

Childhood Trauma and the Burden of Prophecy in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen*

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Abstract

Childhood trauma has emerged as a critical subject in contemporary literary and psychological discourse, reflecting the enduring scars left by early adverse experiences. In Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* (2015), trauma is not merely an outcome of physical violence but is triggered by a prophecy that destabilises the Agwu brothers' lives. The madman's utterance functions as a psychic intrusion, dismantling familial unity and transforming youthful innocence into suspicion, paranoia, and eventual fratricide. This paper analyses the representation of childhood trauma in the novel through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, drawing on Sigmund Freud's concepts of repression, id, ego and super-ego. The study argues that the prophecy embodies trauma's ungraspable quality, a linguistic event whose meaning overwhelms the child's interpretive faculties and reemerges in destructive repetitions. By foregrounding the psychic burden carried by children, the paper reveals how Obioma explores the shattering of innocence as both a personal tragedy and an allegory of Nigeria's fractured postcolonial state. Ultimately, the paper contends that *The Fishermen* situates childhood trauma at the intersection of the individual and the familial, offering insight into how prophecy, fear, and violence scar not only individual lives but also the collective consciousness of a nation.

Keywords: Childhood, Prophecy, Psychoanalytic, Trauma, Unity

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Introduction

Trauma is a widespread, harmful and costly public health problem. Esamagu (2024, p 524) describes trauma simply as wound. Balogun (2011) in Esamagu (2024) described wound as a bearer of that which is off-putting, distinguished by pain. This wound is not necessarily on the body but mostly on the mind. It occurs as a result of violence, abuse, neglect, loss, disaster, war and other harmful experiences. Trauma can include events where individual or group of people feel under threat, frightened, humiliated, rejected, abandoned, unsafe, unsupported, invalidated, trapped and ashamed. Peichal describes trauma as a toxic condition, a mixture of intense anxiety, absolute helplessness and a loss of control (2007). According to Herman, “events are described as traumatic, not because of the frequency of occurrence, but because of their effects on human life” (1992). Trauma is not the event itself but the effects of events or situations on the affected. The factor that determines whether an event could be classified as traumatic to the person is whether its impact remains unresolved (Levine, 2008)

Trauma refers to an emotional or psychological response to an overwhelmingly distressing event or experience. It can result from a single incident or from chronic exposure to adverse circumstances. Traumatic events may include natural disasters, accidents, violence, abuse, combat or witnessing traumatic events. The impact of trauma on individuals can be profound, affecting various aspects of their lives, including mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

Childhood is often idealised as a space of innocence, play, and imaginative freedom, yet literature frequently disrupts this romanticised notion by presenting the child as a vulnerable figure exposed to violence, loss, and psychic scars. In African fiction, childhood emerges as a particularly fraught stage where personal and national anxieties intersect. Childhood trauma refers to the psychological, emotional, or physical harm experienced by a child due to distressing, overwhelming, or life-threatening events that exceed the child’s ability to cope. Such experiences disrupt normal development and can leave lasting effects on mental health, behaviour, and relationships. Childhood trauma is the deep and lasting impact of overwhelming negative experiences during formative years, shaping not just immediate emotions but also future mental health and social interactions

Childhood trauma has become a prominent concern in both psychology and literary studies, with growing attention to how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) shape long-term mental health and social functioning. Madigan et al. emphasise that ACEs, including familial violence, neglect, and community disruptions, leave profound imprints on emotional regulation and resilience well into adulthood (2023). Similarly, Daniëlsdóttir et al. argue that early trauma fractures interpersonal trust, destabilising the individual’s capacity to build and sustain healthy relationships in later life (2024).

