Dialectics of Trauma in Girl-Child Trafficking in Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

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Abstract

This work presents a comparative feminist analysis of Chris Abani's ***Becoming Abigail*** *(2006) and Chika Unigwe's* ***On Black Sisters' Street*** *(2009), arguing that their distinct narrative strategies constitute complementary and necessary modes of critiquing the transnational trafficking of African girls. It posits that Abani's fragmented, lyrical novella performs a poetics of interior collapse, immersing the reader in the disintegrating psyche of a single victim to frame exploitation as the culmination of intimate, familial betrayals. In contrast, Unigwe's polyphonic novel constructs a sociology of collective endurance, mapping the deliberate economic and transnational architecture of the trade to portray trafficking as a systemic, capitalist machinery. Through a sustained examination of narrative form, bodily agency, and systems of power, this study demonstrates that a dialectical reading of these texts, one focused on psychological fragmentation and the other on socio-economic chorus, provides a more holistic literary understanding than either can offer alone. The comparison reveals the crisis as both a profound, soul-destroying personal trauma and a calculated function of global patriarchal capital, advocating for a critical approach that holds the interior and the systemic in constitutive tension.*

Keywords: transnational trafficking, sex slavery, trauma, familial betrayal.

1. Introduction: Literature as a Dual Testimony

The global crisis of human trafficking and sexual slavery, a multifaceted crime sustained by intersecting systems of poverty, patriarchy, and neocolonial inequality, has provoked powerful responses from contemporary African writers. This article contends that two seminal Nigerian novels, Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), offer indispensable yet fundamentally distinct literary testimonies. While both narratives centre on the trafficking of young African women to Europe, they deploy opposing aesthetic and epistemological frameworks to dissect the phenomenon. This research argues that a comparative analysis is not merely additive but fundamentally generative, revealing that the true force of literary witness lies in the dialectical tension between Abani's *poetics of interior collapse* and Unigwe's *sociology of collective endurance*.

Existing scholarship has productively analysed each novel in isolation. Critiques of *Becoming Abigail* have rightly focused on its psychological depth, exploring its fragmented form as a mimesis of trauma (Hron 158), its use of biblical intertextuality to frame a sacrificial figure (Thomas 212), and its subversion of the rescue narrative through the character of Derek (Cooper 185). Conversely, scholarship on *On Black Sisters' Street* has celebrated its polyphonic realism, examining its choral structure as a tool for collective testimony (Cuder-Domínguez 45), its nuanced portrayal of economic agency within coercion (Adedoyin 78), and its depiction of a "ghettoised diaspora" in Europe (Alexander 154). However, these critical conversations have run on parallel tracks, with Abani's work often categorised within studies of psychological fiction and trauma, and Unigwe's within diasporic and migration literature. This separation overlooks a crucial opportunity. By placing these two powerful narrative modes in direct dialogue, we can construct a more comprehensive literary anatomy of trafficking, one that accounts for both the shattered individual consciousness and the oppressive system that shatters it.

This study is grounded in feminist literary criticism and trauma theory. It draws on feminist concepts of patriarchal power (Millett), intersectional vulnerability (hooks), and the female body as a site of contestation. It employs trauma theory, particularly Judith Herman's model of complex PTSD, to analyse psychological devastation. Crucially, it extends into narrative theory, contending that form itself is a primary vehicle of ideological critique. Through a close comparative reading of narrative architecture, representations of the body, and diagnoses of systemic power, this essay will demonstrate that Abani locates the tragedy's root in intimate, psychological failures that render the individual vulnerable, while Unigwe posits the global capitalist system itself as the primary architect, actively manufacturing and managing that vulnerability. Together, they illuminate trafficking as a crime that exists at the painful intersection of the psyche and the system, demanding a critical and ethical response as multifaceted as the problem itself.

2. Narrative Architecture: The Performance of Trauma vs. The Map of the System

The most striking divergence between the two novels is embodied in their narrative architecture, which fundamentally shapes the reader's epistemological engagement with the trauma depicted. Form is not merely a container for content but the primary mechanism for each author's critique.

2.1 Abani's Poetics of Interior Collapse: Fragmentation as Mimesis

Becoming Abigail is a masterclass in the literary performance of a disintegrating psyche. Abani eschews a linear, chronological plot in favour of a fragmented, non-linear structure that incessantly shifts between "Then" and "Now". This is not a stylistic affectation but a profound mimetic strategy. It replicates the intrusive, dissociative nature of traumatic memory as defined by Judith Herman, where past and present collide, preventing the construction of a coherent, safe narrative (Herman 37). The reader, denied chronological distance, is thrust into the chaotic flow of Abigail's consciousness, where childhood loss in Nigeria and present-tense violation in London become indistinguishable. As trauma scholar Madelaine Hron argues, Abani's form "does more than simply tell a story of trauma; it performs it. The reader is denied the comfort of chronological distance and is instead forced to inhabit the same psychological space as Abigail, a space where past abuse and present violation ceaselessly collide" (Hron 158).

