

THE WOUNDED CHILD: TRAUMA AND RECYCLED INHUMANITY IN CHINUA
ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE
HIBISCUS*

by

Johnson Nte'ne

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines manifestations of childhood trauma in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, with a particular focus on the experiences of Okonkwo and Eugene. Okonkwo and Eugene have largely been dismissed by various critics as violent misogynists whose highhandedness leads to the collapse of their individual families. Although this interpretation is understandable, given the belligerence of Okonkwo and Eugene towards other characters, little has been said about the experiences which propel this violent streak. I address this lacuna by reading Okonkwo and Eugene's brutality towards others as manifestations of their own childhood trauma. My arguments are anchored on Cathy Caruth's literary trauma model, which discusses how the incomprehensibility and belatedness of traumatic events shape their impact on the individual. Caruth contends that trauma disrupts the linear progression of time, leading to a perpetual return of the event in the survivor's consciousness. Caruth also argues that trauma leaves a shock in the mind, which is often repressed in an attempt to survive it, only to be pried open later when certain stark or similar incidents trigger it. Accordingly, I argue that Okonkwo's protracted deprivation and the resultant bastardisation of his self-esteem as well as Eugene's maltreatment and eventual radicalisation by the Catholic priests who raised him lead to their traumatisation. As such, both characters demonstrate a form of recycled inhumanity later in their adult lives, not being able to devise a strategy to cope with their own gruesome experiences. I therefore interpret their inhumanity towards others as a helpless reenactment of the inhumanities they suffered as children.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 OKONKWO AND HIS CRITICS

This thesis examines manifestations of childhood trauma in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, with a particular focus on the experiences of Okonkwo and Eugene. Okonkwo and Eugene have largely been dismissed by various critics as violent misogynists whose highhandedness leads to the collapse of their individual families. Although this interpretation is understandable, given the belligerence of Okonkwo and Eugene towards other characters, little has been said about the experiences which propel this violent streak. I intend to address this lacuna by reading Okonkwo and Eugene's brutality towards others as manifestations of their own childhood trauma.

I argue that Okonkwo and Eugene are traumatised children who demonstrate a form of recycled inhumanity later in their adult lives, not being able to devise a strategy to cope with their own gruesome experiences. Their inhumanity towards others is a helpless reenactment of the inhumanities they suffered as children. I commence with a brief survey of existing scholarship on both characters, in order to establish the rationale behind my position.

First published in 1958, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* examines aspects of life in precolonial Igbo society as well as the struggle with British colonial rule, using the life of Okonkwo as its basic plot map. The novel traces Okonkwo's rise from a humble background to when he becomes one of the most respected men in Umuofia. Because of his father's indolence and indebtedness, Okonkwo suffers a childhood of deprivation, which leaves him with a very low self-esteem. But by sheer hard work and determination, he pulls himself out of poverty. However, because he detests his father and everything the latter loved, he disavows virtues such as gentleness, kindness, patience and tolerance, embracing antagonism and outright aggression.

Consequently, he is impatient in his relationship with his wives and children, and beats them at the slightest possible opportunity. Okonkwo's life is also largely governed by the fear of being thought to resemble his father. This fear, coupled with the eagerness to constantly prove his manliness, prompts him to murder Ikemefuna as well as the court messenger of the colonial government. It is this second murder which results in his downfall, because he commits suicide in lieu of being hanged by the colonial government.

According to Rhonda Cobham, Okonkwo believes that "physical strength and the ability to inflict one's will on another human being ... are the only significant forms of social differentiation in establishing a masculine identity" (23). The idea of "social differentiation" suggests that Umuofia is hopelessly sexist, and that being the embodiment of its values, Okonkwo is as guilty of sexism as his community. While Maria Lowe objects to such an "[essentialized] representation of pre-colonial Igbo society" based on Okonkwo's misdeeds (6), Ifeoma Onyemelukwe sides with Cobham, objecting to what she terms Okonkwo's "burning passion to possess and dominate the woman" (351). This passion is demonstrated, according to Onyemelukwe, by Okonkwo's enumeration of his three wives and many children as part of his achievements. Onyemelukwe seems to conflate the reality of polygamy with what would be Okonkwo's inherent misogyny, because, as Columbus Ogbujah argues, polygamy in *Things Fall Apart* depicts "harmonious family scenarios where multiplicity of persons became a formidable source of strength and family economic productivity," as opposed to simply denoting a "house of commotion" (45) where women are pitched against each other under the rule of a husband.

Unlike Cobham and Onyemelukwe, however, I consider Okonkwo, not as an epitome of Umuofia's sexism, but as a victim of its negligence. I argue in this thesis that Umuofia as a community fails to insulate Okonkwo from various forms of childhood trauma, precipitating his

metamorphosis into a physical abuser. I therefore view Okonkwo's "burning passion to dominate the woman" not as a manifestation of innate misogyny, but as an unconscious display of deep psychological injuries.

John Douthwaite carries on the vilification of Okonkwo when he asserts that the latter is "normally authoritarian" (7) – an opinion which aligns with Chris Walsh's description of Okonkwo as a man who is always "reactionary" (112). Clement Okafor further interprets Okonkwo's "downfall" as proof of "his lack of full understanding of his people and culture" (89), suggesting that Okonkwo's death by suicide at the end of *Things Fall Apart* is a well-deserved punishment for his aggression throughout the novel. Anthonia Kalu affirms this position when she equally alleges that Okonkwo "[lacks] full understanding of what [maintains] communal balance and harmony" (Kalu 148).

Douthwaite, Walsh, Okafor and Kalu subtly celebrate Okonkwo's tragic end as payback for his inhumaneness throughout the novel. However, they do not offer explanations for the main cause of Okonkwo's death, namely, his propensity for rash courage. Okonkwo commits suicide rather than be hanged by the colonial authorities for killing a court messenger who is sent to disband a meeting wherein the men of Umuofia gather to discuss their next line of action following the humiliation and imprisonment of some elders of their clan by the colonial government. Killing the court messenger was a foolhardy move, like his participation in the murder of Ikemefuna. I demonstrate in this thesis that both actions are the direct consequence of Okonkwo's desire to overcompensate for psychological deficiencies stemming from his traumatic childhood experiences. This way, the desire to constantly prove his worth can be read as a referendum on Umuofia's collective negligence of him as a child, rather than as a referendum on Okonkwo himself.

Ajoke Mimiko Bestman takes a less antagonistic stance on Okonkwo. She insists that though Okonkwo is likely to be misconstrued as a representation of the gendered society of his time, Achebe deploys sufficient literary strategies to prove that he is actually “the exception [and] not the norm” of pre-colonial Igbo society (172). Bestman, in fact, claims that Okonkwo “was not an Igbo paragon” but was in many ways “a misfit... a one-sided man” who was “too anxious to succeed” (170). Although Bestman’s intention is not to vindicate Okonkwo, she invariably reveals a fundamental disconnection between Okonkwo and his community. Her claim that Okonkwo is “too anxious to succeed” makes it possible to question the source of Okonkwo’s anxiety. The description of him as a “misfit” is also reminiscent of a flawed upbringing, as is? Ada Uzoamaka Azodo’s description of Okonkwo as a “hybrid” who finds himself “up against a whole institution or system” (316). These demonstrate that Okonkwo has a fundamental flaw which may be rooted in his past, rather than in his present action.

In the second chapter, I discuss Okonkwo’s disconnection from his community as a product of his devastating childhood experiences. His unchecked overzealousness is therefore a desperate search for validation, which he hopes will remedy the poor self-esteem induced by his sordid childhood, in line with Jasper Onuekwusi’s argument that Okonkwo’s “quest for excellence” is scuttled by “uncontrollable forces” (72). I argue that Okonkwo can be reinterpreted as the product of a poor upbringing and a victim of childhood trauma, rather than as a heartless villain who enjoys the suffering of others.