In literary trauma studies, scholars highlight how trauma resists direct narration, instead surfacing through narrative fragmentation, silences, and disjointed temporalities. Davis and Meretoja stress that trauma fiction dramatises “the difficulty of narrativising overwhelming experiences” (2020). Rizvi et al. extend this argument by noting that narratives of childhood

trauma often employ metaphor and symbolic displacement to articulate “ruptures in psychosocial growth” (101). In African literature, scholars increasingly examine how childhood functions as a metaphorical register for national trauma. Igwedibia (2022) observes that Nigerian novels often stage children as witnesses and victims of violence, thereby exposing how political instability reverberates in the most intimate spaces of the family. Akintunde and Ndlovu (2021) similarly argue that “childhood precarity in African fiction indexes the failures of the postcolonial state” (749). Tunca (2023) adds that childhood trauma in African narratives frequently embodies “postcolonial melancholia,” where individual suffering mirrors unresolved historical wounds (71).

Critical engagement with Chigozie Obioma’s *The Fishermen* has largely focused on the novel’s use of prophecy as a powerful linguistic and cultural force that determines character psychology and narrative trajectory. López (2019) provides one of the most influential readings of the novel by examining prophecy as a performative speech act. Drawing on speech act theory, López argues that Abulu’s prophecy does not merely predict Ikenna’s fate but actively creates the conditions for its fulfillment. The utterance destabilises the psychological balance of the brothers, especially Ikenna, whose internalisation of the prophecy initiates fear, paranoia, and emotional withdrawal. This interpretation is crucial for understanding how prophecy functions as a burden rather than a mystical inevitability, placing immense psychological pressure on a child who lacks the emotional capacity to process such fatal knowledge.

Similarly, Heinz (2022) situates *The Fishermen* within the tradition of parable and mythic storytelling, arguing that Obioma adapts parabolic structures to explore belief, consequence, and moral collapse. Heinz contends that meaning in the novel emerges relationally, shaped by communal belief systems and narrative transmission. This emphasis on storytelling underscores how prophecy acquires authority through cultural and social contexts. When read alongside López’s analysis, Heinz’s work reinforces the idea that prophecy operates as a socially validated narrative that children internalize, thereby transforming belief into psychological trauma. Although not all critics explicitly frame their analyses in trauma theory, several studies implicitly foreground childhood vulnerability and emotional rupture in *The Fishermen*. Emelone (2020) adopts a sociological approach, reading the novel as an allegory of Nigeria’s historical and political disappointments. While her focus is on national development and historical failure, her analysis reveals how familial disintegration mirrors broader societal collapse. This parallel is significant for trauma studies, as it positions the brothers’ psychological breakdown within an environment of instability, uncertainty, and broken trust—conditions that intensify childhood trauma. Courtois (2019) further situates *The Fishermen* within the tradition of the Nigerian Bildungsroman, emphasising madness, fate, and fractured coming-of-age experiences. He argues that the novel subverts the conventional growth narrative by replacing maturation with emotional disintegration.

Yet, despite this growing body of scholarship, the role of prophecy as a uniquely traumatic catalyst remains underexplored. Prophecy, in Obioma’s novel, is not merely a cultural motif

but an utterance that transforms into a psychic burden for children. While studies have examined superstition and belief systems in African societies, few have interrogated how prophecy intersects with trauma to disrupt childhood innocence and reconfigure sibling relations. This study therefore fills a crucial gap by foregrounding prophecy as a traumatic device in *The Fishermen*, one that simultaneously fractures familial intimacy.

Psychoanalytic theory provides a critical lens for understanding childhood trauma as both a psychic wound and a disruptive force in narrative memory. Rooted in Freud's early formulations, trauma is conceived as an event that overwhelms the child's capacity for assimilation and returns belatedly in intrusive memories, compulsions, and symbolic displacements (Freud 2020). In the context of childhood, these experiences often exceed the developmental resources available to the subject, leaving behind unconscious residues that manifest in fragmented recollections, irrational fears, or destructive behaviors. For the Agwu brothers in Obioma's *The Fishermen*, the prophecy functions in precisely this way: as an intrusive utterance that is not fully comprehended at the moment of encounter but is later re-experienced as an organising force of violence and estrangement.

