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Complex PTSD and Transgenerational Trauma in Chinelo Onwualu's Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses complex PTSD and transgenerational trauma in Chinelo Onwualu's short stories "What the Dead Man Said" and "Letters to My Mother" by investigating the effects of prolonged exposure to physical assault and rape on the protagonists, Azuka and Obeche. The study aims to describe the symptoms and causes of trauma by using a psychoanalytical approach. Based on the analysis, trauma symptoms vary from one character to another, exhibiting somatic and relational features that affect or halt the lives of the victims. Overcoming trauma requires initiating a three-step journey that Judith Herman, an American psychiatrist, identifies as the trauma recovery model, which starts with the stage of establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. Through these three stages, the study shows how Onwualu's protagonists reconcile with their traumatic past, providing a narrative framework for healing that relies on specific cultural elements and the healing power of community-based support. The study concludes that the traumatic memories cannot be erased. They are integrated into the victims' sense of self through the aid of the immediate environment and community. This is revealed in "Letters to My Mother" as the protagonist, Obeche, transcends her transmitted trauma by participating in communal practices that reconnect her with her ancestors and community.

Keywords: Africanfuturism; Chinelo Onwualu; Complex PTSD; transgenerational trauma; trauma recovery

INTRODUCTION

Africa has suffered atrocious and gory events, such as colonisation, slavery, and civil wars, which have scarred the manifold pages of the continent's history. These historical injustices have inflicted long-term psychological trauma on the entire African population across different generations. Trauma does not exist in isolation but reverberates through time, space, and generations; it changes identities and futures in ways that necessitate narrative and cultural re-envisioning. From this point, Africanfuturist writers, such as Chinelo Onwualu, weave plots that aim to raise cultural awareness about how to resolve trauma.

Firstly, Africanfuturism is a literary movement that centres Africa and its intellectual and cultural traditions in literary presentations. It envisions the future through an African lens. As Okorafor (2019), the founder of the movement, describes it, "Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centred on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people), and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It is less concerned with 'what could have been' and more concerned with 'what is and can/will be'". In other words, Africanfuturism prioritises African perspectives and envisions optimistic, progressive futures for African communities. It explores the past, present, and future of the continent by fusing speculative fiction with traditional African mythologies and cultural practices.

Secondly, Africanfuturist literature encompasses a broad spectrum of themes, including mythology, postcolonial struggles, gender dynamics, and social transformation, while maintaining a distinctly African identity. A central feature of Africanfuturist narratives is their incorporation of indigenous myths and supernatural elements as writers integrate spirits, deities, and ancestral presences to situate speculative fiction within African cultural frameworks. Africanfuturist texts critically engage with the enduring legacies of colonialism, functioning as vehicles of social critique. They further challenge patriarchal hierarchies by foregrounding empowered female heroines who transcend restrictive societal norms. Moreover, Africanfuturist literature examines histories of conflict, focusing on their psychological and collective consequences (Okoro, 2021, pp.8-15). Thus, Africanfuturist literature is a dynamic genre that reimagines Africa's past and future through speculative forms, engaging profound social concerns, challenging Eurocentric contexts, and favouring indigenous traditions.

Chinelo Onwualu, a Nigerian short story writer and editor, is an Africanfuturist writer who began her career as a professional writer in 2013, when her debut short story was published in *Mothership: Tales of Afrofuturism and Beyond*, an anthology dedicated to raising the voices of Black writers in speculative fiction. It represents a stepping stone on Onwualu's road to achieving her dream of becoming a speculative fiction writer. In fact, Onwualu's dream was hindered by the realistic trend of Nigerian literature, which prioritises narratives addressing political and social issues over speculative fiction. Onwualu grappled with her desire to write speculative fiction until 2014, when she realised she could merge her African origins with speculative elements to develop her inimitable literary voice.

