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## Rethinking Monstrosity and Subversion in Nnedi Okorafor's Who Fears Death

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The concept of monster or monstrosity is not new in African fiction. Monster characters exist in folklore, fantasy, and horror fiction. In many cases they are cast as villainous, unnatural, and horrific. Monsters are portrayed as conduit for supernatural communication. They are constructed to serve cultural roles of reinforcing conformity and policing boundaries. Monsters are also constructed as subversive characters whose existence is not bound by societal norms and conventions but whose boundless freedom opens up doors to possibilities of wish fulfilment. The above significantly influenced the choice of Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, as primary text. *Who Fears Death* offers multi-perspective approach to concept of monstrosity. There is a cultural perspective where superstitious beliefs and prevailing anxiety influence monstrosity. In the text, this perspective is embodied in the culture of Okeke people. It is a potentially fallible perspective as it can transmute even a morally upright person into a monster. Onyesonwu, for instance, is treated as a monster because she is half-caste. Another perspective ascribes monstrosity to an entity depending on their premeditated actions and attitude. This view holds that monstrous characters subject others to untold misery, inhumanity, and harm usually for selfish reasons. This article borrows Gothic concept of monster and postulations from theorists like Jeffrey Cohen to analyse monstrosity in the selected text *Who Fears Death*. In Gothic fiction, monster character represent vice, unnatural and deviations from regularity attributed to life and nature. The article finds that monstrosity should not be determined by individual's propensity, uncanniness, or cultural beliefs but rather by actions and attitude which cause harm, hurt or destruction. The findings also affirm that acts of subversive acts are laudable if it they help undermine oppressive cultural practices.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Monster characters are common occurrence in Gothic fiction and fantastic literature. Monsters in African folklore include the ogres and giants (Akivaga & Odaga, 1982), and *Ogbanje* (spirit children) of West Africa (Bloom, 2009).

Nnedi Okorafor generally utilizes monstrous characters in her works of fiction. *Who Fears Death*, *The Book of Phoenix*, *Zahra the Wind seeker*, *Akata Witch*, and *Binti*, are some of Okorafor’s fiction which contain monstrous characters. Monster as a term and concept has far reaching implication in literature, societies, and religions. The term monster has its origin in the Latin word *monstrum* which, in turn, derives from the root *monere* which means to warn (Asma, 2009). This etymological aspect of the term renders it ominous and fear-laden. This implies that it can be associated with impending doom or judgment and consequently people are apt to react to it with a certain degree of apprehension. Monster can also be used to refer to a large, creature often ugly and terrifying or an ordinary human being who does very cruel and evil acts (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

The definitions above offer insight into the nature and origin of the monster. By describing it as large and imaginary, the monster in essence is being defined against human or human concepts of natural world (Ng, 2004). Creature of unnatural size or appearance, especially the one which portend evil or has propensity to harm can be classified as a monster. Presence of a monstrous character(s) necessarily creates an atmosphere of intense trepidation because their countenance is “unfaithful to nature” (Huet, 1993). As the definition implies monstrosity also encompasses actions, trends and habits which contradict the normative. Extreme cruelty, for instance, defies limits defined by certain societies and can be conceptualized under monstrosity. Individuals

who commit such acts are therefore referred to as monsters. Monsters are threatening, anomalous figures “within the well-established and accepted order of things” (Beal, 2002).

Monster cannot be fully elucidated without locating its origin. The etymological meaning of monster, which is ‘show’ and ‘warn’, suggests that monster transmits truth or message from the supernatural sources (Ng, 2004). This suggestion is further strengthened by Kearney (2003) who argues that monsters arise from “underworlds” to pinpoint fault lines or absurdities inherent in a society’s thinking or its self-knowledge. By virtue of this description, therefore, monster becomes otherworldly and extraordinary creatures whose presence in the ordinary world is tantamount to an invasion. Carroll (1990) indeed avers that monster is an imposition of an extraordinary character in the ordinary world. Monsters are also associated with the human unconscious. According to Ng (2004, p. 4), monsters are embodiment of “the repressed other who has returned to haunt”. In conclusion, therefore, the monsters can be described as having metaphysical and psychological origins. This article will attempt to explore this assumption using monstrous characters from Okorafor’s *Who Fears Death*.

