

## TRAUMA AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS ON CHARACTERS IN SELECTED NIGERIAN NOVELS

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a study of trauma and its psychological effects on characters in selected Nigerian novels. Trauma studies is a field of cultural analysis that has gained attention in literature. However, it has not been well explored in some Nigerian novels. Therefore, this study explores Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Tree* and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* as narratives that expose the pain and trauma endured by characters due to sexual abuse and societal misconceptions, particularly in a world where differences are stigmatised. The study applies Judith Herman's Trauma Theory as a framework to examine the impact of traumatic experiences on characters in the selected texts. Specifically, it delves into how trauma is depicted in the texts and considers how the characters cope with their distress, raising the question of whether there are better or worse methods of dealing with trauma. It concludes that since there is no clear indication of the total recovery of the mental health of the characters, the present state of such characters should not be ignored.

### **Introduction**

In this study, trauma is understood as a literary portrayal of both physical and emotional experiences that revolve

around human relationships, often triggered by an identity crisis shaped by personal and collective perceptions in Nigerian fiction. Trauma studies have increasingly intersected with literature, focusing on how individuals relate to others through their experiences of mental and physical assaults, often linked to issues of sexual identity. In contemporary Nigerian literature, trauma studies have seen significant growth, largely influenced by Western cultural norms and a new generation of liberal African writers who are openly addressing issues of sexuality. A breakthrough in 21st-century Nigerian literature is the recognition of sexual identities beyond the traditional male/female and heterosexual frameworks, acknowledging a more diverse reality. This shift has allowed for the exploration of various traumatic experiences which are examined through literary criticism.

This research applies Judith Herman's (1992) trauma theory. Herman argues that the study of psychological trauma is not linear but is marked by "episodic amnesia," where victims' stories surface briefly in the public eye before fading away. She describes trauma as an event that overwhelms the victim, stripping them of control, connection, and meaning. Victims may exhibit symptoms such as hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction, sometimes so severe that they enter an alternative state of consciousness to cope with reality. Herman suggests that this altered consciousness can manifest in various ways, such as dissociation, amnesia, or even sleepwalking. One persistent symptom is "intrusion" where individuals repeatedly relive their trauma, making it impossible to return to a normal life.

This disruption of the inner sense of safety, protection, and trust is central to understanding both personal and societal trauma.

In Nigerian culture, open discussions about sexuality and gender identity are often regarded as taboo. The silence around sexual matters in modern Nigerian literature is deeply rooted in social values, customs, and cultural beliefs about acceptable behaviour (Izugbara, 2004). Terms used to describe sexual desire, body parts, and sexual behaviour in Nigerian literature are often vague or indirect, reflecting the cultural restraint on these topics. Despite this, trauma is still a prominent issue that is frequently addressed in public discourse (Esiet, 2001).

However, not much research has examined the portrayal of trauma concerning sexuality in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*. Therefore, this study investigates how the psychological experiences of the characters in these works impact their sense of self. At a time when various aspects of human existence are being re-examined, this research delves into the discourse on trauma within Nigerian literature.

### **Literary Review**

Trauma theory is often viewed as a blend of psychological studies and the humanities. In literature, it is particularly used to explore the complex psychological dimensions of characters. As Radstone (2013, p. 1) observes, trauma theory represents a dynamic, interdisciplinary field that has grown since the 1980s through the merging of psychology and the humanities. One significant goal of trauma narratives is to reshape cultural memory through

individual experiences, often taking on a testimonial nature to expose and prevent the recurrence of similar horrors. Over time, the scope of trauma has expanded to encompass a variety of causes, including communal, religious, regional, and colonial influences. The spread of European colonialism, for instance, had a profound impact on regions like Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, leaving many people subjected to oppression, subjugation, and deep psychological scars. This colonial trauma is a common theme in postcolonial literature, which often reflects on the devastating effects of colonization. Notable works such as Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* (1970), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1981), and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) are powerful examples of literature that deal with these traumatic experiences.