Onwualu colours her fiction with symbols drawn from her dreams. Her stories examine familial relationships and how dysfunctional family dynamics influence psychological well-being, serving as a source of individual trauma. Therefore, Onwualu creates stories to examine how individuals process trauma within family structures, especially in settings that were ravaged by war or colonialism (Curso de Letras Português-Inglês UFMS, 2023). Although trauma is a dominant psychological issue in Onwualu's fiction, there is no literary study that critically examines Onwualu's narratives in the light of trauma theory. Therefore, the current study fills this gap by selecting two short stories: "What the Dead Man Said" (2019) and "Letters to My Mother" (2022), proposing Judith Herman's trauma recovery model as a framework for discussing trauma presentation in Onwualu's speculative texts. Several recent studies have employed Herman's framework in analysing contemporary literary texts that portray violence against women. Both studies converge with the basic hypothesis of Herman's model, affirming that trauma recovery requires progression through different stages. In "Trust the Process of Healing: Tracing the Pattern of Overcoming Rape Trauma in the Novel *Endurer-A Rape Story* by Kapil Raj", the researchers identify the protagonist's healing process, shedding light on the importance of the immediate environment in creating a safe zone in which trauma victims can resolve their trauma. Furthermore, the researchers address a gap in trauma literature by accentuating the role of family and friends' support in preventing shame and guilt from destroying trauma victims, particularly within the Indian cultural context (Jerina & Chithra, 2024). Similarly, Sabhasundar and Karunakar (2025) underscore the importance of cultivating genuine connections and re-establishing engagement with the broader social context, as such acts pave the way for trauma recovery. The current study builds upon the previous studies, selecting texts that provide a detailed description of trauma and emotional recovery, aligning with Herman's trauma framework. It also examines the effects of prolonged emotional suffering and the transmission of painful experience across generations through a detailed textual analysis.

METHODOLOGY

Trauma, as a term, is derived from the Greek word 'trauma', which means bodily injury or wound. Trauma, in general, refers to emotional wounds that cause psychological harm. According to the American Psychological Association, trauma is "an emotional response to a terrible event, such as an accident, rape, or natural disaster" (as cited in Holton & Snodgrass, 2023, p. 337). Trauma is also defined by the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud as a bodily response to an overwhelming experience that the mind cannot assimilate or process through normal cognitive and emotional means (1961, p. 23). Through his clinical work, Freud identified three interconnected concepts: repression, repetition compulsion, and belatedness. He noticed that after experiencing traumatic events such as death and war, the mind tries to protect itself by repressing or blocking the painful traumatic memories from conscious awareness. However, the mind tends to re-enact these painful memories through dreams or nightmares, leading to a psychological phenomenon known as 'repetition compulsion', in an attempt to handle or heal the traumatic experiences (Freud, 1914, p.160).

Rape trauma could lead to different psychological reactions such as anger, anxiety, fear, nightmares, feelings of betrayal, etc. While some women heal without long-term repercussions, others experience persistent, debilitating symptoms that interrupt their daily activities. They may feel locked in a cycle of intrusive memories, unable to shake the psychological grasp of the traumatic incident. Over time, the inability to process and integrate the experience can heighten their anxiety, further damaging their mental and emotional well-being (Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1998, p. 500). Kassaw and Mengistu (2023, p. 42) argue that rape trauma defies the common belief that "time heals every wound", as time alone is insufficient to heal such an abysmal psychological wound. When the survivors are unable to overcome or process their trauma, they develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is a debilitating mental health condition that arises after a deeply disturbing or life-threatening event. People with PTSD are immersed in intense fear, psychological distress, and emotional instability. To cope with intrusive traumatic memories, victims frequently develop avoidance behaviours—steering away from people, places, or situations that might prompt recollections of their past trauma.

Herman (1992, pp. 377-379) asserts that PTSD fails to explain the various psychological effects that emerge from experiencing multiple traumatic experiences. Because PTSD typically results from one severe traumatic experience, Herman developed complex PTSD (CPTSD), which includes an extended range of symptoms that result from long-term trauma. The term 'prolonged trauma' describes situations where victims experience continuous abuse during their time in detention or when they face powerful entities that control their lives. Traumatic events that continue over extended periods lead to severe cognitive, emotional, and social issues. The presence of multiple traumatic events leads to neurological and psychological changes, which result in more severe clinical symptoms that exceed standard PTSD symptom patterns.