Monster has always been one of the key features of Gothic fiction since its inception. In the fiction, monster often embody themes like repression, abjection, and conformity (Punter & Byron, 2004). In his book *Gothic*, Botting argues that monster in fiction represents vice ( ). Some of the most notable works of Gothic fiction which feature monster characters are Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Mary Shelley *Frankenstein*. Gothic writing as such draws on myths, legends and folklore which often enable re-enactment of fantastic world and tales of monsters, ghosts, demons, corpses, fainting heroines, bandits,

extravagant adventures, and terrors, among others (Botting, 1996, p. 2). These archetypal Gothic elements have been appropriated and, sometimes, transformed by contemporary horror and fantasy fiction. Contemporary black science fiction like *Who Fears Death* appropriates Gothic elements. It is therefore analysed as African gothic fiction. Like other transnational gothic works, African Gothic should not be seen as “a copy of” the original Western Gothic, but rather as an “indigenous genre with similar themes and concerns to that of the Western Gothic” (Hughes qtd. in Balmain 2017, p. 2).

### CONSTRUCTION OF MONSTROUS BODIES IN OKORAFOR'S *WHO FEARS DEATH*

Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* narrates a futuristic post-apocalyptic society in Western Africa plagued by ethnic hostilities. The region in the fiction stretches from West Africa to encompass the present-day Darfur region of Western Sudan and is inhabited by two major ethnic groups Nuru and Okeke (*WFD*, 2010, p. 413). The Nuru community largely composed of light-skinned people of Arab descent wage a war of annihilation against the dark-skinned Okeke. One of the major characteristics of the Nuru attacks is the mass rape of Okeke women and girls (2010, p. 21). The Nuru not only uses the rape to demonstrate their power and dominance but to also hurt and destroy families of the WED Okeke people. It was meant to destroy of Okeke's families because if a child is conceived as a result of the rape, then as per Okeke's customs, it would still belong to the husband of the rape victim (2010, p. 21). Yet according to the Okeke's customs, the children born of rape were an abomination because they were “born from violence” (2010, p. 115). These mixed-race children, derogatorily referred to as the *Ewu*, were considered “a bad luck” since they were believed to have come to the world with “soiled souls” (2010, p. 127). Many marriages collapsed while those which chose to accommodate the *Ewu* suffered public ridicule forever. The sufferings experienced by the *Ewu* themselves were unparalleled. They were regarded as outcast and

unfit to marry (2010, p. 220, 8). They lived a precarious life and were always in constant danger of being hurt or killed even by their own family members (2010). In some towns, it was permissible to rape *Ewu* girl and no one intervened if victims protested (2010, p. 221). It was tragic to belong to mixed-race population but it was more tragic if the individual was a female. The Okeke or Nuru never accepted the *Ewu*. Onyesonwu Ubaid Ogundimu, the protagonist of the novel, can be regarded as the epitome of all the sufferings and eventual triumphs of the *Ewu* population.

The experiences of Onyesonwu and other mixed-race members of the community described in the text leads to a conclusion that they were considered monstrous. Onyesonwu's monstrosity can be analysed intrinsically and extrinsically. Intrinsic perspective views individual's monstrosity in terms of their attitude, parentage, attributes, and nature of their existence. This perspective builds to a certain extent on the etymological definition of monster: to warn or reveal (Ng, 2004). The society described in the text considers Onyesonwu innately monstrous because she was born of violence and would grow up to be violent (*WFD*, 2010). Onyesonwu's existence, therefore, portended evil for the community. In other words, the society ascribes monstrosity to Onyesonwu due to the nature of her conception.

Secondly, monstrous body is considered a site where projected ideological crisis, social anxieties and fears are embodied, examined, and subsequently “resolved” (Wright, 2013, p. 27; Ng, 2004). Onyesonwu and the entire mixed-race population in *WFD* are victims of monstrous projection. The text demonstrates that presence of any mixed-race individuals stirs up painful memories of Nuru's violence and their continued threat to the survival of the Okeke people. A clear example in the text is when Onyesonwu uses Oyelowo's her magical powers to enable the people of Jwahir witness how the Nuru raped her mother and other Okeke women. She caused so much panic and fear among them. She wanted to show them that the *Ewu* were victims of Nuru's

attacks. But her action poked “sore part of Jwahir’s psyche” (2010, p. 167). This particular occurrence strengthens the argument that people’s anxiety about the Nuru influences Onyesonwu’s troubles. The members of the community project their fear for Nuru on her thus transmuting her into a monster.

