Onye's conduct is the humiliation and grief entailed by her birth: "I brought dishonor to my mother by existing" (Okorafor 2010, 35). In other words, the protagonist claims that she remains the only marker of Najeeba's marginalization and her pariah status, despite of the woman's marriage to a respectable member of the local community. In this line of thought, it could be assumed that circumcision should erase a portion of the past suffering by allowing

Onye to conform to the social expectations. However, undergoing a ritual ceremony, which translates to succumbing to another form of violence, evidently prolongs the misery, whereby the protagonist, instead of resisting, maintains the position of a victim. Indeed, exposing women to ritual violence reduces them to the role of mothers and subjects them to the desire of men. Consequently, the female function is twofold: on the one hand, women become vessels for new life, which can be exploited in the interest of war, on the other – men use them for their own purposes, including sexual fulfillment.

Psychoanalyst Era A. Loewenstein (2017, 8) associates this type of oppression with dystopian narratives, because the authorities of dystopian regimes establish a perverted world where the goal is to destroy "erotic pleasure and sexual potency." In such a reality, the main objective is to provide pleasure to the aggressor, who enjoys the feeling of power and "destruction of otherness" (Loewenstein 2017, 6). At the same time, ignoring the needs and feelings of the other person, which manifests itself in the expectation of total subjugation, complements the depiction of violence that has its source in rape, but is reinforced by psychological and ritual types of oppression. This feeds into the dystopian characteristics of the female reality in *Who Fears Death* since narratives belonging to the genre "oblige the reader to witness concretized and sexualized sadism" (Loewenstein 2017, 12). In the context of the novel, the level of control that perpetrators seek to gain by impregnating their victims is increased by circumcision, because restricting the liberties of a woman's body is tantamount to forcing her to accept another person's decision. Therefore, it is possible to perceive the female body as a tool of alienation, exploited for the achievement of those who exercise power and control, whether enemy tormentors or male leaders. Moreover, since circumcision disregards women's right to desire accessible to men, another function of theirs apart from being sexual objects that comes into focus is the role of a mother. In this context, however, motherhood – as a consequence of submission – loses its positive connotation, whereas "the loving and creative parental union … is replaced with a sterile, repetitive, mechanical, and destructive intercourse producing a dead or monstrous baby" (Loewenstein 2017, 12). This remains characteristic of dystopian worlds as they are built upon perverted system of rules. In such conditions, loving the child conceived in the circumstances of rape constitutes an act of opposition against violence whose perpetrators wish to distort the maternal relationship in order to exploit its vulnerability against their victim. In other words, abuse corrupts mothers, who become hostages of their feelings. Apparently, the real women of Darfur understand the fact that the love for their babies is the only method of resistance, as one of them claims the following: "I will love the child … But I will always hate the father" (Wax 2004). Opposition within the capacity of being a mother also refers to another variant of violence present in the book, namely reciprocal.

Onye's realization of the aforementioned observations leads her to a change of approach. Instead of accepting the fate of a victim, she opts for confrontation, making preparations in terms of her abilities and actively searching for her biological father. Onye's antagonistic attitude extends to many other people beyond the oppressor himself, as if the protagonist treated passive bystanders as being equally guilty as the actual perpetrator. It seems that the rage caused by the injustice of her mother's suffering, which she experiences more intensely as she grows older, pushes her to various acts of cruelty. Nevertheless, violence inflicted in response to previous violence does not involve interaction purely between the tormentor and the victim and vice versa. The reaction to the initial atrocity spreads to the other participants of the situation, whom the protagonist

holds responsible, even if only in the slightest degree, probably because "reciprocal violence is more likely to escalate" (McQueen 2011, 33). Onye's actions may be more extreme and affect many people also due to the systematic strategy of abuse against her gender. As a woman, she may fit into a pattern according to which "a significant proportion of females seeking help for victimization are also perpetrators" (McQueen 2011, 33). Clearly, the intensity of the violence received is so great that it requires an outlet and a response, preferably in the form of an attack. The necessity of sharing and at the same time returning the aggression Onye's mother suffered and her daughter struggles with manifests itself in a sequence in the market, where the protagonist traps the passers-by to make them participate in the mental projection of her conception. It can be assumed that such a behavior is motivated by the accumulation of strong emotions indicated in the text: "I flared my nostrils and drew on the anxiety, rage, guilt and fear swarming around me" (Okorafor 2010, 163). With her magical abilities, she forces her neighbors to see and experience the suffering caused by the rape: "All of us were there, only eyes, watching…. We watched him ravage and destroy my mother" (Okorafor 2010, 163). The ensuing shock of the observers testifies to the fact that Onye's actions transform her into an oppressor inflicting violence in response to a previous act of cruelty.

