

Onyekachi Peter Onuoha

ORCID: 0000-0002-2145-8139

University of Calabar

Traumatic memory and the abuse of child rights in *Things Fall Apart*

Traumatic memory and the abuse of Child Rights in *Things Fall Apart*

Abstract

Neglect is a form of child abuse it is the failure of parents to redeem their obligation towards their children. In the novel titled: *Things Fall Apart* (henceforth *TFA*) written by Chinua Achebe, the protagonist called Okonkwo suffers parental neglect, which of course led to his ultimate downfall. Okonkwo's father, Unoka failed to give adequate parental care to his son as portrayed by Achebe in the novel and that parental gap acted as an inertia in Okonkwo's tragic end. Through the application of trauma theory, this study examines childhood trauma and how it conditions the character in adulthood in African novel. The study adopts the discursive approach to textual analysis and observes that toxic masculinity is a product of poor parenting resulting in childhood traumatic experiences that culminate into the use of force, exploitation and victimization cum abuse of children and women as depicted in *TFA*. The study submits that Okonkwo's childhood trauma in *TFA* is an unexplored fear that influences and conditions him even unto adulthood. This study opines that Okonkwo's trauma is a site for extended traumatization of kin and that Okonkwo's unhealed trauma finds expression in his survival antics. The study concludes that Okonkwo is a trauma patient and his success and failure in Umuofia is a product of trauma.

Keywords

trauma, child abuse, masculinity, umuofia

Introduction

Critical works on African literature have depicted Okonkwo in various shades: hero and oppressor of women and children without acknowledging that Okonkwo is a traumatic patient. Chinua Achebe is the first in African written literature to imagine the abuse of child rights and the role of religion in the subjection of

children in *TFA*. Onuoha¹ writes that, “art is a vector in correcting the abnormalities in the society.” This illustrates that creative art provides a second view on the human society and enables the re-interrogation of existing norms. The failure of Okonkwo’s father to live up to his responsibilities as the “man” of the household has a traumatic effect on Okonkwo. Van Derkolk & Fisler² captures the effect of abuse and neglect on a child notes that “secure attachments with caregivers play a critical role in helping children develop a capacity to modulate physiological arousal.” Loss of ability to regulate the intensity of feelings and impulses is possibly the most far-reaching effect of trauma and neglect. It has been shown that most abused and neglected children develop disorganised attachment patterns. The inability to modulate emotions gives rise to a range of behaviors that are best understood as attempts at self-regulation such as aggression against others. The failure of Unoka as a caregiver turned Okonkwo into an aggressive man. This aggression in the form of traumatic memory affects every aspect of Okonkwo’s life and by extension that of his children. Caruth³ theorising on trauma notes that *Traumatic neurosis* – emerges as the unwitting re-enactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind. From a psychological perspective it is also observed that the life of a man is the living out of the conditioning he received between zero and seven years. Substantiating the above point, one can find this exhibition in the life of Okonkwo.

Toxic masculinity in most cases is a product of childhood experiences and poor parenting. The failure of Okonkwo’s father has a continuous effect on him. This can be found in Caruth’s⁴ assertion that trauma is understood as the wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. An African proverb says it takes a community to raise a child and it is this community and its actions that condition a child. Okonkwo was a child raised by his community which did define a man based on economic and political power, it is the same community that socializes Okonkwo in the concept of masculinity of firm, force and fierce. Izevbaye⁵ affirms the foregoing that Okonkwo “the representative of a dying age whose terminal violent actions ushers in the new age.” Anyadike⁶ emphasizing the role of the society

¹ O. Onuoha, *Experience as Art in Denja Abdullahi’s “A Thousand Years of Thirst”* [in:] E. Onyerionwu, I. Bala, C.O. Egbuta (ed.), *Of Foot-Soldiers and Hybrid Visions*, Ibadan 2020, p. 304.

² B.A. Van der Kolk, R. Fisler, *Childhood Abuse and Neglect and Loss of Self-Regulation*, “Bulletin of Menninger Clinic” 1994, 582, p. 1.

³ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore 1996, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁵ D. Izevbaye, *Untold Stories: “Things Fall Apart” at the Turn of the Century*, [in:] C. Anyadike, K. Ayoola (ed.), *Blazing the Path: Fifty Years of “Things Fall Apart”*, Ibadan 2013, p. 63.