Foucault observes that a person can be considered abnormal if they are a “descendant of” a person adjudged monstrous by a given community (Foucault, 2003, p. 60). Foucault’s assumption here is that parent’s monstrosity affects progeny. While this perspective does not explicitly account for Onyesonwu’s sufferings in the hands of her community, it does make a reader find a connection between Onyesonwu and her evil biological father Daib. Daib is the arch villain in the story. He is the sole instigator of the ethnic cleansing which engenders mass rape, brutal killings, plunder, and slavery (WFD, 2010). He is a sadist who cherishes and takes pride in the evils he commits against Okeke people and even keeps digital records of such atrocities in his house (2010, p. 394 –395). The actions of Daib are monstrous and Daib is therefore a monster. In Foucauldian sense, Onyesonwu is a monster too since she is Daib’s progeny.

Extrinsic aspect encompasses physical attributes. Monster conflates categorically distinct entities in continuous or discontinuous manner (Carroll, 1990). Onyesonwu’s physical appearance was the bane of her existence among the Okeke. Her light skin which was “smooth and delicate like camel’s milk” (WFD, 2010, p. 10) made her object of intense hate from her much darker neighbours. Mixed-race individuals were despised because they were related to light-skinned Nuru who were avowed enemies of Okeke. Since the Nuru were considered inhuman by virtue of their evil deeds, conflating their identities with those of the Okeke engendered monsters. The *Ewu* were constant reminders of pain and trauma inflicted by the Nuru on the Okeke. People often admired Onyesonwu’s good looks and acknowledged *Ani*’s (God) hand in her beauty but reiterated that the beauty came from “ugliness”. The “ugliness” could signify process through which Onyesonwu

was conceived (2010, p. 10). She was conceived through the brutal rape by the arch-enemy of the Okeke people (WFD, 2010). Onyesonwu considered herself “poison” and “black stain” (2010, p. 14, 11). By this she regarded herself as a dent, an infiltration and unwelcome intrusion into a perfect identity of the Okeke.

Shape-shifting is another extrinsic aspect of Onyesonwu’s monstrosity. This aspect is common among monster characters in Gothic fiction. In earlier Gothic, for instance, we see Count Dracula transforming into a huge dog in order to escape the ill-fated ship he was travelling in (Stoker, 1990). Onyesonwu is presented in the text as an *Eshu* (shape-shifter) who transform into any creature. She was able to transform into a vulture, mouse, flying lizard, and mythical sphinx, among others (WFD, 2010). When she transforms into a creature, Onyesonwu is literally conflating her identity with that of an animal. Onyesonwu was aware how close relationship or association with wild animals could be dehumanizing. She was overcome by self-loathing when a gigantic red-eyed cobra slithered up her body, and a moment later, an oily black vulture flew down and drove away the cobra (WFD, 2010). Conflating categorically distinct entities transmutes one into a liminal being (Carroll, 1990). According to Carroll (1990), liminal beings are also impure. It is through the impurity that monsters develop their capacity to horrify (Asma, 2009). Onyesonwu is looked at with “fear and disgust” because her skin is lighter (WFD, 2010). Her skin made her impure and therefore harmful to Okeke’s identity.

Monstrous beings can also be identified by their unique agency. Agency is the capacity, condition, or state of acting or exerting power (*Webster Dictionary*). Monstrous agency in many works Gothic fiction is presented as exceeding that of ordinary human beings. Gothic fiction tends to set ordinary human protagonists against seemingly indestructible villainous monsters (Botting, 1996, p. 89). Count Dracula in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, for instance, could move quickly down a steep wall like a lizard (Stoker, 1990). Frankenstein’s creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* could run

across a mountain at a “superhuman speed”, bounding over “crevices in the ice” which an ordinary man would usually walk with caution (Shelley, 2012, p. 127). The examples provided attest to the fact that monstrous agency is often portrayed as being extraordinary and more potent as compared to that of the ordinary human being.

Onyesonwu possesses extraordinary capabilities. First, she has shape-shifting ability (2010). Secondly, she can cross over to the world of the dead, popularly known as the wilderness in the text, and glide back to the world of the living again (WFD, 156). Lastly, Onyesonwu is vested with wide range of extraordinary abilities including ability to heal deformities; restore the dead back to life; and restore any part of the body that has been cut off (2010). What sets Onyesonwu aside from other villainous monsters who possess similar powers like Daib, however, is that she deploys her extraordinary abilities in service of common good.

