

FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING: EMPOWERING A GIRL-CHILD TO OVERCOME TRAUMA THROUGH ASSERTIVENESS IN *OGADIMMA* BY UKAMAKA OLISAKWE.

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Abstract

Trauma, a pervasive and complex phenomenon, that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, can have profound and lasting effects on individuals, families, communities, and societies. The indelible aftermath of traumatic experiences can significantly affect an individual's mental health, relationships and daily functioning. This study explores the transformative journey of the girl-child from merely surviving traumatic experiences to thriving and reclaiming her life through assertiveness. It presents a powerful and uplifting theme that conveys hope, resilience and personal development. The study demonstrates how assertiveness can help dispel the various dimensions of horrific and traumatic experiences of the girl-child while facilitating the reclamation of self-awareness, self-expression, boundary setting and self-advocacy. Furthermore, the study examines the relevance of assertiveness in enabling the girl child to regain self-respect and confidence, regulate self-esteem, accelerate personal growth, build healthy relationships, express emotions effectively and reclaim personal power. These issues are explored through "*Ogadimma*" by Ukamaka Olisakwe. The analysis is anchored on complex Trauma theory developed by Judith Herman, which addresses the effects of prolonged and repeated trauma.

Keywords: Trauma, assertiveness, resilience, girl-child

Introduction:

Africa, a polarized continent with diverse history, multiethnic and resilient people is no stranger to the inevitability of trauma. The tumultuous past, marked by colonialism, civil wars, ongoing socio-economic challenges and barbaric cultural practices has created a fertile ground for traumatic experiences to flourish.

Laure (2015) conceptualizes trauma as an individual's response to events with an enormous intensity which impairs emotional or cognitive functioning and can bring lasting psychological disruptions. Vander Kolk and Fisher (1995) view the concept as an inescapably stressful event that overwhelms people's existing coping mechanism. In addition to the various understanding of what trauma entails Pedersen (2015) in his own assertion x-rays it as a range of psychological impacts of the experience or threat of violence, injury and loss. From the foregoing trauma can be deduced to be an overwhelming personal experience that disrupts emotional stability, challenges personal identity and strains relationship. It is a common emotional response to horrific situations as a result of fear and anxiety. It is a pervasive and profound human experience that can leave lasting scars on individuals, communities, and societies. The factors that trigger traumatic experiences are multifaceted and interconnected; Kai Erikson (1991) posits that trauma can be caused by horrific events like war and rape or a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single assault from a period of attenuation and wearing away as well as from a moment of shock (457). Pederson in agreement to what Kai Erikson opined, states the potential traumatic events as including an intentional and non-intentional acts of violence such as violent personal assault, rape, physical or sexual abuse, severe automobile accidents, natural or biotechnological disaster, being kidnapped or taken hostage, being diagnosed with a life threatening illness, exposure to military combat or terrorist attacks, torture, incarceration as a prisoner of war or seclusion in a concentration camp among others.

The girl-child is seen as a female minor typically under 18 years of age. When a girl-child experiences or witnesses traumatic event, it can lead to emotional, psychological, or physical harm. Trauma can affect anyone; however, girl-children are particularly vulnerable due to societal, cultural and biological factors. Anyanwu (1995) examines the living conditions and the challenges of the girl-children as being discriminated against and being married off at early ages, which interfere with their education or acquisition of skills needed for survival. Dare (2024) asserts that being a girl-child in a poor, remote, rural village presents unique often unconquerable challenges spanning generations recounting an incident of a young girl of fourteen years of age Adunmi whom the father refused to send to school and instead married her off to an old man with no sense. "When I was fourteen years of age. I obeyed him and married Morufu, An old man with no sense....When I was there, I saw His second wife Khadija" (104-105)

The female child experiences a variety of harms, insecurities. According to Azeez (2024) citing Agusiobo (2018), these factors deprive her of her right to quality education, freedom, dignity, opportunity, peace, well-being and self-worth, leaving her vulnerable and impeding her full development as a person. Dare (2024) records a misconception in her novel that being ensconced in patriarchal society, it is perceived that a boy child is better than a girl child. Dare observed the impunity at which girl children are relegated to the background and are assumed to be worthless “the men see girls as toilet tissues you use to wipe buttocks and flush inside toilet” (112).

