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Acting-Out and Working-Through: A LaCaprian Analysis of Trauma in Things Fall Apart

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's legendary novel *Things Fall Apart* is more than a story of colonial devastation; it is a meditation on the wounds that refuse to fade. As first advocated by Freud and later interpreted by LaCapra, trauma is not confined to a single moment. It lingers, recurs, and disrupts until it is compulsively acted out or consciously worked through. This paper situates Achebe's novel within this framework of Dominick LaCapra and examines how trauma is inherited, reenacted, and sometimes transformed. While previous scholarship has analyzed Okonkwo's psychology and the distortion of Igbo culture by colonizers, none has explicitly applied LaCapra's ideas on the novel. Through close reading and engagement with LaCapra's concepts of *acting out* and *working through,* this paper explores Okonkwo's obsession with his father's perceived weakness, which traps him in the constant cycle of repetition, collapsing the distinction between past and present. In contrast, Nwoye drives himself away from this inherited trauma, signaling towards the tentative but essential path of healing. Ultimately, this study argues that *Things Fall Apart* dramatizes the haunting persistence of trauma and also hints at the possibility of healing.

Keywords: *Trauma, Acting out, Working through, LaCapra, Achebe*.

Introduction

Trauma is not always a single event. Instead, it is often a quiet persistence, marked by a belatedness, a delayed agony that refuses to be forgotten, repeating itself in the gestures, fears, and behaviors of individuals across generations. The term "trauma" is derived from the Greek word "traûma", which translates as "injury" or "wound" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). However, in modern intellectual discourse, it is not limited to mere physical injury. Instead, it signifies psychological wounds that bleed frequently and unwittingly damage not only a single individual but also reverberate into the coming generations. Rooted in the Freudian concept of psychoanalysis, trauma refers to a psychic rupture and repeats itself in a haunting and belated way. In his works, Freud associates trauma with a wound not inflicted on the body but on the mind (Caruth, 1996). Building on this foundational framework, Cathy Caruth's invaluable work emphasizes the repetitive appearance of trauma in language

and literature, highlighting its resistance to the closure of narratives. In her book, *Unclaimed Experience,* Caruth recounts the parable of "The Wound and the Voice", where the hero, Tancred, unknowingly first kills his beloved and then wounds her soul and, resonates it with Freud's representation of trauma, which "repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will" (Caruth, 1996, p. 2). This means that the traumatic experience is not instant and appears again and again in different forms, haunting the survivor repeatedly.

Dominick LaCapra, an American professor and historian, bridges the insights of Freud and Caruth with historical specificity. In his insightful work, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, he delineates the crucial concepts of *acting out* and *working through* as the two forms of remembering trauma. *Acting out* refers to a state where the past returns in the form of compulsive repetition of certain behaviors that haunt the subjects and block the future by trapping them in "a melancholic feedback loop" (LaCapra, 2001, p. 21). This keeps the individual confined in a perpetual cycle, unable to establish meaning and initiate the healing process. In contrast, *working through* is a process in which the subject acknowledges the traumatic event as belonging to the past, accepts its distressing force, and recognizes that the present is not limited to that earlier experience (LaCapra, 2001). This state allows the subject to engage in mourning, narrative articulation, and ethical judgment.

Importantly, LaCapra considers literature as a "privileged domain" or "safe haven" for the rehearsal and performative transmission of trauma, owing to its nuanced and flexible relationship to reference (2001). Such a pattern becomes particularly salient in postcolonial writings, where the aftereffects of war, historical rupture, and the devastation caused by the colonial forces often project psychological distress in the individuals encountering them. Within this context, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* emerges as a literary masterpiece that offers a nuanced exploration of such wounds and portrays how the psychological burden and societal expectations are passed from one generation to another. Okonkwo, the novel's protagonist, whose entire life is driven by the fear of failure, embodies LaCapra's idea of manifesting the effects of trauma, particularly the concept of *acting out*. Through his violent outbursts, he passes his trauma to his family, particularly to his son, Nwoye. However, Nwoye is seen *working through* the trauma that is inflicted on him by his patriarchal father. In

this way, Achebe's work becomes a space where the society symbolically processes the otherwise unspeakable. Through the lens of Dominick LaCapra, this study analyzes how the contrasting behaviors of father and son embody the patterns of *acting out* and the possibilities of *working through* in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Theoretical Framework