The text allows the reader to explore monstrosity from different angles. From the perspective of the society pictured in the text, Onyesonwu is generally considered a monster and treated as such. She is dehumanized even by some of her close friends. In one instance, her close friend called Diti in a fit of rage compared her to an animal (WFD, 2010). Her words burned inside Onyesonwu’s “like regurgitated bile” (WFD, 2010, p. 212). Dehumanization excludes a group or an individual from moral consideration and makes it easy for oppressor to inflict more damage on them (Moller & Deci, 2009). The entire community was conditioned to regard individuals like Onyesonwu as less than human.

From the narrator’s vantage point, however, Onyesonwu is portrayed as a heroine, victim, and a saviour. She puts her life on the line to bring the war between Okeke and Nuru to end (WFD, 2010). The Okeke community which is seen as the main beneficiary of Onyesonwu’s sacrifice and magnanimity, however, treats her inhumanely. They discriminate, psychologically torture, and render her outcast within her community. They even plot her death (2010). For treating

Onyesonwu inhumanely, the entire community and its oppressive beliefs can therefore be adjudged monstrous. Due to his extreme wickedness, Daib of Durfa presents himself as the ultimate monster and a villain in the fiction.

### **The Monster and Conformity**

Monstrosity whether by nature or by attribution serves important moral purposes within a given society. In the word of Cohen, the monster’s often dreadful physical appearance is meant to be a reification of the creature’s moral state (Cohen, 1996). This implies that hideous and repulsive nature of some monsters in the Gothic fiction testifies to their inherently perverted and evil nature. Portrayal of the monster in such manner described serves as warning to everyone who deviates from the normative. People who fail to rebel against or subvert social sanctions and norms risk being adjudged monstrous. Monster’s presence therefore serves purpose of reinforcing conformity.

According to Botting (2004) (qtd. in Punter & Byron), however, monsters tend to attract sympathies when their woes are seen as resulting from their resistance to conformity and social repression (2004). In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, for instance, the Frankenstein’s creature tells his creator “I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend” (2010, p. 128). By this, the creature sought to defend himself from the crimes he committed by passing the blame to the society and his creator who alienated him. Thus, what might seem proper and normative in the eyes of a society may actually be repressive to some members of the society. The *Ewu* as described in the text try to conform to the customs and traditions of land despite oppression the same customs subject them to. This, however, does not mitigate their tribulations because their existence in itself is a violation. Onyesonwu took part in the Eleventh Rite (WFD, 2010) in order to gain acceptance but it did not work. Despite alienation and the harrowing treatment subjected to her and the entire mixed-race population, the victims were blameless. Onyesonwu attracts more admiration and respect for her audacity and passion with

which she fights for her rights to be recognized and accepted. Her outstanding abilities, and the way she uses them to help others, has earned her reputation even outside the borders of her community (WFD, 2010). Onyesonwu is therefore likely to attract sympathy for her sorrows while the society that oppresses suffers adverse portrayal.

### ***Policing Boundaries***

Etymological definition of monster as that which reveals, warns, or portends (Weinstock 2014) suggests that monster plays a role of policing boundaries. According to Weinstock (2014, p. 1). monster has three major roles: warning against engaging in vicious acts or flouting societal moral codes; revealing the will of God/ gods; and exposing limitations of human knowledge. Cohen (1996) considers every monster as a double narrative: one that explains the genesis of the monsters and another that details what cultural role the monsters play. Frankenstein's creature, for instance, owes his conception firstly, to Frankenstein's unbridled desire to achieve unprecedented scientific breakthrough in creating a living a human being, and secondly, to a latent desire to recreate his dead mother (Hue, 1993). The failure of Frankenstein's dream as indicated by his reactions to monster he had created symbolizes the moral indictment on his finished work; it also a moral indictment on his innate desires that inspired his work (Shelley, 2012). Frankenstein's creature thus becomes the monster of prohibition who warns against unscrupulous scientific adventurism urged by improper motives.

Onyesonwu is a projection of guilt, anxieties, and pain of the Okeke people. Onyesonwu and *Ewu's* plight in general, can be seen as a warning against unjust social oppression and weaponization of rape. Onyesonwu, as a mixed-race girl, was considered a "black stain", a poison, and potentially violent girl (WFD, 2010, p. 14, 32). She was looked at with "fear and disgust" (2010, p. 32). Despite traumatizing life, she experiences as *Ewu* girl growing among the prejudiced people, Onyesonwu manages to gain reputation as mighty

healer and sorcerer (2010). She would later add peace-making role to her garb after playing a major role in the defeat of ruthless General Daib Yagoub thus ending years of ethnic bloodshed between the Okeke and the Nuru communities (WFD, 2010). Onyesonwu also played a major role in the rewriting of the Great Book which led to the lifting of the supposed cursed placed on the Okeke by God (2010). Her rewriting of the Great Book can be considered a revelation of God's will.