Similarly to the market sequence, the next stage in the character's evolution depends not only on sexual aggression, but also on discrimination. When Onye travels to track her father, she almost falls victim to an attempted rape from men who sees her alleged inferiority as an argument against the gravity of their actions. The repetitive nature of the situation evokes in the protagonist a strong desire to hurt her tormentors, in a way breaking the cycle of helplessness of other women: "This is what happened to my mother, I thought … I clearly understood that I wanted to kill these men" (Okorafor 2010, 221–222). By finding strength to keep the rapists alive, she refrains from taking revenge on behalf of other victims, but the effects of the trauma persist. In fact, it can be assumed that the confrontation with her mother's oppressor equals vengeance, even if the intended goal is to protect women by eradicating the source of danger. The protagonist's defiance bears resemblance to other dystopian characters, even though their opposition ranges from minor acts of disobedience to full-blown rebellion – from the thought crime committed by George Orwell's Winston in *Ninety Eighty-Four* (1949) to Katniss Everdeen's revolt in the conclusion to Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010). However, Onye's chance to liberate herself from suffering seems to refer to the ideals of utopia, with which dystopia is clearly associated. This observation concurs with the view that "narratives portraying sexual violence rarely give space to the possibility of significant collective resistance . . . but rather choose to explore the rejuvenatory potential of the utopian space for the recovery of the individual survivor" (Unni 2022, 141). Despite the fact that in the grim reality of Okorafor's novel, the resistance of all victims remains an unrealized fantasy, the healing of the protagonist may be attainable thanks to her magical training. However, the damage inflicted by the persecutors proves too severe to allow the character to experience hope, let alone liberation. As a result, the world depicted in the story remains dystopian in nature, especially when Onye, instead of continuing her task as a self-proclaimed defender, mentally transmits her desired pregnancy to all Nuru women who support the rapists from their tribe in using sexual violence as a weapon of war. At the same time, instead of taking revenge on her father, she brings death to potential rapists in the region: "I don't know how far it went. I don't

think it touched the other towns. But where there are dead men, there are pregnant women" (Okorafor 2010, 402). Again, the dystopian theme of impacting ethnocultural conflicts with "the use of female sexuality" resurfaces in the context of the concept of "sociopolitical identity that depends on controlling women's reproductive capacities" (Jones 2015, 64). In fact, the protagonist responds to the accumulated aggression, different versions of which she has to face daily, by redirecting it towards the enemy side. In other words, as a victim, she becomes the tormentor, forcing women into unwanted pregnancies and killing men whose potential actions reflect the atrocities of the past, thus demonstrating that the cycle of violence can rarely be broken.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As it has been demonstrated on the example of *Who Fears Death*, dystopia as a genre, even if limited to particular elements or characteristics, enables and facilitates the critical thought concerning different representations of abuse, control, and violence, perceived in the framework of socio-historical interactions between groups of people determined by the way they exploit their power. In the analyzed text, the author concentrates on an imaginary manifestation of real past events that center around aggression directed at women, namely rape and other derived forms of violence. In other words, the narrative is constructed on the foundations provided by the real world, but the literary world and characters are depicted with the use of imaginative modes. The real component of the story allows the author to formulate an existing problem, whereas the imaginary part of the novel draws the reader's attention to the necessity of recognizing its importance. Apparently, dystopia provides a general outlook on the subject matter, not implicated in the specifics of particular situations, but also resonates with reality by not being too abstract. Therefore, Okorafor's novel seems to solidify the assumption that dystopian narratives serve as a critique of selected social patterns and stress the issues that should be addressed outside of fiction. In this context, dystopia appears to function as a mode that anchors the narrative in both the past and the present, at the same time offering a fresh perspective on the acts that have become familiar despite their shocking nature. This is possible because the mechanisms of defamiliarization and estrangement allow the writer to show the problem in a new light, hopefully bypassing the desensitization of society.

Parallely, the theme of violence seems to lie at the core of the genre, whereas the motive of rape determines many of feminist dystopias. It should be noted that coercion and physical or psychological oppression apparently fit the contexts explored by dystopia, which shows that "for many people the present world is … full of the injustice, powerlessness and violence" (Stock 2020, 1). Okorafor concentrates on a similar version of reality: she describes the existence of women impacted by their aggressors, which reflects the suffering of the real victims, and simultaneously combines three different perspectives. Indeed, the novel proves to be historically aware, but also manifests its clear engagement with the present, mostly by addressing the current politics, and suggests the importance of its central theme for the future of society. Such an approach towards the story is conform with the affirmation that, as they remain "grounded in anxieties of their present, these political … narratives mobilize knowledge of historic events and traumas to speculate upon consequences of current trends and actions for the future" (Stock 2020,

2-3). Furthermore, Okorafor distances herself from the subject matter through the use of imaginative means and by approaching the main theme from a speculative perspective. At the same time, she seems to demand attention to the plight of women, but also calls for action and warns against adopting the tormentor's point of view, as it may lead to erasing hope for understanding and even more so for a better tomorrow.

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