Childhood Trauma in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen*

The childhood trauma in the work is majorly rooted in the prophecy of Abulu, whose prophecy disrupts the peace and tranquility once enjoyed in Agwu's family. The mad man's prophecy that the eldest son, Ikenna will be killed by one of his brothers is a catalyst that fuels the spread of trauma in the work, particularly as it disrupts the childhood of the children, especially the first four boys who are of age as at that time. The prophecy according to Abulu is that:

Ikena, you shall be bound like a bird on the day you shall die, *Ikena*, you will be mute, *Ikena*, you will be crippled, your tongue will stick out of your mouth like a hungry beast, and will not return back into your mouth, *Ikena*, you shall lift your hands to grasp the air, but you will not be able to. *Ikena*, you shall open your mouth to speak on that day but words will freeze in your mouth. *Ikena*, you will swim in a river of red but shall never rise from it again. *Ikena*, you shall die like a cock dies (90).

Abulu, according to Lopez is a character who presents himself as the oracle of the Yoruba god *Olu Orun* (123)—and his prophecies are clearly grounded in the Nigerian context. In an interview with Nathan Go, Obioma has pointed out that “the phenomenon of a madman or madwoman is very common in [Nigerian] society” and though he goes on to affirm that most madmen are not considered prophetic, he states that he also wished to explore the “superstitious” aspect of African people. This superstitious dimension is related to the fact that, as he explains in another interview, “a little piece of the supernatural, of the metaphysical, and of the unknown placed within the realm of the known is how—at least to the West African mind—the world works”

The prophecy already creates psychological wound in the mind of Ikenna, thereby planting seed of fear in him. The seed of fear in him ultimately leads him to behave in ways beyond his control. His actions are in line with Freud's concept of the unconscious that traumatic experiences, once internalised do not disappear but continue to influence behaviour in ways which are often beyond conscious control. Ikenna's behaviour from the time of the prophecy portrays the dominance of his id. The id represents primal instincts, fear and desires. Ikenna becomes driven by his irrational fears rather than thinking rationally. He begins to suspect his brothers and even gives them space which the brothers are not happy about.

Ikenna metamorphosed from a known person to an unknown person. In the words of Ben, "Ikenna turned into a python ... the Ikenna I knew became a different one: a mercurial and hot-tempered person constantly on the prowl. This transformation had started much earlier, gradually, internally... causing him to do the things we didn't think he was capable of doing" (47). His siblings continue to watch him in surprise with what he turned into due to the prophecy. Despite their assurance of the love they have for him which will make it difficult for any of them to harm him not to talk of killing him, his id makes him to live in constant fear and paranoia. He first cuts off his two younger brothers, Obembe and Ben and bars them from entering the room he shared with Boja and excludes them from playing football with them. The two brothers long for their friendship and companionship again, "but as days went by, it began to seem as if Ikenna had got rid of an infection in his throat by finally coughing us out, like a man who'd simply cleared his stuffed passages" (54). The closeness he shares with Boja soon goes south as well, when after one of their football time, a fight ensues in which Ikenna is punched that his face got swollen. Ikenna gets angry that Boja did not interfere in the fight in order to back him up. He makes him understand that he would have interfered if it is Boja that is being beaten. Despite Boja's excuses, he bursts out suddenly insisting that Boja stood by to watch.

Obembe and Ben in a bid to bridge the gap that is opening among them, decide to use Ikenna's favourite television show to bring him into the sitting room so that they can have opportunity to chat with him but it did not end well as he became violent the moment Obembe tried to stir up a commentary about the show they were watching. He sent all his brothers out of the sitting room for him to be left alone. While Ben and Obembe scampered out, Boja remained seated and while Boja was still sitting, he shouted at him that he should leave the sitting room as well. In the words of Ben:

In anger, he kicked Nkem's mobile plastic chair so that it plunged into the big shelf that held the television, VHS player and telephone. A glass-covered framed photo of father as a young clerk of the Central Bank of Nigeria crashed behind the cupboard, shattering into pieces... After we'd all gone, Ikenna turned on the television and settled to watch- alone (57-58).