The apparent elevation of the most despised girl in Jwahir is a moral interdiction on the Okeke and Nuru for their inhumanity against the mixed-race population of *Ewu*. This implies that The *Ewu* are indirect monsters as they reflect monstrosity of those who oppress them. The statement "*Ani* makes strange beauty from ugliness" seems prophetic indeed as it alludes to God's hand in Onyesonwu's elevation (WFD, 2010, p. 10). The "ugliness" represents the people's unfavourable attitude towards *Ewu* which leads to their dehumanization. Onyesonwu thus represents monster of prohibition as it warns against unjust treatment of people on account of their physical appearance and nature of their conception. By questioning the community's beliefs on the subversion and the normativity in the community, Onyesonwu fulfils the role of exposing "limitations of human knowledge" (Weinstock, 2014). She, for instances, reveals weakness of Jwahirian custom which condemns a child born of rape.

### ***Embodiment of Desire***

Attainment of certain desires in life is often hampered by restrictive societal conventions. The moral codes serve to ensure that the sanctity of a given culture is maintained and protected from practices that might render it impure. Cohen (1996, p. 17) however, argues that monsters, while popularly known for terrifying and interdicting, also have capacity to evoke certain "potent escapist fantasies". Cohen further argues that the monster opens up doors to possibilities of wish fulfilment, facilitates an access to freedom secretly yearned, pushes borders, and enables attainment of "escapist delight" (1996, p. 17). The

body of monster provides a safe conduit for “fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion” (Cohen, 1996, p. 17). Thus, though monster is portrayed as repulsive, frightening, and perverse; its association with boundless freedom does make it attractive. Its habitation is not just a dark region shrouded in uncertainty and danger; it is also a realm of happy fantasies and liberation.

Gothic fiction can be seen as the reaction to the Enlightenment and Victorian traditions which privileged decorum, propriety, virtuous living, morality, and all that reinforced the belief in basic goodness of human beings (Milne, 2009). Gothic reacted to the traditions by illuminating the dark, repressed side of human nature too (Milne, 2009). By this, it afforded readers an opportunity and means to push borders in order to satiate their desires. Pioneer Gothic novels like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* evidently captured Victorian’s Zeitgeist in its exploration of characters’ inner yearnings including desire for escapist fantasies.

Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* can be considered a good example of how monster characters in a text can sometimes embody desire and its attainment. The monsters in *Dracula* awaken taboo sexual fantasies characterised by homoeroticism, inversion of male/female roles during sexual activity, and aggressiveness. Female vampires in the text portray themselves as sexual predators which violate sex norms of the period by initiating and dominating in sexual activity thereby usurping men’s roles (Browning, et al, 2009). Through their inexplicable capacity to evoke in men certain forbidden desires, the vampires are able to enthrall the men, dominate them, and make them amenable for their wicked schemes. When Jonathan Harker encounters the three female vampires in Castle Dracula, he confesses that he felt in his “heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss” him “with those red lips” (Stoker, 1990, p. 54). The confession above lends credence to the fact that the lady vampires in Count Dracula’s castle indeed provoke repressed sexual desires that Harker, himself, is powerless to stop. The fact that he submits entirely to the spell despite his misgivings and guilt conscience testifies to his

inner desire to break away from straightjacket of restrictive Victorian sexual mores.

One is bound to note that the vampire’s sexual perversions are not stated explicitly but rather referred to indirectly. In his reading of Christopher Bentley’s, *The monster in the bedroom: Sexual symbolism in Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1972), Gelder (1994) noted that any explicit treatment of sexuality was forbidden during the period. The use of symbolism to describe the vampires’ perversions therefore guaranteed the popularity of the novel.

The motif of desire in Okorafor’s fiction is portrayed in the way Onyesonwu acts as an agent of wish fulfilment. This comes to life through actions of Onyesonwu and her close friends namely Luyu, Binta, and Diti. The four girls share strong bond that developed when they participated together in the Eleventh-year rite — the age-old female circumcision rite undergone by girls who have attained eleven years of age (WFD, 2010). After the rite, the girls were supposed to refrain from sex until marriage. To ensure that this happened, the scalpel used for the clitoridectomy was treated with *juju* charm to ensure that a woman feels pain anytime she is sexually aroused (2010, 82).