1.2 EUGENE AND HIS CRITICS

Told from the perspective of fifteen-year-old Kambili, Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* explores the gradual decline of the Achike family, due to the domestic abuse of their father, Eugene. The novel was first published in 2003 and is presumably set during the Babangida

military regime which lasted between 1985 and 1993 in Nigeria. Eugene is presented as a Catholic fanatic who uses violence to exact compliance to Catholic traditions. Eugene beats his wife, Beatrice, regularly, even when she is pregnant. He also beats his children and even pours boiling water on their feet at some point. He ostracises his sister, Aunty Ifeoma, because she is too accommodating of Igbo culture, and completely denounces their ailing father, Papa Nnukwu, because he is a “heathen” (17). Ironically, Eugene stands up to the military government of his day, and uses his newspaper, *The Standard*, to expose their misdeeds. This leads to the conferment of a human rights award on him by Amnesty World. However, on account of his highhandedness at home, his wife poisons him, in an attempt to liberate herself and her children.

Like critics of *Things Fall Apart*, critics of Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* have not spared Eugene the chauvinistic gavel. Adichie herself described Eugene, in *We Should All Be Feminists*, as “a man who amongst other things beats his wife” (7), thereby making it difficult to consider anything else Eugene does in good faith, in light of his wife-battery. Accordingly, critics of the novel have tended to compare Eugene’s “virtues” with his vices in a way that suggests that the former could never count for much on account of the latter. For example, Daria Tunca dismisses the fact that Eugene “fights the yoke of military dictatorship” because he simultaneously “imposes fanatical religious views on his wife Beatrice and his children” (1). Roger Kurz echoes Tunca’s position with the observation that Eugene’s “admirable and progressive public stances are matched by a marked intolerance and tyranny in his own household” (26-27). Stanley Ordu equally accuses Eugene of using “masculinist societal control” to intimidate and subjugate his wife, his children and even his sister (68). Nitika Stan and Navreet Sahi further the argument on Eugene’s chauvinism by decrying his deployment of religion as a tool of control deployed in the domination of his household; they refer to him as a “violent Catholic patriarch who acts as a

fanatically devout tyrant at home” (67). This adoption of religion as a tool of control results in the “ritualised abuse” of the Achike family, according to Edgar Fred Nabutanyi, due to Eugene’s “primitively misogynist hatred for femininity” (78 - 79).

Though mostly unfavourable, the foregoing opinions unwittingly reveal a fundamental rupture in the personality of Eugene, which suggests the presence and influence of traumatic experiences. If Eugene “fights the yoke of military dictatorship” while simultaneously “[imposing] fanatical religious views” on his family, to use Tunca’s words, then it is apparent that he has two contradictory ideologies raging inside of him at the very least. He dislikes authoritarianism, hence his constant opposition to military rule in Nigeria – even to the point of imperilling himself and his businesses. Yet he institutes a form of military rule in his home, and even exacts compliance through domestic violence. Clearly, Eugene’s personality rages with good and evil. However, he is unable to tame the latter in favour of the former. As such, while he is awarded by Amnesty International for his efforts in preserving human rights, he is poisoned by his wife for his constant dehumanisation of his family. This is suggestive of a deep internal fissure.

Because of Eugene’s propensity for good, Eyoh Etim and Ima Emmanuel undertake a deconstructionist reading of his role in the novel, reaching the conclusion that he is actually the “epitome of a hero” as well as a “principled protagonist who is murdered for being unwavering in his beliefs” (13). Casimir Adjoe favours this view of Eugene; he points out that although Eugene tends to be “extreme in disciplining his children,” he does regret this extremity and constantly tries to “soothe the children back to serenity” in an attempt “to teach them values” (40). This position sits well with Kurz, for although Kurz disparages Eugene for “intolerance and

tyranny,” he also admits that it is “heroic” of Eugene to battle corruption and stand his ground against the pressure to take a second wife.

In this thesis, I examine childhood trauma as the force behind Eugene’s contradictory actions. Whereas one group of critics considers Eugene to be a monster in spite of his good deeds and the other group considers him to be a hero whose evil actions are somehow misunderstood or exaggerated, my interpretation of the text reveals Eugene to be a victim of unhealed psychological injuries inflicted on him as a child. I argue that Eugene suffered brazen inhumanity at the hands of the Catholic priests who trained him, and that this experience instilled in him a capacity for inhumanity against his better judgement.

It is my position in this thesis that much of Okonkwo and Eugene’s untoward behaviour towards their families is a reenactment of their own sad childhood experiences. Rather than celebrate what Alexander Amete and Alex Osigbo call “the paradox of the patriarchy” (141), that is, the idea that powerful men are eventually destroyed, I offer a reason for the metamorphosis of both characters into violent misogynists in the first instance. Indeed, whereas previous critics have taken a moral stance on the actions of Okonkwo and Eugene, my thesis seeks to offer a rationale for the actions themselves.

1.3 CATHY CARUTH’S LITERARY FRAMEWORK OF TRAUMA

In reading *Things Fall Apart* and *Purple Hibiscus*, I draw my critical bearings from Cathy Caruth’s literary trauma model. Caruth’s trauma theory maps representations of traumatic experiences in texts, emphasising how the event’s incomprehensibility and belatedness shape its impact on the individual. Caruth describes trauma itself as “the repetitive reenactments of people who have experienced painful events” (1), explaining further that trauma embodies “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they

occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (Caruth 91).

Caruth contends that trauma disrupts the linear progression of time, leading to a perpetual return of the event in the survivor’s consciousness. This constitutes an “unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind,” resulting in the rise of what Caruth terms “repetition compulsion” – the tendency to relive the events through flashbacks and nightmares, or maybe even through reenactment (2). Hence Caruth reveals that “the painful repetition of the flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid the unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way” (59). In other words, because of the severity of the event, the mind cannot detach from it easily, hence the repetitive memories. Caruth further argues that trauma leaves a trace or shock in the mind, and that this shock is often repressed by the victim’s consciousness in an attempt to survive it, only to be pried open later when certain stark or similar incidents trigger it. Consequently, she holds that “trauma always serves to reenact a past that has not been symbolised, and so returns only in the mode of belated repetition,” making trauma the return of the repressed (4).

Although Caruth’s work is rooted in historical events like the Holocaust, it is relevant to the arguments I make in this thesis because it outlines certain crucial ideas: (a) traumatic events are often incomprehensible given their scale and the relative unpreparedness of the mind to take them on; (b) trauma victims often attempt to deal with these events by repressing their memories; (c) the mind is occasionally forced to relive these memories through regression; and (d) these events disrupt the linear progression of time, making victims of trauma reenact their experiences in unpredictable ways. This applies to victims of childhood trauma as well, because they are usually ill-equipped to handle their experiences and, if unaddressed, these experiences have the

potential to linger, crossing over into adulthood and consequently conditioning the individual to act in certain ways.

Drawing from Caruth's model, this thesis examines the actions of Okonkwo and Eugene as manifestations of childhood trauma. Okonkwo and Eugene are compelled to deal with psychologically devastating events as children. On the one hand, Okonkwo unsuccessfully attempts to repress the memory of these events, only to relive them in his adulthood. Eugene, on the other hand, is fully aware of and embraces his memories, but is oblivious to the fact that he has been traumatised because he is oriented to believe that his suffering will produce a higher spiritual good. I argue that these events have disrupted the linearity of both characters' memories and occasioned irreversible alterations in their personalities. This is clear from their preoccupation with the past, as opposed to moving on from events they presume they have overcome. I contend that Okonkwo and Eugene cannot forget their unpleasant childhood experiences, no matter how hard they try. Furthermore, these events have conditioned their perceptions by gradually hardening their hearts, leading to the emergence of inhumane patriarchs. By drawing parallels between the events of their childhood and the cruelties they later inflict on their families, my analysis ultimately reveals that Okonkwo and Eugene are only reliving their own childhood trauma, although they do not realise it.