His action that day draws a line between him and Boja as they stop speaking and merely see face to face because Ikenna does not allow anyone to sit wherever he is, especially the sitting room. Boja's persistence on sitting in the sitting room one of the days ended in a fight where while their mother was trying to separate them, Ikenna mistakenly pulled off his mother's wrapper thereby stripping her naked. Ikenna still was not remorse at what he did to his mother as he hissed (an action that was considered "an insufferable act of insubordination" in Igbo culture) at her when she cautioned him for stripping her naked. "In the end, he pushed her to the floor and ran out" (61).

Ikenna continues to live in constant fear and suspicion around his brothers and even his mother. He perceives himself as not being loved in the house. The fear of the prophecy coming to pass has traumatised him to the point of not trusting anyone in the house. He has been dominated so much by his id that all the assurances given to him by his brother always fall on his deaf ears. His actions align with Freud's idea of a traumatic event that it infiltrates the unconscious, shaping thoughts and actions without an individual's full awareness. Many of his actions have been shaped by the event of prophecy which makes him to behave in irrational ways especially to his mother, as Ikenna according to Ben has been a loving and respectful son to his mother and very caring to his brothers prior to their meeting with Abulu.

Ikenna has many times stood to the defence of his mother and his brother. Ben reported how Ikenna bit the fourth finger of their father's right hand because their father hit their mother in a fit of rage, an action that naturally ended the fight. For his brothers, he had stood up for them on many occasions, which has often led them to being recognised. Of note is their meeting with M.K.O. Abiola which happened because Ikenna insisted that Boja would not be punished by the head mistress that they would rather all leave the school instead of Boja being beaten. Their leaving the school caused them to meet the presidential aspirant who took a picture with them and put it on posters in order for it to be circulated and thereby making them stars of their community that time as they were often referred to as M.K.O. boys. The calendar which they all held dear to their hearts was destroyed by Ikenna in the heat of his metamorphosis. In the words of Ben:

The M.K.O. calendar embodied bigger things. It was a badge to us, a testimonial of our affiliation with a man almost everyone in the west of Nigeria believed would be Nigeria's next president. In that calendar was a strong hope for the future, for we'd believed we were children of Hope'93. Ikenna was convinced that when M.K.O. became president, we would go to Abuja. That M.K.O. would put us in big positions and probably make one of us the President of Nigeria someday. We had all believed and put our hope in this calendar, which Ikenna has now destroyed (80).

The destruction of the calendar opens the mother's eyes as it was then that she realised that something is definitely wrong with Ikenna. She exclaimed on the destruction because

Ikenna holds the calendar so dear to his heart and he can do anything to protect the calendar. According to her, “isn’t this the calendar he would have killed to protect; the one for which he beat Obembe?” (81) Perhaps he feels that, since he would be killed by one of his brothers, there is no need to keep the calendar that is a symbol of hope and good memories for them all. His actions align with the belief of Emelone (2020) that traumatic experiences are not isolated — they are embedded in larger historical and familial disappointments.

Ikenna’s unconscious mind pushed him into believing that everyone in the house hated him. He stopped eating with everybody in the house. He skips breakfast and leaves for school early in order not to walk with Boja. Any meal served in the same bowl for them to eat as brothers will not be eaten by him. “As a result, he started to emaciate and deep incurvatures were carved between his collarbones and his neck, and his cheekbones became visible. The white of eyes turned yellow” (110). At some point when his mother forced him to eat, he threatened to leave the house never to return because he is hated in the family. His mother tried to dissuade him from such thought as he is not hated in the family, but the fear he has created in his own mind keeps traumatising him making him to be suspicious of everyone, particularly those that genuinely love him. In his mother’s words:

No one hates you; not me, not one of your brothers. You are doing all this to yourself because of your fear, a fear you have tilled and cultivated with your own hands, Ikenna, Ikenna, you have chosen to believe the visions of a madman, a useless fellow, who is not even fit to be called a human being. How can you believe what a man who sucks cows’ breast says? No Ikenna, you have done this to yourself. You have no one to blame. We’ve prayed for you even if you refused to pray for yourself. Don’t blame anyone for continuing to live in useless fear (108).