Onyesonwu, however, later recovered the part of the body that had been excised during the circumcision because she was *Eshu* (shape-shifter). As it turns out, no part of *Eshu*’s body “is ever permanently gone until death” (WFD, 2010, p. 150). Onyesonwu was therefore able to enjoy pre-marital sex much to the envy of her friends (2010, p. 203). Her indulgence in the forbidden delight generated a lot of desire among her friends. The girls wanted Onyesonwu to use her magical powers to break their *juju* curse so they too could enjoy the sex (2010). Onyesonwu later found out that she could actually reverse the eleventh rite and accordingly fulfilled the desires of her friends (2010). The girls were then able to enjoy sexual act with abandon, and in the process, subvert the communal sexual norms. The girls admittedly had been raised to shun any premarital sexual acts no matter how desirable it could be

(WFD, 2010, p. 289). Onyesonwu thus instigates rebellion against the Jwahir's sexual norms by unintentionally creating desire for the forbidden sex from among her friends.

The first step to the wish fulfilment started when the girls were convinced to accompany Onyesonwu to the desert and away from the Jwahir (WFD, 2010). Journey to the West meant an escape from the restrictive rules of their home town. Places like Banza and Ssolu, with their rather liberal outlook, contrasts sharply with conservative Jwahir. Banza town presented a picture of place with less stringent moral codes: there were taverns; residents dressed in manner that would be indecent by Jwahir's standards; people smoked "cactus sap cigars" which apparently loosens one's morals; and prostitution was tolerated (WFD, 2010, p. 216-220). Binta and Diti's open-mindedness was apparent as they slipped into a tavern to drink and behave indecently with men they met (2010).

"Ssolu moving village", the land of the Vah people, presented even a more liberal image. Hospitality to strangers was upheld (WFD, 2010, p. 273). The Vah people did not have strict rules governing sexual relationships. Individuals followed their urges (2010). Even Eyess, the daughter of Chieftess Sessa was not a biological child to her husband Chief Usson (2010). For Onyesonwu and her friends it was a totally new world. Onyesonwu's Diti and Luyu found themselves being progressively drawn to the new lifestyle. Soon, they were spending night with different types of men (2010, p. 293). Luyu in particular demonstrates heightened sensuality as she sleeps even with Fanasi, Diti's fiancé (2010).

All the escapades experienced by the girls and their companions like Fanasi affirm the instrumentality of Onyesonwu in the wish fulfilment. Onyesonwu becomes the catalyst that brings out the repressed desires in her friends Diti, Luyu, Binta and Fanasi. By so doing, she appropriates monster's role of evoking certain "potent escapist fantasies" (Cohen, 1996, p. 17). This is the attribute that Onyesonwu has in common with the monsters of early Gothic fiction

like *Dracula*. The lady vampires in *Dracula* were able to provoke repressed sexual desires which Jonathan Harker was unable to stop (Stoker, 1990, p. 54). The vampires transformed people through a bite. Lucy Westenra, a once demure woman, suddenly became wanton after being bitten repeatedly by Count Dracula (170). Similarly, manner, Onyesonwu's companions became sexually active, rebellious and adventurers after accompanying Onyesonwu to desert.

Onyesonwu's actions amount to deliberate act of subversion according to the customs of Jwahir people. In the eyes of these people, therefore, she would be considered a monster. Viewed from another angle, however, Onyesonwu's actions are revolutionary, brave, and realistic. She helps the girls go against the oppressive cultural practices. Onyesonwu should not be regarded as a monster but a heroine.

### Monster and Subversion

Monsters are subversive in that they undermine the familiar and the normal with their difference. To subvert, according to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, is to pervert or corrupt by undermining of morals, allegiance, or faith. The definition provided renders subversion a deliberate act. This article however proves that subversion can be deliberate as well as non-deliberate. Deliberate subversion within a society involves defiance of norms and conventions especially those which form the foundation of a society. This often happens when norms in question are oppressive to a section of the population. In Jwahir society described in the text, for instance, the Eleventh -Rite (female circumcision) is a cherished age-old custom. It was meant to prepare girls for marriage. Girls were required to refrain from any sexual act till marriage (WFD, 2010). But some of the girls like Luyu see the enforced chastity as an obstacle to the enjoyment of that which *Ani* (God) gave her free (2010, p. 85). Luyu and her friends assisted by Onyesonwu eventually violated the oppressive custom.



