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The Wounded Child: Trauma and Recycled Inhumanity in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

This paper investigates childhood trauma as a resurgent phenomenon in Nigerian literature, taking the experiences of Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Eugene in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as a case study. Both protagonists have largely been dismissed by various critics as violent misogynists, given their belligerence towards others. However, little attention has been paid to the experiences which propel their violent streak. This paper addresses the resulting lacuna by examining the actions of Okonkwo and Eugene as reenactments of their childhood horrors. Applying the literary apparatuses of Caruth (1996) and Etim (2008) to both texts, this paper finds that trauma is the driving force behind the misdeeds of Okonkwo and Eugene. As a child, Okonkwo is subjected to sustained periods of deprivation and verbal abuse, while Eugene is maltreated, misoriented and eventually radicalised by the Catholic priests who raise him. Both are hardened by these experiences and consequently demonstrate a form of recycled inhumanity later as adults. The striking parallels between their experiences and their actions therefore undercut the position that they are inherently inhumane, while the forty-five-year gap between both novels highlights childhood trauma as a repetitive index in Nigerian fiction.

Keywords: Trauma, Recycled inhumanity, Infantism, Recentralisation, Misogyny

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1. Introduction

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* occupy distinct places in Nigerian literature. While *Things Fall Apart* conferred on Achebe the status of "the father of modern African literature" (Alam, 2014, p. 102), *Purple Hibiscus* established Adichie as "easily the leading and most engaging voice of [the current] era" (Emenyonu, 2017, p. 1). Interestingly, Adichie's debut dialogues with Achebe's on many levels. *Purple Hibiscus* commences with a striking allusion to Achebe's novel: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion…" (Adichie, 2013, p. 3). It then draws parallels to *Things Fall Apart* through the lives of Okonkwo and Eugene. Both are successful businessmen: just as Okonkwo starts from nothing and becomes one of the lords of the clan, Eugene rises from a humble background to become a successful factory owner and newspaper publisher. Both men hate their fathers: Okonkwo hates Unoka because he is a loafer, while Eugene hates Papa Nnukwu because he is a "heathen." Both are domestic abusers: Okonkwo beats his wife in the Week of Peace, and Eugene beats his wife until she miscarries. Both also end tragically: Okonkwo hangs himself rather than being hanged by the colonial authorities, whereas Eugene is poisoned by his wife when she can no longer take his abuse. In addition, both are religious fanatics of sorts: whereas Okonkwo seeks to preserve Igbo traditions as Christianity rapidly spreads across the nine villages, Eugene is passionate about the dominance of the Catholic Church. These and other parallels have earned Adichie the designation of "Achebe's unruly literary daughter" (Tunca, 2018, p. 107).

Notably, critics of both novels are most divided on Okonkwo and Eugene. Cobham (2002) alleges, for instance, that Okonkwo uses "physical strength and the ability to inflict one's will" to "[establish] a masculine identity" (p. 23), while Nabutanyi (2017) accuses Eugene of instituting "ritualised abuse" in his home based on his "primitively misogynist hatred for femininity" (pp. 78 – 79). On the other hand, however, Azodo (2004) describes Okonkwo as a "hybrid" who finds himself "up against a whole institution or system" (p. 316), while Etim and Emmanuel (2015) hail Eugene as a "principled protagonist who is murdered for being unwavering in his beliefs" (p. 13). But besides this critical contention, little attention has been paid to the experiences which propel Okonkwo and Eugene's violent streak. This paper addresses the resulting lacuna by reading both characters' belligerence as manifestations of childhood trauma. A re-examination of both novels reveals that Okonkwo is subjected to sustained periods of deprivation and consequent verbal abuse as a child, while Eugene is maltreated, misoriented and eventually radicalised by the Catholic priests who raise him. Both are hardened by these experiences and, therefore, demonstrate a form of recycled inhumanity later as adults. Their violent dispositions thus appear to be helpless reenactments of their individual trauma, rather than a demonstration of inherent misogyny.