Even the mother could recognise that Ikenna is being driven by fear of the prophecy coming to pass. He has been overwhelmed that he is not conscious of the harm that he is doing to himself. Fear has possessed his heart and has diminished him that he is losing his health in the process. He fell sick some days after that he had to puke all he had eaten. While Boja was cleaning where he messed up, the mother seized the opportunity to reiterate that none of the brothers was capable of killing him, “Ikenna, you live in fear that one of your brothers will kill you, but come and see— see those same brothers of yours weeping for you, see them cleaning up your vomit. Come out and see ‘your enemies’ caring for you, even against your wish” (115).

The fear after affecting his health, affected his faith; he claims not to believe in God any longer after he was discharged from the hospital. His claim to have become a scientist confirms what Ben once heard about fear. According to him, “I once heard that when fear takes possession of the heart of a person, it diminishes them. This could be said of my brother, for when the fear took possession of his heart, it robbed him of so many things—his peace, his well-being, his relationships, his health, and even his faith” (110). He tried to refuse going to

church but later succumbed due to his mother's insistence which afforded the brother the opportunity to assure him that they were not capable of doing him any harm. In Obembe's words, "none of us will kill you. We are not—Ike—we are not even real fishermen. He said a fisherman will kill you, Ike, but we are not real fishermen". For Ben, "We cannot kill you, Ike, you are strong and bigger than us all. Brother Ike, you said we hate you, but it is not true. We like you very much more than everyone. We love you even more than Daddy and Mama" (121). The brothers' words at first brought a quick relief and they thought they had successfully calmed his fears and assured him of their love and loyalty to him, but it was short-lived as Ikenna suddenly asked all of them to leave him alone and not to come close to him.

His fear drives him to the point of wanting to harm his younger brothers, as he was doing everything possible to harm them. Perhaps he thinks in his mind that he should harm them before they kill him. Two days after they tried persuading and assuring him, the brothers woke up to discover that Ikenna had destroyed their most prized possession, a copy of the *Akure Herald* of June 5th 1993. The newspaper told the story of how Ikenna led his brothers to safety during the destructive political riots. Ikenna had cherished the newspaper as it was their medal of honour, even stronger than the M.K.O. calendar. It is so priceless to Ikenna that he could kill to protect. But Ikenna is bent on destroying anything that holds the memory of their 'once upon a time' unity and togetherness. He always seeks opportunity to confirm that his brothers hate him that when Boja tells Obembe and Ben that he hates Ike for sending him out of the room given to both of them by Daddy and Mama, he capitalised on it and linked it to when Boja threw his passport into the well because he did not want Ike to travel to Canada and leave him all alone. He capitalised on the occasions and linked them to Abulu's prophecy thereby confirming to himself that he was right that Boja hates him and wants him dead. In Ikenna's words,

So, I know, my spirit attests, to how much you hate me. I knew, the moment Abulu saw that vision that you were the fisherman he talked about. Nobody else. That is why I'm not surprised when you now confess that you hate me; you always have. But you will not succeed (130).

After the outburst, he charged towards Boja, struck him and Boja fell hitting his head on Obembe's iron box, he bled and passed out that he had to be rushed to the clinic in order to save him. Even though, Ikenna stepped out after what he did to Boja, he did not feel remorseful about the whole situation. Instead, he kept to himself and continued to leave in isolation even though he was in the midst of his family. Through different outbursts and self-isolation from his brothers, the prophecy became self-fulfilling, ultimately bringing an end to the boys' good childhood memories.