Subversion can be non-deliberate. As aberrant bodies within a given society, monster's existence can be considered subversion. To clarify this assumption, individuals coded as monstrous are always treated as intruders or unwelcome strangers within a community. According to Beal monster represents the "outside that has gotten inside" (2002, p.4). The meaning of this statement is that monster's presence is a trespass. Though not always originating from outside as Beal's statement suggests, monster's existence within a community is nonetheless a transgression of community's conventions. In other words, monster's existence is subversion. In *Who Feels Death*, the mixed-race people derogatorily called the *Ewu*, are treated as if they do not belong in the community. Many of them were born and raised in the community but still they are treated as enemies and "outcasts" (WFD, 2010, p. 220). They have been criminalized and condemned to be evil though there is no evidence to support such accusations in the text. Onyesonwu, at her tender age, was already wary of men trying to grab her any time she ventured to market (WFD, 2010). It is quite logical such men would only want to hurt or molest her because she was *Ewu*. As a grown-up girl, Onyesonwu survived attempts on her life. After her father's death, in which she was implicated, some of her family members hatched a plan to kill her (2010). Such was the kind of life many members of *Ewu* group had to content with in regular basis once outside the relative safety of their homes.

The 'normal' human body is often considered "an ideal physical and symbolic" representation of "certainty and order" in a given society (Wright, 2013, p. 48). Presence of monstrous beings therefore destabilize normalcy, certainty, and order since they (monsters), by virtue of their appearance or perversion, embody abnormality. When that which familiar, normal, or homely is suddenly transformed into its opposite, a sense of uncanny is created (Bennett & Royce, 2004). This explains why a monstrous being is often regarded as a personification of the uncanny (Beal, 2002). Monstrous characters in work of art are regarded as subversive by their appearance which is

"unfaithful to nature" (Huet, 1993) or by their actions and attitudes which contradict the normative.

Construction of culture is similar to that of the self. According to Ng (2004) the self is a construction of society, language, culture, and ideology. These building blocks — language, morality, law, and other aspects of culture— constitute what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan refers to as the Symbolic Order (Baldick, 2001, p. 252). In the process of becoming constructed, something fundamental within the self is subjugated (Ng, 2004). That which has been subjugated, or in psychoanalytic sense repressed, is not completely erased, and may return sometimes to destabilize the self, thereby exposing frailty of the construction. The return is embodied as monstrous other since monster opposes the normative or the natural as conceived by a society (Ng, 2004). Construction of culture too leads to subjugation or elimination of certain vital elements. One could argue the subversion is predicated upon these subjugated elements as the elements become objects of desire. The monster thus plays a role of rupturing the reality of culture from within to reveal that the culture is just a construct and necessarily fallible. The monster plays this role becoming object of desire or agent of wish fulfilment.

For the monster to rupture the reality of culture from within, it must be a product of that culture. Monster narratives indicate how monstrosity is intimately interrelated to "culture that produces, camouflages, marginalizes and resists it" (Ng, 2004, p. 1). To further illustrate this view, Grixti (qtd. in Ng, 2004, p. 172) contends that monsters represent "unpleasant social and existential realities" which a society seeks to deny and expurgate. The *Ewu*, as the mixed-race population in the text are referred to, represent horrors done by marauding Nuru warriors. They are the permanent embodiment of the pain which the Okeke people want to expurgate and forget. The *Ewu* are the "unpleasant social reality" of the Okeke people. They are thus dehumanized as monsters, and presented as scapegoats and abjectly, which must be confronted and destroyed

(Ng, 2004). This is because culture is the guarantor of cohesiveness and continuity in a society and is therefore guarded with zeal.

The above discussions lead us to rethink critically the concept of monstrosity and subversion as utilized in a society. Onyesonwu, as a representative of the oppressed minority, has been portrayed as a monster from the perspective of the Okeke. She is treated as the monster because she resembles the Nuru who are the worst enemies of the community. Secondly, her nature of conception supposedly portends evil for the community because she is a product of rape and those who are born of violence (rape) and were expected to become violent ultimately (WFD, 32). ultimately become violent (WFD 32). Thirdly she is endowed with supernatural abilities which, instead of improving her soiled image, seems to contribute more to her uncanniness among the people (WFD, 2010). Lastly, Onyesonwu's presence in the community re-ignites repressed anxiety and fear for the Nuru. Onyesonwu's presence pokes "sore part of Jwahir's psyche" (2010. p. 167). Viewed from the Okeke's (Jwahir) side, Onyesonwu's attributes listed above transmutes her into monstrosity.