Caruth (1996) provides the analytical framework for this paper, while Etim (2008) offers the philosophical persuasions which compel the analysis. Caruth's trauma framework maps representations of trauma in texts, emphasising how the belatedness and incomprehensibility of the causative events shape their impact on the victim. Caruth (1996) describes trauma itself as "the repetitive reenactments" of "painful events," and

contends that trauma disrupts the linear progression of time, leading to a perpetual return of the event to the survivor's consciousness, because trauma victims "cannot simply leave behind" their memories (pp. 1, 2). This inability to dissociate oneself from traumatic experiences, which Caruth (1996) terms "repetition compulsion," forms the basis for reproducing parallels of one's experiences (p. 1). Overall, Caruth (1996) conceives trauma as repressed and/or reenacted shock, where such a shock has the potential for latency and resurgence. This is particularly true of childhood trauma, given the relative psychological immaturity of children. While Caruth (1996) provides a general framework for tracking manifestations of trauma, Etim (2008) establishes a basis for a more elaborate and independent engagement with children's issues. Etim (2008) advocates child-(re)centralisation under the auspices of infantism, based on the tripartite perception that children have been relegated to the periphery, that this relegation owes to the seeming unimportance of children's issues, and that the sidestepping of children can rightly be seen in literature (p. 6). As such, infantism aims to "elevate children and children's issues into the mainstream of literature" by combating the second-class status accorded the latter on account of innocence and immaturity (Etim, 2008, p. 17). Infantism thus tries to "[position] the child as both the subject of literary interaction and the pivot of critical inquiry" by "recentring childhood as a veritable site of literary discourse" (Nte'ne, 2024, p. 98).

Caruth's trauma model makes it possible to view Okonkwo's deprivation and consequent verbal as traumatising events, given the psychological torture they produce. These experiences impose on Okonkwo the fear of being thought weak. This fear becomes a common denominator of his acts of cruelty. Although Okonkwo takes steps to repress his memories, textual evidence indicates the lack of a proper resolution, signalling a wrinkle in the linearity of his thought process. Similarly, Eugene's obsession with his experiences under the tutelage of draconian Catholic priests indicates trauma. Although Eugene's memories are not actively repressed, they constantly return to him and form the basis of his interactions with others, also signalling their unresolvedness. Furthermore, Eugene is manipulated into believing that his maltreatment serves a higher spiritual purpose, hence his proclivity for puritanical cruelty. In line with infantism, this paper refocuses discourse on children by examining Okonkwo and Eugene's childhoods as long ignored but undeniably crucial aspects of both novels. The systematic cruelties meted on both characters thus demonstrate the precarious situation of the Nigerian child, exposing childhood trauma as a noteworthy phenomenon in Nigerian fiction.

2. Deprivation and Traumatisation in *Things Fall Apart*

Things Fall Apart commences with a glamorous presentation of Okonkwo: "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 2009, p. 3). His "solid personal achievements" are products of hard work (p. 3). However, Okonkwo's industry itself is a reaction to a childhood of deprivation caused by his father's laziness. The narrator reveals that "[Okonkwo] had no patience with his father" because Unoka was "quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow," which resulted in his wife and children always having "barely enough to eat" (pp. 4-5). But Okonkwo's disposition towards Unoka consists not only of impatience, but

also of shame: "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?" (p. 8). Given Unoka's laziness, Okonkwo has a rough start in life because "there was no barn to inherit" (p. 16). On the contrary, he builds everything from scratch, and this experience is "slow and painful" (p. 16). His journey to wealth worsens when he borrows seed-yams from Nwakibie, because as a sharecropper, he is entitled to only a third of the harvest "after all the toil" (p. 22). This arrangement is also brokered in "the worst year in living memory," as it rained too late and then too much (p. 23). In the end, that year's harvest "was sad, like a funeral" (p. 24). So great is the distress that "one man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself" (p. 24). Okonkwo is perpetually haunted by the memory of that year, which demonstrates its traumatic impact: "[he] remembered that tragic year with a cold shiver throughout the rest of his life" (p. 24).