The death of Ikenna, and Boja, who threw himself into the well and was found after about eight days of Ikenna's death, threw Obembe into his share of trauma. For Obembe, his ego dominates as he tries revenge the brothers' death. He believes Abulu is the cause of their

death and thus does not deserve to live. He believed that it was the division among his brothers that led to their death and it was Abulu's prophecy that caused their division. Explaining to Ben, he uses Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to explain how division led to his brothers' death and it was solely because of Abulu's vision and prophecy. He then made known his resolve to his brother, "I will kill Abulu. I will do it for them because he killed our brothers. I will do it for them" (202). He is determined and nothing could stop him from achieving his aim, not even Ben's plea and tears. Obembe's childhood becomes truncated as he engages in habits he ordinarily will not venture into. His resolve pushes him into smoking and scheming ways to carry out his most desired revenge. Despite the father's effort in restoring them back to the good old days when they all live happily as one indivisible family, Obembe remains unmoved and uninterested. Their father, who had earlier banned them from watching movies, bought new movies for them to watch and forgot their pains and embraced their new realities. All the father's moves did not move Obembe but his desire to revenge. According to Ben,

After he broke his plan to me, he detached from me and developed his ideas everyday, smoking at night. He read more, sometimes up in the tangerine tree in the backyard. He rejected my inability to be brave for my brothers, and complained that I was not willing to learn from *Things Fall Apart* and fight against our common enemy: Abulu, the madman (203).

He sketched his different plans and was looking for the one that would be suitable in carrying out his mission. He had been consumed with his mission and was gradually becoming hot-tempered towards Ben. He snapped at him at the slightest provocation and Ben in return became careful around him for fear of Obembe hitting him. Ben tried countless times to dissuade him from killing the man but he kept on saying he would not have peace if he did not kill the man. He believes it is in the revenge that they can have peace in their fractured family. He blackmailed Ben into joining forces with him. All efforts to dissuade Obembe from the mission was futile. In his words, "We must kill Abulu, or else we cannot have peace; I cannot have peace; Daddy and Mama cannot have peace. Mama was driven crazy because of that madman. There's a wound he has inflicted on us that would never ever heal. If we do not kill this madman, nothing will ever be the same" (206).

This resolve makes everything around him to be as nothing. His only mission is to make sure that Abulu is killed and nothing will deter him from doing it. When their father brought the news of Canada to them, he was not excited like Ben, what he wants is what he wants. He tells Ben that until he kills Abulu, he is not going to Canada. His trauma becomes more heightened as the joy derived from getting Abulu killed was short-lived as they soon became wanted by law enforcement agents. Obembe had to run away from home in a bid to protect himself and his parents. He could not face the punishments for his actions. His resolve to kill Abulu has been deflated and he wants to escape. The closure he thinks killing Abulu will provide is far from happening and rather wait for everything to be resolved, he absconds, thereby leaving the trauma unresolved and his brother to face the music of their crime alone.

Ben suffered childhood trauma as he has to witness traumatic events from the young age of nine. He shared a happy and care-free life with his brothers as one who is innocent among them. The advent of Abulu into their lives shattered a lot of things out of which is the destruction of the close-knitted brotherhood he once shared with his brothers, thereby causing emotional breakdown for him. Ikenna distancing himself from them takes a psychological toll on him and set him in motion for deeper trauma as the situation continues to unfold.

Despite that he is always in the shadow of his brothers, but his sense of duty and moral consciousness among them all is visible. He craves for the peace and tranquillity that once engulfed their family as he is always looking for ways to bring closure to their fracturing family especially from the time that Abulu's prophecy started affecting Ikenna.

Even though Ben tries to repress his own trauma throughout the work, there are times he expressed his exact feeling. During Ikenna's metamorphosis, he expressed his fear about his brother's state and displaced his anger on his schoolmates:

But I had begun to fear that something bad was going to happen to Ikenna. I spoke little at school and fought when anyone provoked me until I was whipped by one of the disciplinary teachers. This too was rare; for I was an obedient child not only to my parents, but to my teachers as well. I dreaded corporal punishment and would do anything to prevent it. But the sadness I felt for my brother's deteriorating situation had inflamed a bitter resentment towards everything, especially school and all it contained. The hope that my brother would be redeemed had been destroyed; I was afraid of him (116).