According to studies, women with early prolonged sexual assault experience profound emotional dysregulation, such as sadness, suicidal ideation, and anger. These women also tend to develop a distorted view of themselves and have chronic problems with establishing normal relationships (Herman, 1992, pp. 380-382). They also seem to present more varied psychopathological symptomatology than a person with a single traumatic event: greater dissociative episodes, increased susceptibility to re-victimisation, and deeper attachment pathology. Lasting effects of childhood trauma most typically manifest as widespread personality disturbance and maladaptive coping strategies, with consequences that endure into adulthood,

indicative of how early, repeated victimisation can change neurological development and psychological functioning at the deepest levels (Herman, 1992, p. 387).

Herman sees that trauma essentially destroys the victim's sense of safety, independence, and connection to others. To resolve trauma, Herman argues that the healing process should revolve around three stages: Re-establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. In the first stage, the victim's sense of physical and psychological safety must be restored to reduce the feeling of powerlessness. Without a safe environment, the healing process is nearly impossible (2015, p. 195). Ensuring the safety of some victims who reside in unsettled areas or abusive environments could be a difficult task. Therefore, it is more advisable to relocate the victims. The second stage, remembrance and mourning, resembles the core of traumatic healing as it transforms the overwhelming, fragmented memories and sensations of the traumatic event into a manageable part of one's history. According to Herman, the victims should be encouraged to revisit their traumatic past while simultaneously grieving tangible and intangible losses such as loss of self, innocence, childhood, etc. This process reduces intrusive symptoms, such as nightmares and hypervigilance, and helps the victims to comprehend the meaning of their suffering (2015, p. 299). The third stage, known as reconnection, focuses on restoring the victim's sense of self and constructing new relationships with others and the world. Trauma destroys interpersonal bonds, leaving victims alienated and distrustful. Therefore, Herman believes that in this stage, victims should re-engage with their society, form healthier relationships, and develop a sense of belonging to move beyond the world of trauma and regain agency in their lives (2015, p. 206).

If the traumatic experiences remain unresolved, the trauma will be transmitted to subsequent generations, leading to transgenerational trauma, sometimes called intergenerational trauma, that affects the psychological and mental well-being of the following generations. Transgenerational trauma, as explained by Abraham and Torok (1994), extends beyond the individual experience because symptoms of psychological distress do not stem from an individual's repressed childhood memories alone, as in classical Freudian theory, but also from untold, encrypted secrets of previous generations.

If the traumatic event is simply so horrible, so shameful, that it cannot be processed consciously—like genocide and sexual violence—the survivor may not repress the event nor elaborate upon it via any regular psychic mechanisms. Trauma, therefore, becomes encrypted: it is locked away into a psychic "crypt" in the unconscious, safely stored and preserved intact by denial and silence. This mode of encryption allows the emergence of an indecipherable, non-elaborated psychic artefact, a "buried secret", which escapes conscious awareness and symptomatic expression. The most salient point, nonetheless, is that trauma, in this case, becomes transgenerational through the phantom mechanism: the encrypted secret is unconsciously transmitted downwards to the descendants, who recognise the phantom as somehow part of their inheritance. The descendants introject this phantom without ever recognising its origin, bringing forth an unnamed ancestral debt that presents itself clinically as unexplained anxiety, compulsions, or somatic symptoms; relational patterns (e.g., distrust or anger); fragmentation of identity; or existential guilt. Abraham and Torok identify two distinct groups of victims: first generation, who have suffered the original trauma but encrypted it because of its unspeakable nature, and the second and third generations, those who unwittingly collect the phantom; hence, they become living vessels through which the buried trauma appears indirectly (Alavi & Bulut, 2021, p. 2).

In addition, as Steinberg and Payrhuber (2014, p. 36) indicated, trauma transmission takes place via many possible avenues, including somatic, relational, emotional, and attachment factors. On a somatic level, trauma influences biological processes, including genetic and epigenetic changes, cortisol levels, HPA axis function, brain development, autonomic nervous system (ANS) activity, and physiological regulation—even affecting posture. On an emotional level, the unaddressed trauma affects family dynamics as it distorts family communication, leading to suppressed emotions or dysfunctional expression. It could influence parenting styles, as the traumatised parents lean towards excessive control, harsh criticism, or emotional detachment in the process of rearing their children, consequently impeding a child's emotional and psychological growth and leading him to inherit the trauma.