Sigmund Freud is a leading name in the field of psychology, who founded the school of psychoanalysis. He introduced the term "agieren" (*acting out*) in 1905 while treating a patient named Dora, where he linked her sudden departure from therapy to transference, resistance, and recollection rather than mere symptomatic behavior (Bettelheim, 2022). Later in his article "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through", Freud explained that when resistance is strong, the patient "does not remember anything… he acts it out" by repeating forgotten material in the present (Freud, 1914, p. 5). Contrastingly, he develops the concept of *working through,* which is often a slow and arduous process of confronting resistance until the repressed impulse reveals itself, transforming repetition into recognition and initiating the healing process (Freud, 1914).

While Freud conceptualized trauma primarily within the individual psyche, later theorists sought to understand its cultural and historical dimensions. In this regard, Dominick LaCapra enters as a mediating voice, showing not only how trauma repeats itself but also how it might be acknowledged, mourned, and, however imperfectly, worked through. To explicate the concepts of *acting out* and *working through*, he recounts Derrida's deconstruction and values him for exposing the instability of binary oppositions. This helps describe the aporetic nature of trauma. LaCapra correlates Derrida's undecidability with the concept of *acting out,* in which "tenses implode" and "any duality of time is experientially collapsed", thus disintegrating the distinction between past and present (LaCapra, 2001, p. 21). In an interview at Cornell University, LaCapra states that traumatized people often relive the unpleasant past experiences through flashbacks, nightmares, or repeated words where language and memory are displaced, carrying connotations from other temporal and situational contexts (LaCapra, 2000).

Conversely, LaCapra's notion of *working through* refers to a state where the subject is able to distinguish between the present and the past and is open to future possibilities

of healing (LaCapra, 2001). It insists on "mourning" and "critical thought" to facilitate the development of "distinctions and articulations" that serve as essential boundaries, enabling resistance to the state of undecidability (LaCapra, 2001, p. 22). This fosters a conscious engagement with trauma, allowing space for both survival and transformation. However, achieving this state is extremely difficult because trauma resists narrative integration and traumatic memory often returns in fragmented and intrusive forms. Additionally, trauma can acquire what LaCapra calls "negative sublimity", where a devastating experience becomes cathected to the formation of individual or collective identity (Rubenstein, 2003, p. 159). Such "founding traumas" serve as the reference points around which personal subjectivity or communal memory is organized, often shaping future responses, narratives, and modes of identification. The process of *working through* does not guarantee full closure; however, "it may counteract the force of acting out and the repetition-compulsion" (LaCapra, 2001, p. 22). Consequently, while *working through* offers a model of ethical and psychological possibility, it often remains an aspirational goal rather than a consistently attainable reality in the aftermath of trauma. In literary contexts, this framework sheds light on how characters embody trauma across generations. For instance, in *Things Fall Apart*, Unoka's resignation, Okonkwo's compulsive violence, and Nwoye's tentative gestures toward healing reveal the tension between *acting out* and *working through*.