Okonkwo's difficulty is further compounded by the fact that he must simultaneously cater for the entire family. The narrator laments that "at a very early age when he was striving desperately to build a barn through sharecropping, Okonkwo was also fending for his father's house" (p. 22). This is a sharp contrast with the childhood Unoka had, where he "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" (p. 5). Okonkwo is ejected 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" (p. 21). But besides having to provide for the family, Okonkwo also bears the stigma of his father's reputation. Although the impression is that in Umuofia a man is judged "according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father" (p. 8), the exact opposite appears to be the case because, as the narrator reveals, "even now [Okonkwo] still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate told him that his father was *agbala*" (p. 13)—*agbala* being another word for woman and a derogatory term for a man without titles. Like the memory of his time as a sharecropper, this memory survives into Okonkwo's adulthood, hence the phrase "even now." Caruth (1996) explains that such a memory often results in a "pathological condition," which then "defines the shape of individual lives" (p. 59). In Okonkwo's case, these traumatic memories brew in him the fear of weakness, which is fundamentally the fear of resembling his father. It is thus admitted that "perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by … the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" (p. 13). This fear drives his cruelty.

The terms used in describing Okonkwo's childhood experiences also establish their traumatic trajectory. Because of its narrative style, the novel does not dwell on extended periods of Okonkwo's childhood. However, when the narration delves into memories from it, Achebe deploys words which evoke agony. Okonkwo recalls how he "suffered" when a playmate called his father *agbala* (p. 13). This suffering clearly includes various shades of emotional torture. Okonkwo also had to "toil" through sharecropping (p. 22). His journey to wealth is "slow and painful" (p. 18) because he becomes a sharecropper in "the worst year in living memory" (p. 23). In fact, he "[strives] desperately" to build a barn in a "tragic year" (p. 22). And he recalls all these with "a cold shiver" for the rest of his life (p. 26). That Okonkwo's childhood was riddled with catastrophic experiences is undeniable. What is

interesting, however, is that he is unaware of his traumatisation, as Caruth (1996) argues trauma victims often are. His zestful self-immersion into work, which engenders his eventual prosperity, earns him the status of the proverbial child who had "washed his hands" and could therefore "eat with kings" (p. 8). But the cost of his success is telling.

3. Repression and Traumatic Reenactments in *Things Fall Apart*

Okonkwo's trauma takes on an "unassimilated nature" as he becomes dominated by the will to thrive (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). He is revisited by his childhood memories for the rest of his life, and these visitations leave him with "a cold shiver" every time. 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 (Achebe, 2009, p. 66). This is a strategy to repress his memories because, as Erikson (1995) notes, facing reality would plunge him into a position where "evidence that the world is a place of unremitting danger seems to appear everywhere" (p. 195). Added to the repression of his memories, Okonkwo is also befuddled by the "incomprehensibility of [his] survival" because his misfortunes become "a paradoxical experience [of] destructiveness" (Caruth, 1996, pp. 64, 58). This explains the narrator's admission that "It always surprised him when he thought of it later that he did not sink under the load of despair" because even though he was resilient, "that year had been enough to break the heart of a lion" (Achebe, 2009, p. 24). Okonkwo's amazement underscores the ambivalence of survival as expounded by Caruth (1996) and attests to the enormity of his trauma. Although he ultimately attributes his survival to his "inflexible will" (Achebe, 2009, p. 24), 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 strength.

Okonkwo is unaware of his traumatisation arguably because of the nature of his society. As Ahmed (2022) puts it, "cultural context determines how trauma is interpreted and apprehended" (p. 62). Unfortunately, Umuofia does not have any apparatus to deal with trauma. Repression becomes the best option because recalling the traumatic event "[creates] a sense of fracture," whereas repressing it formalises "an internal defence mechanism—a protective filter—to keep people out of injury" (Oanh, 2021, p. 100). Whether out of ignorance, 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. His inflexible will and the drive to not resemble his father coagulate into an unbending desire to work harder. His obsession with work soon morphs into an escapist tendency which directs his mind away from later traumatic experiences. When he murders Ikemefuna, for instance, he is haunted by the memory of the boy's death and "did not taste any food for two days" (Achebe, 2009, p. 63). The same shiver from his sharecropping days also "descended on his head and spread down his body" (p. 63). He then bemoans his lack of work because "if only he could find some work to do he would be able to forget" (p. 64). This further proves that Okonkwo "[throws] himself at [work] like one possessed," not just to make a better life for himself, but also to suppress his memories (p. 18).