DISCUSSION

COMPLEX PTSD IN "WHAT THE DEAD MAN SAID"

The story of "What the Dead Man Said" (2019) is set in the seceded Igbo nation-state of New Biafra in a post-apocalyptic 22nd century, specifically the city of Onitsha. New Biafra is a fictional state formed by the global climate disaster that occurred in the 21st and 22nd centuries and crippled existing governments. In the story, New Biafra was founded by a group of Igbo separatists who cited climate issues to announce their independence from Nigeria and invited Igbo immigrants to return to their homeland. The returning members of the Igbo diaspora utilised advanced bioengineering to restore the land and create a society that combines cutting-edge technology with a powerful revival of the Igbo language and traditions. The name "Biafra" is a direct reference to the secessionist West African state that declared independence from Nigeria in 1967, leading to a devastating three-year civil war. New Biafra is thus a speculative exploration of a realised Igbo nationalist dream in a futuristic, post-climate-apocalypse setting.

Though the story is set in a futuristic time, Onwualu discusses a social, psychological issue, which is rape trauma, through the character of Azuka, the protagonist. Azuka is presented as a grown-up woman, in her 40s, who immigrated to Tkaronto at the age of 12 after being raped by her uncle. Azuka returns to Onitsha after receiving the news of her father's sudden death. With her return, Azuka remembers her unresolved past and how she was repeatedly raped at the family's guardhouse. During the burial rituals, Azuka confronts the ghost of her deceased father. She narrates, "I lay on the living room couch… blinked into the semi-darkness before I saw him sitting on the armrest by my feet" (Onwualu, 2019). The appearance of the ghost is a dissociative symptom of complex PTSD, as the protagonist's mind dissociates from reality and recalls the image of her deceased father, obliging her to confront her traumatic memories. The father-daughter confrontation reveals how, after discovering Azuka's rape, Azuka's father emotionally detached himself from his daughter. This detachment is caused by his sense of guilt as he failed to protect his own daughter, creating a psychological barrier that even time could not eradicate. Therefore, Azuka's statement, "He and I had unfinished business (Onwualu, 2019), reflects her unconscious desire to hear an apology or even an explanation for her father's acts and emotional neglect.

In fact, Azuka could not overcome the symptoms of complex PTSD. Though her mother has tried to heal her by taking her to a distant country, initiating the first stage of trauma recovery, Azuka suffered a complete inhibition of sexuality. The reason behind this inhibition is that "in sexual intercourse, [rape] survivors frequently reencounter not only specific stimuli that produce flashbacks but also a more general feeling of being pressured or coerced" (Herman, 2015, p.62).

Consequently, Azuka avoided any physical contact due to the panic of re-traumatisation. Onwualu illustrates this symptom through the character of Aunt Chio, Azuka's grandmother's friend, who urges Azuka to have a child by stating:

> It's a shame your father never got to see any grandchildren from you…. My dear, have you forgotten our saying: 'To have a child is to have treasure'? That is more important today than ever before. Look at our history. If it wasn't for our children, how would we have survived the Civil War, when Nigeria wanted to see us all dead? And those in the western lands who laughed at us when they stopped having even one child after the Catastrophe, look at them now. Are they not the ones scooping us up to feed their hungry economies? … They have always known the value of our bodies. Before, they packed us away by force in the bottoms of slave ships; now they lure us with sweet songs of success.
>
> (Onwualu, 2019)

In the quoted lines, Auntie Chio expresses New Biafra's national anxiety, which is survival. Her words extend beyond familial interests to encompass cultural and national preservation, which could be accomplished by begetting children whom she characterises as a "treasure" since the survival of the Igbo people and prevention of population decline depend on having children. She also critiques the West's historical and current exploitation of Black bodies. However, by saying so, she commodifies Azuka's body and mutates it into a means to a communal end, disregarding the fact that Azuka is a rape victim. Through Auntie Chio's character, Onwualu underscores the social pressure that women, such as Azuka, have to endure. Azuka explains:

> How could I tell her that my father's line would die with me because I still recoiled at any sort of sexual contact? Or that the thought of having a child sent me into a paroxysm of panic because I was convinced that what had happened to me would also happen to them?
>
> (Onwualu, 2019)

As shown in the quoted lines, Azuka's childfree stance is not a simple choice but a direct trauma response. Her resentment for "any sort of sexual contact" and the "paroxysm of panic" at the thought of childbirth are severe alterations in affect regulation and sexuality stemming from her abuse. Furthermore, her fear that her children might experience the same abuse shows how her trauma has shattered her sense of safety in the world; she cannot imagine bringing a child into a universe she experiences as inherently threatening. Azuka's grief turns into rage as she realises that the "family that had essentially abandoned [her] when [she] needed them most did not get to decide what [she] did with [her] life" (Onwualu, 2019).

Dreams, as Freud denoted, are a form of repetitive compulsion in which individuals re-experience their painful memories. Like many traumatised people, Azuka experiences this state. The memories of her repetitive sexual assaults revisit her dreams as soon as she falls asleep in her father's house. In Azuka's dream, she stands in the guardhouse, the location of her childhood sexual abuse, and "hundreds of disembodied hands" grab her. She narrates:

> They held me down, their fingers clutching, probing, and rubbing. I bit and clawed and slashed, but for every hand whose finger I tore off, for every palm I gouged and wounded, a new hand sprang up in its place. It was an old nightmare, one I hadn't had in over 30 years.
>
> (Onwualu, 2019)

The disembodied hands in Azuka's dream represent the violating and dehumanising nature of rape. The dream reflects how trauma fragments the memory. Therefore, instead of recognising the identity of her abuser, her mind shatters the memory and focuses on the most terrifying part, which is the feeling of being attacked, as it is too painful to handle. The act of fighting these hands

indicates her desire to control or win against her traumatic past. However, Azuka acknowledges the futility of this fight, stating "for every hand… a new hand sprang up in its place" (Onwualu, 2019). This phrase encapsulates the core of Complex PTSD, as no matter how much the victim fights, the memory and its psychological wounds will persist and multiply if he/she does not remember, mourn, and reconnect.

Azuka's confrontation with her father's ghost breaks the silence that had dominated their relationship and reveals how her traumatic experience changed her self-perception, a symptom of complex PTSD. As Herman (2015, p. 118) contends, "survivors who grew up in abusive families have often cooperated for years with a family rule of silence. In preserving the family secret, they carry the weight of a burden that does not belong to them." Consequently, Azuka carries the guilt of her family's fragmentation. She tells the ghost:

> You know, for years I thought it was my fault. I believed that I was the one who destroyed our family. Uncle went to prison, Mama got sick, and you … you couldn't even look at me. Even after we left, if I didn't call you, I didn't hear from you.
>
> (Onwualu, 2019)

As evidenced in the quoted lines, Azuka could not process the reality that the adults in her life had abandoned her, so her mind constructed a less terrifying alternative by convincing her that she is the cause behind her family's destruction. Her father's indifferent reaction and emotional withdrawal that followed her migration intensified her trauma and distorted her self-perception.

Now a ghost, Azuka's father admits his failure in protecting his own daughter. He tells Azuka:

> When I looked at you all I could see was my own failure: I was your father, and I couldn't protect you. I hated myself for it, and I took that out on you—and for that, I'll never forgive myself.
>
> (Onwualu, 2019)

In this quotation, he asks his daughter to forgive him and forget her traumatic past. However, Azuka conceives her father's words as mere "easy philosophies" that disregard her pain since overcoming trauma requires an acknowledgement of the harm that has been done. She utters the bitter truth by stating, "I won't forgive you either" (Onwualu, 2019). Through this statement, Azuka places the responsibility for her psychological destruction on her father, who failed in protecting her and dealing with her rape.