⁶ C. Anyadike, *Listening to the gentle voice: rhetorical strategies in “Things Fall Apart”*, [in:] C. Anyadike, K. Ayoola (ed.), *Blazing the Path...*, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

in moulding Okonkwo writes “Igbo culture is partly responsible because it makes a lot of strength and power and success” – and Okonkwo heard this from his society. All through his life, Okonkwo lived with that consciousness of not wanting to be considered a failure within the social narrative of Umuofia and this fear has a traumatic effect on him, which also conditions his actions. Larson⁷ emphasizing the role of communality notes that “TFA because of its emphasis on communality rather than individuality” the communal values were defining culture of the Umuofia society. This is why Nathaniel and Onuoha⁸ see culture as a social imperative in the peoples’ interaction with one another. The opening of *TFA*,⁹ the narrator submits that “Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on personal achievement. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Almalinze the Cat.” The foregoing were realities of the definition of a man within the Umuofia society and this is so in the sense that as Casper and Wertheimer¹⁰ submit that narratives of individual and communal *self-hood* provide us with idea about who we are, think we are, and present us with visions of our place in the cosmos, history in society, and in doing so relate us to our own sense of interiority. Achebe’s *TFA* provides us with the intricacies of child abuse and how it conditions Okonkwo and leads to further instances of child abuse, Okonkwo who suffers child abuse, victimizes others due to his childhood traumatic experience. Many have viewed Okonkwo as the victimizer but have failed to see how much of a victim he himself is. This is so in the sense that as stated Casper and Wertheimer submit that “traumatic events disrupt and even emaciate language and, at time, the body.”¹¹ Traumatic events explode discourse and materiality, and they overflow easy distinctions between and among notions of *individual agency* and institutional practice.

These explode discourse and its overflows are examined within the world of the novel of *TFA*. The issue of trauma seems to be silent in scholarly engagements in *TFA*. In the novel Achebe imagined childhood trauma. However, although many African scholars have argued that Achebe marked the telling of African stories from African perspective, they also fail to note that some African characters as depicted in *TFA* like Okonkwo is a traumatic patient whose

⁷ R.C. Larson, *The Emergence of African Fiction*, Bloomington 1972, p. 63.

⁸ O. Nathaniel, O. Onuoha, *Art Beyond Facial Value: of Metaphorization and Functionality of Sexual Scenes in Selected Nigerian Short Stories in the Cyberspace*, “LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research” 2017, 14(1), p. 184.

⁹ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 1958, p. 3.

¹⁰ J. Casper, E. Wertheimer, *Critical Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Every Day Life*, New York 2016, p. 19.

¹¹ D. Izevbaye, *Untold Stories...*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

actions traumatized his wife and children. Izebvbaye¹² suggest that “Okonkwo’s weakness is consistently portrayed as a psychological problem illustrating the effect of trauma on the protagonist.” Here, trauma is a product of childhood abuse. WHO¹³ defines Child Abuse as all forms of physical and emotional ill treatment, sexual abuse, neglect and exploitation that result in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, development or dignity. Okonkwo’s trauma is a product of Unoka’s neglect and this finds expression in almost everything Okonkwo engages in thus becoming so traumatized by the failure of his father that his life is dictated by the fear of ending up a failure. Gagiano¹⁴ describes Okonkwo’s trauma as, “dangerous combination of power and insecurity at the depth of his personhood.” Bessel A. Van der Kolk & Fisler¹⁵ corroborates the foregoing thus “trauma is imprinted in the body, and that in order to heal, one needs to create a sheltered trance state from which one can safely observe the horrific past.” Okonkwo’s trauma is imprinted in his body psyche and he exists in its trance and observes this horrific past within his psyche. Okonkwo’s childhood experiences have an impact on his development and relation with his household. Levire¹⁶ theorising trauma notes that “all the ‘shocks’ to the organism can alter a person’s biological, psychological and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes taint and dominant, all other experiences spoiling an appreciation of the present moment.” The foregoing is seen in the live experience of Okonkwo within the world of the novel. Okonkwo’s trauma finds expression in his adulthood, *TFA*¹⁷ so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion-to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness. Okonkwo’s traumatic experiences inform his view of gentleness and his father’s failure to take care of his responsibilities conditioned him to a traumatic life style consequently contributing in forming toxic masculinity. In line with the foregoing, Levire¹⁸ affirms that *Memory is a continued reconstruction more akin to the wayward, wildly unpredictable*. Okonkwo’s action is dictated by his childhood memory and this memory finds expression in his actions and inactions.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ WHO, *Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention, 29–31 March 1999*, Geneva 1999.