In light of the foregoing, the second chapter of this thesis focuses squarely on Okonkwo's childhood experiences. I argue that Okonkwo was subjected to acute deprivation and was forced too early into adulthood because he had to assume the responsibility of fending for his mother and siblings. Also, I contend that Okonkwo's father's bad reputation paved the way for Okonkwo to be verbally abused, which battered his self-image. Okonkwo attempts to repress these memories through his obsession with work; however, he does not succeed because the

memories return to haunt him, and he finds himself reenacting his own traumatic experiences through various acts of cruelty. The third chapter of this thesis looks at Eugene as a product of childhood trauma as well. I argue that because of his horrendous experiences under the tutelage of Catholic priests, Eugene becomes both traumatised and radicalised, and deploys violence as a tool for establishing a puritanical form of Catholicism in his home. The fourth and final chapter compares both Okonkwo and Eugene. In this chapter, I note that Okonkwo's highhandedness is the product of a society which does not place much value on children, while Eugene's violent streak is the product of a fanatical upbringing.

CHAPTER TWO: DEPRIVATION, TRAUMATISATION AND RECYCLED INHUMANITY IN ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

2.1 DESTITUTION AND FORCED ADULTHOOD IN ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

This chapter assesses Okonkwo as a victim of childhood trauma. I maintain that, due to his father's indolence, Okonkwo was subjected to sustained periods of deprivation, and that he was forced to mature too early because he had to assume the responsibility of fending for his mother and siblings. To make matters worse, Okonkwo came under various forms of emotional assault on account of his father's bad reputation. I argue that although Okonkwo does not realise it, these events leave an indelible scar on his mind, demonstrated by his burning hatred for his father as well as the rise of what Richard Begam mildly terms his "immoderate behaviour" (9). I therefore interpret Okonkwo's "iron-willed" disposition, as Clayton MacKenzie calls it, as a strategy deployed to survive his traumatisation (90). However, this strategy has unforeseen consequences because it results in the calcification of Okonkwo's conscience, heralding the emergence of a dictator.

Things Fall Apart commences with a glamorous presentation of Okonkwo. The narrator announces that "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond" because "as a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat" in a wrestling contest (Achebe 3). These "solid personal achievements" are products of Okonkwo's hard work (3). However, Okonkwo's industry itself is a reaction to a childhood of deprivation occasioned by his father's laziness. The narrator reveals that "[Okonkwo] had no patience with his father" because he was "quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow," which resulted in his wife and children always having "barely enough to eat" (4-5). But Okonkwo's disposition towards his father consists not only of impatience, but also of shame, as the novel

further reveals: “When Unoka died he had taken no titles and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him?” (8). Okonkwo holds his father in very low esteem because of his unproductivity and indebtedness.

On the surface, Okonkwo’s arduous childhood might be dismissed as a common existential misfortune, given that Achebe establishes the recognition of difficulty as a fundamental part of human existence through the funeral song: “For whom is it well, for whom is it well? There is no one for whom it is well” (135). However, the effects of his childhood experiences justify their classification as traumatic. Caruth posits that trauma springs from “sudden or catastrophic events,” considering that “trauma is not located in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it is precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (11, 4). This suggests that, added to the occurrence of a sudden or catastrophic event, the expression of trauma could also be gauged with two key indices: (a) its initial unknownness, and (b) its constant haunting return. Unknownness owes to the fact that the event in question may not always be “directly perceived as a threat to the life of the [victim]” even though it eventually results in “a break in the mind’s experience of time,” as Caruth explains in *Literature in the Ashes of History* (5). On the other hand, the potential to haunt is a direct consequence of “repetition compulsion,” which is in a way “the very attempt *to claim one’s own survival*,” given that “trauma consists not only in confronting death but in *having survived, precisely, without knowing it*” (63, 64, 69 italics in the original). In other words, the traumatising experience returns again and again because the mind is still coming to terms with survival. Okonkwo’s hard start in life replicates this phenomenon.

The narrator admits that “Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men usually had”; he did not inherit a barn from his father because “there was no barn to inherit” (Achebe 16). On the contrary, he built everything from scratch, and this experience is “slow and painful” (16). The catastrophic dimension of his start in life is exemplified when Okonkwo borrows seed-yams from Nwakibie. As a sharecropper, Okonkwo is entitled to only a third of the harvest “after all the toil,” yet takes full responsibility for the seed-yams (22). He also enters into this arrangement in “the worst year in living memory” (23). That year, the forces of nature scuttled any and every meaningful farming activity: it rained too late, then it rained too much, then the sun was too fierce. In the end, the harvest “was sad, like a funeral” (24). So great was the distress that year that “one man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself” (24). If the year drove a man to suicide, it goes without question that it significantly impacted Okonkwo, then still a child. This would explain why Okonkwo is perpetually haunted by the memory: “[he] remembered that tragic year with a cold shiver throughout the rest of his life” (24). Okonkwo’s experience that year was catastrophic and revisits him constantly, leaving him with a cold shiver each time. Because the experience was on account of his father’s indolence, what would otherwise have been words of encouragement from the latter “tried Okonkwo’s patience beyond words” (25).

Okonkwo’s suffering is further compounded by the fact that he has to support his mother and siblings, and his father by extension, because “[his mother] could not be expected to cook and eat while her husband starved” (Achebe 22). The gruelling impact of this state of affairs is captured thus: “And so at a very early age when he was striving desperately to build a barn through share-cropping Okonkwo was also fending for his father’s house” (22). This futile venture is compared to “pouring grains of corn into a bag full of holes” (22). Okonkwo’s

childhood was, thus, a toilsome struggle to feed his father, mother and two siblings, which is a stark contrast to his father's childhood, where the latter "wandered around looking for a kite sailing leisurely against the blue sky" to which he would then "sing with his whole being, welcoming it back from its long, long journey" (5). By virtue of the responsibilities he is compelled to undertake at such an early age, Okonkwo is ejected from childhood into adulthood before he is physically and psychologically prepared for it, as he unwittingly admits to Nwakibie: "I began to fend for myself at an age when most people still suck at their mothers' breasts" (21). Okonkwo's trauma stems not just from the sordidness of his experiences, but more so from the age at which he had to handle them.

But besides having to provide for the family, Okonkwo also has to carry the burden of his father's unenviable reputation. Although it is stated from the outset that in Umuofia, a man is judged "according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father" (8), it is apparent from various events in the novel that the shadow of Unoka's improvidence looms perpetually around Okonkwo. Okonkwo complains about his son, Nwoye, to his friend, Obierika, during a visit after the murder of Ikemefuna: "I am worried about Nwoye. A bowl of pounded yams can throw him in a wrestling match... I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him" (66). However, the thought running through Obierika's mind is, "Too much of his grandfather [Unoka]" (66). The narrator admits that "the same thought also came to Okonkwo's mind" even though he has supposedly "learnt how to lay that ghost" by thinking about his own achievements (66). If Unoka's ill reputation is a factor in the perception of his grandchild, it is not a farfetched assertion that Okonkwo had to grapple with it as well. One of Okonkwo's most poignant childhood memories lends credence to this position: "Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered

how he had suffered when a playmate told him that his father was *agbala*. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another word for woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no titles” (13).

This memory, like the memory of his time as a sharecropper, survives into Okonkwo’s adulthood, hence the phrase “even now.” This speaks to the capacity of traumatic memories to outlive the actual event in the mind through “repetitive intrusions” which could potentially result in a “pathological condition” (Caruth 59). The danger of such a pathology, Caruth contends, is that it “defines the shape of individual lives” (59). In the case of Okonkwo, the recrudescence of these traumatic memories shapes him into a fearful person. Because of the starkness of his childhood experiences and the haunting memories that follow, his life is governed by the fear of being thought weak, which is fundamentally the fear of being thought to resemble his father. The novel explains this phenomenon quite clearly: “Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness... it was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father” (Achebe 13). This fear becomes the basis for much of his latter actions, including the murder of the colonial government’s court messenger, which heralds his final doom, as will be discussed in the following section.