Okonkwo's repression is also demonstrated by his struggle with speech. It is recorded that "when he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground, as if he was going to pounce on

somebody," and that "he had a slight stammer" and would "use his fists" whenever he could not speak quickly enough (p. 4). Although Okonkwo's "slight stammer" is presented as a natural impairment, other events in the novel suggest that his struggles have produced in him a traumatic taciturnity indicative of what Erikson (1995) calls "centripetal and centrifugal tendencies," where traumatic memories "[draw] one away from the centre of group space while at the same time drawing one back" (p. 186). Okonkwo is not "a man of [talk] but of action" because his struggles harden into a brazen refusal or inability to say what is on his mind, especially if it betrays any weakness (p. 69). 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" (p. 31). When he scolds his sons 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" (p. 33). Much of his communication is inward—with and within himself—which is reminiscent of a traumatic withdrawal. Indeed, Okonkwo is not given to dialogue in a society in which, ironically, "the art of conversation is regarded very highly" (p. 7). His silence is, therefore, a form of self-repression, hence his proclivity for "pouncing" when he cannot communicate effectively.

Although Okonkwo deploys the foregoing strategies to repress his memories, they cannot be contained indefinitely and are eventually reenacted through acts of brutality, 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" (1996, p. 2). The striking similarity between Okonkwo's actions and his experiences suggests that he is reliving the latter. For instance, when Osugo contradicts him at a family meeting, Okonkwo blurts, "This meeting is for men," invariably calling Osugo a woman because he had taken no titles (p. 27). Although he apologises for this insult, it is stated that he knew how to "kill a man's spirit" (p. 27). Okonkwo fundamentally replicates his experience with the playmate cited earlier. "Killing" Osugo's spirit is also a parallel of his "suffering." Furthermore, Okonkwo's overbearing attitude towards Nwoye is demonstrative of his own rough childhood. 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" (pp. 32-33). Even when Obierika advises that he be patient with the boy, his response is that "At his age I was already fending for myself" (p. 66). Although he inwardly recognises that Nwoye is still too young, Okonkwo seeks to correct his son's "incipient laziness" through "constant nagging and beating" (pp. 13, 14). Because of the disruption of his own childhood, he cannot appreciate the process which would gradually mould Nwoye into a man (p. 21); rather, he demands an instant transition akin to his own. This approach only results in Nwoye's decline into a "sad-faced youth" (p. 14) and demonstrates "a break in [Okonkwo's] mind's experience of time" (Caruth, 1996, p. 5), having lost touch with the natural progression from infancy to adulthood.

Okonkwo's acts of cruelty are indeed a trauma victim's "unknowing acts" executed "against his very will" (Caruth, 1996, p. 2). As such, he is fraught with guilt and regret after performing them. He regrets beating his wife in the Week of Peace. He also recognises his son's natural limitation 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, 2008, p. 4). Despite being instructed by Ogbuefi Ezeudu not to "bear a hand" in the death of Ikemefuna, for example, Okonkwo does not hesitate to draw his machete and "cut him down" because "he was afraid of being thought weak" (pp. 57, 61). Disobeying Ogbuefi Ezeudu's rational instruction can therefore be interpreted 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?" (p. 61).

Interestingly, Umuofia appears to be culturally conscious of children. This is evidenced by the prevalence of child-centred proverbs: "If a child washed his hands, he could eat with kings" (Achebe, 2009, p. 8); "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm" (p. 67); "When mother-cow is chewing grass, its young ones watch its mouth" (pp. 70-71); "A baby on its mother's back does not know the way is long" (p. 101); and "A child cannot pay for its mother's milk" (p. 166). Numerous children are also a significant indication of wealth (pp. 18, 117). But despite this seeming consciousness, children suffer greatly in Umuofia. Twins are abandoned in the Evil Forest because they are a taboo to the Earth (p. 135). A whole chapter (pp. 75-86) is also dedicated to exploring the concept of *ogbanje*—an evil spirit child who is reborn over and over after infant deaths, to cause pain to the mother—whereas spirits of good children are mentioned in passing in one sentence (p. 46), which skews readerly perception against the child. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves also demands the life of a child, Ikemefuna, as atonement for the crimes of a man (p. 57). These incidents lend credence to Etim's position that children are both maltreated in society and edged out of the literary mainstream (2008, p. 7). Indeed, Okonkwo is the victim of a society which only pays lip service to the welfare of children.