In addition to highlighting the specific traumas caused by colonialism, postcolonial literature frequently addresses how such experiences are inscribed in cultural memory. Trauma studies have often used postcolonial themes to represent trauma, with literary works like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004) exemplifying this approach.

Women in Africa face a heightened risk of trauma due to factors such as domestic violence, restricted social or religious freedoms, limited social support, and cultural norms. Prominent social activists and feminists such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have used their voices and

works to advocate for women's rights in Nigeria, confronting the traumas faced by women and pushing for societal change.

Rosanne (2020) writes that:

Tambu's experiences with the traumas brought on by the colonial education system and the colonial war challenge the traditional framework of the Bildungsroman. Instead of a journey of personal growth, her story, as implied by the novel's title, is one of "unbecoming"—a gradual loss of identity, emotions, and connections. Despite her determined efforts to take control of her life, Tambu is continuously held back: by the psychological harm caused by her acceptance of a Eurocentric view of African "inferiority," by her mother's adherence to traditional values, and by the violent events she witnesses during the war.

Rosanne's analysis gives a good insight into the presence of trauma in African literature. This shows the exploration of the concept of trauma in the African literary scene. Dangarembga's text was set in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) but the text shows how trauma studies in African literature began to gain prominence at the turn of the century.

Again, in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, the concept of trauma is explored through Sadiya Isa thus:

Mama, like many other women in Nigeria, suffers from trauma due to the physical and domestic violence inflicted upon her by her husband. On several occasions, Eugene beats her so severely that she suffers miscarriages, punishing her for prioritizing her own desires over what he believes to be the will of God. Consequently, Mama becomes not only a victim of physical abuse but also endures severe emotional and psychological trauma.

Isa's analysis adds to the growing body of work that highlights the presence of trauma in contemporary African literature. Her analysis specifically addresses the themes of trauma in Adichie's work, focusing on how the character's trauma stems from the domestic abuse she endures at the hands of her husband. While Adichie may not fully develop the character in great depth, we can still see the extent of her suppressed trauma through her actions, particularly when she gradually poisons and kills her husband, revealing the depth of the emotional pain she has been hiding.

Apart from this personal trauma, African scholars and critics have also explored the idea of a shared cultural trauma especially in war fiction like Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* with Amanda Ejiofor submitting that:

The plot of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is deeply shaped by the traumatic experiences of that historical period. It portrays a time when both the characters and the nation faced overwhelming events that the human mind

struggled to fully process. The pogrom, or massacre of the Igbo people in northern Nigeria, serves as an unhealed wound, calling out for acknowledgement and recognition.

Ejiofor's perspective reinforces the idea that communities or groups with shared cultural experiences can undergo collective trauma. Unlike individual trauma, this form affects the group as a whole, stemming from shared experiences rather than personal ones. Many African literary works explore themes of trauma, but for this study, the traumatic experiences of characters and their psychological effects are considered through the analysis which focuses on *Under the Udala Trees* by Chinelo Okparanta and *The Death of Vivek Oji* by Akwaeke Emezi.

### **Traumatic Experiences and their Psychological Effects on Characters in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees***

The everyday inner battles that people of the same sex face in the homophobic Nigerian culture are shown eloquently in Okparanta's work. The Nigerian civil war has made it feasible for the author to explore a hostile and turbulent setting at the beginning of the story. At the juvenile age of eleven, the main character, Ijeoma, was forced to see the graphic scenes of blood, murders, beheadings, and horrific deaths that are typical of a war-torn environment.

Ijeoma's household was formerly serene, loving, and quiet, but the war has introduced traits like hate, irritation, antagonism, struggle, lack of food, and safety which

undermine such qualities. The father of Ijeoma was shelled. Her mother nearly went insane as a result of all of this. Ijeoma is essentially abandoned in Nnewi where she takes on the role of house helper at the home of a family friend (the grammar school teacher), under the pretence of providing her with a "safer" setting. These incidents constitute the first trauma that Ijeoma went through as she had to re-establish herself in a new household under the guardianship of a grammar school teacher and his wife. She has a lesbian relationship with Amina, a Hausa girl who is displaced in Nnewi. The two girls were shocked when their guardian, a grammar school teacher, opened the door and saw them having an affair. The first words that awaken them are "... an abomination". He continues to explain the seriousness of the offence, saying "... that is what it is, if a name is to be given to it! ...It is also condemned by the Koran. Although my knowledge of Islam is limited, I am aware that the Bible and the Koran agree on this point" (Okparanta, 2015, p.125).