Onwualu's story does not conclude with a clear end. The last scene frames Azuka as she cries and embraces Auntie Chio. Azuka's tears signify the initiation of the second stage: mourning. She mourns the loss of her childhood and falling victim to such a horrendous act. Onwualu adopts Herman's conceptualisation and ends the story with the note that salvation lies in reconciling with "the broken spaces inside us all" (Onwualu, 2019). In other words, trauma recovery requires integrating the pain of the past into who we are to overcome trauma. Azuka in the story may not be "cured", but she has begun the essential work of confronting her trauma, which is a necessary step to stop it from defining her life.

TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA IN "LETTERS TO MY MOTHER"

Similar to "What the Dead Man Said", Onwualu's "Letters to My Mother" is also set in a futuristic post-apocalyptic period that is defined by recovery from the climate war, where Africans have deliberately built places called Homesteads that are deeply integrated with nature, sustainable,

community-focused, and aesthetically pleasing, in stark contrast to the flawed societal structures of the "old world" that preceded the catastrophe. As the protagonist describes her Homestead, it is a utopian place situated in the heart of an island surrounded by a forest. Fruit trees, berry shrubs, vines, melons, and edible moss are integrated into the built environment. Even the homes are made from "live bamboo saplings", carefully shaped domes, finished with "hardpacked earth," and lined with smooth river stones for natural cooling (Onwualu, 2022, p. 67). By depicting a highly progressive African society that has succeeded in forming a sustainable, living architecture, Onwualu challenges the pessimistic prediction that Africa is "the zone of absolute dystopia" (Eshun, 2003, p. 292).

Obeche, the protagonist, primarily works as a gardener in her Homestead's forest, where she engages in "constant genetic tweaking" to optimise food, fuel, and medicinal plants, considering her observational data on the ecosystem as her true legacy. Though gardening is her passion, the Homestead's communal structure requires all residents to rotate duties, leading her to temporarily serve as an archivist while covering for her friend, Afara. While processing records in the archives, a collection of personal histories stretching back to the "old world", Obeche was drawn to an unusually heavy, fibre-bound journal dating back to the Homestead's founding era. After taking it home and reading its dry, impersonal entries, she finds a letter tucked behind the official entry, written by a daughter to her mother. In this letter, Onwualu presents a story within a story: a story of a dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship eroded by trauma.

The trauma experienced by these two unnamed characters can be classified as transgenerational trauma that has been transmitted from the mother to the daughter and then to Obeche. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's conceptualisation of transgenerational trauma will be applied in analysing the mother-daughter relationship. The mother harboured different traumatic events within a psychic crypt and did not process or heal from these traumatic experiences, which remained encrypted, fostering secrets and silence. In a sense, this encryption releases a "phantom", an unconscious projection of unprocessed trauma (Abraham & Torok, 1994, pp. 173-174) with which the daughter lived her life. The mother exhibited the classic symptoms of PTSD, including strong rage and bitterness, emotional unavailability, deep self-loathing, and incapacity to imagine a future for herself and for her daughter. In the letter, the daughter tells her mother:

> You never really listened, never asked questions. Never seemed truly interested in what I thought or believed. You were so wrapped up in self-loathing you could barely see a future for yourself—much less one with me in it …We never told each other how we really felt, and I don't understand why. Maybe we're just too alike—both of us holding that precious piece of ourselves so closely that we'd forgotten how to share. (Onwualu, 2022, p. 68)

Based on the quoted lines, the mother's emotional neglect, criticism, volatile anger, and impossible expectations constitute the daughter's chronic childhood trauma. The mother's inability to envision a future for herself or her daughter shows how trauma can destroy an individual's sense of self-worth and stunt their perspectives, hindering their development. The mother and daughter's silence and inability to express their true feelings can be construed as a defence mechanism or a shield that is built to protect the core self from being hurt again. The daughter's words, "We're just too alike", indicate a trauma bond that has been created between her and her mother and made them emotionally impermeable due to their psychological wound, which in turn robbed them of the capacity for mutual vulnerability that is the essence of true intimacy. Thereby, the mother and daughter are not alike in their personality traits but rather in the way in which they both have adapted to trauma, trapping themselves in a vicious cycle of silence and loneliness.