Literature Review

Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* has unsurprisingly drawn considerable scholarly interest, with many researchers approaching it from multiple critical perspectives, often situating Okonkwo's fate within broader cultural, psychological, and historical frameworks. Islam and Shuchi (2019) highlight Achebe's careful reconstruction of precolonial Igbo society as both a counter to Western misrepresentations and a narrative of disintegration under colonial rule, noting the tension between resisting stereotypes and inadvertently sustaining them. Okolie (2021) remarks on Okonkwo's exile as an irrevocable fracture, a loss that strips him of his past glory, which he attempts to regain through futile efforts, thereby prolonging his suffering. Ahmed (2022) considers culture as a determinant of Okonkwo's trauma and delineates that his efforts at denial and dissociation only intensify his psychic strain, producing

consequences as devastating as relapse. He further observes that this traumatic identity links father and son, since both Okonkwo and Nwoye respond to psychic wounds in divergent ways. Eke and Muroko apply Maslow's hierarchy of needs to Okonkwo's character, suggesting that he fulfills the basic and intermediate levels but fails at the highest level of self-actualization. In this way, his inability to reconcile personal ambition with colonial pressures makes suicide appear as his only resolution (Eke & Muroko, 2022). Casetta (2023) underscores how colonialism inflicts psychological trauma by uprooting the identity of the people and highlights the colonized subjects' fractured sense of self and autonomy in the novel. Likewise, Mumu (2023) utilizes Freudian and Jungian models to argue that Okonkwo's repression of the anima and descent into the id underpin his toxic masculinity and eventual collapse. Hezam (2024) reads Okonkwo as a character embodying the core values of masculinity and patriarchal authority, and depicts him as an "allegorical representation" of his culture and other societies that have withstood the withering of deeply rooted traditions under the prevailing shadows of imperial rule (p. 11). Building on these insights, this paper examines the novel's characters through the lens of Dominick LaCapra. It argues that Okonkwo symbolically collapses the distinction between past and present, allowing the inherited fear to dominate his psyche and drive his compulsive repetitions. In contrast, Nwoye breaks the cycle by separating past from present and moves towards the difficult yet necessary path of *working through*.

Research Questions

i. How does Okonkwo's compulsive repetition of violent behavior illustrate LaCapra's concept of *acting out* and the collapse of past and present?
ii. How does Nwoye's rejection of his father's legacy exemplify the process of *working through* and the possibility of healing generational trauma?

Significance of the Study

Although scholars have examined generational trauma in *Things Fall Apart*, the research often emphasizes cultural and symbolic aspects. This study addresses Okonkwo's psyche, exploring the inherited fears that trap him in the constant cycle of violent *acting out* and prevent him from healing. In contrast, Nwoye's response signals the path of survival by *working through* the trauma. Applying LaCapra's framework, this study contributes a deeper psychological dimension to the existing

trauma-based interpretations of the novel.

Research Methodology

By applying Dominick LaCapra's trauma framework, this study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the effects of trauma in Achebe's legendary novel, *Things Fall Apart.* The primary sources for this study include *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *Writing History, Writing Trauma* by Dominick LaCapra. The secondary sources that support and underpin the argument include critical essays and research papers that illustrate the dynamics of trauma and memory across generations. Through close reading and textual interpretation, the analysis situates the characters as the symbolic embodiments of the theoretical framework.

Textual Analysis

Divergent Paths in a Patriarchal Order: Unoka's Shame and Okonkwo's Rage

Okonkwo's early years were marked by self-struggle and hardships as he did not inherit any barns from his father nor any young wife. Unoka, his father, failed to meet the masculine and economic standards of his society and felt no shame in that. His love for the simple pleasures of life and the radiance from his serene face almost emanated a Wordsworthian mood of joy that expresses itself in "blessedness and peace" (Achebe, 1994, p. 4). Unoka's detachment from the social pressures and his indulgence in the ethereal solace of his flute stand in stark opposition to Okonkwo's relentless pursuit of dominance. For possessing "womanly" traits, Unoka is not only hated by his son but also mocked by his society. Throughout the novel, he is labeled as "lazy and improvident", "failure", "loafer", and "ill-fated man" (Achebe, 1994). Nnoromele (2000) describes Unoka as a biological male, but then states that "among the Igbo, he was never a man" (p. 149). For Okonkwo, his father's gentleness and avoidance of conflict are not merely flaws but a reminder of weakness, and he transforms this inherited shame into an all-consuming fear of resembling him.