This fragmentation extends from plot down to the syntactic level. Abani employs truncated, verbless sentences and disjointed prose to reflect Abigail's dissociative states and her struggle to process experience through conventional language. The narrative voice, while technically third-person, consistently slips into free indirect discourse, blurring the boundary between external observation and internal turmoil. Consider this passage detailing her spectral existence in her father's home:

She was a ghost in their house. A shadow with chores and silence. They looked at her but never saw her. They saw the ghost of her mother, the woman she was named for, the woman whose death was a price she was forever paying. The silence in the house was a living thing, and it was eating her from the inside out. (Abani 59)

The short, stark clauses ("A shadow with chores and silence") perform her reduction to a non-entity. The metaphor of being consumed by silence is not just described but viscerally felt through the rhythm of the prose. Abani's stylistic choices – fragmentation, free indirect discourse, and lyrical metaphor – constitute an ethical and aesthetic commitment to representing internal collapse from the inside out. His project is to make the reader *feel* the psychological truth of trauma, which Herman describes as shattering "the construction of the self that had been formed and sustained in relation to others" (Herman 51).

2.2 Unigwe's Sociology of Collective Endurance: Polyphony as System

In direct contrast, Chika Unigwe's narrative architecture in *On Black Sisters' Street* is engineered to diagram the very system it critiques. Her primary technique is the choral use of third-person limited perspective, rotating among the four women, Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce. This polyphony ensures that no single character's suffering is allowed to dominate; instead, their collective experience becomes the novel's true subject. This method, as critic Pilar Cuder-Domínguez observes, serves to "dismantle the singular, pathetic image of the African prostitute" by meticulously restoring their individual histories and motivations (Cuder-Domínguez 45).

While the novel's overarching structure weaves between present-day Antwerp and the characters' pasts, each backstory is itself relentlessly linear and causal. We follow a clear trajectory from a specific "push" factor – Efe's need to provide for her son, Ama's escape from a dead-end future, Sisi's ambition, and Joyce's flight from war – to the same "pull" of deceptive recruitment and eventual exploitation on Zwartezusterstraat. This creates a powerful dialectic: the collective narrative is a complex web, but each thread demonstrates a predictable, replicable pathway. Unigwe's form argues sociologically that trafficking is not an isolated psychological tragedy but a systemic outcome with multiple, structurally determined entry points.

The narrative voice remains largely exterior, focusing on actions, dialogues, and observable socio-economic circumstances rather than descending into stream-of-consciousness. We understand the women through their calculated choices and pragmatic speech. Efe's reflection is emblematic of this exterior, economic focus:

> Efe had a plan. It was a simple one. She would do this work, this thing that made her skin feel too tight for her body, until she had saved enough. Enough to build a house in Lagos. Enough to put her son through a good school. She had calculated the number of men and the number of years. It was a transaction. She offered her body, and in return, she bought a future. (Unigwe 118)

The prose here is clear, analytical, and transactional. The focus is on the plan, the calculation, and the grim economics of survival. Unigwe further grounds her systemic critique in tangible social reality through the use of distinct linguistic registers, including Nigerian Pidgin, which authenticates the characters' backgrounds and highlights the diversity of experience that nonetheless converges in the same exploitative system. Her form itself insists that the problem is not inside a single, broken mind but woven into the fabric of a globalised economic order.

3. The Body as Contested Site: Self-Annihilation vs. Strategic Performance

Within the brutal economies of both novels, the female body becomes the primary territory upon which power is inscribed and contested. A comparative analysis, however, reveals a stark divergence in how agency is enacted through the body, further illuminating the authors' contrasting focuses on psychological interiority and systemic navigation.