As trauma rends familial bonds, the daughter abandons her mother and migrates to San Francisco. She states:

> I walked away because that's what I had to do to survive. Loving you meant being crushed by the weight of your expectations. Trying to make you happy was like working to a vague, ever-shifting standard with no breaks, no bonus, and no possibility of promotion. And if I failed, I had to be on guard for the next attack.
> (Onwualu, 2022, pp. 68-69)

In the quotation above, the daughter explains the reason for her sudden departure. According to her, leaving was not a choice; it was an urgent need to preserve her sense of self. Living in the same house with her mother means "being crushed by the weight of [her] expectations." The mother turns into a symbol of oppression as her impossible demands threaten the daughter's sanity and psychological well-being. The mother's expectations were always unmet, for the goalpost kept shifting, and with that, any definition of success became elusive. Such an abusive or pathological environment breeds anxiety and insecurity.

In a flashback, the daughter recalls her last meeting with her mother. In this meeting, the mother breaks her silence and narrates the essence of her trauma: being raped and forced to leave her hometown. Thus, she transmits her encrypted pain to her daughter, making her the carrier of the phantom. After narrating the rape incident, the mother tells her daughter, "Sometimes, I wish I never had a child" (Onwualu, 2022, p. 74), an utterly devastating phrase that signifies the ultimate rejection, as the daughter's existence will be a constant reminder of her mother's physical violation. Although the mother attempts to mitigate the influence of her statement by following it up with "But I am glad that I had you" (Onwualu, 2022, p. 74), it is rather too late for the daughter, as the psychic damage has already been done. The last words that resonated in the daughter's mind before committing suicide were her mother's, as she wished she had never had her.

The traumatic experiences that Obeche has read induced unprocessed pain within her, a pain she has sensed the moment her hand has touched the pages. She articulates:

> The pain hit me like a blow to the chest, knocking me breathless. I doubled over, dropping the book and spilling my tea ... When it passed, I could only lay there staring at the ceiling and straining to breathe.
> (Onwualu, 2022, p. 69)

The unprocessed trauma of these women bypasses Obeche's conscious mind and directly impacts her autonomic nervous system, leading to somatic transgenerational trauma. By touching the letter, Obeche's body re-experiences the woman's overwhelming despair as if it were her own. Her inability to breathe signifies her physical and mental collapse. Even with the passage of time, Obeche could not overcome her initial shock. She experiences a prolonged state of nervous system dysregulation that she describes as "a dull ache suffusing [her] whole body" (Onwualu, 2022, p. 70). She also states, "Every movement was a desperate attempt to stay ahead of creeping exhaustion. I felt as if I was drowning in grey waters" (Onwualu, 2022, p. 70). Obeche's exhaustion and lack of energy are classic burnout from sustained cortisol/adrenaline overload and the metabolic cost of chronic dysregulation. The phrase "drowning in grey waters" vividly depicts the sensory and emotional fog of this state – dissociation, numbness, and pervasive hopelessness. Unable to deal with the transmitted pain, Obeche "curl[s] inward… slides back down into [her] bed and pull[s] the blanket over [her] head" (Onwualu, 2022, p. 75). The bed, in general, represents safety since it is the only place where exhaustion can be surrendered to. Pulling the blanket over her head is a desperate attempt to control her sensory input. Light, sound, and the sight of other people's worried faces are all too much for her overwhelmed nervous system to process. She is

building a literal cocoon to shield herself from the world. Her social withdrawal and inability to perform tasks demonstrate how this dysregulation impairs basic functioning and connection, core symptoms of trauma.