"And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion - to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness." (Achebe, 1994, p. 13)

This fear initiates Okonkwo's suffering when he is still in his youth. The societal ridicule, to which Unoka seems indifferent, is absorbed directly by Okonkwo, as he is afraid of resembling his father and being called a woman. He fails to process

it as a rational understanding of difference; instead, it is transformed into a silent, unacknowledged wound. In LaCapra's paradigm, such an unresolved past frequently manifests as acting out and compulsively engaging in behaviors to gain mastery over or flee from the original pain. Therefore, Okonkwo contradicts his father in every way and earns a good reputation in his society by winning titles, marrying three women, having eight children, and, most importantly, ruling his household with "a heavy hand" (p. 13). Earlier in the text, Achebe narrates that Okonkwo was perhaps not cruel at heart (p. 13); however, the fear of weakness drives him to suppress his softer emotions, which might make him resemble a woman. Hezam (2024) delineates that Okonkwo does not even take an interest in women romantically outside the marriage and sees them "as a threat to masculinity" (p. 7). Onyemelukwe (2004) calls him "a monomaniac of male dominance" (p. 39). This hostility towards women, for Okonkwo, is less a cultural belief and more a compulsive reenactment of his unresolved fear. Each time he encounters soft traits like patience, compassion, and hesitation, he acts as though he is reliving the humiliation tied to his father. In this way, his behavior becomes a performance aimed at protecting an identity that feels under threat. However, by identifying himself differently from his father, Okonkwo allows the past to constantly interfere with his present, trapping him in a never-ending loop of unresolved identity struggle.

Domestic Sphere as a Site for Acting Out

The acting out of violent behavior provides a temporary outlet for tension by displacing the anger onto a present situation that is somehow connected to the original wound. Greenacre (1950) draws on Fenichel's description of *acting out* as an unconscious attempt to alleviate inner tension by partially discharging repressed emotions. This process, though, offers a fleeting sense of relief, keeps the wound unhealed. Okonkwo illustrates this pattern throughout the narrative. The beating of his wives and children is one of the instances in this regard. Minor infractions by his family are enough to provoke him. One particular day, Ojiugo, the youngest of his wives, went to style her hair and did not return early enough to prepare the midday meal. It was the Weak of Peace, and no man was allowed to hit his wife even if she was seen with her lover. However, Okonkwo considered the domestic sphere as a stage to enact the unprocessed insecurity.

"And when she returned, he beat her very heavily. In his anger, he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm, pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody halfway through, not even for fear of a goddess." (Achebe, 1994, p. 29,30)

Here, violence is symbolic; a repeated attempt to prove masculinity, which never resolves the underlying fear. According to Fenichel, the current situation unconsciously reminds the person of the repressed memory, and the "cathexis (the emotional energy) is displaced from the repressed memories to the present derivative" (Greenacre, 1950, p. 455). Okonkwo, on one hand, overly values his culture and traditions. However, on the other hand, he is unable to control his desire to break heads at the slightest provocation. Even the fear of the gods could not stop him from the reckless thrashing of his wife. Hezam (2024) states that Okonkwo's perception is consistently mediated by the "lens of a male-female dichotomy" (p. 8). This dichotomy, Hezam further argues, is embedded in Igbo culture, but Okonkwo surpasses his community in his rigid and inflexible rejection of the feminine aspects of life (2024). He equates any challenge to his authority with weakness. Ahmad (2022) believes that Okonkwo's fear is "properly trauma" (p. 63) as it is acted out in the form of hyperactivity and ruthlessness. The fear of softness, more precisely of being called a woman, drives him to dishonor the sacred week. In this way, he redirects his repressed energy into the present situation, and the original pain remains unattended. As narrated further in the text, "**Inwardly, he was repentant. But he was not the man to go about telling his neighbors that he was in error**" (Achebe, 1994, p. 31). This highlights his inability to confront his inner conflicts, which might lead to genuine change. Consequently, his remorse remains locked within himself, keeping him bound to thoughts and behaviors that sustain his suffering.