The reader, however, is also presented with another aspect of Onyesonwu which contradicts the earlier one. She is a brave, assertive girl who fights relentlessly for what she believes, and whose spirit is not dimmed by incessant criticism and denunciation from her detractors. She never relented when Aro rejected her request to be taught sorcery lessons, but kept on insisting till he gave in to her demands (WFD, 2010). When men in the town of Banza tried to rape her, as they always did to other *Ewu* girls, Onyesonwu fought back fiercely and earned reputation in the town (2010). When hostile natives attacked them attacked them as they travelled, she valiantly defended herself and her friends and managed to thwart attempt on their lives (2010). She was mighty healer whose fame spread far and wide (2010). Onyesonwu risked her life to defeat Daib Yagoub, the arch villain behind Okeke's tribulations (2010). Daib was a powerful sorcerer who instigated his people to wage war of

annihilation against the dark-skinned Okeke for his own selfish schemes. He resisted any effort that could lead to cessation of hostilities between Okeke and Nuru because his aim was to exterminate all the Okeke (WFD, 2010).

Onyesonwu thus becomes the heroine of the novel. Treating her as monster on account of what she portends, and who she is, rather than what she has done is erroneous and faulty. Her elevation by *Ani* (God) to powerful position of sorcery, a healer and a mighty warrior who brings down fearsome Daib is an indictment on Okeke's attitude towards her. Onyesonwu subverts the Eleventh Rite and its oppressive *juju* charm by using her extraordinary healing power to help girls restore parts of their genitals which had been mutilated (WFD, 2010). By so doing, she subverts an oppressive cultural practice and in the process, amplify silent voices, like that of Luyu, which had been denouncing the repressive practice (86). Subversion therefore cannot be cast in an unfavourable light if it attempts to remove oppressive practices.

This article thus finds that the torture and oppression meted out to Onyesonwu and all the *Ewu* amounts to monstrosity. By perpetrating such evil against innocent people, the Okeke people and their faulty beliefs are adjudged monstrous. Daib Yagoub of Durfa, however, becomes the ultimate monster as he is the one responsible for the aura of dystopia in the text. His subversiveness knows no bounds as he uses magic on his soldiers to make them wreak more destruction on the Okeke people.

## CONCLUSION

Monster is a common phenomenon in African fiction. Literal monsters are derived from fantasy or folklore. Monstrous characters in fiction serve important socio-cultural roles. They create an atmosphere of intense trepidation because their countenance is "unfaithful to nature" (Huet, 1993). Despite being cultural constructs, monsters are often described in works of art as intrusion, or entities whose origin lies outside of a society. Monster can be used to refer to a large, imaginary creature often ugly and frightening. It is also

associated with supernatural warning and revelation. As a portent, monster pinpoints fault lines or absurdities inherent in the human world. Monster, whether in its metaphysical or physical manifestation, defy the nature and the normative.

In her novel *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor approaches monstrosity from various perspectives. The Okeke people attribute monstrosity to the Nuru and the mixed-race population called *Ewu*. While monstrosity of the Nuru can be substantiated because of their constant attacks and hostility towards the Okeke, monstrosity of the mixed-race people cannot be validated. Monstrosity can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic monstrosity is contingent on innate qualities while extrinsic monstrosity focuses on physical attributes of an individual. Monster is a liminal being as it conflates categorically distinct entities (Carroll 43). Onyesonwu's monstrosity is attributed to conflation of Nuru and Okeke identities since the former is considered monstrous by the Okeke.

Monster embodies desire, polices boundaries, and reinforces conformity. It embodies desire in that it opens up doors to possibilities of wish fulfilment (Cohen, 1996, pg. 17). Onyesonwu plays monster's role when she helps her friends satiate their sexual desires contrary to Jwahirian norms which prohibit premarital sex. She polices boundary of what is acceptable or not by epitomizing sufferings of minority mixed-race community. The monstrosity inscribed in her body is actually a reflection of her tormentors' monstrosity. Finally, Onyesonwu reinforces conformity through her physical appearance and sufferings. This kind conformity, however, is challenged as Onyesonwu and the *Ewu* people attract sympathies from those who recognize that their tribulations result from faulty superstitious beliefs.

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