Unlike "What the Dead Man Said", Onwualu in "Letters to My Mother" traces the three stages of Herman's trauma recovery model through the protagonist Obeche. To amend Obeche's broken self, Onwualu surrounds Obeche with a safe environment through the character of Great-Grandmother Nya, a motherly figure who offers her wisdom, guidance, and compassion to the entire community. Her physical presence represents the sanctuary that allows Obeche to process her pain. The second phase of remembrance and mourning involves consciously confronting the traumatic experience in a safe holding environment, processing any feelings engendered, and mourning the losses sustained by virtue of the trauma. Obeche's "howling tears" and "coarse sobs" in Great-Grandmother Nya's arms are not signs of a breakdown but are critical somatic releases; they are the crucial act of mourning. She cries not only for her own pain but for the collective, ancestral loss of "the women whose names [she does] not know" (Onwualu, 2022, p. 76). Herman insists that for mourning to take place, the survivor must reconstruct the story of the trauma, and here, the story is reconstructed literally by finding out the name, the story, and, very importantly, the song of the dead woman. In the Homestead, every child has his/her own praise poem composed by the mother while the child is in her womb. This song or poem is very significant as it connects the child with the long lineage of his/her ancestors, evoking the child's individual and collective identity. The rediscovery of the woman's song will convert the faceless, haunting anguish into a specific, knowable story with an identity.

To discover the song, Obeche joins communal meditation. She states:

> For days after my mother's visit, Afara and I sat in communal meditation. I'd lanced the boil of the grief that had driven the dead woman to suicide, but I still had to heal the infection of her trauma, which still lived inside me. If I was not careful, I could spread it like a disease throughout the community. Slowly we uncovered more about her—her name, her story, and most importantly, her song.
>
> (Onwualu, 2022, p.78)

Based on the quoted lines, communal meditation serves as a safe space that allows Obeche to process her transmitted trauma so it does not affect others. It also helps her to slowly uncover the dead woman's name, story, and song.

According to Herman's third stage, reconnection, trauma victims must restore their sense of self and re-engage with their societies because "recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience" (2015, p. 133). To rebuild her shattered self, Obeche relies on her socio-cultural circle as she holds a ceremony and invites her community to participate in the rituals of awaking the dead woman's spirit. Together, they sing her song, plant her tree among the grove of the ancestors, and pour a libation of water and milk. Through these rituals, Obeche reconnects the dead woman's spirit with her community, bridging the gap between the living and the dead. She also shares her burden and pain with the rest of the community, creating an opportunity for the once-privatised, unspeakable trauma to become a shared story, to be witnessed and held by all. She states:

> I took her pain and mine and shared it with everyone present, then I let the forest take them. Like the transformation from waste to compost, her grief became a memory rich with life, a catalyst that would help me and my people grow stronger.
> I danced until I collapsed. And I was lucky, for when I fell, my mother's hands were there to catch me.
>
> (Onwualu, 2022, p. 79)

The physical collapse into Great-Grandmother Nya's waiting hands at the end indicates that Obeche is no longer isolated by her trauma; she is now supported by her community, which serves as a safety net.

CONCLUSION

The study synthesises trauma-related issues in Chinelo Onwualu's short stories. In "What the Dead Man Said", Onwualu reveals how Azuka's prolonged rape experience shattered her family and made her incapable of experiencing any physical intercourse, delineating the symptoms of complex PTSD. While in "Letters to My Mother", Onwualu discusses how unprocessed trauma is transmitted to the following generations, forming what is known as "transgenerational trauma". Following Judith Herman's model of trauma recovery, this study shows that healing is not an individual act; rather, it is rooted in socio-cultural contexts. Azuka and Obeche, the protagonists of these stories, are both confined by their traumas. To break the shackles of trauma, the two protagonists need to rebuild their fractured social connections, as these connections have a significant role in creating a safe haven where trauma victims can transform private suffering into shared narratives. For instance, Azuka remembered and mourned her traumatic past through confronting the ghost of her deceased father. However, her decision to leave her community and return to Tkaronto halts the healing process and obstructs her movement towards the third stage of integration. On the other hand, through Obeche, the protagonist of "Letters to My Mother", Onwualu argues that trauma, when voiced and witnessed by the community, can be composted. It is not erased, but transformed from a toxic secret that fractures the self into a source of collective memory and resilience, ultimately allowing both the individual and the community to reclaim their stories and move forward. Consequently, the deeper implication of Onwualu's narratives is fundamentally bound up with cultural recovery, showing that individual healing and community support are deeply entangled.

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