¹⁴ A. Gagiano, *Achebe’s Children: Resonance Poignance, and Grandeur*, [in:] C. Anyadike, K. Ayoola (ed.), *Blazing the Path...*, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ B.A. Van der Kolk, R. Fisler, *Childhood Abuse...*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁶ A. Levire, *Trauma and Memory: Brain and Body in a Search for the Living Past*, Berkeley 2015, p. 36.

¹⁷ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁸ A. Levire, *Trauma and Memory...*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

Synopsis of the text

Chinua Achebe's epic novel *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958. The novel is structured in three parts: the first part is the pre-colonial era that has to do with the tribal life of the Igbo people of the Eastern region of Nigeria, which is fictionally captured as Umuofia. The Second, part of the novel focuses on Okonkwo's exiled from his village as a result of the accidental murder of his kinsman. The third part has to do with Okonkwo's return from exile and dissatisfaction with the new religion, the new government, as well as the new ways of his people. In classifying Chinua Achebe and *Things Fall Apart*, Ebim writes:

Chinua Achebe is regarded as the most dominant figure in modern African literature. His first novel and magnum opus *Things Fall Apart*... occupies a pivotal place in African Literature and remains the most widely studied, taught and read African Novel. Achebe sought to escape the colonial perspective that predominated African Literature, and drew from the traditions of the Igbo people, Christian influences, and clash of Western and African values to create a uniquely African voice. His style relies heavily on the Igbo oral tradition, and combines straightforward narration with representations of folk stories, proverbs, and oratory. Achebe's work had been widely analysed, and a massive body of scholarly works discussing it has arisen. Some of the themes... touched are politics, history, culture and colonialism as well as masculinity and femininity. To date, his total influence remains unmatched in African Literature.¹⁹

The foregoing provides a brief summary of Chinua Achebe's *TFA*. It indicates the power of *Things Fall Apart* as a traditional masquerade which one needs to move around in the field of performance to be able to have a complete aesthetic appreciation. *TFA* has continuously opened itself to various interpretations by various scholars as indicated by the principles of the seven blind men and the elephant meaning is given to the text based on the critical lenses one is putting on. The plot of *TFA*²⁰ revolves around the life of Okonkwo, a leader of an Igbo community before the advent of colonialism, his accidental killing of a son of the community and his banishment for seven years, his return and dissatisfaction with his community which leads to his killing of the Whiteman's messenger and the failure of his clan to support him. This communal and societal neglect ultimately leads Okonkwo into committing suicide, an exercise that epitomises an abominable act in the African society. However, the opening story of Okonkwo is premised on his achievement, which later unfolds with aspects of the narratives of the failure of his father Unoka who is "unsuccessful" according to the social definition of his time. Unoka,

¹⁹ M.A. Ebim, *Critical Discourse Analysis of Narrative Processes in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"*, "UTUENIKANG, Akwa Ibom journal of language and literary review" 2021, 1(1), p. 192.

²⁰ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Okonkwo's father is lazy and always in debt and by his actions brings shame and disgrace to his family. The narrator captures the character of Unoka thus:

Unoka, for that was his father's name, had died ten years ago. In his day he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking of tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, call round his neighbours and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he was the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime. Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbour some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts.²¹

Unoka died leaving his unsettled debts for his son, and his actions toward life become a source of worry for his son. Due to the social narrative that classified his father as a failure and the inability of Unoka to provide for his household, Okonkwo suffers trauma and as a source of motivation for him to be better than his father. Okonkwo strive to be better than his father and this motivated him to be rash in his attempt to present himself as a strong man. The societal definition of his father as a lazy man provokes him to be aggressive and hardworking attributes which were the qualities that were admired in Umuofia, the community depicted in the novel in *TFA*. In an attempt to hate everything including gentleness and idleness, which were associated with his father, Okonkwo maltreated his son Nwoye by constantly nagging and beating him. It is this same fear of not being like his father that leads to his killing Ikemefuna, a boy who called him father.

Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative methodological framework, which has to do with the analysis of data from a purely discursive approach. In this study, the data elicited from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* were subjected to textual analysis. This approach gives the researcher the opportunity to critically examine the data by subjecting them to literary interpretation through the application of a literary theory. It enables the researcher to tell what patterned stereotypes individuals are depicted or the various literary forms of traumatic experiences the protagonist has gone through. Using this approach, the best way of detecting 'real' attitudes is to register behavioural reactions to language in real-life situations as Ebim²² observes, this form of analysis attempts to elicit behavioural reactions from participants and these reactions are then used as determiners for language attitudes and stereotypes.