Ben's case is that of vicarious trauma, a situation whereby one is traumatised by seeing or listening to a traumatised individual or event. This is his case as the metamorphosis of his brother really affected his psyche. Witnessing a loving and caring brother changing into an aggressive and paranoid personality and eventually being one of the first to see his dead body under a horrific circumstance; witnessing Boja being removed out of the well in which they just used the water to drink tea and witnessing his new leader, Obembe overwhelmed with the burden of revenge is a lot for his young mind to handle. His father's open tears during the valedictory service of his brothers also put him in emotional turmoil as he watched his father openly shed tears, "a feeling of shame seized me at the sight of my father openly weeping, I bent my head and fixed my eyes on my shoe while father continued" (233). Other people's trauma is always traumatising Ben.

Unlike Obembe who channels his energy to revenge his brothers' death, Ben internalised his pain. He blames himself subtly for not preventing the death of his brothers and even though he is motivated to follow Obembe to revenge his brothers' death, he is still filled with uneasiness and guilt. Right from when they killed Abulu, he has regretted his actions and keeps telling Obembe that they should not have done it. He is ready to tell their parents what he has done, "Obe, we should tell them what we have done so Father can take us— run away— to Ibadan

to meet Mr. Bayo” (273). While Obembe is not remorseful but rather wants to look for another solution, Ben was ready to face the consequences of their actions, not minding he is the only one remaining.

His superego comes to fore when Obembe asked them to run away from the soldiers so as not to get arrested. He remembers his father’s words and could not proceed with the journey as he knew the implication of running away from their crime and making their parents suffer for the crime he committed with his brother, Obe. According to him:

We’d covered a good distance, and although it was difficult to make out in darkness, I reckon we were about to reach the district centre when father’s words – “henceforth, before you do anything, think first of her, of what it might do to her, and then make your decision” – pierced me sharply, sending a stray rod into my track... I pleaded with him to let me return to our parents – that I didn’t want them to miss us both. I extricated myself in the end... (276-277).

He knows the implication of returning but yet followed his mind because of the words of his father. He is left without the companionship of his brothers and their absence deepens his emotional wound. He relied so much on his brothers that whatever thought in his mind would float through his brothers’ head first. Obembe’s escape caused more emotional pain for him more than the death of Ikenna and Boja. In his words, “And even after Ikenna and Boja died, I’d lived on as if unaffected because Obembe had closed in on their absence... but he, too, was now gone, leaving me at the threshold of a door I shuddered to enter. Not that I feared to think or live for myself, I did not know how, had not prepared for it” (279). Ben is not prepared to be the leader to his younger siblings just as his dad told Ikenna while he was alive and what he told Obembe after the death of Ikenna and Boja. He is not prepared and the reality that he would soon be told that he is the new leader of David and Nkem weighed heavily on his psyche.

Despite his trauma, he tries to cope as he dwells more on reflection on what happened and he represses his grief and pain which in turn emerge in the act of storytelling. Ben as the narrator becomes the vessel for the family’s collective grief and trauma.

Catalyst for Childhood Trauma

The childhood trauma experienced by the Agwu brothers is majorly caused by their father’s absence. James Agwu has been known to be a strict disciplinarian, whose presence sends fear and orderliness into the children. James Agwu enforces discipline on his children, that they are not permitted to play truant or constitute nuisance in the society which is the reason he seized their console game set when the reports gotten from their school shows that they have derailed drastically from their academics.

His transfer opens up the children to the childhood they wanted. They became free from his spying eyes and they soon joined other children playing football in the neighbourhood. After the continuous destruction of their balls, they resorted to fishing, as introduced to them

by Solomon. Adaku could not cope with training the children alone which is why she kept ringing it to his ears before his final exodus to Yola, “Eme, remember you have growing boys back here, I’m telling you, oh” (11). All the time, the boys have started slipping out of Adaku’s control, she keeps complaining about their father’s absence. Yola to Akure is not a short distance and it was not easy for the father to always navigate fortnightly as promised. The three-month seminar to Ghana which did not afford the father to be around, especially during the heat of Ikenna’s metamorphosis, is a very crucial factor that contributes to Ikenna’s trauma in particular and the whole family at large.