3.1 The Inward Turn: Abigail's Corporeal Language of Despair

In *Becoming Abigail*, the protagonist's relationship with her commodified body turns inward toward tragic, self-destructive assertion. Having been stripped of autonomy, her body becomes the only canvas upon which she can inscribe a semblance of control. Her acts of self-harm and intricate carving constitute a desperate, private language of ownership. Scholar Laura Chasen interprets these acts as a form of resistance through self-annihilation, arguing that Abigail "exhibits her agency as an active subject" by using her body for self-inscription (Chasen 27). This is evident in a key ritual:

> She took the razor blade, the one she kept for this, and made a small cut on her shoulder. The blood welled up, a perfect ruby… It was a language only she understood, a map of her interior landscape. It was the only thing that was truly hers. (Abani 47)

The tragedy of this agency is its solipsism. The "language only she understood" signifies profound isolation; the act is communicative yet ultimately unreceivable. As critic Sarah Ilott suggests, these markings are "palimpsestic", layering her own identity over the one imposed upon her through a process that mutilates the physical self (Ilott 92). Abigail's bodily resistance culminates in her final act of self-immolation, representing the logical endpoint of an agency that can only express itself through self-destruction when all external avenues for personhood are closed. Her body is the site where internal trauma becomes visually, fatally legible.

3.2 The Outward Calculation: Strategic Dissociation and Economic Agency

In direct contrast, the women of *On Black Sisters' Street* adopt a pragmatic, strategic relationship with their bodies, orientated toward survival and future liberation within the system. Their resistance is not one of self-destruction but of calculated performance and economic management. They consciously perform their sexuality as a form of labour, engaging in a protective dissociation. Sisi's reflection captures this survival mechanism:

> She had learnt to divide herself in two: the body that lay on the bed, that was touched and entered, and the mind that floated somewhere near the ceiling, observing it all with a detached curiosity. The body was a tool, an instrument for making money. The mind was where she lived, where she dreamed of the day she would have saved enough to buy her freedom…(Unigwe 89)

This "division" is a deliberate strategy, distinct from Abigail's pathological fragmentation. It is a conscious dissociation for the purpose of economic gain and future emancipation. Their agency is expressed not through self-injury but through the meticulous, collective management of their earnings. Scholar Babatunde O. Adedoyin notes that this complicates simplistic victimhood, as they become "active participants in a gamble for a better life," using their exploited bodies as the very tools to navigate their predicament (Adedoyin 78). Efe rationalises her suffering through the lens of maternal sacrifice, framing her body as a bridge: "What is a mother's body for, if not to be a bridge for her child?" (Unigwe 122). Sisi's clandestine plan to save money and literally buy her freedom is the ultimate expression of this agential mode, a long-term economic strategy that stands in stark opposition to Abigail's immediate, self-obliterating gestures. One reveals the body as a site of final, tragic assertion; the other portrays it as a strategic instrument for enduring a continuous system.

4. Diagnosing the Pipeline: Intimate Betrayal vs. Systemic Architecture

Having examined the internal and corporeal dimensions, the analysis turns to the novels' diagnoses of the trafficking pipeline itself. Here, the divergence in primary cause is most pronounced: Abani excavates the familial and psychological roots of vulnerability, while Unigwe foregrounds the deliberate, transnational economic architecture of the trade.

4.1 The Complicity of the "Home": Spectral Patriarchy vs. Corporate Recruitment

The initial betrayal occurs at "home", but its nature differs fundamentally. In *Becoming Abigail*, the enabling patriarchy is intimate and psychologically dysfunctional. Abigail's father, lost in grief for his dead wife, sees her only as a ghostly replacement, creating a foundational void of identity and love. This spectral patriarchy becomes actively predatory in her cousin, Peter, who weaponises familial trust. His manipulation is personal, exploiting her emotional starvation with false promises:

> "He smiled, a slow spreading of lips that didn't reach his eyes. 'London, Abby. Just think of it…' His voice was a low murmur, a secret just for her. And in that moment, the

> promise was so bright, so real, it burnt away the memory of her father's silent, haunted house." (Abani 52)

The complicity of the home here is its failure to provide love and security, creating a void that traffickers fill.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the "home" is a context of economic scarcity, and the betrayal is impersonal and business-like. The figures of the madam and her enforcer, Dele, represent a corporate patriarchy motivated solely by profit. They prey not on individual psychological need but on widespread economic desperation, selling a fabricated dream of European prosperity with the precision of salesmen. Dele recruits Sisi by framing exploitation as a logical career move: "It is a simple job. Caring for children. The pay is good, in euros… You will become somebody" (Unigwe 67). The betrayal is not of intimate trust but of the hope for a better life within a grossly unequal global system. The traffickers are its cold, logical product.