²¹ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²² M.A. Ebim, *Terrorists or Tags? Contested Identities in Media Portrayal of Militants in Nigeria*, "Journal of African Studies" 2017, 6(2), p. 143.

Childhood trauma and its metamorphosis in TFA

Okonkwo was psychologically abused as a result of his father's lack of achievement. Unoka's inability to be a man among his people is a source of trauma for Okonkwo. Caruth²³ is of the opinion that "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden catastrophic events which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other intrusive phenomena." Okonkwo's traumatic memory occurs in a delayed and uncontrolled manner with those who show such gentleness like his father. The omniscient narrator in Achebe's *TFA*²⁴ notes that among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. There is nothing worthy of respect of the Umuofia society as it is to compare Okonkwo to his father because Unoka, the grown up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him for the fact that he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back. But Unoka was such a man that always succeeded in borrowing more, and piling his debts. Unoka's failure to take care of his family, which constitutes neglect and his ability to borrow without paying back, had traumatic effects on Okonkwo. Caruth captures the metamorphosis of trauma thus:

trauma seems to be pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche. It is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked to only what is known, but also to what remains in our very actions and our language.²⁵

Unoka's failure to take responsibilities of his household has traumatic effect on Okonkwo. The omniscient narrator in *TFA* notes that: "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children." Perhaps, down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man, but his life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these, *TFA*.²⁶ The foregoing highlights the power of childhood trauma and how it finds expression in complex

²³ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²⁴ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*, p. 3-4, 7-11.

²⁵ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*, *op. cit.*, p. 4-5.

²⁶ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*

ways. Caruth²⁷ in theorising on trauma notes that: *the complex ways that knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it*. The inner working of Okonkwo indicates that he is a traumatic patient from childhood. Caruth²⁸ reports that *traumatic experience* is a not fully assimilated as it occurs. And this is reflected in the omniscient narrator's observation in *TFA* that:

It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was agbala. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that agbala was another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion- to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness.²⁹

Okonkwo's trauma resulted from the failure of his father to fit into the definition of his time. Okonkwo was insulted by his playmate, which left a psychological wound on his memory. Archbishop Duncan Williams supports the foregoing when he says you become what you hate. The excerpt indicates that child abuse can take the form of verbal bullying as seen in Okonkwo's playmate mocking him that his father was Agbala. Ebim³⁰ is on the opinion that meaning, is convey through language, which suggest the social construct of the meaning of the word used on Okonkwo. The effect of the insult and all the failure of his father fashioned him in such a way that Okonkwo hated everything his father Unoka had loved such as gentleness and idleness. Okonkwo's situation is implicated in Caruth³¹ submission that "trauma narratives, does not simply represent the violence of a collision but also conveys the impact of its very incomprehensibility." What returns to haunt the victim, is not only the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known. Okonkwo is influenced and controlled by his childhood trauma. The social narratives within Umuofia inflict psychological wounds in Okonkwo who suffers from the danger of a single story of his father as one who is lazy and idle. This compounded his trauma in the sense that stories can make or mar humans. Okonkwo's traumatic experience emanated from the social narratives of his father, whose negligence over the care of his family resulted in his traumatic experience. Okonkwo did not inherit anything from his father.

²⁷ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*, *op. cit.*

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

²⁹ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*

³⁰ M.A. Ebim, *Critical Discourse...*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

³¹ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*, *op. cit.*

Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men usually had. He did not inherit a barn from his father. There was no barn to inherit. The story was told in Umuofia of how his father, Unoka, had gone to consult the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves to find out why he always had a miserable harvest.³²

The Oracle informed Unoka about his laziness and chased him away, which also became a social narrative. Caruth³³ is of the opinion that *The story of trauma* as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality-the escape from a death, or its referential force- rather attests to its endless impact on a life, and this is clearly seen in Okonkwo's life and indeed he was possessed by the fear of his father's contemptible life and shameful death *TFA*.³⁴ This fear of being like his father conditioned Okonkwo such that, Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness the only thing worth demonstrating was strength. He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everybody else-with a heavy hand *TFA*.³⁵ This is in line with Caruth's³⁶ submission on trauma thus the historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experience at all. However, Okonkwo kept making reference to the site of his trauma and feeling that his son should be as strong as he is:

His eldest son, Nwoye, and Ikemefuna helped him by fetching the yams in long baskets from the barn and in counting the prepared seeds in groups of four hundred. Sometimes Okonkwo gave them a few yams each to prepare. But he always found fault with their effort, and he said so with much threatening. 'Do you think you are cutting up yams for cooking?' he asked Nwoye. 'If you split another yam of this size, I shall break your jaw. You think you are still a child. I began to own a farm at your age.'³⁷

Okonkwo's trauma is referential to his childhood memory. He told Nwoye and Ikemefuna that he, Okonkwo, began having yam farm at their age. Affirming Caruth³⁸ submission that for history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs... that a history can be grasped in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence. Okonkwo did not remember that the failure of his father to live up to his responsibility made him to

³² C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*, p. 13, 15, 22, 30.