Okonkwo's indirect response to his experiences is repression, whereas his direct response is a decision to hate everything which reminds him of his father. Although he is not innately cruel, his disdain for his father makes him "hate everything [Unoka] had loved," including gentleness and idleness (p. 13). His industry becomes a defence strategy against his memories, while his aggression becomes an offense strategy against vestiges of his father. Hence, whenever Okonkwo beats Nwoye, he is fundamentally antagonising his father, because he views Nwoye as "cold, impotent ash"—just like Unoka (p. 153). Even the 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" (Okhamafe, 2002, p. 144). This attack, which precipitates his eventual suicide, is indicative of Okonkwo's inability to negotiate or accommodate, and instantiates his proclivity to "pounce" on people. It stands to reason, therefore, that Okonkwo is not really the "shaper of his own destiny," as Nnolim (2009) argues, but rather that his destiny is shaped by his childhood trauma (p. 128). This is also true of Eugene in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, despite the forty-five-year gap between both novels.

4. Traumatisation, Radicalisation and Replicated Cruelty in *Purple Hibiscus*

Two principal incidents point to Eugene's childhood in *Purple Hibiscus*. The first is when

he publicly scolds his daughter, Kambili, for dropping from first position to second. Kambili comes second because she is traumatised by her mother's miscarriage close to her exams. Having watched her mother bleed, the words in Kambili's school books keep "turning to blood" each time she tries to read them (Adichie, 2013, p. 37). Despite her class teacher's praise of her hard work and good character in her final report, Kambili "knew Papa would not be proud" (p. 39). Eugene makes it clear that only the first position is worthy of her private school education. He reminds her that "his Godless father" had not spent a dime sending him to school (p. 39). In fact, he drives Kambili to school at the start of the new term and scolds her in front of her entire class. In his admonition, Eugene insists that "you have to do something with all these privileges" because "[God] expects much from you" (p. 47). He then enumerates the challenges he faced 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" (p. 47). On an intra-textual level, this tirade achieves the desired goal of making Kambili reclaim the first position that term and thus regain Eugene's approval. But on a metatextual level, it reveals Eugene's tough childhood.

The second reference to Eugene's childhood is made during the discussion he has with Kambili after pouring boiling water on her feet. Eugene calls his father a heathen, and forbids his children, Kambili and Jaja, from being in the same house with him. However, during their visit to their aunt, Aunty Ifeoma, Papa Nnukwu suddenly falls ill and is brought from the village to stay with them. He remains with them till he dies. After his death, Eugene discovers that Kambili and Jaja had been in the same house with their grandfather. He punishes them by pouring boiling water on their feet. Kambili recounts how Eugene made her climb into the tub and "lowered the kettle … 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" (p. 194). Afterwards, he talks to her about why she should not wilfully walk into sin. He admits that "I committed a sin against my own body once," and that the priest who caught him "asked me to boil water for tea" (p. 196). But rather than serve him tea, the priest in question "poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it…" (p. 196). This discussion further reveals the traumatic nature of Eugene's childhood.

Eugene's mind is bifurcated in a binary opposition wherein his Catholic fathers are good, while his biological father is evil. This defies logic, because the natural reaction to the cruelty of the priests would be to detest them. But Eugene is enamoured of the priests: he refers to the one who scalded his hands as "the good father" and even legitimises the maltreatment by affirming that "[he] did that for my own good" (p. 197). This affirmation is indicative of Stockholm syndrome, where victims of traumatic events, particularly victims of captivity, develop a bond with their victimisers. Incidentally, Eugene exudes a deep affection for the Catholic Church. He refers to Pentecostal congregations as "mushroom" churches (pp. 5/29), believing that Catholicism is the only authentic brand of Christianity. He lets his father suffer under the yoke of poverty and neglect because Papa Nnukwu will not convert to Catholicism (p. 61). He visits Father Benedict every Sunday after Mass with his family. When his wife asks to stay behind on one occasion, she receives a heavy beating (pp. 32-33). Kambili also observes that he is "gracious" and "eager-to-please" when he speaks with priests and nuns (p. 46). These are in addition to his heavy

donations to Peter's pence and St. Vincent de Paul (p. 5). Eugene's veneration of the institution which maltreated him invariably suggests that he has been brainwashed.