The terms used in the presentation of Okonkwo’s childhood experiences also establish their traumatic slant. Because of its narrative style, *Things Fall Apart* does not dwell on extended periods of Okonkwo’s childhood. However, when the narration delves into memories from it, Achebe uses words which evoke agony, thereby drawing attention to how traumatic Okonkwo’s childhood was. Okonkwo recalls how he “suffered” when a playmate called his father *agbala* (Achebe 13). This suffering clearly included various shades of emotional torture, and perhaps

even ostracisation among his agemates. Okonkwo also bemoans how he had to “toil” through the sharecropping experience (22). His journey to wealth is “slow and painful” (18) because he becomes a sharecropper in “the worst year in living memory” (23). In fact, he is described as “striving desperately” to build a barn in a “tragic year” (22). And he recalls all these with “a cold shiver” for the rest of his life (26). Nothing better elucidates his traumatic leap into adulthood “at a very young age” (23).

That Okonkwo’s childhood was riddled with catastrophic experiences is undeniable. What is interesting, however, is that he is unaware of his traumatising, as Caruth argues trauma victims often are. His zestful self-immersion into work, which leads to his eventual prosperity, earns him the description of the proverbial child who had “washed his hands” and could therefore “eat with kings” (Achebe 8). In the end, everything seems to work out fine because he achieves wealth and fame in a society which, according to Francis Ngabor-Smart, “defines the self primarily in material terms” (9). But the cost of his success is telling. Okonkwo’s trauma takes on an “unassimilated nature,” slipping into his unconscious mind as he becomes dominated by the will to thrive (Caruth 4). He is revisited by the memories of his arduous childhood for the rest of his life, and these visitations leave him with “a cold shiver” every time (Achebe 26). He is also haunted by his father’s reputation so much so that he has to “lay that ghost” by “thinking about his own strength and success” always (66). This is a strategy to repress his memories because, according to Kai Erikson, facing reality would plunge the trauma victim into a position where “evidence that the world is a place of unremitting danger seems to appear everywhere” (195).

Added to the repression of his frightening memories, Okonkwo is also befuddled by the “incomprehensibility of [his] survival” because his misfortunes become “a paradoxical

experience between destructiveness and survival” (Caruth 64, 58). This is substantiated by the following musings from the novel: “It always surprised him when he thought of it later that he did not sink under the load of despair. He knew that he was a fierce fighter but that year had been enough to break the heart of a lion” (Achebe 24). His childhood horrors seem impossible to survive, hence his amazement. This underscores the ambivalence of survival as expounded by Caruth and also attests to the enormity of Okonkwo’s trauma. Although Okonkwo ultimately attributes his survival to his “inflexible will” (Achebe 24), vestiges of his trauma reveal that this is just the prognostication of his conscious mind. In his unconscious mind, however, his trauma looms large, and is reenacted from time to time through various acts of cruelty disguised as demonstrations of manliness, as I argue in the next section.

2.2 REPRESSION AND TRAUMATIC REENACTMENT IN ACHEBE’S *THINGS FALL APART*

Okonkwo is unaware of his traumatising mostly because of the nature of his society. As Kabir Ahmed puts it, “cultural context determines how trauma is interpreted and apprehended” and unfortunately, in Umuofia, “neither the idea of trauma exists” nor does the community possess the apparatus to deal with it (62, 60). In fact, the collective response to anything incomprehensible in Umuofia seems to be ostracisation. This is evidenced in the seclusion of the *osu*¹ and the *efulefu*², as well as in the sentencing of twins to death by abandonment in the Evil Forest. Trauma as a mental health phenomenon is, therefore, neither conceptualised nor engaged. Repression then becomes the next resort, because recalling the traumatic event, according to Dang Hoang Oanh, “[creates] a sense of fracture,” whereas leaving it within the realm of the unknown formalises “an internal defence mechanism – a protective filter – to keep people out of injury” (100). Whether out of innocent ignorance, brash self-denial or both, putting his survival

down to his “inflexible will” and “laying [the] ghost” of his father’s bad name constitute repressive strategies deployed by Okonkwo to manage his trauma.

Okonkwo’s inflexible will and the drive to not resemble his father coagulate into an unbending desire to work harder and harder. Because it is fundamentally a repressive tactic, his obsession with work morphs into an escapist tendency which directs his mind away from later traumatic experiences. When he participates in the murder of Ikemefuna, for instance, he is so haunted by the memory of the boy’s death that he “did not taste any food for two days” (Achebe 63). Additionally, a similar shiver from remembering his sharecropping experience harasses him: “Now and then a cold shiver descended on his head and spread down his body” (63). Ikemefuna The more he tries not to think about the boy, the less he succeeds in forgetting. The only way he can deal with the memories is with work, as the narrator reveals: “His mind went back to Ikemefuna and he shivered. If only he could find some work to do he would be able to forget. But it was the season of rest between the harvest and the next planting season” (64). The reiteration of this thought is extra proof that Okonkwo “[throws] himself at [work] like one possessed,” not just to make a better life for himself, but also to suppress the memories of his traumatic childhood (18); according to the novel, “if he had killed Ikemefuna during the busy planting season or harvesting it would not have been so bad; his mind would have been centred on his work” (69).

Okonkwo’s recourse to repression is also exemplified by his struggle with speech. The narrator informs us that “when he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists” (Achebe 4). Although this quote presents Okonkwo’s “slight stammer” as a

natural impairment, other events in the novel suggest that his struggles have produced in him a traumatic taciturnity that can be read as a form of withdrawal into self, adumbrating Erikson's point that "trauma has both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies" because it can "[draw] one away from the centre of group space while at the same time drawing one back" (186). The narrator reveals that "even in those days he was not a man of many words," and also that "[he] was not a man of [talk] but of action" (109, 69). Over time, Okonkwo's struggle with speech hardens into a brazen refusal or inability to say what is on his mind, especially when it would betray any form of weakness. When he is fined for beating his wife during the Week of Peace, it is reported that "inwardly, he was repentant. But he was not the man to go about telling his neighbours that he was in error" (31). When he scolds Ikemefuna and Nwoye for not cutting up seed-yams properly, it is also revealed that "inwardly [he] knew that the boys were still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing seed-yams. But he thought that one could not begin too early" (33). Much of his meaningful communication is inward, with and within himself, which is reminiscent of a traumatic withdrawal. It is also doubly significant that Okonkwo is not given to dialogue in a society in which "the art of conversation is regarded very highly" so much so that "proverbs" become "the palm oil with which words are eaten" (7). His silence is, therefore, a form of self-repression, hence his proclivity for "pouncing" when he cannot get his points across. This sharply contrasts with the social ethos in Umuofia, which counters the notion that Okonkwo is representative of the latter.

Alas, Okonkwo is unable to perpetually stave off the outworking of his trauma. Although he unsuccessfully deploys repressive strategies to keep his traumatic memories at bay, the overall effect of trauma cannot be contained, since he is not even aware of his traumatisation. As such, he unwittingly reenacts his traumatic experiences through acts of brutality against other

characters, thus substantiating Caruth's claim that "the experience of trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor against his very will" (2). The striking similarity between Okonkwo's acts of cruelty and his childhood experiences is proof that he is reliving them or perhaps trying to exact some form of revenge for them. For instance, when Osugo contradicts him at a family meeting, Okonkwo blurts out, "This meeting is for men," invariably calling Osugo a woman because he had taken no titles (Achebe 27)³. Although Okonkwo apologises for this insult, it is clearly stated that he knew how to "kill a man's spirit" (27). This scene is an exact replica of Okonkwo's experience with the playmate who called his father *agbala* (13). "Killing" Osugo's spirit is also a traumatic parallel of Okonkwo's "suffering" when the said playmate insulted his father.