Due to the "abomination," Ijeoma departs from Nnewi and moves to Aba to live with her mother. The house is too disrespectful for the two of them to dwell in because of the taboo tag and Ijeoma's mother's religious upbringing. Ijeoma's mother saw the deed as heinous and repugnant, and as such, she needed heavenly cleansing and pardon from God. Her mother starts attending Bible cancelling sessions in an attempt to drive out the gay demon.

Ijeoma wants to express her sexuality, even in opposition to what her mother thinks. As a result, two distinct universes are made: one for her mother who approaches the problem from a different angle, and



another for Ijeoma who has another viewpoint. Her mother wants her daughter to turn away from the wickedness of same-sex attraction, which is seen from a religious perspective as sinful and against God's creation of "a man and a woman." She goes on to lecture her daughter on the immorality of what she is doing, saying things like, "Man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed". For this reason, God destroyed Gomorrah and Sodom (Okparanta, 2015, p.74). She made it very evident what the Bible thought about the matter by paraphrasing Leviticus 18: "...thou shall not lie with mankind and womankind: it is an abomination" (Okparanta, 2015, p. 75). On the other side, Ijeoma makes unsuccessful attempts to teach her mother the opposite. "Yes, woman was made for man", she adds. But how could that rule out the possibility that one lady may have been made for another? or a guy serving another man? Many options, and every single one of them is quite feasible (Okparanta, 2015, p.83).

Ijeoma tries, but her mother's growing religious indoctrination, which denigrates her sexuality, subdues her. The cry, "You must ask God for forgiveness of all your sins especially for that one particular sin in you", is becoming more and more common. I will not let any of my children have such sick, terrible desires. They are a tremendous disgrace to God and to me, just by being!" inside the home (Okparanta 2015, p. 86). As the main character, Okparanta depicts a person who is internally tortured by the stricter religious beliefs, the forbidden and dehumanizing images that her society projects, and her surroundings (Aba).

As the story develops, it becomes clear to the reader that Ijeoma is fighting to survive in the raging homophobic atmosphere of her mother, who stands in for her society's rejection of her sexuality and willingness to even burn the victim. One such instance includes Adanna who was burned after she was found out. According to Opkaranta (2015, p. 210), the crowd who carried out the burning raid felt that the deed "was aided by God, that an example needed to be set to cleanse Aba of such sinful way."

Ijeoma descends into melancholy and self-pity at the height of her mother's and society's rejection of her sexual orientation. She frequently attends church to ask for God's pardon and purification because she has been called wicked and her deeds heinous. "At that point, I started to think of myself as a witch under the devil's spell, and if Mama's exorcism failed, I felt like I owed it to myself to find anything that would. Purification of oneself was the aim (Okparanta, 2015, p.196). She gives Dil Emma a soul-torturing performance. She seems to be overcome by a sense of dejection one day. She visits the church to ask God for guidance, as she says:

As soon as I got to the pulpit, I bent over and took out my bible. I opened my bible and firmly positioned my palms within its pages. I prayed, closing my eyes, "Dear God, what does this mean?"...I come before you, God, confessing my sins, pleading with you to lead me in the direction of righteousness. But what if I'm not really committing any sins? What happens if I am unnecessarily making myself feel guilty?

Lord, please explain. Give me a sign, please.  
Please give me a sign if there is any evil in my  
heart so that I can identify it and turn away from  
it (Okparanta, 2015, p. 197).