³³ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³⁴ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6, 17.

³⁷ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

³⁸ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

be a man at a very tender age, because Caruth³⁹ submits that the traumatic nature of history means that events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others, Okonkwo's traumatic history implicates every aspect of his life and Onuoha⁴⁰ is on the opinion that memory is the product of history and that is a second past action or inaction in the society that culminates into fossils. Actions or inactions of individuals transform with time into relics Onuoha⁴¹ which the individual unconsciously draws from in negotiating life. In an attempt for Okonkwo to correct his son, he implicates his traumatic history of his father thus I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands. Okonkwo's father could not hold up his head in the gathering of his clan and Okonkwo feared such for his son and as such overworked his children. He was a very strong man and rarely felt fatigue. But his wives and young children were not as strong, and so they suffered. But they dared not complain openly. Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye, was then twelve years old but was always causing his father great anxiety and he sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating. And so Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth *TFA*.⁴² Okonkwo's trauma affects the raising of his son, which affects the right of Nwoye to grow at his own space, making him develop into sad face youth. Achebe⁴³ captures the trauma that women and children pass through in the hand of Okonkwo thus Okonkwo ruled his household with heavy hands. His wives, especially, the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. It is through Okonkwo's reaction and relationship with his family that we are able to recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of Okonkwo's catastrophic experience Caruth.⁴⁴

Children without rights and subjugation of children by men and gods in *Things Fall Apart*

Ikemefuna came into Okonkwo's household when Mbaino, Ikemefuna's people killed the daughter of Umuofia. Foregrounding the reason for Ikemefuna leaving home, the narrator in Achebe's⁴⁵ describes so when the daughter of Umuofia was

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ O. Onuoha, *The Interface Between Self, History and Literature in Chris Anyokwu's "Naked Truth"*, "Journal of Languages Linguistics, and Literary Studies" 2018, 5, p. 17, 26.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*, p. 11-12.

killed in Mbaino, Ikemefuna came into Okonkwo's household. When Okonkwo brought him home. A member of Mbaino clan gave Ikemefuna and a girl as atonement for the crime committed. It seems in traditional Umuofia society, the rights of children to life and existence were more or less left at the mercy of their parents. Ikemefuna was used as a sacrificial lamb to atone for the sin of his father irrespective of how Ikemefuna felt about the situation. He was forced out of his father's house without any explanation.

As for the boy, he was terribly afraid. He could not understand what was happening to him or what he had done. How could he know that his father had taken a hand in the killing a daughter of Umuofia? All he knew was that a few men had arrived at their house, conversing with his father in low tones, and at the end he had been taken out and handed over to strangers. His mother had wept bitterly, but he had been too surprised to weep. And so the stranger had brought him, and a girl, a long, long way from home, through lonely forest paths. He did not know who the girl was, and he never saw her again.⁴⁶

The plight of Ikemefuna in *TFA* is symptomatic of the society that tramples on the rights of children. This can be seen in the excerpt below. So when the daughter of Umuofia was killed in Mbaino, Ikemefuna came into Okonkwo's household and so the stranger had brought him, a girl, a long, long way from home, through lonely forest paths.⁴⁷ This highlights the dilemmas of children as sacrificial lambs without any recourse to their rights as human beings. Ikemefuna is viewed as an object of sacrifice where his foster father kills him without mercy in contravention of the warning of his friend Ogbufi Ezeudu. Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father.⁴⁸ Ikemefuna becomes the first child carrier in African Literature without the reward and explanation given to him why he is performing such role unlike Elesin in Soyinka's⁴⁹ *Death and the king's Horseman*. Although Elesin Oba is informed of his role toward the society, which he accepts out of his free will as adult carrier in his society, Ikemefuna is not given such a privilege because he is a child. Upon the abuse of Ikemefuna, which was not defined, as he was given out like an object by his clan to Umuofia to appease them. Achebe writes. "At first Ikemefuna was very much afraid. Once or twice he tried to run away, but he did not know where to begin. He thought of his mother and his

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 8, 22, 29, 46.