Okonkwo's overbearing attitude towards Nwoye is also demonstrative of his own childhood suffering. When Nwoye mishandles seed-yams, for instance, he says: "You think you are still a child. I began to own a farm at your age" (Achebe 32-33). Even when Obierika advises that he be patient with the boy because "the children are still very young," his response is that "Nwoye is old enough to impregnate a woman. At his age I was already fending for myself" (66). Although he inwardly recognises that Nwoye's amateurishness at farming is a matter of youth, Okonkwo still seeks to correct his son's "incipient laziness" through "constant nagging and beating" (13, 14). Because Okonkwo had to fend for himself "at an age when most people still suck at their mothers' breasts," he cannot appreciate the growth process which would gradually mould Nwoye into a man (21); rather, he demands an instant transition akin to his own. This approach only results in Nwoye's decline into a "sad-faced youth" (14). Okonkwo's brutal insistence that Nwoye become a man overnight is, therefore, a replication of his own sad upbringing. It also reveals that his traumatising has resulted in "a break in [his] mind's

experience of time” (Caruth 5) because he can no longer fathom the linear progression from infancy to childhood to adolescence to adulthood, given the disruption of his own childhood.

Okonkwo’s acts of cruelty are indeed a trauma victim’s “unknowing acts” executed “against his very will.” The fact that he is buffeted by guilt and regret after performing them justifies this position. As has been shown in foregoing paragraphs, Okonkwo regrets beating his wife in the Week of Peace. He also recognises the natural limitation of his son in handling seed-yams. Yet he continually brutalises the people around him because he feels a compulsion to prove his masculinity, which is really an attempt to invent himself into “the dialectical opposition” of his weak father (Njeng 4). Despite being instructed by Ogbuefi Ezeudu not to “bear a hand” in the death of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo does not hesitate to draw his machete and “cut him down” because “he was afraid of being thought weak” (Achebe 57, 61). If, as Imafedia Okhamafe argues, the murder of Ikemefuna is Okonkwo’s “last chance to exhibit his definition of manhood” (144), then disobeying Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s rational instruction could be read as an affront to patrilineal authority. Okonkwo eventually regrets this action, hence the soliloquy: “How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number?” (Achebe 61) The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves decrees that Ikemefuna must be killed to appease the land. Okonkwo is not assigned the task of executing the boy, and he is advised against it, since Ikemefuna regards him as his father. Yet Okonkwo repudiates Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s admonition because he perceives that abiding to it will make him look weak.

Unoka’s indolence paves the way for Okonkwo to be verbally abused while simultaneously grappling with unenviable living conditions. Okonkwo also has to bear the stigma of Unoka’s infamy for all his life. His indirect response to these catastrophic realities is repression, whereas his direct response is a decision to hate everything which reminds him of his

father. Although “down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man,” his disdain for his father makes him “hate everything [the latter] had loved,” including gentleness and idleness (13).

Okonkwo’s love of work becomes a tool of repression because it affords him the opportunity to evade the reality of his traumatising. His aggression, on the other hand, becomes a tool for confronting reminders of his father. Thus, whenever Okonkwo beats Nwoye for the latter’s “incipient laziness,” he is indirectly antagonising his father, because he views Nwoye as “cold, impotent ash” who relishes song-filled women’s stories rather than tales of blood and war, just like Unoka (13, 153, 54). Even Okonkwo’s attack on the colonial government’s court messenger is a gesture of anti-gentleness because for him there is “no non-martial way of engaging such enemy force as the Christian missionary” and “the only alternative to war is capitulation” (Okhamafe 144). His brash attack on the court messenger, which precipitates his eventual suicide, is indicative of his inability to negotiate or accommodate. This is another manifestation of his proclivity to “pounce” on people when he cannot get his words out, which is itself an act of traumatic withdrawal (Achebe 4). Hence Simon Gikandi’s concludes that “Okonkwo has repressed himself to sustain the public image of a heroic man and in the process his ideals become perverted” (43). Okonkwo deploys a repressive strategy to cope with his trauma. He successfully survives and achieves everything his father could not. However, this strategy has the unforeseen effect of eroding the virtues that otherwise would have made him more humane.

Okonkwo is the victim of childhood trauma. Plunged into painful deprivation because of his father’s indolence, he had to mature abruptly and assume the responsibility of fending for himself, his mother and his siblings at a tender age. Added to that, he had to bear the burden of his father’s damaged reputation. This experience leads to unrecognised psychological injuries and forces him to define himself in dialectical opposition to his father by hating everything the

latter loved, including noble virtues like patience, dialogue and gentleness. Okonkwo devotes himself to hard work as a means to escape poverty but also as a repressive strategy, yet he is unable to truly evade the reality of his traumatising because he finds himself unwittingly reenacting his trauma through various acts of brutality. His actions as an adult bear striking resemblance to the things he suffered as a child, showing that he is only reliving his childhood trauma. It is clear, therefore, that Okonkwo is not really the “shaper of his own destiny,” as Charles Nnolim claims (128); rather, Okonkwo’s destiny is shaped for him, or at least it is greatly affected, by his childhood trauma.

¹ The *osu* are outcasts because they are dedicated to gods.

² The *efulefu* are a group of “worthless” effeminate men.

³ “Title taking” is a form of sociopolitical elevation for people within the community, based on their wealth, prowess in war, oratorical ability, etc. There are many such titles in Igbo society. In *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, many men of high standing are called Ogbuefi, which literally means “he that kills a cow” – that is, he that can feed the entire community with a cow. In *Purple Hibiscus*, on the other hand, Eugene holds the title of Omelora, meaning “he that does for all” – that is, he that takes care of the entire community. In precolonial times, titles were the exclusive preserve of men, while their first wives wore anklets which showed their husbands’ titles. This has changed, with Adichie herself receiving the title of Odeluwa – the one who writes for the entire world – in 2022. Title-taking ceremonies are often marked by heavy feasting, and the ability of a person to “host” the entire community during their title-taking ceremony attested to their “worthiness” of the title.

CHAPTER THREE: RADICALISATION, TRAUMATISATION AND RECYCLED INHUMANITY IN ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

3.1 EUGENE AND THE QUESTION OF INHUMANITY IN ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Eugene—mostly referred to as Papa by his daughter, Kambili, and his son, Jaja—is responsible for various forms of domestic abuse in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. He beats his wife when she expresses an opinion contrary to his, until she miscarries. Kambili recalls hearing “thuds” on her parents’ bedroom door after lunch on a Sunday: “I was in my room after lunch ... when I heard the sounds. Swift heavy thuds on my parents’ hand-carved bedroom door... I sat down, closed my eyes, and started to count... I was at nineteen when the sounds stopped...” (Adichie 33). Eugene comes out afterwards with his wife “slung over his shoulder,” and Jaja notes that “there’s blood on the floor” as he takes her out of the house (33). Beatrice loses her pregnancy and is hospitalised for about a day (29). Kambili also recalls how he once “slapped [her] left and right cheeks at the same time,” leaving imprints of his huge palms on her face and a ringing sensation in her ears (51). It is on account of these and many more acts of violence that Oluwole Coker calls Eugene a “high-handed hypocritical father” (106). This opinion is sustained by a number of critics who trace Eugene’s inhumanity to religious fanaticism, misogyny, or both.

Besides various forms of physical abuse, Eugene is also obsessed with exerting total control over every member of his family. He regulates the lives of his children very rigidly, using their “schedule” as an instrument to monitor their time. The children are obligated to spend their time doing the assigned task, hence Kambili’s revelation that “we wanted to spend every minute of the half hour Papa devoted to uniform washing” (19). Eugene’s insistence on controlling their lives is so overbearing that Kambili imagines him drawing up a schedule for their unborn infant sibling: “I wondered when Papa would draw up a schedule for the baby, my new brother, if he

would do it right after the baby was born or wait until he was a toddler” (23). Even the Achike family home is built in the similitude of a prison. Kambili mentions that the walls are “so high I could not see the cars driving by on our street,” and are equally “topped by electric coiled wires,” as though to keep certain things in and others out (9). The architecture of their home and the regulation of their lives with a schedule attest to Eugene’s obsession with control (9).