Assertiveness empowers them to express their needs, boundaries and opinions effectively without aggression or passivity. This forms a powerful foundation for self advocacy, allowing girl children to navigate complex social dynamics, resist peer pressure and bullying, communicate effectively with adults and peers, build healthy relationship, and make informed decisions about their lives. Assertiveness is the ability to speak up for oneself, asserting rights helps the girl child to break cycles of silence and oppression, challenge gender stereotypes and biases, promote equal opportunities and access. The novelist depicted the dimensions of torturous abuse and inhuman treatment of the girl child as the thematic preoccupation of the study. Olisakwe apparently prescribes some activities which can enhance the healing process of these brutal battering. This becomes the thrust of the study owing to the objective to empower a girl child to overcome trauma through assertiveness. Woruggi and George (2018:74) in their stance with Helen Chukwuma posit that an assertive woman must possess a strong disposition and character and the environment in which she finds herself must be permissive for such action irrespective of her educational background and economic status. They further explain that an assertive female is one who is bold, forceful, decisive, aggressive, firm and confident in herself and in what she believes in. This is in accordance with the position of Fafa (2017) that education, economic independence and sisterhood are the avenues for assertiveness. Olisakwe (2020) through her work paints a vivid picture of a girl child and the challenges she faces which eventually abort her dreams of a better tomorrow.

Aspects of Traumatic situations in *Ogadimma* by Ukamaka Olisakwe

Olisakwe (2020) presents *Ogadimma* a naïve teenage girl who is ab-initio full of great ambition and prospects for further studies in the university. Her dream is cut short and became unfulfilled by the various dimensions of traumatic experiences encountered. She eventually becomes a victim of rape from a pedophile Barrister Chima who is assumed to be trusted by her father. In *Ogadimma*, Olisakwe paints a vivid picture of trauma on a girl child's personality as observed in the life of the protagonist *Ogadimma*. Olisakwe explores rape, and brutality that lead to the fragmentation of self, the distortion of emotions and aborted careers. *Ogadimma* being a bright and determined young girl who is focused and enthusiastic is on her way to achieving her goal of becoming a university student. Olisakwe observes that “She opened her bag and brought out her jamb result, 240 good enough to get her admission into the state university”

However her life as a young girl is forever altered by being brutally raped at the age of seventeen by Barrister Chima. Her innocence is shattered with emotional scars leaving her voiceless and defenseless. Her dreams of becoming a graduate of literature are suddenly derailed, replaced by the harsh realities of trauma. She faces unimaginable challenges; she loses her pride (18), and is married off to a brutal older man Tobe, this eventually ends her education and her autonomy. The trauma she encounters is in quick succession ranging from a rape by Barrister Chima, to her marriage with an inhumane and vicious husband, to being accused of being responsible of her husband's misfortune. She also encounters the father's insensitivity and Aunt Ngozi's indifference. In addition; she encounters sexual abuse from a charlatan prophet. All these culminate to upsetting, distressing and traumatic experiences that render her suppressed and vulnerable, causing her irreparable harm and emotional distress. Olisakwe in painting a graphic picture of the traumatic scenario asserts:

Ogadimma followed behind him, fear gripping her chest again. She was panting as she climbed the stairs and had just stepped onto the veranda when a hand grabbed her by the neck, pulling her inside and shoving her against the wall. He drove his fist into her face, rattling her teeth. There was sickening snap of cartilage. Dizzying packets of pain shot up her nose, swallowing her face, rising in swift courses over her body. She screamed, she was falling, she was on fire, she opened her mouth to cry out again, but saw his feet driving into her face before she blacked out. (141).