Embodied Signs of Guilt and Distress

Another instance of Okonkwo's compulsive behavior is the killing of the "doomed lad", Ikemefuna, who was forcibly separated from his family and was given to Okonkwo as a hostage. His three-year stay at Okonkwo's house ended violently and in bloodshed as he was murdered in the forest by Okonkwo and the leaders of the clan to appease the oracle. As Unoka's ghost haunts Okonkwo throughout his life, so is

Ikemefuna stronger in death than he was when alive. After his killing, Okonkwo could not eat or sleep for two days, the very condition that made him think that he had become soft.

“When did you become a shivering old woman?" Okonkwo asked himself, "you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valor in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed.” (Achebe, 1994, p. 65)

Ikemefuna’s prolonged stay made Okonkwo fond of him, and he also came to regard him as his own father. However, this profound connection could not restrain Okonkwo from participating in the “manly” act of his sacrifice. LaCapra’s framework highlights how unresolved trauma perpetuates harm and can foster complicity. In this regard, Rothberg (2019) devised the notion of “implicated subjects”, referring to the individuals who are neither a direct victim nor an active perpetrator of violence, “although indirect or belated, their actions and inactions help produce and reproduce the positions of victims and perpetrators” (p. 1). Okonkwo is simultaneously a victim of trauma and an agent of its transmission. The members of the clan advised Okonkwo to stay away from the manifestation of the Oracle’s decision to kill the boy. However, Okonkwo’s fear of being soft and weak like Unoka, who feared the sight of bloodshed, makes him complicit in the cruel custom of his culture, and rather than staying at home, he performed the deed with his own hands.

Visser (2015) suggests that becoming aware of “the insidious nature of complicity” intensifies the trauma of loss and deprivation, leaving characters burdened by the feelings of shame and guilt (p. 259). Achebe’s description of Okonkwo after the killing reveals the profound psychological guilt concealed beneath his external machismo. The imagery of his “eyes red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor” (Achebe, 1994, p. 63) captures his panic of an animal cornered and unable to escape its fate. Likewise, the metaphor of “drunken giant walking with the limbs of a mosquito” (p. 63) portrays his strength as having collapsed into grotesque weakness. Despite these heavy emotions, he berates himself for feeling grief and calls it womanly. His inner monologue reveals both personal guilt and cultural complicity, placing him in a double position as both a

traumatized individual and an implicated subject. Eventually, he silences his conscience by upholding the patriarchal code that equates masculinity with brutality.

Okonkwo's Suicide: The Final Echo of Unresolved Pain

LaCapra (2001) warns that when loss collapses into absence, the subject falls into "endless melancholy, impossible mourning and interminable aporia" and risks the foreclosure of *working through* (p. 46). Consumed by the endless shame tied to Unoka's effeminate character and the resistance to change, he totally aborts the process of *working through*. Partly because of his self-destructive machismo and partly due to the tragic events, his life has been reduced to a mere tragedy.

"Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women." (Achebe, 1994, p. 83)

This excerpt illustrates that Okonkwo's grief is an amalgamation of several unprocessed wounds. He fails to localize his trauma by generalizing and externalizing it to the collective decline of his clan, the very notion that LaCapra calls the indiscriminate rhetoric of absence, where the individual relates his loss to a broad sense of devastation. Okonkwo reaches a state of foreclosure where mourning becomes impossible, and the chances of *working through* are permanently revoked. This final gesture of Okonkwo's *acting out* is perhaps the greatest tragedy and irony, shaped by various factors, including the Igbo belief system and his personal fears throughout the entire narrative. Hezam (2024) opines that the reason for Okonkwo's tragic end was "his inability to come to terms with his reduced manhood" (p. 10). The man who despised his father because of dying like an abomination, himself ends as one by taking his own life, and the one who was known as a "roaring flame" is reduced merely to a "reasonable paragraph" to be mentioned in the District Commissioner's book.