Eugene also leverages his economic power to try to control his father—called Papa Nnukwu—and his sister, Aunty Ifeoma. When Papa Nnukwu complains to the members of their extended family about not knowing his grandchildren because Eugene will not let them see him, Kambili mentions that “Papa had offered to build him a house, buy him car, and hire him a driver, as long as he converted” to Catholicism (61). Papa Nnukwu declines; his only request is “to see his grandchildren when he could” (61). As a result, “Papa himself never greeted Papa Nnukwu, never visited him” (62). Eugene also does not like Aunty Ifeoma’s confidence and the fact that she challenges him on issues, even accommodating aspects of the Igbo traditional culture. When his wife mentions that Aunty Ifeoma needs gas cylinders, his first reaction is to ask, “Is that what you and Ifeoma planned?” (108) even though “there are many gas cylinders in the factory” (76). As such, Janet Ndula rightly avers that “[Eugene] loves his [family] and wants the best for them,” but uses extreme oppression to express this love “because it must be on his own terms” (37). Eugene’s love appears to be predicated on the condition that he must regulate the lives of its beneficiaries.

Although his behaviour is unjustifiable, I argue in this chapter that Eugene’s inhumanity is largely the product of childhood trauma. Drawing from the few references to Eugene’s childhood presented in the novel, I assert that Eugene was raised by draconian Catholic priests and was beholden to fanatical religious standards of discipline for a sustained period of time.

These standards led to his traumatisation and religious radicalisation. His acts of cruelty later in adult life therefore represent a form of conscious reenactment of childhood experiences, occasioned by the overzealous desire to establish a puritanical form of Catholicism in his home. Unlike Okonkwo, the incidents in Eugene's childhood do not lurk in his subconscious mind waiting to be resurrected by triggers. On the contrary, he has processed them and now perceives them as a standard of morality. His repetition of these acts does not, therefore, constitute a return of repressed impulses from the subconscious, as is the case with Okonkwo, but demonstrates what Caruth terms the "incomprehensibility" of trauma, because Eugene cannot recognise them as traumatic events. Ultimately, I make the case that Eugene has been taught to adhere to fanatical Catholicism as the only worthy way of life, and that he is himself a victim of this violent upbringing.

3.2 RADICALISATION AND TRAUMATISATION IN ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Two principal incidents from the novel provide pointers into Eugene's childhood. The first is the incident at Kambili's class, when Eugene publicly scolds her for coming second. The second is the discussion following the pouring of boiling water on Jaja and Kambili's feet for staying in the same house as Papa Nnukwu.

Kambili comes second in class for the first time following her traumatisation by her mother's miscarriage. Having watched her mother bleed as she was carried down the stairs by Eugene, the words in Kambili's school books "kept turning to blood" each time she read them (Adichie 37). Even as exams approached, "the words still made no sense" (37). She drops from first position because she cannot focus on her schoolwork. Despite her class teacher's praise of her hard work and good character, she "knew Papa would not be proud" (39). Eugene makes it clear that only the first position is a worthy justification for all that is spent giving her and Jaja a

private school education. He also tells her that “no one had spent money on his own schooling, especially not his Godless father” (39). Eugene drives Kambili to school at the start of the new term and scolds her in front of her entire class for letting another student beat her to the first position.

In his admonition, Eugene insists that “you have to do something with all these privileges” because “[God] expects much from you” (47). He then enumerates the challenges he faced while growing up: “I didn’t have a father who sent me to the best schools. My father spent his time worshipping gods of wood and stone. I would be nothing today but for the Catholic priests and sisters at the mission” (47). Eugene also mentions that “I was a houseboy for the parish priest for two years. Yes, a houseboy... I was a gardener for the priests while I attended St. Gregory’s Secondary School” (47). This tirade has the desired effect because Kambili forces her mind back to stability and regains the first position that term. But it is noteworthy that Kambili adds in her retelling of the incident that “I had heard this all before,” which reveals Eugene’s obsession with repeating the story of his challenges (47).

The episode in Kambili’s class shows that in Eugene’s mind there is a binary opposition in which the Catholic priests are good while his biological father is evil. This binary is further complicated when he holds a discussion with Kambili after pouring boiling water on her feet for staying in the same house as their grandfather. Amongst other things, he tells her that “everything I do for you, I do for your own good” (196). To demonstrate his motive, he recounts an incident from his time with the Catholic priests: “I committed a sin against my own body once. And the good father, the one I lived with while I went to St. Gregory’s, came in and saw me. He asked me to boil water for tea. He poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it...” (196). Eugene confirms that he never sinned against his own body again after that (196).

He believes the end justified the means, hence the opinion that the priest who soaked his hands in boiling water did that for his own good (197).

It is important to note the parallel between Eugene's actions and his own suffering as a child. For sinning against his own body—presumably by masturbating—Eugene had his hands soaked in boiling water by the priest with whom he was living. Years later, he pours boiling water on his children's feet for "walking into sin" by staying in the same house as a "heathen" (page#). Kambili recounts how Eugene made her climb into the tub and "lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it toward my feet," simultaneously reminding her that "that is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet" (194). The choice of the exact same manner of punishment as was used on him by the priest and his statement to Kambili that "everything I do for you, I do for your own good" (196) demonstrate Eugene's belief that burning his children's feet is a necessary action he must take to produce the long-term result of preventing them from walking into sin again, just as he never sinned against his own body again after his hands were soaked in boiling water. Because of his own upbringing, Eugene elevates cruelty to the status of discipline, based on the hope that it will produce long-term spiritual virtue.

As a child, Eugene is subjected to a high level of inhumanity by his tutors at the Catholic parish where he served as a "house boy" while acquiring formal education. It is curious, then, that he does not disdain the Catholic priests responsible for the gruelling experiences of his youth. Rather, he adores them. He even considers them a better model than his biological father. He refers to the priest who soaked his hands in boiling water as "the good father," while he calls his own father a "Godless" heathen. For him, the benefits of the lesson far outweigh the pain of the mode of instruction, hence the affirmation that it was done "for my own good." This opinion

clearly suggests that Eugene does not view his abuse for what it is and therefore remains unaware of his traumatisation. On the contrary, he considers the things that happened to him as a necessary discomfort required to achieve the higher spiritual goal of attaining purity. This explains his adoption of the same model in his relationship with his wife and children.

But despite his seeming unawareness, Eugene is still a victim of childhood trauma. Caruth makes it clear that trauma is not always recognised for what it is by its victims. She states, for instance, that it is “this incomprehension [the inability to readily recognise trauma for what it is]” as well as “[the] departure from sense and understanding” which lead to the rise of traumatic “witnessing” (56). She further notes that the true import of traumatic events can sometimes “remain unavailable to the consciousness” and can even “[extend] beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known” because “belatedness and incomprehensibility” are at the heart of “repetitive seeing” (92). In other words, a victim of traumatic events may not always be aware that he or she has been traumatised. Dominick LaCapra echoes this position in his assertion that traumatic events often involve “double binds” and therefore have the potential to “limit what may be represented with any degree of accuracy” (377). It could even be argued that it is this lack of awareness of one’s traumatisation which makes trauma very difficult to handle, leading to what Michelle Balaev calls “the potential to infect another pure and integrated subject”—the potential to inflict trauma on others as well (151). This inability to recognise trauma worsens in the case of children in religious settings.

In her essay on childhood trauma in religious situations, Heather Boynton reveals that “spirituality [is often] deemed as a resilience factor” in handling trauma because trauma has the potential to create “soul pain” (25). In other words, where the environment is religious, spirituality may become the avenue of escape for people who have suffered various forms of

trauma. If a traumatic event may not always be recognised as such by victims, and if spirituality can be deployed as a “resilience factor” in dealing with trauma, it is possible therefore that where trauma emanates from events which occur in religious or spiritual settings, the victims may end up in a “double bind” where they do not recognise their traumatising, and may even view the traumatic event as something which serves a higher purpose if oriented to believe so. This forms the basis of radicalization because, as The Devon Safeguarding Children Partnership notes, one of the possible factors in the religious radicalisation of children includes “the risk of physical harm or death through extremist acts” because children may be subjected to extreme acts for the sake of faith, may be encouraged to perform extreme acts as proof of faith, or both. Soaking a person’s hands in boiling water is indeed an extreme form of punishment, and the fear of undergoing it again is sufficient to compel compliance. Teaching? the victim that this compliance, compelled by ruthless punishment, holds spiritual value, has the potential to result in fanaticism.