She also discovers that she is powerless against the two conflicting forces of persistent lesbian desire and homophobic beliefs. She attempts to waver between the two occurrences, but since they are diametrically opposed, happiness escapes her. But she realises that it is hard to suppress her homosexual pleasure, particularly when it is sparked by the lusty and ecstatic thoughts of Ndidi:

I couldn't stop thinking about Ndidi. She was there, occupying every available place, including the nooks and crannies of my thoughts, while I got into bed and put on my pajamas. I was unable to control myself. In my mind, I picture myself physically reacting to her. I get so absorbed, so overflowing with want. No matter how much I tried to push the memories of the bible study with Mama aside, they kept coming back. Words that condemned me were over me like a downpour, soaking me and making me feel as though I would drown. I was in the best mood I had in a long time when all of a sudden I had this terrified dream as if to make fun of me and make me wonder how I could have ever believed that happiness was something I could achieve. In (Okparanta 2015, pp. 194–195).

Ijeoma is still grumbling about her unwavering sexuality and her internalized fear of homophobic attacks. She prefers her same-sex lover Ndidi over males and heterosexual marriage. This indicates the cause of her marriage's breakdown with male Chibundu.

Two points of view are therefore raised, the society that wants characters who have gone through emotional and psychological traumatic experiences to turn from their wicked ways which Ijeoma's mother represents. Secondly, a self-accepted identity of individuals who want to be identified for who they are, not what others think of them, as seen in the character of Ijeoma.

### **Traumatic Experiences and Their Psychological Effects on Characters in Akwaeke Emezi's *Death of Vivek Oji***

Akwaeke Emezi sets her story, *The Death of Vivek Oji*, in a community in Southeast Nigeria. The story opens with the protagonist Vivek's death revealed: "On the day Vivek Oji died, they burned down the market" (Emezi, 2020, p. 8). When Vivek's mother opens the door, her son is waiting for her, draped in a rainbow of cloth. She is clueless about what transpired. The story refers to an ambiguous "they" without providing particulars, piquing the reader's interest in what has transpired. Then Vivek Oji's narrative starts, and in a sequence of flashbacks, the reasons why he ended up dead on a doorstep are revealed. The story elucidates Vivek's life journey, revealing aspects of him that he concealed from his family regarding his transition to a transgender identity, causing him internal suffering. Even if we are aware of Vivek's demise from the start, his life's events and their order are not

predetermined. Rather, the tension is increased when the reasons for his death are revealed in such a strange fashion.

The mystery surrounding Vivek starts when he isolates himself from his loved ones and the community. The daughters of the so-called "Nigerwives", foreign-born women who have married Nigerian men, appear to be the only peers who seem to tolerate his sexual orientation. Among these pals are Somto and Olunne, whose mother Rhatha is Thai. Vivek's neighbourhood transitions into a multiethnic community where many social customs and cultures coexist. Within this kind of society, Vivek might find solace and tranquillity in a variety of different lifestyles. Chika, Vivek's father, is aloof, preoccupied with his problems, and fails to notice the changes in his son's life or give him any thought. Even though his mother is so overly protective that it makes him feel limited, Vivek is not at ease or secure because of her intrusive attention. As a result, he experiences mental anguish. He distances himself from the adult world to find comfort among his classmates and friends. He especially seeks solace with the women who are more understanding and compassionate toward his gender identity. Without knowing his parents' sexual or emotional preferences, Vivek learns to follow his intuition and challenge the gender binary as he grows up. This sets him on a path of self-discovery.

To find a place of freedom in the Nigerwives' homes, where he is free to live his feminine lifestyle, he distances himself from both his family and the adult world. In the end, Vivek's long hair and weight loss highlight a key component of the persona he decides to create for himself.

Vivek's aunt, the devout Mary, thinks that his long hair and his insistence on keeping grownups at a distance are indicators that he is under the influence of demonic spirits: "And every day it was difficult, walking around and knowing that people saw me one way, knowing that they were wrong, so completely wrong, that the real me was invisible to them," the boy who is being thrown bottles at by street boys says. To them, it didn't even exist. So, are you still there if no one sees you? (Emezi, 2020, p. 30). He comes to understand that, although his friends, family, and community cannot see him, he has his own identity and life.