4.2 The Neocolonial Destination: Psychological Prison vs. Ghettoised Enclave

The European destination, promised as a site of liberation, is revealed in both novels as a carceral space, but its function differs. In *Becoming Abigail*, London is a vast, impersonal backdrop that magnifies Abigail's internal imprisonment. Abani renders it not through landmarks but through sensory and psychological assault:

> The London grey seeped into her, a damp chill that no amount of clothing could ward off. The streets were a maze of anonymous faces… The roar of the underground was the sound of her own panic… Here, the silence was different from her father's; it was the silence of being completely and utterly alone in a crowd of millions. (Abani 78)

The city becomes a correlative for her psyche, a maze, a grey atmosphere, and a state of profound anonymity. Her imprisonment is existential and psychological.
Conversely, Unigwe meticulously grounds her characters in the specific, ghettoised reality of Antwerp's Zwartezusterstraat. Their confinement is physical, legal, and socio-economic:

> Antwerp was a city of beautiful, ancient buildings… but none of that belonged to them. Their Antwerp was Zwartezusterstraat… Beyond their street lay a city they could not access, a world where they were 'illegal'. Their prison had no visible bars, but its walls were made of paperwork, of fear, and of debt. (Unigwe 134)

This is not a psychological condition but a material one. As scholar Simone A. James Alexander describes, they inhabit a “ghettoised diaspora”, physically present yet “legally, socially, and emotionally stateless” (Alexander 154). Unigwe's Europe is a systemic prison built on immigration law and economic coercion.

5. The Illusion of Escape: Failed Saviours and Crushed Self-Liberation

Both novels offer a final, devastating critique of the possibility of escape, targeting different agents of failure. Abani dismantles the myth of the individual saviour, while Unigwe exposes the system's lethal intolerance for self-liberation.

In *Becoming Abigail*, the social worker Derek embodies the flawed Western saviour complex. His intervention, blurred by personal desire and paternalism, becomes another form of entrapment. Scholar Brenda Cooper argues that Derek's relationship “transforms a potential narrative of salvation into one of complicity,” where the rescuer becomes another captor (Cooper 185). His hollow promise, “I can save you,” is revealed as a transaction serving his own need for redemption (Abani 103). His failure signifies that for a psyche as profoundly shattered as Abigail's, individualistic rescue is impossible; the trauma has already foreclosed that narrative.

In stark contrast, *On Black Sisters' Street* shifts the critique to the system itself through Sisi's thwarted plan. Her character is defined by pragmatic self-reliance: “She would not wait for a miracle or a man to save her; her salvation was in her own hands, calculated in the growing stack of bills…” (Unigwe 151). Her meticulous economic strategy represents the pinnacle of agency within the system. However, her murder just as she nears her goal delivers the novel's brutal thesis: the trafficking machinery is designed to make successful self-liberation fatal. Her death is not a personal failure but a systemic elimination of a threat to its control and profit. Where Abani shows agency swallowed by internal trauma, Unigwe shows it violently crushed by external, structural forces.

6. Conclusion: The Necessity of the Dialectical Reading

This comparative analysis elucidates the distinct yet complementary diagnostic frameworks of Chris Abani and Chika Unigwe. The findings reveal a critical divergence in their attribution of primary cause, embedded in their very narrative architecture. Abani's *Becoming Abigail* locates the tragedy's core in the psychological and familial realm. The global system appears as a predatory force that consumes individuals already fractured by intimate betrayals and spectral patriarchy. The novel provides a profound psychological backstory, answering *why* a specific individual is vulnerable. Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, conversely, posits the global economic system as the primary architect. It is sophisticated machinery that actively manufactures, manages, and capitalises on vulnerability as a matter of course. Her novel provides the socio-economic blueprint, answering *how* the system mass-produces and controls that vulnerability.

To privilege one perspective over the other is to adopt a critically reductive view of a profoundly complex crime. Abani's poetics of interior collapse makes us feel the internal holocaust of the victim, the silencing of a voice, and the erasure of a self. Unigwe's sociology of collective endurance makes us see the cold, calculative logic of the market, the balance sheet of profit and loss written on human flesh. One traces the pathology from the inside out, beginning with the shattered soul; the other from the outside in, beginning with the ruthless logic of capital.

Therefore, the power of reading these novels in tandem lies in their generative, dialectical tension. They demonstrate that girl-child trafficking is not a monolithic phenomenon but exists at the painful intersection of the psyche and the system, the intimate betrayal and the impersonal market. The journey of the trafficked girl is simultaneously the erosion of a self *and* the operation of a machine. Literature's greatest contribution to this discourse is its ability to hold both truths in constitutive tension, insisting that any path toward justice must be as complex as the problem itself, addressing both the broken heart and the broken system with equal urgency. This comparative study ultimately affirms that only through such a dual vision can literary criticism fully honour the scale and depth of the crisis these authors so courageously narrate.

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