Eugene is so inhumanely punished and is oriented to believe that this horrid experience with “the good father” is for his own benefit. The fact that he has the same conversation with Kambili after replicating the same model of discipline suggests that the priest had a similar conversation with him. Eugene apparently believed the priest. He is maltreated, then manipulated into believing that his maltreatment is justifiable because it achieves a higher spiritual purpose. This bipartite strategy, sustained over the years he went to school, leaves him traumatised and radicalised. Just as he is not aware of the irrationality of his fanaticism he is equally unaware of his traumatising. As Caruth specifically notes, trauma is “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). While Eugene’s hands may have healed from the scalding following his punishment, his mind has not. That is why he recalls his experiences with the priests at every

opportunity, as Kambili reveals when she mentions that “I had heard this all before” (Adichie 47). His conscious acts of violence are therefore rooted in the inability to recognise the abnormality and traumatic slant of his childhood experiences.

Although Eugene consciously brutalises his family, the overarching belief in brutality as a means to achieve Godliness springs from his own unrecognised trauma. Hence Rose Okayo Murundu’s insistence that “it is also not unlikely that his abuse of his family is a vengeful act for what the priests had done to him when he was young and dependent” (106). While his brutality to people can be read as a form of “acting-out,” his constant reiteration of his experiences demonstrates a form of “living-through” (LaCapra 707). Both spring from his radicalisation, which is rooted in his inability to see that he was traumatised by the priests. The result is that he develops something akin to Stockholm syndrome because he venerates the very system that perpetrated his suffering.

Eugene does venerate the Catholic church. He refers to Pentecostal churches, for instance, as “mushroom” churches (29), and is opposed to any form of change that would make the Catholic church slightly similar to them. He even asks the family to pray for “that young priest” who breaks into a song in the middle of a sermon like “a Godless leader of one of these Pentecostal churches” (29). Aunty Ifeoma suggests that Eugene is trying to be more Catholic than the Pope when she tells Beatrice that “Eugene should stop doing God’s job” because “God is big enough to do his own job” (95). Furthermore, Eugene lets his Catholic faith come between him and his father, in contravention of the Biblical injunction to honour one’s parents. He watches his father suffer under the yoke of poverty and neglect because the latter will not convert to Catholicism, whereas his father-in-law occupies a place of honour in his house—his picture is hung on the wall in the dining room—having been a Catholic knight (32). This is a direct affront

to the very teachings of Christ, who insist that parents should be provided for first before gifts should be given to God (Matthew 15:5-6). But in Eugene's worldview, his father can only receive from him if he converts to Catholicism. Eugene is willing to defy Christ to maintain his loyalty to the Catholic church.

But what is very striking is Eugene's seeming attachment to priests. He visits Father Benedict every Sunday after Mass, and insists that every member of his family come along. It is Beatrice's desire to remain in the car on account of her vomiting that leads to the beating referenced in the foregoing paragraphs. During prayer, Eugene even "asked God to forgive those who had tried to thwart his will, who had put selfish desires first and not wanted to visit His servant after Mass," equating a visit to Father Benedict with God's eternal plan (32). Kambili also observes that "Papa changed his accent when he spoke, sounding British, just as he did when he spoke to Father Benedict. He was gracious, in the eager-to-please way that he always assumed with the religious, especially the white religious" (46). Situated within the context of his childhood experiences with Catholic priests, Eugene's eagerness to please becomes reminiscent of what Caruth calls "the return of origins in memory" (13). Eugene's memories began with maltreatment at the hands of Catholic priests. The conventional reaction to that would be to avoid Catholic priests. But Eugene metaphorically clings to the origin of his memories through his seeming attachment to priests. This suggests continuous efforts to find closure. His swift donations to Peter's Pence and to other Catholic causes contrasts sharply with his negligence of his father. If his excuse is that his father is not a Catholic, then his systematic neglect of Auntie Ifeoma is ample proof that he is merely overcompensating for a perceived failing, which further attests to his radicalisation.

Eugene's trauma also manifests in the way he demonstrates love to his children. One of the commonest ways Eugene shows his love to his children is to share his tea with them. This tea is always so hot that it burns, and Kambili recalls drinking the tea and "feeling the love burn my tongue" (Adichie 31). Although it is supposed to be a "love sip," the aftereffect of tasting her father's tea is that "if lunch was something peppery, my raw tongue suffered" (8). Anna-Leena Toivanen therefore calls the sip an "ambiguous mixture of suffering and affection" which helps Kambili "realise that domestic violence is not a normal condition of family life" (106). Like Toivanen, many critics have also suspected Eugene's love sip to be an expression of violence. But it is remarkable that Eugene drinks this tea every day, despite its hotness. The hotness of the tea can therefore be read as a literary parallel to the heat of the water in which his hands were soaked as a child. Drinking it becomes an act of self-flagellation intended to atone for his perceived irredeemableness. He thus reenacts his maltreatment by the priests primarily on himself, offering a sip to his children only as a way of inviting them into his trauma.

3.3 TRAUMA AND INVOLUNTARY IMPULSES IN ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Significantly, Eugene manifests signs of remorse each time he metes out cruelty on members of his household. When he returns from the hospital, after beating his wife until she miscarries, Kambili observes that "his eyes were swollen and red [from crying], and somehow that made him look younger, more vulnerable" (Adichie 34). When he beats his children for breaking the Eucharist fast, he also immediately "crushed Jaja and me to his body," asking if the belt hurt them, before walking out "as if something weighed him down" (102). When he finally allows the children to go to Nsukka to spend some time with their cousins, he stands waving long after the car leaves the compound, and Kambili observes that "he's crying" (109). Even when he pours boiling water on her feet, Kambili notes that "he was crying now, tears streaming down his

face” (195). While Coker views Eugene’s reaction to their pain as hypocrisy (106), it could alternatively be read as a manifestation of unwillingness to cause it, a desire which is always eventually overpowered by the fanatical desire to maintain strict religious principles. Eugene’s childhood abuse was justified as a measure to curb his ‘immoral’ nature. He therefore adopts brutality as a strategy to deal with ungodliness in his home, despite always regretting his actions afterwards.

In addition to regret, there are a number of ironies which attest to a dividedness in Eugene’s personality. He prefers not to speak Igbo, yet he gives his children Igbo names (Adichie 13, 69). Notably, he names his son Chukwuka—meaning “God is the greatest” or “God is superior”—and his daughter Kambili—meaning “let me live” or “let me survive.” Stringed together, both names morph into Eugene’s metaphorical appeal to God for life or survival, having undergone such cruel treatments at the hands of his Catholic masters. This is echoed by Kambili, who conceptualises the protest against the military junta in the novel as a fight for “a freedom to be, to do” (16). Also, Eugene supposedly detests Igbo ways of life, yet he takes the title of Omelora—meaning “the one who does for the community”—one of the highest titles in his community (55). Again, he hates his father’s “heathen” religion, yet he pays for a burial where all those rites of that religion will be observed (213). He makes excuses for why Jaja and Kambili cannot come to Nsukka, but when Auntie Ifeoma persists, he eventually agrees (104). Even when Jaja insists on going to Nsukka without prior information, Eugene also acquiesces (261). Despite his smug response to his wife’s request for gas cylinders for Auntie Ifeoma, he agrees, and even sends more than Auntie Ifeoma expected (109). Given these attitudinal contradictions, it can be averred that Eugene is not a person who is just “primitively misogynist,”

as Nabutanyi's notes (78), but one who is deeply divided, seeking to reconcile his fanatical upbringing with an entirely different reality.