As Vivek's aunt Mary represents the community's religious ideals, Vivek's pain persists. Upon observing the changes in Vivek's life, such as his hair growing longer and his weight decreasing, Mary believes he is under the influence of demonic forces. Even though to others her religious ideas are little more than superstitions, she helps Vivek because of them. Mary's story demonstrates how the core of her religious practices are Nigerian values. Spiritual problems cannot be settled in the hospital, so Vivek's aunt decides to take him to church to drive off evil. When Mary phoned that evening to find out how the visit went, she said, 'Let me take him to my church. 'Kavita, it can't harm. They'll make an effort to take away anything evil that is connected to him. You consider prayer to be true.'" (Emezi, 2020, p. 52). Mary sees Vivek's altered look as a result of the church rites acting as a remedy for his spiritual demon problem:

Children who maintain their spiritual  
connection even after being born to their

biological parents are referred to as ogbanje in Igbo culture. The idea stems from a cultural viewpoint that holds that the spiritual and natural worlds are intertwined (Makombe & Magaqa, 2021).

Here, as *The Death of Vivek Oji* demonstrates, it is evident how Igbo culture influences African writers and serves as inspiration for their works. Vivek's mother, an Indian woman, is unconcerned about receiving such religious care. She rejects the religious and mythical rites that Mary says can cure Vivek and give him the strength to go over his problems by driving out the evil from his spirit. In the same way, Vivek rejects the idea that he may be healed by church rites. Conversely, the actions make him even more miserable and prolong his agony. The community is unable to discern between Vivek's decisions, physical illness, and spiritual issues: "They are bastards!" he spits out. Do you really believe that treating someone like an animal is acceptable? For the sake of their pointless salvation? Mba, hold on. It was referred to be an exorcism. (Emezi, 2020, p 53). The problem is exacerbated by the church's liturgical rites. Vivek physically suffers as a result of the abuse he endures at the church: "They had to beat it out". He revealed a swath of dark red welts on his side by lifting his shirt. (Emezi, 2020, p. 53).

The reader understands how Vivek's life may have ended because of the merging of the community's religious beliefs with legendary heritage. Because they are based on ignorance and superstition, Kavita and the Nigerwives reject these community beliefs and mock

them: "All the Nigerwives liked to make fun of what they called the fanatic Christians, who were always catching the Holy Ghost and convulsing on carpets...etc." (Emezi, 2020, p. 58). The Nigerian community is the source of these religious ideas, particularly those that pertain to the human spirit.

In the Nigerian community, a transgender person experiences societal rejection. Vivek finds that his peers are more accepting of his sexual orientation. In addition, he seeks refuge at the houses of Nigerwives' daughters, Texas-born Elizabeth, Somoto, and Olunne, and her mother from Thailand. By giving him clothing, cosmetics, and other feminine products, these women enable Vivek to indulge in his feminine tendencies. Since these daughters of foreign-born women do not object to Vivek's sexual orientation, they may be more accepting of Western culture and way of life. A brother cannot lust for his brother's bride in Nigerian society: "Chika stole a glance at Mary from the Veranda" (Emezi, 2020, p. 10). With a fierce gaze, his mother told him to "mind yourself," sounding as though she could read his thoughts. "That's the wife of your brother" (Emezi, 2020, p.10). Any kind of trespass is a breach of the community's social ideals, which demand that the limits be observed.

Vivek should be penalized because his change violates the social and cultural norms of the adult world. Many African writers, and Nigerians in particular, contend that the community's mythical and traditional values are boundaries that must not be crossed to avoid punishment. As a punishment for defying the community's ideals, Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is forced to temporarily leave his tribe. The



community's ideals are seen as a terrifying code that, if broken, should result in severe punishment for the transgressor. Eventually, unable to uphold the social, religious, and cultural norms of the community, Okonkwo kills himself.

Here, Vivek is seen as worthy of punishment for his audacity in publicly defying the community's standards on the day of the riot by walking down the street in a dress. The rioters feel that Vivek ought to be punished for challenging their customs. They kill him by throwing stones at his head and announcing that other people who break the community's rules will suffer the same fate. They took away Vivek's Ganesh necklace, which represents his self-discovery, to show that they could not stand his actions. On the other hand, Vivek's mother affirms her son's existence and self-identity. Throughout his life, Vivek tried to be true to himself and discover his identity in an environment that refused to accept reality, particularly when such information went against the customs and culture of the neighbourhood.