In addition to being severely maltreated by the priests who raise him, Eugene is also indoctrinated to believe that this maltreatment will build virtue. When he pours boiling water on Kambili's feet, for instance, he declares that "everything I do for you, I do for your own good" (p. 196). He then makes Kambili affirm this by saying, "Yes, Papa" (p. 196). Later, he intimates that the priest did the same to him for his own good (p. 197). Given that Eugene replicates his own punishment, it can be assumed that his pep talk afterwards is also a replica of the one he got from the priest. The parallelism in his rendition of both talks lends credence to this assumption: "Everything I do for you, I do for your own good" / "The good father did that for my own good." This underscores a systematic attempt to normalise child abuse by convincing the victim that the end justifies the means. Accordingly, Eugene describes his actions as something done for his daughter, rather than something done to her, as much as he considers the scalding of his hands as something done for his own good. Situated within the context of his childhood experiences, Eugene's attachment to the Catholic establishment recalls what Caruth (1996) calls "the return of origins in memory" (p. 13). Eugene's trauma began with maltreatment by Catholic priests. But he metaphorically clings to the origin of his memories, signalling continuous efforts to find closure. He neglects his father for being a heathen but also avoids his sister who is Catholic; his liberality to Catholic causes can therefore be interpreted, not as a matter of principle, but as a form of overcompensation indicative of his radicalisation.

Because of his own traumatic upbringing, Eugene elevates cruelty to the status of discipline. But he is also clearly unaware that he is traumatised, because trauma is not always recognised by its victims. As Caruth (1996) points out, it is "[the] incomprehension [the inability to recognise trauma]" as well as "[the] departure from sense and understanding" which lead to the rise of traumatic "witnessing" (p. 56). Caruth (1996) further notes that the true import of traumatic events can sometimes "remain unavailable to the consciousness" and can even "[extend] beyond what [is] seen or what can be known" (p. 92). In line with Caruth's positions, LaCapra (2016) asserts that traumatic events often involve "double binds" and therefore have the potential to "limit what may be represented" (p. 377). Taking this into account, it could even be argued that it is the unawareness of one's traumatisation which births "the potential to infect another pure and integrated subject"—that is, the likelihood of trauma victims wreaking further havoc (Balaev, 2008, p. 151). This dispositional possibility makes it credible to read Eugene's inhumanity as a plausible fallout of his own traumatisation, despite the puritanical intentions behind them.

Boynton (2022) warns that "spirituality" can become a "resilience factor" in handling childhood trauma in religious settings, because trauma in such settings has the potential to cause "soul pain" (p. 25). In other words, where the environment is religious, spirituality may become a survival strategy for children who have endured ineffable horror. The likelihood of turning to fanaticism thus increases. Eugene's extremism fits this paradigm because he accepts his maltreatment as a purification ritual conducted by the priest to help

him attain infallibility. He therefore adopts cruelty as a model for enforcing the same. This is why he beats Kambili for "desecrating" the Eucharist fast, even though she eats breakfast so she can take medications for her menstrual cramps (Adichie, 2013, p. 102). Eugene 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 damaged and radicalised, cementing the perception that extreme punishment is justifiable if it leads to religious purity. As Caruth (1996) specifically notes, trauma is "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (p. 3). While Eugene's hands may have healed from the scalding, his mind clearly has not. This explains his constant recollection of his experiences, as Kambili reveals when she mentions that "I had heard this all before, how hard he had worked, how much the missionary Reverend Sisters had taught him, things he would never have learned from his idol-worshipping father" during the episode in her school (p. 47)—an obvious indicator of repetition compulsion.