⁴⁹ W. Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, 1975.

three years old sister and wept bitterly.⁵⁰ Due to Ikemefuna's uprooting which is synonymous with the experiences of Fredrick Douglas' uprooting as depicted in the *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*,⁵¹ he became ill for three market weeks, and when he recovered, he seemed to have overcome his great fear and sadness.⁵² Ikemefuna's relief is short lived as the gods decides his death. A god he did not offend, Onuoha in commenting on the people of Umuofia and their god notes that the people of Umuofia venerated their god as these deities shaped how they thought, acted and even spoke.⁵³ Ogbuefi Ezeudu's appeal to Okonkwo not to have a hand in death of Ikemefuna foregrounds the conspiracy of the gods against a child who did not offend any of them but because he was not in a position to make decision for his survival as a child. It also indicates the abuse of child's right by the traditional god of Umuofia society. Ogbuefi Ezeude says that boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death. Okonkwo was surprised, and was about to say something when the old man continued. Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will outside Umuofia, as is the custom, and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father.⁵⁴ Umuofia, which is made of elderly men and the god of the Hills and Caves conspired to kill Ikemefuna who had not wrong them in any way. Ikemefuna is abused emotionally before Okonkwo, the clan and god on the road murdered him to his execution; he felt uneasy.⁵⁵ On the road one of the men behind him cleared his throat. Ikemefuna looked back, and the man growled at him to go on and not stand looking back. The way the man said it sent cold fear down Ikemefuna's back. His hands trembled vaguely on the black pot he carried. Why had Okonkwo withdrawn to the rear? Ikemefuna felt his legs melting under him. And he was afraid to look back. The uncertainty of Ikemefuna's situation torments him emotionally and affects his mobility and his reaction to his immediate environment. Ikemefuna is about to be killed by a man he had never offended; as the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his matchet, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, *My father, they have killed me!* as he ran toward him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought a weak.⁵⁶ Ikemefuna is murdered by the one he calls a father and Okonkwo's action is motivated by the fact that he was afraid of being thought weak. Okonkwo's ac-

⁵⁰ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*, p. 11-12.

⁵¹ O. Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, London 1989.

⁵² C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*, p. 11-12.

⁵³ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*

tion emphasizes Caruth's⁵⁷ submission that the history of the traumatized individual, is nothing other than the determined repetition of the events of destruction. Okonkwo's action has a traumatic effect on Nwoye as soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed, and something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow. He did not cry. He just hung limp.⁵⁸ Nwoye is traumatized by the death of Ikemefuna, whom he considered as elder brother because he made him feel grown up.⁵⁹ Through memory and picturing we could see how the people's custom, which was determined by their gods deprived children of the right to life because they come in pairs. They were returning home with baskets of yams from distant farm across the stream when they had heard the voice of an infant crying in the thick forest. Nwoye had heard that twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest but he had never yet come across them. A vague chill had descended on him and his head had seemed to swell, like a solitary walker at night that passes an evil spirit on the way. Then something had given way inside him. It descended on him again, this feeling, when his father walked in, that night after killing Ikemefuna.⁶⁰ Nwoye is affected by cries of thrown away twins and the denial of life with the Umuofia community, which is their fundamental right to life and the murder of Ikemefuna. LeVire⁶¹ commenting memory notes that our current moods and sensations play a key role in how we remember event. They structure our evolving relationship to these "memories" as well as how we deal with and reconstruct them anew. Nwoye's mood and the role of Ikemefuna in his life kept the memory of his death ever fresher in his heart and form a critical aspect in defining his identity within the world of the novel. Nwoye is traumatized by his father's constant criticism and the loss of Ikemefuna in his life and so he found solace in the new religion. Although Nwoye had been attracted to the new faith from the first day, he kept it secret. He dared not go too near the missionaries for fear of his father. But whenever they came to preach in the open market place or the village playground, Nwoye was there. And he was already beginning to know some of the simple stories they told.⁶² The narratives of the new religion told within the framework of stories created a new form of memory. McNeill⁶³ theorizing on the linguistic memory notes that when

⁵⁷ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁶¹ A. LeVire, *Trauma and Memory...* *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁶² C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*

⁶³ D. McNeill, *On Linguistic Memory*, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/David-McNeill-7/publication/259293738_On_Linguistic_Memory/links/02e7e52ad05061d747000000/On-Linguistic-Memory.pdf [accessed: 27.04.2022].