The above is the detailed description of the violence and aggression meted out to the girl child *Ogadimma* for airing her views in a discussion with Tobe and Aunt Ngozi. Her oppressive and domineering husband does not believe that she has the right or the capacity to voice out her opinion. This becomes her fate in a harsh patriarchal environment. In the same vein Olisakwe avers “Tobe wanted to kill me, Papa *Ogadimma* said “I spoke out of turn. But that is not the reason he would try to kill me look at my body, Look at my face. Her voice was choked with tears”(145) This study tries to capture how Olisakwe empowers a girl child in the midst of this harsh and chaotic environment. She is brutally beaten and suffered various assaults from her husband, leaving

her with laceration, physical and emotional scars. There is also a portrayal of the father's insensitivity towards the ill treatment meted to her only child Ogadimma; the father is more concerned on his personality in a patriarchal word over the mental wellbeing of his daughter. According to Olisakwe "He did not say anything about her swollen nose or the bruising around her eyes" (144).

These horrific experiences which are happening in quick succession are really harsh and vicious for her to contain. From one oppressive encounter to the other, as if that cruelty from Tobe is not enough. The Onye ekpere, the prophet swoops on the situation to launch his libidinous stunt on the girl child by severely abusing her sexually in a guise to obliterate the evil spirit responsible for Tobe's misfortune. Olisakwe recounts thus:

"Onye Ekpere knocked on her door at night... He approached her, his gaze Piercing "pull off your clothes...She was too tired to cry, too exhausted to think... No sir. I will not let you do this!...shut your mouth! His voice thundered...the rumples in his navel quivered as he approached her and his penis stock out like a thumb from the folds of shrunken skin. Tears stinging and hot, trickled down the sides of her eyes as he climbed the bed and half stretched atop her, so he would not press too hard on her protruding belly. (191-194)

The encounter with Onye Ekpere doubles her sorrows and pains being that she is pregnant with Tobe's child and all these are happening, Olisakwe asserts that "Deep hollows soon appeared under her eyes. Morning melded into afternoon, and noon bled into night, bringing her horrors she resigned her body to (195)

Aspects of Assertiveness using Herman's Triphasic Model

The novelist advocates Herman's triphasic model for trauma recovery. The first model is the concept of safety and trust which entails the ability to trust someone again who could help them feel safe. The second model involves remembrance and mourning of the assault, the survivor has regained control over her hyper arousal and will begin to tell her story of trauma and transform the traumatic memory so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story. The final stage of Herman's trauma treatment model is reconnection. The girl child reclaims her life and faces the task of creating a future. During this stage the survivor engages in the external social world and permits others to begin to see her, and in turn shapes her into a synthesized being.

The aspects of assertiveness in relation to the triphasic model which the novelist portrays to help the protagonist Ogadimma overcome trauma. While she tries to scamper for safety (210) from the toxic relationship, she continues to receive battering from the husband. Prior to her delivery, Tobe literally blamed his misfortunes on the poor girl and kept beating her mercilessly. As Olisakwe points out.

... he slapped the bowl with the back of his hand, like a bat To a tennis ball, ... the stew spilled from the bowl and hit her smack the chest. Hot, spicy stew splashed on her body, on her face, and even jumped into her eyes.... She screamed and jumped off her Seat, grabbing her face, her eyes she was temporarily blind and as she made to rush into the bathroom... she ran into the door and bumped her head against the wall. Excruciating Pain rose..... around her head. Her eyes were on fire. Her chest was burning... she still felt the unbearable needles of pain pricking her eyes (176).

The above excerpt was the height she could contain. She made a firm resolve to end this horrific experience by being confident and bold enough to leave the house for safety according to Herman's triphasic model after delivery. This would enable her regain her sanity, reclaim herself confidence, self-esteem and accelerate her personal growth and healthy relations. She decided to stop going through this emotional and physical turmoil by absconding regardless of a sweet baby boy she gave birth to, as Olisakwe states.