Breaking the Cycle: Nwoye's Path towards Healing

According to LaCapra (2001), the traumatized subjects remain tied to trauma because they think that "one must somehow keep faith with it" as though moving on would betray the gravity of the past (p. 22). Okonkwo's relentless pursuit of strength embodies this impulse as he remains faithful to the shame of his father's failure. His

physical distress reveals that his violent acts never liberate him; instead, they deepen his wound, which he passes to his family, particularly his first son, Nwoye. This twelve-year-old boy becomes the victim of his father's "heavy hand" due to his "incipient laziness", which the latter was determined to resolve by "constant nagging and beating" (Achebe, 1994, p. 13). However, this "sad-faced youth" turns out to be different from his father, rejecting his traditional values and turning toward Christianity as an attempt to "work through" his inherited trauma. The arrival of the colonizers serves as an escape route for Nwoye, as well as for many other members of Umuofia, whom the village had ridiculed and ostracized. As Achebe illustrates that the converts were "worthless, empty men" (p. 143), so was Nwoye in Okonkwo's eyes. Therefore, he abandons his father by taking refuge in Christianity.

"I am one of them," replied Nwoye.

"How is your father?" Obierika asked, not knowing what else to say.

"I don't know. He is not my father," said Nwoye, unhappily. (Achebe, 1994, p. 144)

LaCapra (2001) notes that working through is about acknowledging the wound and making distinctions between past and present. Nwoye starts making these distinctions, which Okonkwo never could. So preoccupied with the "masculine" set of values, Okonkwo does not see that Nwoye is in his father's obi, not because he wants to be there, but because he is expected to be there at his age. As Schick (2011) argues that "people search desperately for meaning in the wake of disaster" (p.1842), so does Nwoye with his new identification with the missionaries. He acknowledges the wound that, in his case, is Okonkwo's brutality and the death of Ikemefuna, whom he considered his elder brother. After his untimely and brutal death, Nwoye looks for emotional sustenance and comfort somewhere far away from the confines of his father's oppressive and restrictive world. In Mbanta, he finds his opportunity and joins the Church not because of the doctrine of the Trinity, but because of the poetry that "felt in the marrow" (Achebe, 1994, p. 147) and that provided answers to the questions haunting him. The hymns, in particular, became a source of healing that flowed into his weary soul, offering an unexpected sense of relief. This proves to be a frustrating blow to Okonkwo's high hopes and pride. Nwoye's denouncing him and his gods is considered a "great offence" by Okonkwo, and he perceives him "as

effeminate and weak, akin to clucking old hens" (Hezam, 2024, p. 9). Nonetheless, determined to work through his trauma and influenced by the utopian impulse embedded in Ikemefuna's stories, Nwoye channels his pain and seeks an empowered future by learning the white man's knowledge from the district headquarters in Umuofia. This act reflects a critical shift from *acting out* to *working through* his trauma. In this aspirational vision, he dreams to return one day to his father's compound to protect and redeem his mother and siblings, signaling a conscious reimagining of identity and belonging, where the inherited silence and cycles of violence are transformed into a pursuit of healing and liberation.

Conclusion

Dominick LaCapra's notions of *acting out* and *working through* serve as a compelling lens to understand the silent yet devastating theme of generational trauma in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo's life is an epitome of repetition without reflection, trapping him in an endless cycle of violence that also harms his own personality alongside his family. He remains unable to bridge the gap between past wounds and present realities, which eventually leads him to his downfall. The theoretical framework exposes the paralysis of a seemingly hypermasculine figure unable to confront his wounds, while also highlighting the redemptive potential of *working through* in one marginalized as effeminate by his community. Nwoye's quiet resistance and eventual break from the cycle signal toward this arduous process, where pain does not vanish but begins to find a new identity that suits his pursuits. In this way, this study applies LaCapra's paradigms to portray the generational echoes of pain and the varied responses they elicit within a fractured cultural landscape.

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