language evolved, it created a new form of memory. We experience it daily as we speak. Experience and human actions are factors that influence the development of human language and the stories Nwoye listened to create a new form of memory different from the traumatic memory of Umuofia. Carey⁶⁴ notes about art people of all ages have turned to play and to the arts to deal not only with the stresses of everyday life, but also to cope with trauma experiences that are too overwhelming for the ego to assimilate. The foregoing highlights the reason Nwoye finds solace in the new religion. Due to Nwoye's acceptance of the new religion, Okonkwo progresses in abusing his son physically

One morning Okonkwo's cousin, Amikwu, was passing by the church on his way from the neighboring village, when he saw Nwoye among the Christians. He was greatly surprised, and when he got home he went straight to Okonkwo's hut and told him what he had seen. The women began to talk excitedly, but Okonkwo was sat unmoved. It was late afternoon before Nwoye returned. He went into the Obi and saluted his father, but he did not answer. Nwoye turned round and walk into the inner compound when his father, suddenly overcome with fury, sprang to his feet and gripped him by the neck. 'Where have you been?' He stammered. Nwoye struggled to free himself from the choking grip.⁶⁵

Aside psychological abuse, Okonkwo abused Nwoye physically as a result of Nwoye's choice to worship a god different from that of Umuofia. Achebe affirms "Language was crucial to the creation of society" and Okonkwo's words and actions have physical and psychological damage on Nwoye.

Okonkwo's failure is as product of trauma

From childhood, Umuofia had defined a man based on fierceness, force and economic power. Macdonald⁶⁶ affirms the forgoing thus masculinity is defined through material practice. Unoka did not fit into this definition. However, Umuofia was a changing society whose values were affected by time. Although social narratives conditioned Okonkwo and the definition of his father by the society, what he failed to understand was that, such tags were changing based on time. Benezet⁶⁷ accounting for how trauma works in social context submits that traumatic events never happen in the social vacuum. They are connected to the social

⁶⁴ L. Carey, *Expressive and Creative Arts Methods for Trauma Survivors*, Philadelphia 2006, p. 9.

⁶⁵ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*, p. 121, 130, 139.

⁶⁶ M. Macdonald, *Suicide falls through the cracks a symptomatic reading of Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"*, [in:] C. Anyadike, K. Ayoola (ed.), *Blazing the Path...*, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

⁶⁷ G. Benezet, *Trauma Signals in Life Stories*, [in:] L. Rogers (ed.), *Trauma and Life Stories*, London 1979, p. 30.

context in which they take place. In many if not most cases, they are related to the norms of society and to what is spoken about and what is kept silent in public. Life stories include an exposition of the relation between the private and the collective context. Okonkwo's trauma happened within a social context and this social context is not static. Okonkwo was coming back to meet a community that his father Unoka would have been considered not a fail but a part of the wider society. "Umuofia had indeed changed during the seven years Okonkwo had been in exile. The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low-born and the outcast but sometimes a worth man had joined it."⁶⁸ In seeing this society Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women.⁶⁹ The society, which classified Unoka as a failure as a result of his approach to life suddenly, accepted such ways, which Okonkwo failed to understand. Okonkwo suffers from childhood definition of his father from social narratives and his father's negligence to take economic responsibility toward his family and these "agbala-men of the society now accept" is that which they had rejected. Casper and Wertheimer⁷⁰ submission highlights the nature of Okonkwo's trauma when they note that trauma describes events unique in their ability to disrupt or conform to both what we believe know about bodies (our own and those of others), and our ways of knowing about embodiment Caruth.⁷¹ Okonkwo's trauma did not allow him to accept the change in the society. His trauma kept making reference to his past and the definition of strength within Umuofia. As he lay on his bamboo bed he thought about the treatment he had received in the white man's court, and he swore vengeance. If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself. He thought about wars in the past.⁷² This was the society Okonkwo knew and was raised in and assumed the responsibility to hold on to such definition, and not to be considered weakling like his father Okonkwo. In a flash Okonkwo drew his matchet. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's matchet descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body.⁷³ The foregoing is the greatest undoing of Okonkwo within the world of the novel and highlights his traumatic rejection of the gentleness of his father, which was a source of trauma from his childhood. Carey highlights the

⁶⁸ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁰ J. Casper, E. Wertheimer, *Critical Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Every Day Life*, New York 2016, p. 30.