In the end, Kavita has lifelong anguish as a result of realizing the life her son led. Given that she is Indian, it is possible that her upbringing and decisions were unaffected by the customs of the Nigerian community. She regrets not being able to give her son the life he desired. She altered the gravestone's inscription to confirm her son's identification as an act of atonement for her negligence, reading "VIVEK NNEMDI OJI-BELOVED CHILD" (Emezi, 2020, p. 156). This is her way of acknowledging her son's gay identity and approving of his life, whatever it may have been. Since he had always thought of himself as a girl, Nnemdi was the

name that ought to have been given to him at birth. Vivek's desire to be called by such a name reveals his feminine leanings.

Kavita had only one child, Vivek, and she was deeply affected by her loss. She often remarked, "He is enough. This sufficed." (Emezi, 2020, p.15). Ultimately, Vivek's mother represents a change in the communal circumstances by accepting the life her son was pursuing. The daughters of foreign-born women, like Vivek's mother, show greater acceptance and comprehension of Vivek's personal life and his quest to discover who he is.

Vivek's relationship with his family and the world of adults is marked with complexities. His father, Chika, keeps to himself, away from his son's problems, and does not bother with the details of his son's life. His mother, Kavita, is overprotective, placing restrictions on Vivek when his life requires more freedom: "You're keeping me in a cage!" he shouts. "You think I want to stay in this house every night like a prisoner?" (Emezi, 2020, p.64). Vivek is fed up with the social restrictions imposed by his mother, in particular, as well as by the larger community.

He wants to live his life freely and develops a striking physical appearance. The cultural and social values of the community, along with a religious background that is blended with myth, do not help Vivek. He is driven to pain and misery from his path to the queerness that determines his self-identity as transgender, a path that is rejected by the community. A transgender person in the Nigerian community becomes a social outcast. In the world of his peers, Vivek finds more tolerance toward his sexuality. He also finds safety in the homes of the daughters of Nigerwives, including Somoto

and Olunne, whose mother is from Thailand, and Elizabeth, whose mother is from Texas. These women allow Vivek to indulge in his feminine behaviours, providing him with makeup, dresses, and other feminine items. Perhaps, these daughters of foreign-born wives are more open to Western culture and lifestyle, as they do not reject Vivek's sexual orientation.

The story is both a cultural depiction of Nigeria and the exploration of one's own identity within the context of tragic occurrences. As Oluwatomisin (2021) says: "This is the legacy of Vivek Oji: taking the air around us and converting it to what we need to breathe, to be" (Emezi, 2020, p. 48) might be said to be his legacy. The story therefore captures the exploration of tragic occurrences of one's identity, self-defeat, self-isolation, fear of the unknown, and rejection. In the Nigerian community, a transgender person faces social intimidation and rejection, which always leads to negative psychological effects on the thoughts of such a character which might lead to depression as seen in the character of Vivek Oji.

## **Conclusion**

Characters' traumatic experiences continue to be a persistent problem in a homophobic culture. As long as gay characteristics persist and show themselves in the person's life, they will always be at odds with the society that rejects such orientations. When it reaches its peak, the person spirals out of control into trauma, annoyance, and sadness. When reading the novel critically, one notices how the characters, Vivek and Ijeoma, are suffocated by both their local homophobic culture and two realms of persistent same-sex inclination. However, this frequently

results in a broken heterosexual marriage, as in the instance of Ijeoma, who had to leave her marriage to Chibundu to be with her homosexual lover, Ndidi, as well as melancholy, frustration, and arguments within the family. However, this paper has explored the need for total acceptance of such characters which will heal the wounds of victims of the traumatic experiences they face in Nigerian Literature. Although there is no clear indication of the total recovery of their mental health, the need to accept the present state of such characters should not be ignored.

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