She hastily stuffed her clothes and the money into the bag... she carried the bag out into the passage... I'am going somewhere, she told the girl 'please take care of him... she did not know where she was going, where she wanted to go, but she sat and kept her head down, until the bus eased onto the road and rolled away. (210)

In consonance with Herman's second model of recovering from trauma through assertiveness which deals with remembrance, where the victims begins to tell her story. Olisakwe asserts that Ogadimma after she left Tobe's house, looked for her aunt to tell her about her miserable encounter. She writes

Okwy's arms wrapped around her body and the soft Comforting rub of her fingers on the small of her back. She suddenly felt like a small child seeking comfort in her aunt's embrace and this filled her with peace, weights lifted off her shoulders and her tense nerves calmed. This peace was unfamiliar and uplifting (214).

The above depicts the peace and warmth Ogadimma gets from being in contact with her aunt, there she recounts and tells her story. Meeting Ejiro her friend is another outlet for finding solace and comfort from the cruel

experiences. Slowly she is overcoming the miserable experience, from there “she learns that a married woman would speak with such authority without attributing every decision she made to her husband”(230). This forms the beginning of her freedom from the shackles of harsh environment. Furthermore Ogadimma witnesses a scenario of how a woman in the bus actually challenged a man to a standstill as Olisakwe writes

“She thought about the woman and her boldness. She had not seen the Woman’s face clearly, but she remembered the raised shoulders, how she sent the man scurrying away like a wounded rat. She fleetingly wished she had clapped and cheered for her when the man got down (226).

With the observation of assertive behaviors of other women like Ejiro and the woman in the bus, she is emboldened and finally decides to bring these traumatic experiences to an abrupt end, when she put to practice the assertiveness she has learnt as Olisakwe writes.

This reminds me so much of Living with Tobe. He was domineering And made decisions concerning me Without consulting me, and expected Me to dance to this tune. I am learning to stand on my own. I would rather be shot, be done with all of this, than return to that life, Ever again. (240)

The above is her first proof of assertiveness, warning Kelechi, Tobe’s friend, that all what she tolerated with Tobe could not in any way be accepted from him. In another occasion, Ogadimma tries to not only set herself free from the harsh clutches of trauma but also she tries in all honesty to defend anyone around her who is facing this same horrific experience. Olisakwe portrayed Ogadimma in a brawl with a man called Karim who wants to intimidate other people she writes.

It is my business when you feel you can intimidate women because you are what – a man? I would have said the same thing If they were man...He turned to Ogadimma. “so, Do you do this all the time: you Go about rescuing women from men I wish I could (254).

The final stage of trauma recovery by Herma is the ability to create future. This is in tandem with how Olisakwe portrays Ogadimma as she finally enrolls in as a salon to learn hairdressing. The skill she registers to learn enhances her adaptability and resilience; it fosters her personal growth and fulfillment. It also prepares her for future challenges and opportunities as Olisakwe puts it thus “it is good for a woman to learn a skill or a trade, so she can earn her own money”(234) though her initial dreams of studying literature was like a ship that never sailed, her hopes were crushed. The shattered expectation and the lost opportunity did not deter her from having a renewed hope and aspiration.

Olisakwe posits thus

She had never thought she would go to school again, and now she was a student. Although this was far from her earlier dreams, she was glad she was finally in a Classroom. She closed her eyes and smiled, she was contented, and this filled her belly with something warm, filled her mouth with something sweet” (250)

Conclusion

From the analysis of the novel under study, whose thematic preoccupation is trauma, it can be concluded that for a girl child to overcome trauma, a multifaceted approach is required. Assertiveness is a crucial component of the healing process because by developing assertive skills, she can reclaim her power, establish healthy boundaries, and break free from the emotional shackles of trauma. Assertiveness enables her to express her needs and feelings effectively. By embracing assertiveness, the girl child can overcome trauma’s emotional grip and develop emotional resilience. Ultimately, she can transform her life and emerge stronger, more empowered, and more resilient.

As Olisakwe asserts in *Ogadimma*, Ogadimma realizes that she “could not afford to put herself in a violent situation ever again” (253). Upon reaching this realization, the novelist further states: thus. “There was a certain warmth that came with knowing that she was living on her own terms and no one was dictating to her” (259).

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