⁷¹ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁷² C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart...*, *op. cit.*

⁷³ *Ibidem.*

nature of Okonkwo's trauma thus memories of traumatic experiences are difficult, if not impossible to access. Even by the character but it finds expression in the character's actions. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: *Why did he do it?*⁷⁴ It was after this realisation that Okonkwo committed suicide.

Conclusion

Achebe's TFA depicts Okonkwo and his aspiration to fit into the social definition of Umuofia, what a successful man motivated him to be aggressive, fierce and assertive and this is as a result of the strong hatred that he has for the qualities associated with his father. The social narrative about the failure of Unoka and his inability to provide for his family leading to the neglect of Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* were part of the issues that conditioned Okonkwo at childhood. The fear of not wanting to be identified with his father who was a weakling during his time was a traumatic memory that finds expression in Okonkwo abusing his son Nwoye physically and psychological. To some extent there was no child's right in Umuofia society and the surrounding communities as the murder of Ikemefuna illustrates. The gods are implicated in the murder of Ikemefuna whose only offence was that he was a child and came from a particular community. The tradition, which is linked to the gods, played an important role in the throwing of children into the evil forest, which is the abuse of the fundamental rights of children to life. Okonkwo from the examination of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a trauma patient and his untreated trauma is continuous and referential in his dealing with others and finds expression in his aggression and fear from being like his father.

Bibliography

- Achebe C., *Things Fall Apart*, 1958.
- Anyadike C., *Listening to the gentle voice: rhetorical strategies in "Things Fall Apart"*, [in:] C. Anyadike, K. Ayoola (ed.), *Blazing the Path: Fifty Years of "Things Fall Apart"*, Ibadan 2013.
- Benezer G., *Trauma Signals in Life Stories*, [in:] L. Rogers (ed.), *Trauma and Life Stories*, London 1979.
- Carey L., *Expressive and Creative Arts Methods for Trauma Survivors*, Philadelphia 2006.
- Caruth C., *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore 1996.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

- Casper J., Wertheimer E., *Critical Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Every Day Life*, New York 2016.
- Ebim M.A., *Critical Discourse Analysis of Narrative Processes in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"*, "UTUENIKANG, Akwa Ibom journal of language and literary review" 2021, 1(1).
- Ebim M.A., *Terrorists or Tags? Contested Identities in Media Portrayal of Militants in Nigeria*, "Journal of African Studies" 2007, 6(2).
- Equiano O., *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, London 1989.
- Gagiano A., *Achebe's Children: Resonance Poignance, and Grandeur*, [in:] C. Anyadike, K. Ayoola (ed.), *Blazing the Path: Fifty Years of "Things Fall Apart"*, Ibadan 2013.
- Izevbaye D., *Untold Stories: "Things Fall Apart" at the Turn of the Century*, [in:] C. Anyadike, K. Ayoola (ed.), *Blazing the Path: Fifty Years of "Things Fall Apart"*, Ibadan 2013.
- Larson R. C., *The Emergence of African Fiction*, Bloomington 1972.
- Levire A., *Trauma and Memory: Brain and Body in a Search for the Living Past*, Berkeley 2015.
- Macdonald M., *Suicide falls through the cracks a symptomatic reading of Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"*, [in:] C. Anyadike, K. Ayoola (ed.), *Blazing the Path: Fifty Years of "Things Fall Apart"*, Ibadan 2013.
- Mcneill D., *On Linguistic Memory*, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/David-Mcneill-7/publication/259293738_On_Linguistic_Memory/links/02e7e52ad05061d747000000/On-Linguistic-Memory.pdf [accessed: 27.04.2022].
- Nathaniel O., Onuoha O., *Art Beyond Facial Value: of Metaphorization and Functionality of Sexual Scenes in Selected Nigerian Short Stories in the Cyberspace*, "LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research" 2017, 14(1).
- Onuoha O., *Experience as Art in Denja Abdullahi's "A Thousand Years of Thirst"*, [in:] Onyerionwu E., Bala I., Egbuta C.O. (ed.), *Of Foot-Soldiers and Hybrid Visions*, Ibadan 2020.
- Onuoha O., *The Interface Between Self, History and Literature in Chris Anyokwu's "Naked Truth"*, "Journal of Languages Linguistics, and Literary Studies" 2018, 5.
- Soyinka W., *Death and the King's Horseman*, 1975.
- Van der Kolk B.A., Fisler R., *Childhood Abuse and Neglect and Loss of Self-Regulation*, "Bulletin of Menninger Clinic" 1994, 582.
- WHO, *Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention, 29–31 March 1999*, Geneva 1999.