Ben also acknowledges father’s absence as one of the reasons they are in trouble because of their meeting with Abulu. Their encounter with Abulu would not have been possible if Father was not transferred out of Akure. The law and order he laid down would still have been maintained in the house. In his words:

In father’s absence, the perimeters of the house seemed to have magically widened as though invisible builders unclasped the walls, like they would a paper house, and expanded its size. When Father was around, even if his eyes were fastened to the pages of a newspaper or book, his presence alone was enough to enforce strictest order and we maintained what we often referred to as ‘decorum’ in the house. As I thought of my brother’s refusal to come with us to church to break what might be a spell, I craved for Father, and wished, strongly that he would return (107-8).

The author uses Abulu’s prophecy as a tool to explore the emotional and psychological trauma experienced by the characters. Trauma is not only an individual experience because once a family member is caught deeply in the web of trauma, it is capable to tear through families, leaving them emotionally and psychologically wounded. The novel illustrates that trauma, once internalised, does not disappear but continues to shape human behaviour, often in tragic and irreversible ways. The novel ultimately suggests that while trauma can be confronted, its effects linger, leaving indelible marks on the psyche and family structure.

Another catalyst for trauma in the work is fear. The fear that Ikenna has concerning the prophecy affects him and his behaviour greatly and it rubbed off on all the people in the house. It is a fact that nobody hears the date of his death and rejoices, but the way Ikenna takes the prophecy and allows the fear to rule over him hastens the fulfilment of the prophecy. Solomon warned him not to listen to the madman but Ikenna insisted that he is calling his name and therefore will listen to whatever he has to say. He listened and started to leave in fear. Even mama acknowledged Ikenna’s fear and warned him greatly against being fearful for nothing.

The fear Ikenna has is not only rooted in the prophecy itself but in the fact that whatever Abulu says always comes to pass and he has been known for that. In the words of Ben:

The prophecies he gave to people bred fear of the dark fate awaiting them. At first, no one heeded his words, until event after event buried the possibility of the

things he saw being taken as mere pockets of coincidences. The earliest, most prominent one was when he predicted the ghastly motor accident that claimed an entire family... Then there was a man he said would die from ‘pleasure’; that man would be carried out of a whorehouse a few days later, having died while having sex with one of the prostitutes. These strings of occurrences engraved themselves in flaming letters on the memories of people and carved a fear of Abulu’s prophesies in their mind (101).

The things that have happened to people due to Abulu’s prophecy before his encounter with the Agwu brothers made Ikenna fearful, but the fear started robbing him of many things when Iya Iyabo, the woman who has reported to their mum, having seen them along Omi-ala river came to report to their mum that Biyi has been killed by his wife, Aderonke. A death believed to be the fulfilment of Abulu’s prophecy to Biyi that he will be killed by what he treasured most. Ikenna, hearing that makes him believe that there is no way out for him from the prophecy thereby increasing his fear when Ben says, “Ikenna stood there, his eyes lifeless like those of a doll. It was here that his illness began, when the fear robbed him of his health, for it seemed that the account of the man’s death had established in him the unquestionable inescapability of Abulu’s prescient powers, causing smoke to rise from things yet unburned” (114). Ikenna is one of those that fear of Abulu’s prophecy torments. The fear tormented him till it eventually led him to making the prophecy self-fulfilling.

Conclusion

Chigozie Obioma’s *The Fishermen* offers a comprehensive exploration of how childhood trauma shapes adult relationships. Through the experiences of the brothers, particularly Ikenna, Ben, and Junior, Obioma illustrates the profound and often destructive impact of trauma on familial bonds. The emotional scars left by their father’s absence, the weight of the prophecy, and the breakdown of trust within the family alter the characters’ relationships and their ability to function emotionally as adults. The author uses Abulu’s prophecy as a tool to explore the emotional and psychological trauma experienced by the characters. Trauma is not only an individual experience because once a family member is caught deeply in the web of trauma, it is capable to tear through families, leaving them emotionally and psychologically wounded. The novel illustrates that trauma, once internalised, does not disappear but continues to shape human behaviour, often in tragic and irreversible ways. The novel ultimately suggests that while trauma can be confronted, its effects linger, leaving indelible marks on the psyche and family structure.

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