Eugene is exposed to overwhelming cruelty as a child growing under the tutelage of Catholic priests. He labours as a gardener to go to school, and has his hands soaked in boiling water for committing a 'sin' against his own body. This incident sticks with him throughout his life and is adumbrated in his love for hot tea. He is also oriented to believe that the priest burned his hand for his own good, perhaps to save him from the immortal flames of hell fire. As such, he perceives this inhumanity as an act of kindness, hence the description of the priest as "the good father." Considering his eventual idolisation of the same institution which meted such cruelty on him as well as his stiff hatred for anything non-Catholic, it is clear that Eugene is radicalised by his trauma. Eugene does not recognise his trauma for what it is, but adopts brutality as a model of discipline because it supposedly made him into the successful person he is. His actions are therefore the products of a dysfunctional belief system stemming from unrecognised and unaddressed childhood trauma, despite being conscious and premeditated.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

4.1 OKONKWO AND EUGENE IN CONVERSATION

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* dialogues with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* on many levels. *Purple Hibiscus* commences with an allusion to *Things Fall Apart*: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the etagere" (Adichie 3). The novel then draws parallels to *Things Fall Apart* through the lives of Okonkwo and Eugene. Both Okonkwo and Eugene are successful businessmen: while Okonkwo starts from nothing and builds a huge barn, marries three wives and sires a number of children, Eugene equally rises from a humble background to become a successful factory owner and a manager at Leventis. Both men hate their fathers: Okonkwo hates Unoka because he is a loafer, while Eugene hates Papa Nnukwu because he is a "heathen." Both men are domestic abusers: Okonkwo beats his wife in the Week of Peace, angering the gods, while Eugene beats his wife during pregnancy until she miscarries. Both men also end tragically: Okonkwo hangs himself rather than be hanged by the colonial government for the murder of a court messenger, while Eugene is poisoned by his wife when she can no longer take his abuse. By contrast, whereas Okonkwo seeks to preserve Igbo traditional ways of life as Christianity spreads rapidly throughout the nine villages, Eugene is passionate about the spread of Catholic beliefs. Alongside other things, these parallels have earned Adichie the designation "Achebe's unruly literary daughter" (Tunca 107). This thesis focuses on the childhood traumas of Okonkwo and Eugene.

Okonkwo's trauma is a result of a sordid childhood marked by protracted deprivation and verbal abuse. He is forced to assume the responsibility of fending for his family at an early age on account of his father's unproductivity. He also bears the burden of his father's infamy for

much of his life. In response to this, Okonkwo gives himself to hard work “like a man possessed.” He eventually rises to become one of the lords of his clan as a young man. However, Okonkwo’s hatred for his father and his desire to oppose anything remotely reminiscent of the latter makes him reject virtues like gentleness, dialogue, and accommodation. This forges him into an impatient and inconsiderate husband and father. Although Okonkwo’s obsession with work helps him navigate his traumatic childhood, it also functions as a strategy to repress his traumatic memories. Because of the nature of his society, Okonkwo is not even aware of his traumatisation and cannot seek help for it. But he can only repress his memories for so long, because as an adult he unwittingly abuses the people around him—verbally and physically. The striking similarity between his acts of cruelty as an adult and the things he suffered as a child demonstrate that he is only reenacting his own childhood experiences. This explains Gikandi’s assertion that “Okonkwo lives against his true nature, and has created a personal ideology of self which, nevertheless, undermines the selfhood it is supposed to sustain” (43). Okonkwo’s inhumanity towards others can therefore be read as a reenactment of his own childhood experiences.

It is important to note, though, that in Umuofia there appears to be a sociocultural consciousness of the value of the experiences of children. This is evidenced by the use of so many proverbs which centre around children: “If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (8); “A child’s fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm” (67); “When mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth” (70-71); “A baby on its mother’s back does not know the way is long” (101); “A child cannot pay for its mother’s milk” (166). Numerous children are also a significant indication of wealth (18, 117). However, despite this seeming value placed on children, they suffer greatly in Umuofia. Twins

are abandoned in the Evil Forest because they are a taboo to the Earth (135). A whole chapter is dedicated to exploring the concept of *ogbanje*—an evil spirit child who is reborn again and again, after death in infancy, to cause pain to the mother (75-86)—whereas spirits of good children are mentioned in passing in one sentence (46). The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves also demands the life of a child, Ikemefuna, as atonement for the crimes of a man (57). These examples lend credence to Eyoh Etim’s claims in *The Infantist Manifesto* that children have been both maltreated in society and edged out of the literary mainstream (7). Julie Agbasiere explores the ill-treatment of children in *Things Fall Apart*, submitting that “the sad story of Ikemefuna is a pointer to the helplessness of the child in an adult world” (69). It is clear then that, as Joseph Obi argues, although as an adult Okonkwo “represents and eventually contradicts the values of his society” (78), as a child, Okonkwo is actually a victim of the carelessness of a society which pays little attention to the welfare of children as a collective ethos.

Eugene’s traumatising, on the other hand, is traceable to his time under the tutelage of Catholic priests. He informs his children of how he walked for miles to go to primary school, how he laboured as a gardener for a priest for two years to acquire secondary education, and how his hands were soaked in boiling water for masturbating. But unlike Okonkwo, Eugene is fully aware of the enormity of these events and does not try to repress the memories. In fact, he embraces and appreciates them, even referring to the priest who soaked his hands in boiling water as “the good father.” He designates this extreme form of punishment as something positive because it prevents him from sinning against his body again. Eugene’s is a case of radicalisation. He is maltreated and then manipulated into believing that it was necessary for his spiritual welfare. As such, when his children “walk into sin,” he metes out the same form of punishment by pouring boiling water on their feet. He also demonstrates a metaphorical attachment to the

Catholic church and to priests, hence his constant berating of Pentecostals, his heavy donations to Catholic organisations, and his constant visits to Father Benedict after Mass, which sharply contrasts with his complete negligence of his ailing father and struggling sister. But like Okonkwo, Eugene demonstrates appreciable remorse after each act of violence, which suggests that a part of him opposes his actions, even though he judges them necessary for spiritual uprightness.

It is also noteworthy that Eugene and Aunty Ifeoma both had Catholic upbringings. Although nothing is said about Aunty Ifeoma's childhood due to the narrative technique deployed in *Purple Hibiscus*, it is stated that she also attended a Catholic school and is herself a devout Catholic. Despite being an enlightened—perhaps even liberal—university professor, she encourages her children to honour the traditions of the Catholic church by accepting Latin names for their confirmation. Yet she does not insist when they decide otherwise, which demonstrates her ideological flexibility and contrasts with Eugene's stiffness on issues. This might be a case where the same water which softens the potato hardens the egg, or it might be a case of differences in upbringing, given that they each went to different Catholic schools. Nonetheless, Eugene's radicalisation is proof that, although he embraces his childhood experiences, he is still unaware of his traumatising. Indeed, even though he acts in full consciousness, he still reenacts his childhood experiences through his brutal treatment of his wife and children.

Critics of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* have been divided on the rationale behind the actions of Okonkwo and Eugene. While a number have dismissed both characters as violent misogynists, others have viewed them as products of their individual societies or even heroes shortchanged by uncontrollable circumstances. In this thesis, however, I have interpreted both characters as victims of varying degrees of childhood trauma. While

Okonkwo's trauma is rooted in acute deprivation and verbal abuse, Eugene's trauma stems from his experiences under the tutelage of draconian Catholic priests. Both characters are significantly influenced by their traumas, as the parallels between their childhood experiences and their actions as adults demonstrate. Although a number of critics have discussed trauma in relation to war/conflict narratives in Nigerian literature, little attention has been paid to literary representations of childhood trauma. Perhaps this is due to the relegation of childhood to the background, considering Palmer's assertion that children's experiences do not constitute part of "the complexity of national affairs" (10). Nonetheless the forty-five-year gap between *Things Fall Apart* and *Purple Hibiscus* suggests the inevitability of childhood trauma as an aspect of the Nigerian literary canon, and a topic that deserves attention. This thesis is my contribution to opening up conversations on childhood trauma in the Nigerian novel.

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