Eugene's conscious acts of violence are rooted in the inability to recognise the abnormality of his childhood experiences. Although he consciously brutalises his family, the overarching belief in brutality as a means to achieve Godliness springs from his own unrecognised trauma. Murundu (2017) thus observes that "[Eugene's] abuse of his family is a vengeful act for what the priests [did] to him when he was young and dependent" (p. 106). To borrow an apt phraseology from LaCapra (1999), Eugene is simply "acting-out" his traumatic experiences through his brutality to others and "living-through" them through his constant tirades (p. 707).

5. Trauma Underpinnings and Questions of Responsibility in *Purple Hibiscus*

Besides his direct acts of cruelty, other textual clues reveal Eugene's traumatisation. One of the commonest ways Eugene shows love to his children is to share his tea with them. This tea is always scalding hot, and Kambili recalls drinking it and "feeling the love burn my tongue" (Adichie, 2013, p. 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" (p. 8). Toivanen (2013) 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" (p. 106). Like Toivanen (2013), many critics also perceive Eugene's love sip as an act of violence. But it is remarkable that Eugene drinks this tea every day, despite its hotness. His daily tea can therefore be interpreted as a literary parallel to the water in which his hands were soaked as a child. Drinking it becomes a form of daily self-flagellation intended to atone for his perceived irredeemableness, betraying a dysfunctional understanding of the injunction to take up of the cross daily and follow Christ (Matthew 16:24). Eugene thus reenacts his maltreatment primarily on himself, but also offers a sip to his children as a metaphorical invitation into his trauma. This is further substantiated by the fact that he loves drinking tea, given that "the good father" had asked him to boil water supposedly for tea.

Like Okonkwo, Eugene manifests demonstrable remorse each time he "disciplines" his

family. 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, 2013, p. 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" (p. 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" (p. 109). Even when he pours boiling water on her feet, Kambili notes that "he was crying now, tears streaming down his face" (p. 195). While Coker (2017) views Eugene's reactions to his family's pain as hypocrisy (p. 106), they could alternatively be viewed as manifestations of his actual unwillingness to cause pain—a desire constantly overpowered by the pressure to maintain religious purity. 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. As Etim (2008) observes, "If a child is cared for, he imbibes the concept of care" (p. 3). But because Eugene is brutalised, he adopts brutality as a relational principle.

Besides regret, several ironies also expose Eugene's mental balkanisation. Although he prefers not to speak Igbo to his children, he gives them Igbo names. He names his son (Jaja) 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 a metaphorical appeal to God for life/survival, having undergone such cruel treatments at the hands of his Catholic masters. Also, Eugene supposedly detests Igbo ways of life, yet he takes the title of Omelora—meaning "the one who does for the community"—which is one of the highest titles in the land (p. 55). Again, he hates his father's "heathen" religion, yet he pays for a burial where all the rites of that religion will be conducted. He makes excuses for why Jaja and Kambili cannot visit their aunt, but when Aunty Ifeoma persists, he eventually agrees. Even when Jaja insists on going to Nsukka without prior information, Eugene also acquiesces. Despite his smug response to his wife's request for gas cylinders for Aunty Ifeoma, he accedes to her requests, and even sends more than Aunty Ifeoma expected. Based on these attitudinal contradictions, Eugene can be viewed, not as being "primitively misogynist," as Nabutanyi (2017, p. 78) suggests, but as being deeply divided—a person seeking to reconcile his fanatical upbringing with an entirely different reality. While it might also be too generous to describe Eugene as a hero, as Etim and Emmanuel (2015, p. 13) propose, it is undeniable that Eugene is a textbook example of the maltreated child who normalises molestation based on a history of abuse. His faulty upbringing thus necessitates a discussion on responsibility.

All things being equal, parents are the principal custodians of their children and are responsible for their welfare and socialisation. Because no mention is made in the novel of Eugene's mother, it can be surmised that Papa Nnukwu was his sole custodian before his stint with the Catholic priests. During a discussion with Aunty Ifeoma, Papa Nnukwu admits that "I should not have let [Eugene] follow those missionaries" (Adichie, 2013, p. 83). This admission proves his culpability in Eugene's traumatic childhood, perhaps because he did not take adequate steps to prevent Eugene's abscondment to the Catholic priests. Papa Nnukwu further recounts that the priests "gathered the children under the

ukwa tree in the mission and taught them their religion. I did not go, kpa, but I went sometimes to see what they were doing" (p. 84). He clearly recognised the systematic targeting of Eugene and other children by the missionaries. He also clearly recognised the philosophical anathema of the new religion, hence his abstinence from it. Yet he did not prevent his son from joining the missionaries. Even when he found out about the supposedly inimical illogic of the Holy Trinity, which was being taught to the children, he still did not stop his son from joining the priests: "It was then that I knew the white man was mad. The father and the son equal? Tufia! Do you not see? That is why Eugene can disregard me, because he thinks we are equal" (p. 84). Papa Nnukwu blames the priests in retrospect, but his inactions constitute culpable negligence, seeing as they lead to Eugene's abuse.

It is noteworthy that Eugene and Aunty Ifeoma both have Catholic upbringings. Although nothing is said about Aunty Ifeoma's childhood due to the narrative technique deployed in the novel, it is stated that she also attended a missionary school and is herself a devout Catholic (p. 83). Despite being an enlightened university professor, Aunty Ifeoma encourages her children to honour the traditions of the Catholic Church by accepting Latin names for their confirmation (p. 272). Yet she does not insist when they decide otherwise, which demonstrates an ideological flexibility foreign to Eugene. This difference in religious outlook might be a case of the water which softens the potato hardening the egg, or a matter of experiential differences, since Eugene and Aunty Ifeoma went to different schools. Nonetheless, it speaks volumes that not one but both of Papa Nnukwu's children are raised by complete strangers with little or no input from him. Aunty Ifeoma only seems fortunate not to have fallen into the hands of radical tutors. Unoka's indolence and Papa Nnukwu's inertia reveal a disturbing pattern of parental ineptitude which exposes children to various forms of abuse. In Okonkwo's case, it is impoverishment and consequent verbal abuse; in Eugene's, it is maltreatment and indoctrination.

Narrative limitations make it impossible to determine if Eugene started off like Oduche, who was sent by Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God* to join the white missionaries in order to "have a man of your family in [their] band" (Achebe, 2013, p. 43), or if his case is similar to that of Nwoye in *Things Fall Apart*, who is endeared to the white man's religion because it offered respite from the internal "snapping" occasioned by structural injustices like the killing of twins and the murder of Ikemefuna (Achebe, 2009, p. 61). This notwithstanding, it is illogical to abdicate the responsibility of raising one's children to people of antagonistic cultural persuasions and then expect the same children to not adopt the same antagonism. If he who pays the piper dictates the tune, he who raises the child will determine their cultural leanings. Papa Nnukwu did not raise his children. The Catholic priests did. Eugene walked miles to school and worked as a houseboy to see himself through school. He is exposed to overwhelming cruelty because of this. Etim (2008) warns that "whatever state the child is subjected to today is what the parents (adults) want for the future of the world" (p. vi). Eugene's abuse is a seed for further abuse. But worse still, he is also oriented to believe that his suffering is for his own good. Consequently, he conceptualises inhumanity as an act of kindness if it achieves stated spiritual goals. His actions are therefore the products of a dysfunctional belief system stemming from unrecognised and unaddressed childhood trauma. These factors establish Eugene as a

wounded child who only recycles the inhumanity inflicted on him.

6. Conclusion

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. This paper has interpreted both as victims of varying degrees of childhood trauma. While Okonkwo's trauma is rooted in acute poverty and verbal abuse, Eugene's trauma stems from his experiences under the tutelage of ruthless Catholic priests. The parallels between their childhood experiences and their actions as adults suggest that their cruelties are reenactments of their individual traumas. Although trauma has been reasonably discussed in Nigerian literature with respect to war, little attention has been paid to childhood trauma, perhaps based on the perception that children's experiences do not constitute "the complexity of national affairs," as Palmer (1972) very erroneously alleges (p. 10). Nonetheless, the forty-five-year gap between *Things Fall Apart* and *Purple Hibiscus* suggests that childhood trauma remains an issue to be explored. This paper therefore hopes to propel conversations on the subject.

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